

## **A Perspective on the Distinctiveness of Mark's Gospel.**

**John W. (Jack) Carter**

**Abstract.** For many years many scholars all but ignored the Gospel of Mark, assuming that it was a subset of the Gospel of Matthew. Later criticism argued that Mark predates Matthew and inspired a flurry of research that both defended and attacked this theory. What is found is that the Gospel of Mark is, indeed, a unique and powerful presentation of the identity and power of Jesus. It is written in the form of a narrative that is fast-paced and to the point, disregarding many details of events in order to highlight their main purpose for presentation. The main emphasis of the gospel centers around Jesus as the Son of God who came as his agent to suffer on the cross to atone for the sins of mankind for all ages. Mark presents the plan of salvation through Jesus' teaching rather than his own statements; a plan that is sufficient, complete, and secure. He also presents a Jesus who tends to keep his true identity a secret that is to be revealed through the context of his passion and prophesy rather than his own testimony.

Though the Gospel of Mark is written in Greek, many of its forms are of a low, or common, Greek that includes many of the word forms and idioms commonly used that come from other languages, including Latin and Aramaic. Just as some early scholars did not take the Gospel of Mark too seriously because of its similarity to Matthew, they also disregarded its authority because of its lower quality of Greek language. Many scholars agree that Mark learned his theology from the apostles and his primary source was the apostle, Peter. Some argue that the entire gospel is simply a transcription made by Mark

of Peter's personal testimony. Its impetuous pace, its prominent positioning of Peter in the text, and its similarity to Peter's epistle all support this view.

Much controversy has surrounded the placement of the gospel into the New Testament Canon, particularly concerning the sequence of the gospel writings and their sources. The positioning of the Gospel of Mark is a key to understanding the Synoptic Problem, an attempt to explain the variety of the writings of Mark, Matthew and Luke that will probably never be fully understood this side of the rapture. However difficult as the problem may be, the central theme of the Gospel of Mark is the centrality of Jesus to God's plan for the salvation of mankind. It is fully consistent with the other gospel writings as well as the New Testament epistles, yet presents a unique, Marcan, perspective.

### **A Perspective on the Distinctiveness of Mark's Gospel.**

If the most dynamic message in the Holy Bible is the gospel of Jesus Christ, then the most dynamic book in the Holy Bible is the Gospel of Mark. It is widely accepted that the book was written shortly after the fall of Jerusalem, at a time when both Jewish and Jewish Christian communities were profoundly shaken. With the fall of the city, the Jews' identity and confidence collapsed. Against these turbulent times that seemed to signal an end to the Jerusalem-centered communities, Mark begins his book with a bold statement of a new beginning, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ"<sup>1</sup>. The use of *archē* implies that this is the beginning of something where the consummation is still yet to come. At a time when the Christian community needs hope, Mark provides, not only inspiration but also illumination. The loose canon of written and spoken gospel that were the vehicle of evangelical communication are, possibly for the first time, consolidated in a single, hard-hitting written account of the identity of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the eternal security that is found in Him.

From the 4th through the 19th centuries the Gospel of Mark was "largely neglected by scholars because it was commonly regarded as an abridgment of Matthew. But by the end of the 19th century the theory that Mark was the first Gospel written gained widespread acceptance. Since then Mark has been the object of intense interest and study."<sup>2</sup> Consequently, a first impression of the Gospel might leave one thinking it is simply a duplicate or subset of the other synoptic gospels. However, upon moderate investigation it does not take long to see a very distinctive flavor in its structure and content.

The form of the gospel of Mark is fast-paced and often abrupt. "The Gospel of Mark pictures Christ in action. There is a minimum of discourse and a maximum of deed. And yet the same essential pictures of Christ appear here as in the Logia, in Matthew, in Luke, in John, in Paul, in Peter, and in Hebrews."<sup>3</sup> Mark's story is one of conflict, and conflict is the force that propels the story forward. The major conflict is between Jesus and Israel, made up of the religious authorities and the Jewish crowd,"<sup>4</sup> predominantly the former. The crowd does not enter the narrative as an antagonist until the passion of Christ.

