

**The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
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The Gospel of Mark

General Introduction

The Gospel of Mark offers astonishing good news and an awfully stern challenge in one fell swoop.

Mark's Jesus speaks good news – about a God who forgives, loves, and welcomes all comers. Mark's Jesus also is good news – offering forgiveness, reaching to gather the forgotten ones, standing up to the purveyors of exclusive regulations and dried out rules, and dying to set humanity free. There's a whole lot of good news in this book.

Mark's Jesus speaks and is a challenge as well – modeling a Way of service and self-denial that gives itself out for neighbor and stranger, and then calling us to follow in his steps. Of any who will answer that call, this Jesus will settle for nothing less than a whole life. Indeed, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous saying could very well have been planted by Mark: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” (*The Cost of Discipleship*)

In addition to its benefits to our faith, the Gospel is also just a whole lot of fun to read. The author has cleverly sewn together stories of Jesus in a way that builds characters and themes, ironies, comedies and tragedies into his book. Expert crafting encourages close and attentive reading.

This interwoven whole of good news, challenge, and literary delight make the Gospel of Mark a wonderful book to read together in Bible study.

The Composition of the Gospel

Somewhere near the Mediterranean Sea about two thirds of the way through the first century, forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, a few years after Paul wrote his last letter, around the time Roman soldiers burned Jerusalem down, just after Nero almost burned Rome down, an early Christian gave us a gift.

Until that time, Christians who had not known Jesus heard about him through stories shared orally in their churches. A parable here, a prayer there, a miracle

somewhere else. Over time some of Jesus' sayings were collected here, his miracles there, his conflicts with authorities somewhere else. There may have been small collections of his conflicts with Jewish leaders. Paul and other missionaries were telling the story of his crucifixion and resurrection. There were ways of hearing about Jesus. But there was nothing that told the whole story, with a beginning, middle, and end...until Mark. When that book's first words ring out "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ...", they also mark the beginning of Gospels – the first full story about Jesus.

"The Gospel according to Mark" or "The Gospel of Mark," was not in manuscripts, and no author is listed. So why do we refer to it that way? The title was assigned because of second-century Christian claims. The earliest of these comes from a churchman named Papias, who writes around 125 C.E.,

"Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered. It was not, however, in exact order that he related the sayings or deeds of Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied Him. But afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who accommodated his instructions to the necessities [of his hearers], but with no intention of giving a regular narrative of the Lord's sayings. Wherefore Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things as he remembered them. For of one thing he took especial care, not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements (Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 3.39)."

A half-century later, another 2nd-century Christian wrote, "after the death of Peter himself, [Mark] wrote down this same Gospel in the regions of Italy." (*The Anti-Marcionite Prologue to Mark*)

The Mark to whom these authors refer is probably John Mark, the son of a Jerusalem Christian mother, who became a co-worker of Paul and Barnabas. Some scholars find this author too little Jewish, too little aware of the Hebrew Bible (he quotes it according to a Greek translation) to fit that resume. And so it is not clear how sure we should be of Papias' and the prologue-writer's claims – they too have "neither heard" Mark "nor accompanied him," but instead depended on tradition. Nonetheless, in this study we will call our author by the shorthand name "Mark."

Whoever he was and wherever he wrote, we imagine this author/Mark did this generous literary work for a community of his fellow followers of the Way. One hobby for readers of Mark is to guess at the circumstances of those first readers. The tradition places the book in Rome after the death of Peter, and so written in the aftermath of Nero's persecutions. Within the book itself, chapter 13 suggests that the

imagined audience may have been experiencing persecution. In chapter 7 the author clues his readers in on Jewish customs in ways that indicate a goodly share of them were Gentiles. You may find another clue or two as you read. You will probably also find that the imagined audience for this marvelous Gospel ends up, ultimately, being you.