

The Significance of the Passion Story in Mark's Gospel

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Mark's Gospel has famously been described by Martin Kähler as 'a passion narrative¹ with an extended introduction'. This is because around one third of the gospel is devoted to the Passion story. Many scholars point to a major dividing point in the gospel in Mark 8, around half way through the account of Jesus' ministry. There, after being consistently rejected and misunderstood, despite everything he has said and done, Jesus starts to talk about the necessity of the suffering, death and resurrection of the Son of Man. Most recognise the passion narrative fully starting at chapter 14.

In order to understand the significance that the Passion Story has in Mark it is first important to describe as much as we know about who wrote the Gospel, on what it is based, when it was written and why.

There is a lot of debate over who wrote the gospel and according to one tradition, the author, Mark, is not an apostle himself, not one of the original disciples but a follower of one of them. Whether Mark was a Gentile or a Jew remains a subject of scholarly debate, as is the place of composition.

Mark's Gospel is the first of the written gospels and it is the one that establishes the life of Jesus in story form. Although it is the second to appear in the New Testament, most scholars now agree that it was the first gospel composed. Gospel meant "good news" and it is good news that Mark wants to set forth.

One of the most important testimonies is that of Papias, who was bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia of Asia Minor until about AD130. His statement about Mark is recorded in Eusebius's History of the Church (Historia Ecclesiastica) written in 325.

It indicates that Mark became Peter's interpreter and

Wrote accurately all that he remembered, not indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making,

¹ The Passion (translation of Greek πάσχειν paschein, 'to suffer') is the period in the life of Jesus covering his visit to Jerusalem and leading to his execution by crucifixion.

*as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in writing down single points as he remembered them.*²

Three important claims arise from this statement:

1. Mark wrote the gospel that, in Eusebius's day was identified with his name.
2. Mark was not an eyewitness but obtained his information from Peter.
3. Mark's Gospel is not in order and reflects the occasional nature of Peter's preaching.

This last point is an important one and may partly speak to the gospel makeup, and the importance of the passion.

Other scholars suggest that the Mark referred to may have been John Mark, who is mentioned in Acts 15:39 and 12:25. If this is the case then Mark may have been an eye witness. Because there is a lot of scholarly debate on the authorship of the gospel, Mark is for all intents and purposes anonymous.

Where was it written?

Some scholars think that he wrote his book in Rome, others in Alexandria, and others in Syria. The way that Mark tells the story suggests that his audience lived outside Israel, spoke Greek rather than Aramaic and were not familiar with Jewish customs. They were Christian.

The gospel emphasises Jesus's humanity and suffering. For years it was thought of as inferior to and almost a summary of Luke and Matthew. It is now thought likely to be a major source for Luke and Matthew's gospel.

Mark was probably written in the period AD66-70. Mark has a lot to say about the importance of disciples following the "road to the cross" walked by the Lord.

This fits with the situation that Christians will have found themselves in at this time. They would have been facing the grim prospect of martyrdom at the time of or after the persecution of Christians in AD65. Mark 13 is said by some to reflect what was happening in Palestine during the Jewish revolt between AD67 and AD69.

² (Moo, p. 7)

Mark is purposely written. The passion story contained within reveals the Christological identity of Jesus, and is designed by Mark to teach a lesson. The significance is that readers can learn about Jesus' deeds, his parables and the miracles he performed, but unless this is understood in combination with his suffering and His victory through suffering or the vocation of his followers, they cannot fully understand him.

The theme of persecution features in several passages relating to the nature of discipleship. The disciples' lack of faith also forms a significant motif in the structure of his story. The failure of the disciples to appreciate that following Jesus would involve suffering, and the failure of any human being in Mark's story other than Jesus himself to perceive that he is God's Son until after Jesus has died on the Cross is also an important motif (the so called 'messianic secret')

The purpose of the Gospel and Significance of the Passion Story

Mark stands out in a special way as the Gospel of the Cross. It resembles a volume of Sermons, rather than a biography, and in its composition it is possible that Mark started with the Cross and then worked backwards. Mark makes it quite clear in v1 He is writing the Gospel about Jesus Christ, he is not writing a life of Jesus.