Though the content and theology of the Gospel of Mark is consistent with that of the other gospels and the New Testament epistles, it exhibits its own perspective and purpose. "Redaction critics largely agree, that Matthew wanted to stress Jesus as the Son of David and King of Israel, that Mark highlighted His role as miracle worker and suffering servant, that Luke emphasized Jesus as completely human and concerned for the outcasts of society, and that John underlined Jesus as the Son of God equal to the Father Himself."<sup>5</sup> Unlike the gospel of Luke that contains lengthy and detailed historical discourses, or the gospel of Matthew that contains lengthy sermons and detailed accounts of many events, the gospel of Mark presents the good news of Jesus Christ in a dynamic, fast-paced, almost abbreviated fashion that intertwines three story lines that interact with frequent cycles of conflict and resolution. The focus starts on Jesus, and remains there throughout the book. The book slows its pace only twice, in chapters 4 and 13 to present lengthy discourses by Jesus.

The first story line is that of the ministry, passion, and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God. The second story line is that of the religious leaders who, though given

authority by the Jewish community, exercise a false, pride-based, form of authority. They are in continual conflict with Jesus' ministry and message and are frequently pointed out by Jesus as exemplifying the failure of works-based righteousness. The third story line involves the calling, training, and discipling of the twelve apostles. Though they respond eagerly to the call and listen intently to Jesus' teaching, they never seem to understand the context of their calling, or the messages that Jesus presents to them. They do not comprehend Jesus' self-description or prophecies and, in the end, are so lacking in commitment as to abandon Jesus during His passion. Following the description of the resurrection events, an appendix to the book closes quickly with a short description of the commissioning of the disciples and their subsequent ministry of preaching, teaching, and performing miracles.

Its introduction is short and to the point, stated in the first verse: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."<sup>1</sup> Note that some manuscripts omit "the Son of God." Whereas both Matthew and Luke present lengthy narratives on the birth of Jesus and the events that surround it, Jesus bursts into the scene as an adult. "Mark was not writing the life of Jesus, and so he does not begin his story by telling how Jesus was born or how He lived as a young man. His purpose was only to tell his readers: a. about that work of Jesus which resulted in His being killed, b. how He died for all mankind, and was wonderfully raised again."<sup>6</sup> Mark's omission of the virgin birth of Jesus has raised many questions among scholars. Guthrie states that "it certainly cannot be claimed that silence [concerning the virgin birth] indicates ignorance."<sup>7</sup> The birth of Jesus was not considered by Mark to be a priority. The Gospel of Mark contains a very concentrated Christology that is similar to the book of Hebrews: the gospel centers its

narratives around an exalted Jesus. The birth stories of Luke and Matthew bring other characters into the center stage, most markedly, Mary, the mother of Jesus. Instead of involving all of these individuals in his introduction of Jesus, Mark immediately introduces Jesus as the Son of God, first through the prophecies of Malachi (Mal. 3:1) and Isaiah (Is. 40:3), and then through the testimony of God the Father following Jesus' baptism by John.

The following is a short outline of the book:

I. Title	Mark 1:1
II. Introduction	Mark 1:2 - 13
III. Jesus Authenticated	Mark 1:4 - 5:43
IV. Jesus in Conflict	Mark 6:1 - 8:26
V. Jesus' Teachings	Mark 8:27 - 10:52
VI. Jesus' Journey toward Calvary	Mark 11 - 13
VII. The Passion and Resurrection	Mark 14 – 16

The book presents five relevant doctrines:

1. God took the initiative to reveal His purpose to man by sending His Son, Jesus, to provide a way for the relationship between Himself and His created mankind to be restored.
2. Jesus brought a new age, a new covenant of grace, that brings to the faithful His Spirit of peace, with innumerable blessings.
3. It was necessary for Jesus to suffer so that the sins of all mankind, past, present, and future, can be vindicated.

4. True Christian commitment is demonstrated only by a personal confession of faith in Jesus that agrees with who He is: Lord and Savior.
5. God is able and faithful to sustain the salvation of those who place their faith in Him.

Fully one-third of the Marcan gospel (chapters 11 - 15) describes the last eight days of Jesus' earthly ministry, from His entrance to Jerusalem through the Passion and the Resurrection. This is so strong a theme in the book that some have referred to the gospel as a "passion narrative with an extended introduction."<sup>8</sup>

The theology of the Marcan gospel varies little from the other synoptic gospels, but the emphases placed upon the events of the gospel message are sufficiently different from the other gospel writers as to raise theological questions. Why does "Mark devote the bulk of his gospel to Jesus' miracles and exorcisms and to the authority which he teaches and debates, and why does Mark depress and counteract as much as possible the element of suffering"<sup>9</sup> in the passion? The answer to these questions lies in the central purpose of Mark's writing. Like the other gospel writers, Mark had a unique perspective from which to share the gospel that inspired its form, and a well-defined message he wished present as its clear and predominant theme.

