

Summer Seminar

Exploring the Gospel of Mark



Sunday, 17 January 2021, 12.15pm,
Anglican Parish of Lower Hutt

How we got the Gospel – written and oral transmission (Jonathan Berkahn)

It's not clear whether – or how far – Jesus was literate. It is clear that he never wrote a book. Why is this? Wouldn't it have been so much more unambiguous and straightforward if we had the gospel written down in black and white, the direct words of the Master, one single text, no room for uncertainty, "this is how it is": the handwriting of the eternal Word himself (wonder how much an autographed edition would fetch...)?

Instead, the gospel has been relational – conversational, even – from the start. This is partly for pragmatic reasons: if Jesus is coming back next Wednesday, what's the point of writing a book about it? But, as the first generation of Christians started to die, it was realised that maybe someone had better write down their recollections before it was too late...

There are, as you know, four canonical gospels; John is the odd one out. But Matthew, Mark, and Luke have an awful lot in common – they are called the synoptic ("seeing together") gospels for this reason. Why is this? Or, to put it another way, who copied whom?

**"MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE, SEE ME
AFTER CLASS.**



**YOUR BOOK REPORTS ARE SURPRISINGLY
SIMILAR."**

In the 4th century, St Augustine developed a theory that Mark was copied from Matthew, essentially an abridged and simplified version of the text. There are scholars who hold similar theories today, but by far the majority view is that Mark was the earliest surviving gospel to be written. It seems pretty clear that authors of Luke and Matthew had this gospel in front of them as they were working, and as they made use of these texts they reshaped them according to their own priorities and purposes.

We can see a typical example of the way

Matthew reworked Mark's material in the resurrection narratives in Mark 16:4-8 and Matthew 28:2-10. Sometimes Matthew and Luke explain things that are unclear in Mark: for example, when Jesus gets annoyed with the disciples for not understanding what he meant by "the leaven of the scribes and pharisees" (but doesn't explain),¹ Matthew and Luke both have interpretations. Different interpretations. As C. S. Lewis said, "what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are."²

Mark, however, only makes up about half of the other two synoptic gospels. Where did the rest come from? Because there is such a lot that Matthew and Luke have in common beside what is

¹ Mark 8:14-21; Matthew 16:5-12; Luke 12:1-3.

² *The Magician's Nephew*, Ch.10.

within Mark, many scholars have posited another, now-lost source, “Q” (from “*Quelle*”, German for “source”), consisting mostly of sayings of Jesus. This, according to the scholarly consensus, is the most likely account of how they came to be.

I do wonder, however, if there needed to be a *written* source for the material normally ascribed to Q? The raw material of the gospels must have existed in spoken form for some decades before they were written down (Mark was the earliest; maybe around 70 CE). As members of a literate society, we think of written texts as being more stable than oral ones. When we want to remember something important, we write it down. When the people of Jesus’ day wanted to remember something important, they told it to *others*. And, in the telling and retelling, the parables, the sayings, the healings, and all the other acts and incidents, took on a durable, pebble-like hardness in being passed from hand to hand, such that their identity remains clear, even when handled by such different personalities as Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Papias of Hierapolis (early 2nd century?) seems to have been present during the earliest stages of this process, as these individual, oral stories were first combined into written collections. He seems to have written a few books himself (now lost) with some very odd stories in them. But he also is quoted as saying this:

“The elder also used to say: ‘Mark,³ who had been Peter’s interpreter, wrote down carefully, but not in order, all that he remembered of the Lord’s sayings and doings. For he had not heard the Lord or been one of his followers, but later on, as I said, one of Peter’s. Peter used to adapt his teaching to the occasion, without making a systematic arrangement of the Lord’s sayings, so that Mark was quite justified in writing down some things just as he remembered them. For he had one purpose only—to leave out nothing that he had heard, and to make no misstatement about it.’”

He may also, however, have looked back with nostalgia to the time when he could hear directly from the first generation of disciples:

“If, then, any one came, who had been a follower of the elders, I questioned him in regard to the words of the elders,—what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the disciples of the Lord, and what things Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say. For I did not think that what was to be gotten from the books would profit me as much as what came from the *living and abiding voice*.”⁴

³ Is he talking about this gospel? And about which Mark? (Mark was the most popular first name in the Roman Empire.)

