

# I.

## Getting Our Bearings in Mark

We begin by answering key questions about the Gospel of Mark, author, date, reliability etc. We then move on to address the overarching theme and aim of the book as a whole. Next, we consider some of the details important to ascertain when tackling Mark and then we finish by mapping out the structure of the gospel. All this is crucial in getting out bearings in Mark.

### Writer and date

The writer was Mark, also known as John Mark. He is referred to a number of times in the New Testament, both in the Acts of the Apostles which records the history of the early Church (Acts 12:25; 13:5, 13; 15:37, 39) and in some of the letters written to churches and individuals (Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11 and Phil. 24). The apostle Peter, who lived and worked closely with Jesus, had a particularly strong influence on Mark (1 Pet. 5:13). It is generally accepted that Peter was Mark's primary source of eye-witness testimony.

Mark wrote his Gospel around A.D. 60, less than thirty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The ministry of the

apostles, who were eye-witnesses of Jesus and the founders of the Church, was coming to an end. Mark's Gospel, based on the apostles' eye-witness testimony, would prove to be an invaluable resource for the Church from then and ever since.

## First Gospel book

Mark's Gospel was the first of the four Gospels to be written. All four Gospels are named after their authors. Both Matthew and Luke include a lot of material from Mark as well as adding material of their own. John is written in a different style. The reason Matthew comes first in our Bibles (rather than Mark which predates Matthew) is because of the genealogy at the start of Matthew which links the Old and New Testaments.

Why are they called Gospels? The word 'gospel' simply means 'good news'. The focus in all four Gospels is Jesus and so they are books that tell the good news about Jesus.

While the Gospels record factual information about Jesus' life, ministry and teaching, they are not biographies in the conventional sense. The writers select and organise their material with a specific purpose in mind.

## Reliable historical evidence

Mark and the other Gospel writers record factual information about Jesus' life and teaching. Is what they write reliable? This is a very important question. If what Mark wrote isn't true, then Christian faith has no basis. There are three reasons to give us confidence Mark's Gospel is reliable evidence.

## Eye-witness testimony

In order to establish the facts about something, the first thing you do is look for witnesses who saw what happened – eye-witness testimony. That's how investigation works.

It is also how Mark's book works. As a companion of the apostle Peter, Mark's Gospel is based on eye-witness testimony from someone who saw and heard everything first hand. Peter was one of Jesus' closest disciples. All through the text there are incidental details, references to people and places and descriptive phrases, exactly what you'd expect to find in eye-witness reports. It rings true.

When Mark's Gospel was written around A.D. 60, lots of people were still alive who had lived through the events Mark describes. If he had been making things up, what he said would never have persuaded anyone. It would have been discredited. Yet the exact opposite happened. From the start Mark's Gospel was received as reliable evidence.

Also, what we find as we read other historical sources, non-Christian or even hostile sources, is that Mark's basic facts are not disputed.

## Not the kind of stuff you'd make up

The climax of Mark's account is Jesus' death by crucifixion, a horrific form of execution that was reserved for the worst class of villains. Even to talk about such things was seen as rude and embarrassing in polite society. And when Jesus rises from the dead, right at the end of Mark's account, the witnesses who see Him are women, whose testimony would have been inadmissible in the sexist legal system of the day. Jesus' message about the need to believe in Him for the forgiveness of sin was so unpopular that Jesus and many of His followers were killed for sticking by it and spreading it. So the question we have to ask is this: 'Why make up a story that is embarrassing, unpersuasive, offensive to your audience and might even get you killed?' Unless of course you are reporting true events.

## We have the original Mark's Gospel

What if the Mark's Gospel we have and read is not the original? In other words, how do we know it hasn't been changed, for example by adding stuff that didn't happen or exaggerating the evidence and claims about Jesus? Academic scholarship gives us confidence. All the normal tests and standards by which classicists and historians judge ancient documents point to the New Testament books like Mark being authentic, i.e. we have the original text Mark wrote. The key tests of reliability are: (a) how many copies of ancient manuscripts there are; and (b) how close in age these copies are to the original. On both counts Mark's Gospel scores extremely highly (as do the other Gospels). The fact is, in terms of these standard tests, the Gospels are far more reliable than most other ancient manuscripts we rely on as historical evidence. We can be confident the text we're reading is the text Mark wrote.

Each one of these three reasons is compelling in itself for taking Mark's book seriously as reliable evidence. Taking all these factors, we can have real confidence that what Mark wrote is a true record of what happened.

## Carefully selected material

Mark doesn't record everything Jesus did or said. He is more than a faithful biographer, he is also a wise interpreter. He is selective in his choice of material, reflecting his own particular purpose in writing. This is true of all the Gospels. That said, there is what we might call 'core' material found in all the Gospels, for example the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. And there are some miracles recorded in all four Gospels, like the feeding