

A Short Introduction to St Mark's Gospel

In 1933 the Reichstag in Berlin was destroyed by fire. The Nazis fixed the blame on the Communists. In Rome, in the winter of AD64-65, a similar thing happened. Large parts of the city were destroyed by fire and Nero found a scapegoat in the early Christians. "A killing time" ensued during which both Peter and Paul are said to have been put to death.

It was soon after this that a little book (or, more exactly, a small papyrus scroll) appeared with the title "the Gospel of Jesus Christ". This is generally held by scholars to be the first of the four Gospels. We need to ask two questions: Who wrote this Gospel? And why did he write it?

Who wrote this Gospel? Early tradition is unanimous in naming Mark. Papias (who died around 130AD) wrote, "*Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately everything he remembered, without recording in order what was said or done by Christ*". The author's full name was John Mark. He was a native of Jerusalem and his mother's house was a rendezvous for the early followers of Jesus (see Acts 12.12).

It is possible that Mark knew Jesus, at least during the last week of his ministry. In his account of the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Mark records one little detail which seems quite trivial when set in the context of the drama. "*A young man followed him with nothing on but a linen cloth about his body, and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked*". Perhaps those who were sent to arrest Jesus had first sought him in Mark's mother's house. Perhaps Mark had run to warn Jesus and arrived too late. Perhaps this tiny detail is, in fact, Mark's signature written in the corner of his Gospel, his way of saying he was there.

We have surer information some years later. *Acts* tells us that he accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey; that he deserted them in Perga; and that he was later reconciled and shared Paul's imprisonment in Rome. But what really matters is that Peter was almost certainly the prime source of Mark's knowledge of Jesus. Even if he did not write his Gospel until around AD65, he was tapping into the very earliest traditions about the life of Jesus. And so, we come to our second question.

Why did Mark write his Gospel? It is often assumed that his purpose purely biographical, but to treat his Gospel in this way is to do it a great injustice. If it is a biography, it is an extremely bad biography. This fact led H Bulcock, who initially read Mark as a biography of Jesus, to comment: "*Mark was simply incapable of recognising the greatest features of Jesus, even with all the good will capable on his part. It is only a very partial picture, inadequate not merely because of its scarcity of information, but because of its faulty emphases, its choice of the least significant features, and the inability of its author to appreciate the greatest elements in the life and teaching of Jesus*".

This might seem harsh, but everything needed for a biography is missing: There is no 'character'. There are no personal details. We are not told how old he was or what he looked like. There is no systematic account of his teaching.

Why then did Mark write his Gospel? We cannot give single answer to this question, but if we remember that Mark was writing for the people of own time, we can identify at least four purposes.

1. The early Church found it necessary to explain why life of Jesus, (whom they claimed to be 'Messiah'), should have ended in the shame of a criminal's death: Here Mark gives two answers: On the **historical level**, he argues that Jesus was innocent of the charges against him. The charge that he sought to start a rebellion refuted by his constant charges to silence: *"He would not permit the demons to speak because they knew him"*. (1.34) Mark shows that Jesus was orthodox in his teaching by his answer to the scribe's question about the greatest commandment. Jesus points to the *Shema, the great commandment of Israel*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord, is one and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all you soul, and all you mind, and all your strength." (12.29-30). Jesus was neither a rebel nor a heretic. The only charge on which he was guilty was that of claiming to be Messiah.

On the theological level, Mark argues that the rejection of Jesus was part of God's plan. The little Greek word *'dei'* (must) appears again and again: *"The Son of man must suffer"*. In his teaching in the temple, Jesus says, *"Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest seize me, but let the scriptures be fulfilled"*. (14. 49)

2. Mark sought to answer the question of why Jesus did not claim to be Messiah earlier and more outspokenly. For Jesus, the whole understanding of what it meant to be Christ or Messiah had to be redefined. It needed shifting from the image of a mighty warrior who would drive the Romans from the land to that of the gentle Suffering Servant found in Isaiah. It is not until we are half way through the Gospel that the "Messianic secret" is revealed and Peter makes what Paul Tillich called "the greatest discovery that any man had ever made": "You are the Christ" (8.29). But the secret is still to be confined to the disciples: "He sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him". (8.30). Jesus still needed time for them to understand God's suffering servant on a cross!

3. Mark was writing to support the suffering persecuted Christian community in Rome around the year AD65. He reminds them that Jesus himself had suffered. He reminds them that Jesus had warned the disciples that following him would entail suffering (8.31) and that faithful suffering would be rewarded: *"Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age ~ houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions ~ and in the age to come eternal life."* (10.29-30)

4. Mark sought to show that Jesus had overcome the powers of evil in the universe. To understand what Mark was trying to do, we need to understand a little of how people thought in 1st Century Palestine, which is very different to the way we think today. Dennis Nineham put it in these words: *"The Jews and others in the ancient world held that the act of creation had involved a tremendous struggle against the supernatural forces of evil and chaos. In this struggle, God had been victorious, but in the course of time the evil powers had to some extent reasserted their sway over God's creation. And so, before God could bring creation to the perfect consummation, he planned for it, it was expected that he, or some representative of his, would engage in a further, and, this time, finally decisive, struggle with the evil power"*. (Nineham – St Mark p.33)

Other motives for writing can be found by a careful examination of Mark's Gospel. What we need to remember that Mark was not writing for us, but for the persecuted followers of Jesus in the Rome of around AD 65. And when we have seen what he said to them in their time, we need to apply that meaning to our own time and lives. The wonder is that, when we try to do this, the living Christ breaks through into our time and lives. That is why we perhaps need to take Mark's Gospel and the whole the New Testament more seriously than we do.