The emphasis on the death of Jesus was deliberate and events move rapidly to a climax within the story. Some scholars believe the story of Jesus' passion was the first part to achieve written form. The cross inevitably casts its shadow over the story. Mark does talk about some of the miracles that Jesus performs, but it has been suggested that Mark's point may be that the true messiahship of Jesus cannot be recognised in his miracles. Mark suggests that to believe that Jesus was the Messiah because he did miracles is not a real understanding of who Jesus was. The disciples, as they witness the miracles being performed do not understand what is going on. They are taught to understand from the prediction of the passion onwards who Jesus is.

The Gospel was probably designed to be read in one sitting. It is informed by the Hebrew Scriptures and organised according to Jewish worship practices. It may have been written for a community who as already mentioned were being persecuted, or like the Corinthian Church saw their discipleship in terms of gain and advantage.

Two reasons that the death of Jesus may dominate the Gospel in this way are:

1. Jesus' death was important. The death of Jesus and in particular the crucifixion caused

problems for the Corinthians, they had problems accepting the scandal of the cross. Could it be that the community that Mark was writing for also had these issues? How could the Messiah have been crucified? This to them did not make sense and would have caused a doctrinal problem. The whole idea of a crucified Messiah! They may have even chosen to conveniently ignore the message of the cross.

Crucifixion was a horrible, painful, bloody and torturous way to die. It was a public spectacle, and whether living or dead when the victim was nailed or bound to the cross they suffered a degrading loss of all dignity. Within the Jewish context, crucifixion was seen as an accursed death, based on Old Testament tradition. In Gal 3:13, Paul refers to Deut 21:23 when he writes that “anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.” You can see why people may have taken some offence. You can imagine an audience shaking their heads in disbelief because someone who bore the title Messiah could not possibly have been crucified or, rather they could not possibly bear the title Messiah any longer³.

Perhaps, as Morna Hooker suggests “we should see Mark’s gospel primarily as a piece of Christian apologetic, explaining how it was that the Messiah had been put to death in this way.”⁴ This would explain the emphasis on the inevitability of the death of Christ that he died in accordance with the scriptures, and that Jesus clearly spelt out what was going to happen to him and to the disciples, even though they seemed to be quite unprepared for what happened. When Christians who were finding it difficult to comprehend how God allowed his Messiah to be put to death they could look back at the story and see the clarity and inevitability of what happened.

2. Some scholars suggest that Mark may have been writing for those who were not so much perplexed by Jesus death on the Cross but offended by it. Like the Corinthians they just did not want to know about a crucified Lord. “Their Lord was risen, victorious – and the fact that victory came through apparent defeat was brushed aside as unpalatable”⁵

³ (Cyss, 2004)

⁴ (Hooker, Not Ashamed of The Gospel: New Testament interpretations of the death of Christ, 1994, p. 48)

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It is suggested then that Mark wrote the gospel not to explain the scandal of the cross but to remind his readers that this part of the story was absolutely central to their faith.

This may be one reason also why he has a great deal to say about Christ's death and little to say about his resurrection. Mark also links the death of Jesus with the suffering of others, both before him and after him. In fact the first hint of what might happen to Jesus occurs in 1.14 where we are told that Jesus came into Galilee after the arrest of John the Baptist.

Mark seeks to underline the link between Jesus' death and the cost of discipleship. In 8.31 remember Jesus challenges the Crowd: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Imagine the impact on those who heard these words, and for which crucifixion was not just a metaphor, but a real possibility. What is the impact for us today and those being persecuted for their beliefs in Syria and elsewhere?

So we learn that Jesus' death was inevitable and that it must be shared by others. Those who truly wish to be disciples must live as he lived and they must be prepared to die as he died.

Mark is encouraging Christians not to be like the disciples of Jesus that deserted him at the time of suffering, but rather to be strong like Jesus who till the end was faithful to his mission. We are guided in our faith to walk the way of fellowship with Christ in both his suffering/death and his resurrection (cf. Philippians 3:10 and some of what Paul says about the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11:17ff).

The resurrection of Jesus throws light on the meaning of the Cross. The Cross becomes a symbol of hope rather than of despair. Will you then take up your cross and follow Him?

Questions

- + How does this Passion Narrative speak to us today?
- + What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ today?
- + Does Mark call us to share in Jesus' suffering?
- + Do we need to suffer to know God?
- + How will you respond to this call?

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