⁴ Both quotes are in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3:36 (313-325 CE)

Context and themes in the Gospel of Mark (Peter Benge)

Each Gospel has different emphases

Since the four Gospels are written by different authors, it is natural for each of them to tell their story about Jesus differently. The Gospels are all based on the first apostles' proclamation about Jesus, and ultimately derived from Jesus' own life and teaching (all relayed through various sources). There are many points of similarity among them. But the different Gospel-writers and their communities of faith would have had different contexts and concerns. By looking at each Gospel as an individual work we can learn how individual Christians and their communities received and applied the teaching and example of Jesus in various different ways and to meet various different needs.

In the 20th century, awareness grew among church leaders of the importance to faith of the particular view of each Gospel-writer. One outcome of this is that the church's lectionary (cycle of readings) changed to reflect the witness of each of the synoptic Gospels. In our three-year cycle of readings each of the synoptic Gospels is covered consistently – Matthew in Year A, Mark in Year B and Luke in Year C. Each of these years also incorporates some readings from the Gospel of John. This allows us to appreciate much more fully the distinctive emphases of each of the synoptic Gospels. This year is Year B, so we are following the Gospel of Mark.

Information we can glean from the Gospel about the Gospel-writer

The Gospel-writer (who is not named in the Gospel) writes in fairly lowbrow non-literary Greek. There is some indication that he may have been unfamiliar with the geography of the region (5:1, 13; 7:31 etc), and his Gospel appears to be based on Greek sources, rather than being a translation from Aramaic, the local language of the disciples (Brown, 159, 160). So it does not seem likely that the Gospel-writer was among the disciples who were closest to Jesus in his lifetime. However, it is clear that the Gospel-writer, if not an eye-witness of many of the events, had been well resourced by accounts of Jesus' life and ministry (perhaps from St Peter). Christian tradition has identified the Gospel-writer as John Mark, cousin of St Barnabas, who was a missionary with Barnabas and Paul, and known to St Peter. However, there is no textual evidence for this in the Gospel itself.

Information about the community for which the Gospel was being written

Because the Gospel-writer writes in Greek, translates Aramaic words (e.g. 5:41; 15:34) and explains Jewish customs (e.g. 7:3-4), it appears that the community for which this Gospel was written was made up of Greek-speaking Gentile followers of Christ.

It is reasonable to think that themes emphasised in the Gospel had significance to the community for whom the Gospel was first intended. Some notable themes are the suffering of Jesus the Messiah, the conflict of good against evil, persecution of the faithful, and the disciples' misunderstanding and failure of Jesus. These themes suggest that the community to whom the Gospel was written had themselves experienced persecution and possibly personal failure in following Jesus. This fits a setting in Rome during or following the persecution of Christians there by Nero in 64AD, but the persecutions could have taken place elsewhere.

The purpose and probable date of writing

The Gospel is written to bear witness to Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Son of God. It would have been intended to be read aloud where Christians gathered in house churches. Scholars tend to date the writing of this Gospel between the mid-60s AD and the early 70s AD.

Particular themes in the Gospel of Mark

Some key themes are discussed in Murray's presentation, so I will simply list them here:

- The Messianic secret
- The misunderstanding and failure of the disciples
- Jesus' suffering and death as a key to his significance
- Suffering as an essential part of discipleship

I will focus on another major theme – **the conflict between good and evil**

Jesus' conflict with demonic forces is clearly expressed throughout the Gospel, but this may not be easy for modern readers to accept. For one thing it is foreign to Western materialistic thinking and secondly, too great a focus on demonic activity has sometimes led Christian churches into serious abuses. So do we decide that the emphasis on the demonic in this Gospel is a product of an outdated and now unhelpful world view, and actively discard it? Or does this emphasis on the conflict between good and evil offer us some deeper insights into how we should be living today as Jesus' disciples?

The Gospel-writer presents a world that is in the hands of Satan and demonic forces. It needs to be rescued by the Son of God and transformed by followers who live out the values of his kingdom. The disciples are presented very ambiguously. They misunderstand Jesus and prove disloyal to him, but he proves loyal to them and the angel says that they will see Jesus again after his resurrection (16:7).

a) There is a tendency within the Church to assume that we are on the right side, and doing okay – or that the goal is to be generally good and kind, not holy and transformative through the power of God. The emphasis on demonic forces in Mark causes us to question our own motives, attitudes and actions, and shows us our constant need of the help and transforming power of God through Jesus Christ.

