

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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This resource has been adapted into multiple languages, including English, Tok Pisin, Arabic (عربي), French (Français), Hindi (हिन्दी), Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Portuguese (Português), Russian (Русский), Spanish (Español), Swahili (Kiswahili), and Simplified Chinese (简体中文).

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Mark

In his opening verse, Mark gives his audience the main key to understanding his gospel. We can learn about the disciples and other characters. What matters most is what Mark teaches about "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" ([Mark 1:1](#)).

Setting

Most scholars agree that Mark was the first of the four canonical gospels to be written. *Canonical* means “belonging to the official list of books that the church accepts as Scripture.” Most scholars believe Mark was the first written gospel. Instead, people shared gospel stories out loud, guided by personal witnesses and ministers of God's word ([Luke 1:2](#)). As these personal witnesses began to die, it became important to write down the gospel stories.

Church tradition says the apostle Peter was killed for his faith in the mid-60s AD. The church in Rome asked John Mark to write down Jesus's life and teachings as Peter had told them. Thus, Mark was the first to create a written account of Jesus's life and teachings from oral stories.

Summary

The structure of Mark has its basis in geography:

1. The first nine chapters describe events in Jesus's ministry in Galilee and nearby areas.
2. In [10:1–52](#), Jesus and the disciples travel from Galilee to Jerusalem.
3. The last chapters occur in and around Jerusalem ([11:1–16:20](#)). The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses [9–20](#) of chapter 16. Matthew and Luke used this outline of geography in their gospels. But John organized his gospel differently.

Within the geographical outline, Mark arranged much of his material by topic. Mark includes collections of different kinds of stories. These include:

- miracle stories ([1:21–45](#); [4:35–5:43](#)),
- stories about controversy or conflict ([2:1–3:6](#); [12:13–37](#)),
- parables (symbolic stories with special meanings) ([4:1–34](#)), and
- teachings about the end of time ([13:5–37](#)).

Some parts of the Gospel of Mark follow a timeline:

- Jesus's ministry began with his baptism and temptation ([1:2–11](#); see [Acts 1:22](#); [10:37](#); [Mark 1:12–13](#)).
- His suffering, death, and resurrection happened at the end ([11:1–16:8](#)).
- A few individual accounts are linked in the order they happened. This includes: Peter's confession of Christ at Caesarea Philippi and when Jesus "transfigured before them" ([8:27–33](#); [9:1–13](#); see also [1:29](#), [35](#)).

The major turning point in Jesus's ministry occurs in [8:27–33](#), near the center of the book. At Caesarea Philippi, the disciples first confess their belief that Jesus is the Christ ([8:29](#)). After acknowledging this

fact, Jesus begins to tell them about his coming death and resurrection ([8:31](#); compare [Matthew 16:21](#)). Jesus's death and resurrection are the main themes of [8:31–16:8](#).

Author

The earliest known mention of Mark as author of this gospel comes from Bishop Papias in the early second century AD. The early church historian Eusebius quotes Papias, saying, "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote down everything he remembered accurately, though not in order, about the things said or done by the Lord. Mark had not heard the Lord or followed him, but later followed Peter" (Eusebius, *Church History* 3.39.16).

Early church tradition consistently identified John Mark as the author. It is unlikely that Papias and others would have credited this gospel to someone with a poor reputation, like a non-apostle, unless Mark was truly the author (see [Acts 13:13; 15:36-41](#)).

The author of this gospel knew two languages, as the Aramaic phrases in its Greek text suggest (for example, [Mark 5:41; 7:34; 15:34](#)). He was also Jewish, as he knew and explained various Jewish customs to his non-Jewish audience (for example, [7:3-4; 14:12](#)). John Mark was a Jew raised in Jerusalem ([Acts 12:12](#)). He knew Aramaic, the native language of Judea, and was familiar with Jewish customs.

Some people argue that this gospel does not obviously show a link between Mark and Peter. They also say it seems more skilled than expected from Peter's direct testimony. However, if Mark wrote this gospel near or after Peter's death (see "Date" below), Peter had been sharing these stories for over thirty years. By recounting them often, his story would have become uniform.

There are also mentions of Peter in this gospel that might be due to Mark's personal connection with him (for example, [Mark 1:16-20; 8:32-33; 9:5-6; 14:28-31, 66-72](#)). It makes sense to consider this gospel as written by John Mark, the cousin of the apostle Barnabas, based on Peter's accounts.

Date

John Mark probably wrote down Peter's teachings about Jesus around the time of Peter's death. Peter died in Rome around AD 64 during Nero's persecution of Christians. Mark probably wrote this gospel in the late 60s AD.

A couple of things support this theory:

4. The focus on remaining loyal to God during persecution suggests he wrote it during or shortly after Emperor Nero's persecution in the mid-60s ([4:17](#); [8:34-38](#); [10:30](#); [13:9-13](#)).
5. Jesus's speech in chapter [13](#) suggests the destruction of Jerusalem was near, probably after the Jewish revolution had started in AD 66.

Audience

According to tradition, Mark wrote his gospel for the church in Rome. The original audience were Greek-speaking gentiles (non-Jews). The author explains Jewish customs and distinguishes the audience from "the Jews" (for example, [7:3-4](#); [14:12](#); [7:3](#)).

