

Gospel of Mark

Background

Authorship

The author of the gospel never reveals his name in the text. However, we know from an ancient historian, that it was written by a man named Mark. Mark was not among the disciples and did not directly listen to the teachings of Jesus himself. However, he was closely in contact with the Apostle Peter. Mark was converted to Christianity and remained with Peter in Italy (and some say in the vicinity of Rome). He listened to all of the teachings about Jesus that Peter had told all of his followers. However, Mark did not feel the need to record what Peter had said until after Peter had died.

It is believed that he wrote the Gospel between 65 and 70 AD. This early authorship makes it the first of the gospels to be written (though other books of the New Testament had been written by this point, including many of Paul's letters, such as First Corinthians). It is widely accepted that Matthew and Luke had used Mark as a reference while they were writing their gospels.

Coming to a better understanding:

If Mark didn't know Jesus, does he have the authority to write a gospel? How do we know that it is accurate?

If Matthew (who did learn from the teachings of Jesus) had used Mark as a reference, what does that say about the legitimacy of Mark's account?

Why would Mark wait until after Peter had died to write anything?

Target audience:

Almost all of the books in the New Testament were written to a specific congregation or person.

There are several theories about who the gospel was written to. The most accepted is that it was written, in part, for the Christians in Rome where they were undergoing persecution. Rome had just suffered a terrible blow. A fire had started that had wiped out most of the structures in the city. Just as soon as the fire had gotten under control, it had started back up again. By the time the final flame was quenched, only three of Rome's seventeen districts were left. Many buildings were burned to the ground, and the city lost most of its oldest structures and monuments.

Rumors began to circulate as to who might be the blame for this disaster, and one of the popular rumors was that the Emperor Nero himself ordered the fires to be started. Nero tried to combat these rumors by making immediate emergency orders lowering the price of grain, suspending local taxes (in Rome only), and by making massive renovations and quick reconstructions. Streets were widened, homes were rebuilt, and the new constructions were of fire resistant materials. When the rumors still persisted, Nero needed a scapegoat – the Christians.

When word had spread that the Christians were actually to blame, Nero had issued a death penalty to those who were found as having membership to a Christian group. The persecution was small, and did not last long, but it still resulted in the death of many Christians, whose only crime was to follow Jesus.

It was to these people that Mark was writing. This is why one of the major themes that he addresses is discipleship. He talks of what it means to follow Jesus, both the good news and the bad. The

focus of the gospel is “the good news of Jesus.” The good news is that of belief and salvation. However, there is also a cost of discipleship. In that time, the believers in Rome may have to suffer death, just as Jesus did, as a cost of their discipleship.

Coming to a better understanding:

What is the good news that Mark speaks of? What might be the bad news?

Why was it important that Mark talk about the cost of discipleship? Do you think that would be encouraging to believers? Do you think it might discourage non-believers from believing in Jesus?

Other themes

There are a number of other themes that Mark brings in. He talks about the “kingdom of God.” In Mark’s gospel, Jesus says, “the kingdom of God is near,” and “the kingdom of God is here,” and also, “the kingdom of God is yet to come.” However, there are multiple understandings of what the kingdom of God is. Many of us just think of heaven when we hear about God’s kingdom, but God’s kingdom refers to any place where God is king, even if that means in the hearts of individual believers. This is why the Kingdom is already here, because it is in your heart. But the kingdom hasn’t come to its fulfillment. The fulfillment is when Jesus returns and makes his glory fully revealed, and God’s will is the only will that is done.

Another theme is “the messianic secret.” Most of the time during the first half of the book when someone understands the truth about who Jesus is, he asks the person to tell no one. This is most likely because Jesus was the messiah, but most people in that day did not understand what being the messiah meant. They thought that the messiah would come and be a political/military/religious leader. They thought that the messiah would come, vanquish the Romans, set the people free, and establish a golden age of Israel, while he sat on their throne as king (over an earthly kingdom) forever.

The book is ordered very deliberately in the way it stresses certain themes. The first half of the book seems to be leading the readers through the journey of trying to figure out who Jesus is. People in the crowds wonder if he is just a wise teacher, a healer, some sort of miracle worker, or maybe something more. During this time, Jesus is trying to proclaim the message of the Kingdom of God, but often times his efforts are frustrated by a crowd who simply wants healing alone, and are less interested in the teaching. In the middle of the book, Jesus confirms for the first time that he is indeed the messiah. From that point on, Jesus’ teachings begin to focus more on the mission of dying and rising again. Also, at this point he shifts to teaching the disciples about how to carry on his mission once he is no longer with them.

Coming to a better understanding:

Why would Jesus want to keep his identity as the Messiah a secret until later?

What is the Kingdom of God? Why do some people describe it as “already/not-yet”?

Why would Mark so deliberately order the stories of Jesus’ teachings the way he did?