The central theological theme in the gospel of Mark centers around Jesus as the Son of God, affirmed by the Father (1:11, 9:7), by demons (3:11,5:7), by a Roman centurion (15:9), and by Jesus Himself (13:32; 14:36, 61-62). The authoritative power of the Son of God is demonstrated in the authority of His teaching (1:22,27), his power to heal disease and disability (1:30-31, 40-42; 2:3-12; 3:1-5; 5:25-34; 7:31-37; 8:22-26;

10:46-52), His absolute power over demonic forces (1:23-27; 5:1-20; 7:24-30; 9:17-27), His power over nature (4:37-39; 6:35-44, 47-52; 8:1-10), and ultimately, his power over death (5:21-24, 35-43)<sup>10</sup>. Mark used first hand testimony (believed by many to be Peter's) to prove that by these powers the Kingdom of God had come to the people through Jesus Christ. The only reasonable response to such knowledge must be to come to Jesus in faith. Because of this central theme, Mark is not as concerned about serving as a historian or chronicler of Jesus' ministry. Mark's purpose is to present the person and power of Jesus Christ, the Messiah who is the Son of God.

Mark's Jesus-centered theme is further indicated by the abrupt ending of the book. Early manuscripts conclude the book with the discovery of the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, and their instruction to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen, and would meet them in Galilee (Mark 16:8). To this point Mark does not include any of the post-resurrection events that are recorded in the other synoptic gospels. The writer of the book has already completed his purpose, doing so without turning attention away from Jesus as the Son of God by focusing on His commissioning and sending out of the disciples. If we wish to learn of these events and their consequences, we must refer to the books of Matthew, Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, and the epistles. The appendix to the book (Mark 16:9-20) that contains a brief description of these events is not contained in the early manuscripts.

Another distinctive and recurring theme that subtly runs through the Gospel of Mark involves the care with which Jesus handled the public dissemination of knowledge concerning his identity. It is as if He were keeping His true identity as the prophesied Messiah a secret. Hence, this theological theme is referred to as the "Messianic Secret."

Several arguments have been raised in an attempt to explain this theme. "Some contend that Mark and the other Gospel writers inserted these commands for silence as a literary device to explain why the Jews did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah during His earthly ministry."<sup>11</sup> I disagree, and would insert another opinion that centers, not around a literary device of the writer, but rather around a practical plan of the Savior. Since it was through His vicarious death that Jesus would save His people, that death was necessary before his true identity was to be made known. If his identity were to be made public prior to his death, much conflict would have arisen from the Jews' basic misunderstanding of who the Messiah was to be. We only need to observe the triumphal entry into Jerusalem as recorded in the other two synoptic gospels to see the way people would flock to follow him as their King. The people were awaiting a Messiah who would free them from the political tyranny of Rome. The people would readily follow Jesus if He were this Messiah, and would be trading, at least from their perspective, a worldly kingdom for the Kingdom of God. Any such movement by the people would be contrary to Jesus' true identity, and would be interpreted by the politics of the day as a rebellion against the governing authorities. When the religious leaders heard Jesus' message, their first response was to destroy him. Consequently, when Jesus confronted the demons and they recognized Him, their silence was demanded (Mk. 1:25, 34; 3:12). Though the performance of miracles was fundamental to the verification of who he was, when such events took place, Jesus commanded that they not be made public (Mk. 1:44; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26). The truth of who He was would come in God's time through God's means.

“Unfortunately, Judaism did not have the same clarity about the Messiah and his mission. Some groups among the Jews were not looking

for any Messiah. The golden age had come with the Maccabean victories in 164 B.C. As long as the temple functioned, deliverance was not needed. Others (for example, the people who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls) believed in two Messiahs. One would be a descendant of David who would rule as king, while the other would be a descendant of Aaron who would purify temple worship as high priest. For both groups Scripture and the experience of Hasmonean priest-kings from 164 to 163 B.C. had proved that the roles of ruler and priest could not be combined. Still others were looking for a warrior-king who would deliver them from the Romans. In fact several people presented themselves as candidates for the office (Acts 5:36-37 has only a partial listing), and one, Simeon Ben Kosiba, would lead the Jews to a final defeat in A.D. 135.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus often spoke in parables that were not understood by the audience to whom He was speaking. Even the disciples did not understand most of Jesus' teaching, and when the passion took place, their commitment to Him was so weak that they scattered in fear for their own lives. I believe the answer to these latter misunderstandings is not so much attributable to the Messianic Secret as many scholars contend, as it is to the basic plan of salvation. The disciples' understanding radically changed when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.<sup>13</sup> The ignorance of the people, and of the disciples who sometimes appear to act as a band of "Keystone Cops," was attributable to the fact that the truth of the gospel is foolishness to those who are not enlightened by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup> It was at the Pentecost event that the Holy Spirit revealed to the disciples the truth behind all that Jesus had said and done. The response of every one of the apostles was to dedicate the remainder of their lives to the dissemination of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The "Keystone Cops" of the synoptic gospels became the pillars of the faith in the Acts and the Epistles, each one dying a martyr's death. (Some argue that John's exile on the island of Patmos was not martyrdom, but since he was banished to that prison because of his testimony of Jesus and he died there, I would define that as martyrdom.) The Jews