The original audience was made up of Christians. Because they knew the gospel stories well, the author does not explain:

- various Old Testament references ([2:25-26](#)),
- who John the Baptist was ([1:2-8](#)),
- who Isaiah the prophet was ([1:2](#)), or
- who the Pharisees and teachers of religious law were ([7:1](#)).

The audience was probably made up of Romans. This is because of the Latin terms used in Mark. In [6:27](#), he uses a Latin word for "soldier." In [12:42](#), he refers to a Roman coin, the *quadran*, to explain "two lepta," which were Greek coins. In [15:39](#), [44-45](#), he uses the Latin word "centurion" (officer in charge of 100 soldiers) instead of the Greek word that Matthew and Luke use.

Literary Features

Mark's editorial work is most evident in:

- His introductions (for example, [1:21–22; 2:1; 4:1; 7:1](#)).
- His explanations (for example, [1:16; 2:15; 5:8, 28, 42; 6:14, 17, 20, 52; 7:3–4](#)).
- His summaries (for example, [1:14–15, 34, 39; 3:7–12; 6:53–56](#)).

Mark uses terms like “suddenly,” “at this,” and “immediately” to show progress (for example, [1:23; 3:6; 6:45](#)). He uses the Greek present tense instead of the past tense to create an urgent sense (for example, [1:12, 21, 38, 40, 44; 2:3; 3:13](#)). Mark often places one story inside another (for example, [3:22–30](#) within [3:20–21, 31–35](#); [5:25–34](#) within [5:21–24, 35–43; 11:15–19](#) within [11:12–14, 20–26](#)).

In the last example, this technique shows that the middle part relates to the surrounding story (compare [11:15–19](#), “the cleansing of the temple” with [11:12–14, 20–26](#), “the cursing of the fig tree”). When Jesus cleared out the things polluting the temple, it was a symbolic act of judgment (compare [13:3–37](#)). Thus, Mark’s editing connects different events and shows their importance.

Meaning and Message

The Person of Christ

Mark's main religious or theological focus is on the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. This focus is evident from the first verse of the gospel. Mark wanted his audience to know that Jesus of Nazareth is "the Christ, the Son of God."

The title "Son of God" appears often in Mark, with various witnesses to Jesus's status as God's son:

- the demons (evils spirits) ([1:34](#); [3:11](#); [5:7](#); compare [1:24](#));
- God himself ([1:11](#); [9:7](#));
- Mark, the author ([1:1](#));
- a Roman centurion (officer in charge of 100 soldiers)([15:39](#)); and
- Jesus himself ([12:6](#); [13:32](#); [14:61-62](#)).

Other titles for Jesus appear in Mark's Gospel, including Jesus's own favorite, "Son of Man" (for example, [2:10](#)). However, in Mark's Gospel, all these titles and his actions emphasize his identity as the Christ, the Son of God (for example, [1:22](#); [4:41](#)).

During his life, the Son of God protected himself and his followers from misunderstandings about the term "Christ" (or Messiah) (see "The Secret of the Messiah" below). Jesus's main mission as the Son of God is shown through his death, where he gave his life as a "ransom for many" ([Mark 10:45](#)). The call to be a disciple or learner of Christ is a call to follow the Christ, the Son of God. This especially refers to his service and sacrifice. Jesus's work as the Son of God on earth also points to his return as the ruler of God's kingdom.

The Death of Jesus

The Gospel of Mark focuses on Jesus's suffering and death (passion), as well as resurrection. The gospel frequently mentions the death of Jesus ([2:19-20](#); [3:6](#); [8:31](#); [9:9](#), [12](#), [31](#); [10:33-34](#), [45](#); [12:1-11](#); [14:1-11](#), [21](#), [24-25](#), [36](#), [14:64-15:47](#)). Mark emphasizes that the death of Jesus was part of God's plan. His death was necessary ([8:31](#)).

This was because God planned it ([10:45](#); [14:36](#)). The Old Testament also prophesies the death of the Christ (see [9:12](#); [14:21](#), [27](#), [49](#)). Jesus came "to give His life as a ransom for many" ([10:45](#)). He also shed

his blood to create a new covenant (special agreement) ([14:24](#)).

Christian Discipleship

Mark emphasizes the importance of following Jesus by denying one's desires and carrying one's cross (see [8:34](#)). Being a disciple or "following Christ" (discipleship) requires full commitment. It means being willing to leave everything to live for Jesus ([1:18](#), [20](#); [10:21](#), [29](#)). It may lead to persecution and death ([13:9-13a](#)). But God promises Christians that enduring in faith leads to salvation and eternal life ([13:13](#); [10:30](#)).

The "Secret of the Messiah"

Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells others not to reveal his true identity as the Messiah (or Christ). Scholars often call this the "Messianic Secret." Jesus likely does this because many people misunderstand who he is and what he came to do. Still, the secret cannot be kept ([7:36](#)). Jesus inspires such wonder and is so amazing that he cannot remain hidden. The characters in the story struggle to understand Jesus's identity. Yet, Mark's audience have the advantage of knowing the full story of Jesus's identity through his death and resurrection.

The Coming of God's Kingdom

The coming of God's kingdom is central to Jesus's message. People need to ask God to forgive them and believe the good news about Jesus because the kingdom of God "is near" ([1:14-15](#)). Old Testament promises are becoming fulfilled. Life in the kingdom is different from life before its arrival.