



MARK... ... UNCUT¹

The who when why what and how of Mark's Gospel

By Pete Tong

Introduction

Mark is the shortest of the Gospels and the most action filled.

It is a story told simply but with great emotional power.

Who Author

No where in the Gospel of Mark does the author explicitly identify himself. As the story unfolds it seems as though it is written from the perspective of the Apostle Peter as there are details and insights that only Peter would be aware of.

However other clues in the New Testament and Church History strongly suggest that the author was another New Testament character, John Mark.

John Mark was an associate of Peter and a book written one generation after Peter and Mark (second Century) describes their relationship like this:

“Mark...having been the interpreter of Peter...neither heard the Lord, nor was he a follower of his, but at a later date of Peter”

(Eusebius, History of the Church iii.39; cited in Barnett p11).

There are other New Testament texts that indicate Peter and Mark worked together (12:12, 1 Peter 5:13) making it highly reasonable that Mark authored Peter's account of Jesus' story.²

Why? - Purpose

Related to 'who' is the 'why'. If the information from the Gospel has all come from Peter, why did Peter not write the Gospel himself?

Peter was from the North in Galilee and spoke Aramaic whereas Mark was from Jerusalem in the South and also spoke and was very literate in Greek. It appears as though Mark wrote Peter's story in Greek for a Greek-speaking, gentile audience.

When – Date

Of all the Gospels, Mark is the earliest and therefore is written closest to the events they speak of. We do not have an exact date for Mark but it is probably written between 64 and 70 AD that is within one generation of the events. This means that eye-witnesses and key characters are still alive when the Gospel is circulated. This is very important for judging the accuracy of Mark, as eye-witnesses would have had opportunity to challenge or oppose the story if the facts and events were not true.

¹ Mark UNCUT is a series of segments we are running at 6pm Naremburn. They deal with topics that there simply isn't enough time to cover in a sermon. Each week the audio presentation will be put on the web as well as a much fuller written document – look out for each installment.

² Mark also toured with Barnabas (Col 4:10; Acts 13:4-5, 15:39).

What is Mark

If you worked in the ancient library in Alexandria and you found a copy of Mark, which section would you put it into?

- History
- Biography
- Religious
- Magic
- Theology
- Fiction

It is difficult to categorise the Gospel because it contains so many features of other genres. So, how does Mark himself describe his book? In the opening sentence, Mark calls this book a Gospel (1:1). But that doesn't help us much because some people have suggested that 'Gospel' was a brand new genre invented by Mark, Luke and Matthew and John to report their stories of Jesus.

'Gospel' literally is an announcement or proclamation. So, in the library you could find the proclamation/announcement sections and place Mark there. However Mark is very rich literary document there are three elements, which I think help us understand three facets of Mark's Gospel.

Story

First of all, Mark is a story. You could say the announcer clears his throat for the royal proclamation, then launches into a story.

It is in-fact a very well told story replete with technical devices, symmetry, character development, tension, suspense and drama. Mark was a highly skilled author and a highly skilled story teller.

This is important because often our information of the Gospels is fragmented. We know bite sized bits here and there, little episodes, but very few of us see how the whole story fits together. That is not what Mark wanted. **If you think of each little episode as a pearl, often we have studied the Gospels by looking at one pearl at a time and perhaps skipping a few along the way. But because Mark is a story, we need to stand back from each pearl and look at the whole necklace.** Then we will see the connections, the big picture and how each episode relates to the others around it.

Next week the topic for Mark uncut will be the structure of the Gospel and we will see the big picture much more clearly.

History

But Mark is not just a story – it is a true story. We are able to date the events to real times (for example we know the crucifixion took place at 9 o'clock in the morning on 3 April in the year known as AD 33³). The places are real places and the people truly lived.

Thus Mark is also history. A story grounded in events that took place on our earth in our past.

However it is probably more helpful to say that Mark is *historical* rather than *history*. That is because Mark is not setting out to write a detailed history of Jesus like a modern biographer. Mark has condensed Jesus' ministry into important episodes which enable him to make his proclamation that Jesus is the Christ – and that Jesus is Son of God. The whole Gospel turns on these two identifications (1:1, 1:10, 8:29, 9:7, 15:39).

Yes Mark is a Gospel *story* but it does give true and accurate information.

Theology

Finally because this story and history is about God (and not just humans), the Gospel of Mark is also theology.

It is a story and a history that gives information about God. A story and a history that gives information about what God did and does. A story and a history about how to relate to this God.

So Mark is a Gospel – proclamation – with three strands: story, history, theology.

³ Bolt, p13.

How to study this Gospel...

I want to finish by giving some tips of how to get the most out of Mark. As we do this it is helpful to think of Mark in this threefold facets: story, history, theology.

1. Read the story

As a story, Mark was to be read aloud. We should think of the first audience as hearers not readers because in Mark's world documents like this were to be read aloud to many who could not read.

This is why we are making Bible reading a big feature in this series at church in and in Bible studies too. **Like notes on a page, they only truly come alive when played on instruments** – this is how Mark was designed.

2. Know the story

Make sure you come to understand how the whole story is constructed. Learn how each episode pieces together and how Mark develops major themes and characters.

To help, you could:

- ✓ Sit and read the whole story in one sitting (doing this next week after church)
- ✓ Print off a copy of the Gospel to take to church and Biblestudy. Circle, highlight, write, draw, make it your own!
- ✓ Learn the sequence of events in Mark
- ✓ Memorise a chunk – a chapter or two

3. Know the history

Understand the culture, people and places that Mark was writing about. If you don't appreciate the culture and customs you will miss important emphases. For example if you understand that a leper was kicked out of his house and even town and not allowed even to touch another human, then you will realize the significance of Jesus healing him by reaching out and touching him (Mark 1:41).

Similarly with places, if you trace things on a map, then you will realize that the location John the Baptist was baptizing was almost the same spot where Israel crossed the Jordan in Joshua 6 when they first entered the Promised Land. John's ministry is a new beginning for Israel.

Mark **assumed** the listener understands how the culture works, where the places were and their significance.

To help, you could:

- ✓ Use a Bible dictionary to look up events, places, people and customs
- ✓ Make use of the map in the back of your Bible!

4. Read the book through the theology of the Old Testament

As a story about God, the Gospel of Mark is not the first thing that God does. The events of God as told in the Gospel can only be interpreted through what God has already done. This is recorded through the stories in the Old Testament. Thus the Old Testament is the only theological framework which enables you to understand Mark's message.

To help you could

- ✓ Track down cross references as they appear in your Bibles
- ✓ Read through relevant Old Testament passages
- ✓ Check commentaries which do the hard work for you!
 - Why not buy a commentary and read it along side the sermons and Biblestudies...

What will Mark do for you?

Studying Mark's Gospel in detail will do at least two things for you: **First it will bring you face to face with Jesus the Kingly Servant** forcing you to make up your mind about where you stand. **Secondly, it will sharpen your evangelistic skills**, as you know Jesus more deeply you will be better equipped to share your knowledge of Him.

Further Reading

Mark, the Servant King by Paul Barnett, 2006 Aquilla Press. Pages 1-16

The Cross from a Distance by Peter Bolt, 2004. Chapter 1