

Introduction to the Gospel according to Mark

Where is it in the Bible?

Mark is the second book in the New Testament and the second of the four Gospels.

Who wrote it?

Mark was a very common name and the book itself is anonymous, so we can only make suggestions as to the identity of its author. About the middle of the second century, a Christian writer named Papias said that Mark was “Peter’s interpreter”. This led to the belief that the evangelist was the Mark mentioned in 1 Peter 5:13. In turn, church tradition has assumed that this Mark who was with Peter in Rome is the same person as John Mark, who is mentioned in the book of Acts and in some of Paul’s letters. Most scholars today do not accept this claim.

When was it written?

The Gospel according to Mark is considered to be the earliest of the four Gospels. Although some scholars argue for an earlier date, it was probably written sometime between 65 and 73, around the time of the Jewish War with Rome and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Its original audience was most likely a community of Gentile Christians somewhere in the Roman Empire.

What is it about?

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels and tells a fast-paced story can be read from beginning to end in one sitting. This Gospel highlights Jesus’ activities and does not include a lot of his teachings. Its focus is on Jesus, the Son of God who gave his life on the cross as a ransom for many.

How is it structured?

- I. Introduction (1:1-15)
- II. Jesus Early Ministry in Galilee (1:16-3:12)
- III. Jesus Later Ministry in Galilee (3:13-6:6)
 - a. Jesus calls disciples (3:13-35)
 - b. Jesus teaches in parables (4:1-34)
 - c. Jesus performs miracles (4:35-5:43)
 - d. Jesus is rejected at Nazareth (6:1-6)
- IV. Jesus Ministry Outside of Galilee (6:7-8:26)
 - a. Sending of the Twelve (6:7-13)
 - b. Death of John the Baptist (6:14-56)
 - c. Teachings on Moral Defilement (7:1-23)
 - d. Opening to Gentiles (7:24-30)
 - e. Miracles in the Decapolis and Bethsaida (7:31-8:26)
- V. Jesus Predicts His Death and Talks about Discipleship (8:27-10:52)
 - a. Peter’s Confession (8:27-33)
 - b. Call to discipleship (8:34-9:1)
 - c. Transfiguration and healing (9:2-29)
 - d. Instructions on putting others first (9:30-50)
 - e. Instructions on divorce, wealth, and humility (10:1-52)

- VI. Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem (11:1-16:8)
 - a. Jesus enters Jerusalem (11:1-11)
 - b. Jesus teaches in the temple (11:12-12:44)
 - c. Jesus speaks about the last days (13:1-37)
 - d. Jesus' trial and crucifixion (14:1-15:47)
 - e. Resurrection (16:1-8)
- VII. The Longer Ending of Mark (16:9-20) – Many of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts of Mark do not include these verses. However, they are found in other early and many later manuscripts. Because of this, they are frequently placed in brackets to recognize that they may not have originally been part of the Gospel, but have been accepted by many in the Church for a long time.

What are some of its themes?

- **Centrality of the cross:** Although this Gospel is only about half as long as Matthew and Luke, the passion narrative is about the same length in all three. In fact, Martin Kähler, a nineteenth century scholar, described Mark as “a passion narrative with an extended introduction.” The crucifixion story is what matters most to Mark, and this reflects the fact that the early Church emphasized Jesus' death on the cross to redeem humanity from sin over other things he did.
- **Failure of the disciples:** The disciples are portrayed more negatively in this Gospel than in any other. They repeatedly fail to grasp what's going on. Each time they seem to be starting to understand, they do something that indicates they do not truly realize what is happening.
- **“Immediately”:** Mark is fast-paced and action-packed, with rapid movements and changes of scene. The Greek word for “immediately” is used over 40 times in Mark, more than four times as often as in the rest of the New Testament. The narratives are vivid and detailed; versions of the same narrative in Matthew and Luke are shorter and less descriptive. For example, compare Mark 9:14-29 with Matthew 17:14-21 and Luke 9:37-45a.
- **Messianic Secret:** Although the audience knows from the very beginning of this Gospel that he is the Messiah, Jesus attempts to keep his identity secret. People who are healed are told not to tell anyone what happened. The disciples are instructed not to tell others that Jesus is the Messiah. Demons are silenced when they reveal who Jesus is. Most scholars now feel that Mark's point was that Jesus life could only be understood properly in the light of the cross.
- **Portrayal of Jesus:** While Jesus is unmistakably identified as the Son of God, Mark also gives a very clear portrayal of Jesus as a human being. He gets hungry and tired. He experiences a full range of emotions from compassion and pity to anger and indignation.