

# **The Significance of the Passion Narrative in Mark's Gospel**

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Mark's Gospel is the second Gospel to appear in the New Testament, but most (not all) scholars agree it was the first one written. Tradition holds that Mark arranged the teachings of Peter to give a written account of Jesus Christ to the church and there is evidence to the fact that it reflects the preaching of Peter that we see in the book of Acts<sup>1</sup>. We know from Acts 12:12 that Mark had contact with Peter no later than the mid-40s C.E. and that the church met at Mark's home.

Mark's Gospel has 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. This story starts with Jesus' visit to Jerusalem and ultimately to his crucifixion and resurrection.

My task in this seminar is to try to uncover why it was important for Mark to spend so much time on Jesus Christ's walk to the Cross and death.

Many scholars point to a major dividing point in the gospel in chapter 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.

Mark's Gospel was probably designed to be read in one sitting. It is informed by the Hebrew Scriptures and organised according to Jewish worship practices, and 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 found themselves in at this time. They were facing the grim prospect of martyrdom at the time of or after the persecution of Christians in C.E.65. Mark 13 is said by some to reflect what was happening in Palestine during the Jewish revolt between C.E.67 and C.E.69.

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<sup>1</sup> (Monaghan 2012)

Many Christians thought that the revolt, which failed, would usher in the new kingdom on earth and herald the triumphant return of the Messiah. After all Jesus was remembered as proclaiming that “Some of you standing here will not taste death until you see the kingdom come with power” (Mark 9:1.20). Mark seems to want to recast the traditional images of Jesus so that we can make sense of the events that occurred, or did not occur, after Jesus died. There is something about the Christian understanding of Jesus at that time that Mark seems compelled to correct and give new meaning to.

Mark stands out in a special 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 with the story of Jesus passion being the first to be written. Mark makes it quite clear in verse one he is writing the Gospel about Jesus Christ; he is not writing a life of Jesus hence why Jesus’ early years are not included. The emphasis on the death of Jesus was therefore deliberate and events move rapidly to a climax within the story.

Mark’s Gospel is designed by Mark to teach. Readers can learn about Jesus’ deeds, his parables and the miracles he performed (his power over nature), but unless they are understood in combination with his suffering, death and resurrection (his power over death), they cannot fully understand him. Many people including the disciples confess that he is the Messiah, but initially only demons (who quake at his authority<sup>2</sup>), women like the woman who anoints him for burial and other socially marginalised people, seem to understand who he really is

Perhaps at the time too much emphasis was being placed on the Miracles performed by Jesus and Mark was aware of different views or beliefs on who Jesus was. He may have set out to correct these understandings.

Peter partly seems to ‘Get it’ in what is called the Confession of Peter in Mark 8:30:

Jesus takes his disciples north of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi for a time away from the crowds. On the way, he asks them, “Who do people say I am?” Their answers are varied: “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” Jesus then turns to them: “But what about you?... Who do you say I am?” Peter answers for the others: “You are the Messiah!” Jesus’ words and actions have convinced Peter

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<sup>2</sup> The demon quakes with fear at Jesus’ authority “*What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!*” (Mark 1:24)

that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Saviour of Israel.

In a shocking twist, Jesus defines the role of the Messiah as one of suffering and death (Mark 8:31). Peter is shocked and rebukes Jesus. Jesus, in turn, rebukes him right back: “Get behind me, Satan!... You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns” (Mark 8:33). Though Peter is right that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, he cannot understand the suffering role of the Messiah, he is reflecting the popular expectation that the Messiah would defeat the Romans and then establish God’s Kingdom on earth. Without his suffering and death, the salvation of humankind will not be accomplished, however. Of course, Peter would go on to deny that he knows Jesus three times.

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. Could it be that the community that Mark was writing for also had these issues?

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 longer<sup>3</sup>.

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.”<sup>4</sup> 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 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

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<sup>3</sup> (Cyss 2004)

<sup>4</sup> (Hooker 1994, 48)

to death they could look back at the story and see the clarity and inevitability of what happened, that Jesus can only reach his destiny through the Passion.

Mark then may have written his gospel 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.

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 countries overseas?

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 until 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. 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 Jesus?

### **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?

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