

## INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT MARK

[Excerpted from *The Gospel of Mark*. 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.). The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. (1). Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.]

### The Synoptic Gospels

The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are always known as the synoptic gospels. The word *synoptic* comes from two Greek words which mean *to see together*, and these three are called the synoptic gospels because they can be set down in parallel columns and their common matter looked at together. It would be possible to argue that of them all Mark is the most important. It would indeed be possible to go further and to argue that it is the most important book in the world, because it is agreed by nearly everyone that it is the earliest of all the gospels and therefore the first life of Jesus that has come down to us. ...

### Mark, the Writer of the Gospel

Who then was this Mark who wrote the gospel? The New Testament tells us a good deal about him. He was the son of a well-to-do lady of Jerusalem whose name was Mary, and whose house was a rallying-point and meeting place of the early church (Acts 12:12). From the very beginning Mark was brought up in the very centre of the Christian fellowship.

Mark was also the nephew of Barnabas, and when Paul and Barnabas set out on their first missionary journey they took Mark with them to be their secretary and attendant (Acts 12:25). This journey was a most unfortunate one for Mark. When they reached Perga, Paul proposed to strike inland up to the central plateau; and for some reason Mark left the expedition and went home (Acts 13:13).

He may have gone home because he was scared to face the dangers of what was notoriously one of the most difficult and dangerous roads in the world, a road hard to travel and haunted by bandits. He may have gone home because it was increasingly clear that the leadership of the expedition was being assumed by Paul and Mark may have felt with disapproval that his uncle was being pushed into the background. He may

have gone home because he did not approve of the work which Paul was doing. Chrysostom—perhaps with a flash of imaginative insight—says that Mark went home because he wanted his mother!

Paul and Barnabas completed their first missionary journey and then proposed to set out upon their second. Barnabas was anxious to take Mark with them again. But Paul refused to have anything to do with the man “who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia.” (Acts 15:37–40.) So serious was the difference between them that Paul and Barnabas split company, and, so far as we know, never worked together again.

For some years Mark vanishes from history. Tradition has it that he went down to Egypt and founded the Church of Alexandria there. Whether or not that is true we do not know, but we do know that when Mark re-emerges it is in the most surprising way. We learn to our surprise that when Paul writes the letter to the Colossians from prison in Rome Mark is there with him (Colossians 4:10). In another prison letter, to Philemon, Paul numbers Mark among his fellow-labourers (verse 24). And, when Paul is waiting for death and very near the end, he writes to Timothy, his right-hand man, and says, “Take Mark and bring him with you; for he is a most useful servant to me.” (2 Timothy 4:11.) It is a far cry from the time when Paul contemptuously dismissed Mark as a quitter. Whatever had happened Mark had redeemed himself. He was the one man Paul wanted at the end.

### Mark's Sources of Information

The value of any man's story will depend on the sources of his information. Where, then, did Mark get his information about the life and work of Jesus? We have seen that his home was from the beginning a Christian centre of Jerusalem. Many a time he must have heard people tell of their personal memories of Jesus. But it is most

likely that he had a source of information without a superior.

Towards the end of the second century there was a man called Papias who liked to obtain and transmit such information as he could glean about the early days of the Church. He tells us that Mark's gospel is nothing other than a record of the preaching material of Peter, the greatest of the apostles. Certainly Mark stood so close to Peter, and so near to his heart, that Peter could call him "Mark, my son." (1 Peter 5:13.) Here is what Papias says:

*"Mark, who was Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, all that he recollected of what Christ had said or done. For he was not a hearer of the Lord or a follower of his. He followed Peter, as I have said, at a later date, and Peter adapted his instruction to practical needs, without any attempt to give the Lord's words systematically. So that Mark was not wrong in writing down some things in this way from memory, for his one concern was neither to omit nor to falsify anything that he had heard."*

We may then take it that in his gospel we have what Mark remembered of the preaching material of Peter himself.

So, then, we have two great reasons why Mark is a book of supreme importance. First, it is the earliest of all the gospels; if it was written just shortly after Peter died its date will be about A.D. 65. Second, it embodies the record of what Peter preached and taught about Jesus; we may put it this way—Mark is the nearest approach we will ever possess to an eyewitness account of the life of Jesus.

### **The Characteristics of Mark's Gospel**

Let us look at the characteristics of Mark's gospel so that we may watch for them as we read and study it.

(i) It is the nearest thing we will ever get to a report of Jesus' life. Mark's aim was to give a picture of Jesus as he was. Westcott called it "a

transcript from life." A. B. Bruce said that it was written "from the viewpoint of loving, vivid recollection," and that its great characteristic was *realism*.

If ever we are to get anything approaching a biography of Jesus, it must be based on Mark, for it is his delight to tell the facts of Jesus' life in the simplest and most dramatic way.