failed to see Jesus as the Messiah simply because they had such a misunderstanding of who the Messiah would be. The same prejudices keep the modern Jewish community from understanding the gospel message.

The language and vocabulary of the Marcan gospel is unique and identifiable. Mark's proficiency in the use of the Greek language is considered to be less than the other New Testament authors.<sup>15</sup> He also mixes various forms of Latin and Aramaic into the writing, creating a mixture of prose that is more closely associated with communication between common people, than that between Greek scholars. "In literary terms, its shaping is primitive."<sup>16</sup> This characteristic of Mark's form is consistent enough that many scholars agree that the last eleven verses (16:9-20) were added from another source at a later date. This argument is so widely accepted that most Bible translations make note of that position in some form or another.

The apparent speed with which Mark's gospel progresses is enhanced by words such as "straightaway" (used over 40 times).

"He employs over seventy words which are found nowhere else in the New Testament. We find him preserving the identical Aramaic words uttered by the Lord. In his Gospel alone occur *Boanerges* (3:17); *Talitha cumi* (5:41); *Korban* (7:11); *Ephphatha* (7:34); and *Abba* (14:36). Writing for Romans we find him transferring certain Latin words into Greek, such as *legio, legion* (5:9); *centurio, centurion*, which elsewhere is *quadrans, farthing* (12:42); *flagellare, to scourge* (15:15); *speculator, executioner* (2:27); *census, tribute* (12:14); *sextarius, pot* (7:4); *praetorium* (15:16). Three of these, *centurio, speculator, and sextarius* are found in his Gospel only. He always adds a note of explanation to Jewish words and usages."<sup>17</sup>

Certainly, the most significant area of controversy surrounding the Gospel of Mark is its place in the sequence of the development of the New Testament Canon. As stated above, the Gospel of Mark was initially considered an abridgment of the Gospel of

Matthew, and was not carefully considered until recently. In these last 100 years scholars have held the opinion that the gospel of Mark, and another unknown gospel source predates the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and that the latter two writers drew upon Mark's gospel in the creation of their own. But, was Mark actually a source for the other synoptics? "The critical analysis of the sources of the Gospels is justifiably regarded as one of the most difficult research problems in the history of ideas. Its difficulty is caused not only by the material itself but also by the almost unparalleled expenditure of conscientious attention to even the slightest detail over a period of the last 200 years."<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, there is no shortage of opinion concerning gospel sources. The primary position for recent years was the Markan Hypothesis, or the "Two Source Theory" that held to the priority of the Gospel of Mark and a later and hypothetical unknown source named "Quelle," German for "Source." However, modern scholarship has asked many questions concerning the validity of this hypothesis, and its integrity has been significantly challenged. According to Stoltz, "The Marcan hypothesis, for more than a hundred years almost universally regarded as the solution of the synoptic problem, is untenable." He then goes on to make many arguments that refute the Markan Hypothesis. A similar and fully developed argument is made by Meijboom and may be worth some review.<sup>19</sup>

"The synoptic problem has vehemently disturbed the minds of biblical scholars ever since the controversial publication of Das Leben Jesu, Kritisch Bearbeitet by David Freidrich Strauss in 1835 - 1836 (Eng. Tran. The Life of Jesus Critically Examined, 1846)."<sup>20</sup> The Synoptic Problem remains unsolved, so no attempt will be made to solve it here.

Another area of controversy, mentioned twice above, concerns the source of the last twelve verses in the book. “The last 12 verses of Mark (16:9-20) known as “the longer ending of Mark” constitute one of the most difficult and most disputed textual problems in the New Testament.”<sup>21</sup> Were they written by the same author? Was it an appendix inserted by early redactors? We will also leave this argument without a solution, though speculation on the issue is quite tempting.