- Does the teaching in our church sermons and our home church studies point us to the power that is beyond us and in God, or is it more focused on us doing and being better (in our own strength)? How consistent is this with the Gospel of Mark's theology?
- What personal practice or practices help you most to connect with God's transforming power?

b) The Gospel-writer shows the conflict of good against evil as taking place in the spiritual dimension (exorcisms, healings, etc), the natural world (e.g. the calming of the storm) and in the interpersonal dimension of human life (e.g. false accusations, representing God's work as the work of Satan, malicious and murderous intentions). Let's focus on one aspect of this, the issue of false witness and lying.

- In recent US politics we have seen the problems that result when there is a resolute commitment to lying. Would you count this behaviour as demonic? Why or why not?
- What about lesser lies we tell to ourselves or others that could cause harm? Are these lesser lies demonic? If so, how seriously should we take them? What should we do about them?
- When you do something wrong, what do you find helps you to get back to alignment with God?

c) The Gospel-writer implies that we as Jesus' followers need to engage actively in the conflict of good against evil if we are to be part of the change that God wants to bring. Action for social justice and courage to stand up for what is right and true appears to be part of this conflict.

- Identify one thing in our community or country that you think of as really wrong or evil. Or name one good thing that strongly calls for your support. Share it with others. Once all have shared choose one of the topics mentioned. Brainstorm some things that you or your church could do about it.

Bibliography

- Brown, R. (1997). *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday.
Painter, J. (1997). *Mark's Gospel*. London: Routledge.

The Significance of the Passion Narrative in Mark's Gospel

Rev'd Murray Wills

**Seminar on Mark
St James' Church January 2021**

Mark's Gospel has famously been described as 'a passion narrative with an extended introduction'. This is because around one third of the gospel is devoted to the passion story, which is the brief period in the life of Jesus covering his visit to Jerusalem and leading to his execution by crucifixion.

Where, when and for whom Mark wrote his Gospel of "Good News" has relevance to Mark's message. It was probably written around 70 C.E. after the failure of the first Jewish Revolt and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple at the hands of the Romans to a Gentile Christian audience.

The gospel emphasises Jesus's humanity and suffering. 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 70 C.E. The passion story 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, death, and resurrection, they cannot understand him. Without his suffering and death, the salvation of humankind will not be accomplished.

Mark stands out in a distinct way as the Gospel of the Cross. It resembles a volume of stories, rather than a biography, and in its composition, it is possible that Mark started with the Cross and then worked backwards. The emphasis on the death of Jesus was deliberate and events move rapidly to a climax within 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.

The reason that the death of Jesus may dominate the Gospel in this way is that Jesus' death was important for Mark to explain. The death of Jesus and in particular the crucifixion caused problems for the Corinthians, they had problems accepting it. It was a scandal. A crucified Messiah did not make sense to them and would have caused a doctrinal problem. They may have even chosen to conveniently ignore the message of the cross, conveniently just focusing on the miracles and deeds of Jesus. Could it be that the community that Mark was writing for also had these issues?

Mark seeks to underline the link between Jesus' death and the cost of discipleship. In 8:31 remember Jesus challenges the crowd: "if anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his 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.

We learn in Mark's Gospel 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.

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

1. What stood out to you about the significance of the Passion story?
2. What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ today?

