

THE GOSPEL OF MARK - PRESENTATION 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL

I. Who was St. Mark?

A. St. Mark was a member of an early Christian family living in Jerusalem. Early Christians met in his mother's house (Acts 12:12.) He was a cousin of St. Barnabas (Col 4:10), an associate of St. Paul who was given apostolic (later to be called episcopal) authority.

B. He started to accompany Sts. Paul and Barnabas on an early mission, but soon went back home, apparently because of the hardships. He rejoined Barnabas later, but Paul refused to go with them. (Acts 12:6-13, 15:36.)

C. He was reconciled with St. Paul and eventually became an assistant to him when St. Paul was in prison, apparently in Rome in 60s. (Col. 4:10, Philemon 24, 2 Tim. 4:11)

D. Pappias, a friend of St. John the Evangelist, and Eusebius, the court historian of Constantine describe him also as Peter's interpreter in Rome. See also 1 Peter 5:13. He was probably more used to Latin culture and language than St. Peter and thus helped Peter convey his message.

E. Sometime shortly before or after the death of Sts. Peter and Paul, he apparently went to Alexandria to help establish the church there.

II. When and where did he write his Gospel?

A. Most of the early commentators say he wrote the Gospel in Rome, although some argue he wrote it in Alexandria.

B. Almost all commentators, ancient and recent, agree he wrote the Gospel in the 60s, as persecutions of Christians were increasing, but before the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70. There is some disagreement about whether it was written before or after the deaths of Sts. Peter and Paul, which were probably in 66.

C. The Gospel was probably written for pagan or at least Hellenistic/Latin converts to Judaism. Mark explains Jewish customs and Aramaic terms (e.g., Ephphatha, Golgotha).

D. It was written in a style similar to the spoken word. It may well have been a record of sermons, especially those of St. Peter.

III. The style of this Gospel

A. The Gospel is very fast paced. It covers events quickly, but with some vivid detail (e.g., the cure of the demoniac at Gerasene, see Mark 1:1-20). Unlike the other evangelists, St. Mark does not add much commentary. And he uses few quotations from the Old testament, except when quoting Jesus.

B. There is not a clear structure or breaks in the Gospel. Instead, it goes rapidly from one event to another. It does relate one event back to another (e.g., the references at the beginning and near the end to Jesus as the Son of God.).

IV. Some themes of the Gospel.

A. Jesus truly entered into our human condition, with emotions, passion, suffering.

1. The Gospel vividly describes Jesus emotions. E.g., Mark 6:1-6.

2. The crucifixion scenes emphasize the abandonment of Jesus.

3. One message is the need to struggle with Jesus and His reward to those who do so.

B. Jesus as the Son of Man.

1. Jesus refers to Himself repeatedly as the Son of Man.

2. The term could simply mean a human being, as in the Book of Ezekiel, or the judge who would come to bring justice to the world, as in Daniel 7 and some non-Biblical apocalyptic literature.

a. With regard to the first meaning, the term emphasizes the fact that Jesus is really human and really entered into our struggles. E.g., Mark 8:31.

b. With reference to the latter meaning, it emphasizes the judgment Jesus will bring. E.g., Mark 8:38.

C. Jesus as the Son of God.

1. The Gospel begins by identifying Jesus as the Son of God, but this fact is hidden from the other humans until after the crucifixion.

a. The demons whom Jesus expels recognize Him as the Son of God, but are silenced. E.g. Mark 3:11-12.

b. Jesus is also announced as the Son of God at His Baptism and Transfiguration, but this fact remains hidden from others. E.g., Mark 6:51.

c. At last, the centurion recognizes Him as the Son of God after His death (Mark 15:39).

2. The term was used in the Old Testament to refer to angels, the king of Israel, the people of Israel, or the just in general. E.g., Ps. 29:1, Job 1:6, 2 Sam. 7, Hosea 11:1, Wisdom 3:18.

a. In general, this term was used collectively. An individual would not usually be singled out as the son of God. But the triumphant future king of Psalm 2 is an exception.

b. The other evangelists make it clear that this term as used in the Gospels refers to Jesus' divinity by describing His divine birth (Matthew, Luke) or in the introduction (John). Mark instead lets Jesus' actions, especially driving out

demons, forgiving sins, and rising from the dead speak for themselves.

C. The Gospel of Mark is often represented by the figure of a lion, with the other Gospels being represented by a man, an ox, and an eagle. The figures are from a scene of the angels in the Book of Revelations 4:7. See also Ezekiel 1:4-12. The idea is to reflect the thundering message of dramatic conflict and transformation in the Gospel. But others, such as St. Augustine, finds the man the best symbol for this Gospel because it records so dramatically the humanity of Jesus.