(ii) Mark never forgot the divine side of Jesus. He begins his gospel with the declaration of faith, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." He leaves us in no doubt what he believed Jesus to be. Again and again he speaks of the impact Jesus made on the mind and heart of those who heard him. The awe and astonishment which he evoked are always before Mark's mind. "They were astonished at his teaching." (1:22.) "They were all amazed." (1:27.) Such phrases occur again and again. Not only was this astonishment in the minds of the crowds who listened to Jesus; it was still more in the minds of the inner circle of the disciples. "And they were filled with awe, and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?'" (4:41.) "And they were utterly astounded." (6:51.) "The disciples were amazed at his words." (10:24, 26.)

To Mark, Jesus was not simply a man among men; he was God among men, ever moving them to a wondering amazement with his words and deeds.

(iii) At the same time, no gospel gives such a human picture of Jesus. Sometimes its picture is so human that the later writers alter it a little because they are almost afraid to say what Mark said. To Mark Jesus is simply "the carpenter." (6:3.) Later Matthew alters that to "the carpenter's son" (Matthew 13:55), as if to call Jesus a village tradesman is too daring. When Mark is telling of the temptations of Jesus, he writes, "The Spirit *drove* him into the wilderness." (1:12.) Matthew and Luke do not like this word *drove* used of Jesus, so they soften it down and say, "Jesus was *led* by the Spirit into the wilderness." (Matthew 4:1; Luke 4:1.) No one tells us so much about the emotions of Jesus as Mark does. Jesus sighed deeply in his spirit (7:34; 8:12). He was moved with

compassion (6:34). He marvelled at their unbelief (6:6). He was moved with righteous anger (3:5; 8:33; 10:14). Only Mark tells us that when Jesus looked at the rich young ruler he loved him (10:21). Jesus could feel the pangs of hunger (11:12). He could be tired and want to rest (6:31).

It is in Mark's gospel, above all, that we get a picture of a Jesus of like passions with us. The sheer humanity of Jesus in Mark's picture brings him very near to us.

(iv) One of the great characteristics of Mark is that over and over again he inserts the little vivid details into the narrative which are the hall-mark of an eyewitness. Both Matthew and Mark tell of Jesus taking the little child and setting him in the midst. Matthew (18:2) says, "And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them." Mark adds something which lights up the whole picture (9:36). "And he took a child and put him in the midst of them; and *taking him in his arms*, he said to them ... "In the lovely picture of Jesus and the children, when Jesus rebuked the disciples for keeping the children from him, only Mark finishes, "*and he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them.*" (Mark 10:13–16; cp. Matthew 19:13–15; Luke 18:15–17.) All the tenderness of Jesus is in these little vivid additions. When Mark is telling of the Feeding of the Five Thousand he alone tells how they sat down *in hundreds and in fifties*, looking like vegetable beds in a garden (6:40) and immediately the whole scene rises before us. When Jesus and his disciples were on the last journey to Jerusalem, only Mark tells us, "*and Jesus went before them.*" (10:32; cp. Matthew 20:17; Luke 18:31); and in that one vivid little phrase all the loneliness of Jesus stands out. When Mark is telling the story of the stilling of the storm he has one little sentence that none of the other gospel-writers have. "And he was in the hinder part of the ship *asleep on a pillow*" (4:38). And that one touch makes the picture vivid before our eyes.

There can be little doubt that all these details are due to the fact that Peter was an eyewitness and was seeing these things again with the eye of memory.

(v) Mark's realism and his simplicity come out in his Greek style.

(a) His style is not carefully wrought and polished. He tells the story as a child might tell it. He adds statement to statement connecting them simply with the word "and." In the third chapter of the gospel, in the Greek, there are 34 clauses or sentences one after another introduced by "and" after one principal verb. It is the way in which an eager child would tell the story.

(b) He is very fond of the words "and straightway," "and immediately." They occur in the gospel almost 30 times. It is sometimes said of a story that "it marches." But Mark's story does not so much march; he rushes on in a kind of breathless attempt to make the story as vivid to others as it is to himself.

(c) He is very fond of the historic present. That is to say, in the Greek he talks of events in the present tense instead of in the past. "And when Jesus heard it, he *says* to them, 'Those who are strong do not need a doctor, but those who are ill.'" (2:17.) "And when they *come* near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and to Bethany, to the Mount of Olives, he *sends* two of his disciples, and *says* to them, 'Go into the village opposite you ...'" (11:1, 2.) "And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of The Twelve, *comes.*" (14:43.)

Generally speaking we do not keep these historic presents in translation, because in English they do not sound well; but they show how vivid and real the thing was to Mark's mind, as if it was happening before his very eyes.

(d) He quite often gives us the very Aramaic words which Jesus used. To Jairus's daughter, Jesus said, "*Talitha cumi.*" (5:41.) To the deaf man with the impediment in his speech he said, "*Ephphatha.*" (7:34.) The dedicated gift is "*Corban.*" (7:11.) In the Garden he says, "*Abba, Father.*" (14:36.) On the Cross he cries, "*Eloi Eloi lama sabachthani?*" (15:34.)

There were times when Peter could hear again the very sound of Jesus' voice and could not help giving the thing to Mark in the very words that Jesus spoke.