It is evident that the content and context of Mark’s gospel was greatly influenced by the teaching of the apostles, particularly those credited with the composition of other New Testament writings. Early tradition, and much current speculation, subscribes to the thesis that there was a close theological tie between the author of the book of Mark and the Apostle Peter. “Acts 10:36 - 43 seems to reinforce this tradition, for many have seen the Marcan outline in this example of Peter’s preaching. Since Peter’s preaching is basically the outline and content of the Gospel of Mark, John—having been with Peter for many years—would have been completely familiar with this body of truth.”<sup>22</sup>

This early tradition was promoted by the writings of Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea in his text, Ecclesiastical History.<sup>27</sup> This text, written between 300 and 325 A.D. stated that “Mark, who became Peter’s interpreter wrote accurately whatever he remembered, though not in order, of the things said or done by the Lord.”<sup>23</sup> Eusebius was quoting from the writings of an earlier bishop, Papias who wrote around 140 A.D. Papias was a collector of first-century religious tradition, and though only fragments of his work have survived, his opinion was considered accurate by many in the early church. Irenaeus, who postdates Papias, stated that “after their [Peter and Paul’s] decease Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also handed down to us in writing what Peter had preached.”<sup>24</sup>

However convincing the testimony of these early writers may appear, clear internal evidence is difficult to find. However, there are many internal implications that may lead one to agree with the early tradition. The lack of chronology in the gospel may lead one to assume that the gospel is simply a collection of stories that the writer had learned from someone else. When the early historians point to such a close relationship between Mark and Peter, it is easy to rationalize that Peter is that source. Peter's part in the gospel of Mark is very dominant (Mk. 3:16, 5:37, 8:29, 9:5), so dominant as to come into direct conflict with Jesus (Mk. 8:32-33). When lists of the apostles include Peter's name, that name appears first (Mk. 3:16, 5:37, 9:2, 13:3). He often was the first to speak in response to events taking place (Mk. 10:28, 11:21). Peter is frequently implied as the leader of Jesus' "inner circle" of apostles (Mk. 14:33, 16:7). His boldness, which was to serve the kingdom of God well after Pentecost is clearly evident in the text (Mk. 14:29,31). Yet to the risk of misleading new converts, Mark also vividly describes the fallibilities of Peter's humanity (Mk. 14:37, 54, 66-72 ). A connection between Mark and Peter is recorded in 1 Peter 5:13 when he is listed as Peter's "son" and obvious co-laborer. However, this connection pales in reference to the number of times the apostle Paul also refers to Mark as his co-laborer (Col 4:10, 2 Tim 4:11, Philemon 1:24.)

Consequently, because of Mark's close association with the writers of the New Testament epistles, we see much of the theology of those epistles in Mark's gospel. It is interesting to note, and it would be interesting to fully investigate, the close theological Christology of the Gospel of Mark and the Epistle to the Hebrews, particularly in light of the doubt as to the author of the Hebrew epistle. These arguments presuppose the author to be John

Mark, identified by Peter and Paul. There is some contention among scholars as to whether or not the author of the gospel was this individual.

Again, Mark would have been greatly influenced by the doctrine of the apostles as he often traveled and ministered with them (Acts 12:25). Because Eusebius makes no reference to the influence that these others would have had on him, one can argue that the Mark to whom Eusebius refers, and the John Mark who is attributed with the authorship of the book are, most likely, different individuals.<sup>25</sup> Papias' quotation named Mark as author and included the following information about Mark:

- (1) He was not an eyewitness follower of Jesus.
- (2) He accompanied the Apostle Peter and heard his preaching.
- (3) He wrote down accurately all that Peter remembered of Jesus' words and works "but not in order," that is, not always in chronological order.
- (4) He was Peter's "interpreter," probably meaning he explained Peter's teaching to a wider audience by writing it down rather than translating Peter's Aramaic discourses into Greek or Latin.
- (5) His account is wholly reliable (cf. Eusebius Ecclesiastical History 3. 39. 15).<sup>26</sup>

The Gospel of Mark was written during a time when the stability, hope and identity that the good news of Jesus Christ was badly needed by a scattered, confused, and frightened body of Christian believers.<sup>27</sup> Also, the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."<sup>28</sup> The gospel was and is in its entirety the Word of God that not only had the power to change lives at the time it was written, but has and will continue to do so until the end of the age. Its theology is consistent with the

remainder of Biblical content, and yet contains the unique perspective of witness and purpose that was introduced by its writer. Consequently, its power remains. People who do not know Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior can find instruction and illumination in these pages that will lead to faith. Christians who are in need of encouragement and direction will find guidance here also.

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