

An Introduction to Mark's Gospel

Who?

The earliest reference to Mark's gospel comes from Papias, who was Bishop of Hierapolis in 130AD. In this reference, the author of the gospel is described as an interpreter for the apostle Peter and thus the assumption was made fairly early on in church history, that Mark was telling Peter's story.

To slightly confuse matters, there is also a Mark named in the book of Acts, who is apparently the same person mentioned by Paul in his letters to the Colossian church, Timothy and Philemon. The trouble with this Mark is that there is little evidence to connect him to Peter, making it likely that Papias' Mark is a different person.

If we accept the testimony of Papias, then Mark's gospel was written not by somebody who had witnessed the life of Jesus at firsthand, but someone who did have a direct link, via Peter. It is thought that Mark probably had another source at hand when writing as well, the hypothetical Q document, which is believed to have been an early collection of the sayings of Jesus.

When?

The early church placed Mark after the gospel of Matthew in the Bible, believing it to be a later abridged version of Matthew. However, study of the three synoptic gospels has led to a re-evaluation and Mark is now considered the oldest text. This is largely because there is hardly any material in Mark that does not appear in Matthew or Luke and there is not a compelling reason to cut back from those gospels to produce Mark's shorter one.

If Mark is older than Luke and Matthew, it is also likely that the other two writers of the synoptics used Mark as a template for their work, copying the order in which he arranges his material.

It's largely agreed that Mark was written after the death of Peter in 64AD, but if it was used by Matthew and Luke to shape their accounts of Jesus' life, it must have been written and available before they produced their gospels. When we looked at Matthew, we saw that the most likely date for that book was around 70-90AD, so the most likely dates for Mark are between 65&75AD.

Why?

Mark is the shortest of the gospels, and is associated with a brief writing style and fast paced switches between scenes. The first verse is an example of the author's style, and in it he sets out his reason for writing: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'

In this terse opening Mark sets out his purpose, which is to present the reader with a message that demands a response (the 'good news' or 'gospel') and also to establish who the person of Jesus is.

Mark then presents his evidence in two parts, the first of which, from chapters 1-8, deals with the ministry and miracles of Jesus. In chapter 8:31, Jesus tells his disciples that he will die and rise again, thus beginning the second part of Mark's presentation, the events leading up to and including Jesus' death on the cross.

Throughout both halves of Mark's gospel, we – the readers – are asked two questions: 'Who is Jesus?' and 'How should I respond?' By showing us the wonder-worker first, Mark asks us to formulate answers to the first of these questions, which are then challenged by the second half of the gospel. Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah midway through – correctly, Jesus confirms – and then the reader has to wrestle with her own understanding of what and who the Messiah is.

Mark's gospel is written to prompt a response, it's written to present an argument for Jesus as the Messiah and it's written as good news, a message to thrill and inspire its readers.