Summer Series 2021

The Gospel of Mark concluding section

Part A: Reference: Please look up Mark Chapter 16

Derek Lightbourne

- 1) **Brevity:** What will first be noted is the brevity of the account of the events after the death of Jesus and his being taken down from the cross and taken to the tomb. Then some Addendums are added. What would seem to have happened is that the original text, written on a parchment and wrapped in a scroll has got lost or torn off. To learn the complete story, we need to read other accounts in 1 Corinthians 15.3 -8, and the other three gospels. Another possible reason could be that Mark intended to end his gospel in this abrupt way.
- 2) **Link with preceding events:** Some biblical scholars have pointed out that significance can be found. Note that most of Jesus' ministry, and his followers were Jewish. Jewish customs are observed (as in the burial). Note 15.38 the curtain of the temple is torn in two. The suggestion is that Judaism's claim to hold exclusive access to God is ended. Access to God is now available only through the death of Jesus. (Hebrews 10.19-20 reflects: Christ 'opened a new and living way for us through the curtain', '...let us approach with a true heart and full assurance of faith...' Secondly, the universality of the gospel can be marked by the observation of a Gentile – a Roman soldier becomes the first human to recognise the full reality of who Jesus is 'a son of God' (15.39, or NRSV: Truly this was God's Son')
- 3) **Early in the morning:** Jesus' body had not been fully buried, just placed in the tomb, so that the custom of not 'working' on a Sabbath could be kept. The women would have had to purchase the expensive spices to anoint the body prior to burial. Thus it was laid in a rock-hewn tomb loaned by Joseph of Arimathea (Mt 28). A large heavy stone was rolled in front for security.
- 4) **The tomb is empty:** It was generally the women's role to anoint the dead body and Mark tells us it was Mary from Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Salome. How did they expect the stone could be moved? Hopefully they might find nearby folk who could do this. But as they presumably pondered this on the way, on arrival they found it had been moved and their attention was drawn to meeting 'a young man' ('an angelic being' – dressed in white suggests that). Furthermore he gives them the 'key' message: no need to be fearful (what could have happened?). 'He has been raised.'
- 5) **The male disciples:** The women are 'sent' (*apostolo*) to share the message of resurrection. Peter is singled out, possibly as God-given consolation for his remorse in denying knowing Jesus in the tension of the arrest. They are to be reminded that Jesus had predicted these events would occur 'just as he told you.'
- 6) **Terror and amazement:** How would you have reacted given the total surprise? Would you have kept it a secret ('they told no one' – till they met up with the male disciples? 16.8)

Part B: The Ending of the Gospel

1) 'An old ending'

In most contemporary versions there is an Addendum indicating verses 9 – 20 are not in some early manuscripts (including the Sinaiticus and Vatican versions). How did this come about? The early copies were hand written on papyrus. It is likely some copies were made in Mark's life and certainly after his death. The version can vary as 1.41 suggests Jesus was 'sorry' or 'Jesus was angry..' with the leper. For storing and passing round, the papyri were rolled into scrolls, and it is likely with use the outer part got damaged and lost. Thus a further 'tradition' was included. Most contemporary versions acknowledge and include this. What I consider allows for its validity is what is described as happening wouldn't have been included if they didn't happen. The verses thus describe aspects of life in the early church community.

2) The extended ending – Four sections

i) Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (vv. 9 -11)

16.8 ends rather abruptly with Mary Magdalene and Mary mother of James and Salome going to the tomb, seeing angels and being in 'terror and amazement'. What is interesting here is about Mary Magdalene having been healed by Jesus (some ascribe Luke 7.36 – 50 as being this same person but Luke does not name her). Note the impact of Mary's healing, now being a key person featuring in the discipleship group.

ii) Jesus appears to two followers (vv. 12 – 13)

This reads as a summary of the extended story in Luke 24 of the two travellers encountering the 'stranger' on the road to Emmaus.

iii) Jesus commissions 11 disciples (vv. 14 – 18)

- 'Seeing is believing' – would seem to have applied not only to Thomas. It would seem others had doubts, see also Matthew's account 'but some doubted.' What is interesting is that they were willing to tell this story against themselves and not conveniently omit it.

- A commission – Matthew's is to 'make disciples.....' Mark is to 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation (*cosmos*). What might be the implications of this?

- Believing and baptism for salvation – or condemnation. This rather conveys how some in the early church interpreted commands in 'black and white'. The letters of John are similar – either in the light or in the darkness.

- Performing 'signs'. From this it would seem evident the ministry begun by Jesus continued in the early church. Thus casting out demons (Acts 19.11ff) speak in 'new tongues' (Acts 2, 1Cor 12. 10 and 16), laying on hands for recovery of sickness (Acts 9:32 – 42, 28 .7-10), picking up poisonous snakes (Acts 28.3 – 6), and a story of immunity in traditions of Justus Barsabbas (the disciple not chosen in Acts 1.23).

iv) The ascension of Jesus (vv. 19-20)

- a similar 'rounding off' of Jesus' final resurrection appearance along with a 'theological statement': 'seated at the right hand of God'. There's joy among the disciples and an affirmation of Jesus' ministry continues through them: 'The Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.'

Questions for discussion:

- 1) What would you have included in the gospel story if you had been Mark?
- 2) What are important points this final Addendum seeks to convey?