



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

The Joyful Tidings (Mark 1:1)

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Ask the question “Who is Jesus?” and the answers are numerous. Some will say the Son of God and others will say a son of God. Some believe Jesus is one of the greatest men in history. Some say he was a great teacher and activist, but misunderstood and was killed because of the misunderstanding. Many will say he is someone whose character we should all emulate—a role model for all the ages.

During the Interim in the Missouri Capitol, we will continue the journey through the biblical Gospel of Mark. The four books of the Bible we call the “Gospels” are biographies recording the various actions and words of Jesus. The things we know about Jesus Christ come from these four books. Therefore, we must turn to them if we are to answer the question: “Who is Jesus?”

I hope you will bring your lunch every Wednesday to Hearing Room #1 at 12noon to join us for a study of this book. Regardless of your beliefs about Jesus, we invite you to come and hear more about Him. I encourage you, even if you cannot come, to read these weekly studies for they will be helpful in understanding this pivotal person in history.

INTRODUCTION

Today’s study is going to introduce the Gospel of Mark. Some may look at this study as a collection of boring, historical data. In reality, though, it is necessary to a good understanding of the story. The life of Jesus was not lived in some far-away, imaginary land like Narnia. Jesus came and dwelt (John 1:14) with real people, who lived in a real land, who had real troubles, trials, pains, pleasures, happiness, tragedies, etc. Even though the culture is much different than ours today, it will not take long to understand that the difficulties and joys in the people’s lives 2000 years ago are not much different than ours.

Today, we are going to take a quick look at the life of Mark and examine the cultural context in which the angel proclaimed, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy” (Luke 2:10b KJV).

A. MARK—THE AUTHOR

The earliest possible mention of Mark (a.k.a. John Mark) is not a pretty picture. Some scholars over the last hundred years believe the young man who fled the scene of Jesus’ arrest naked by escaping the clutches of the soldier (Mk. 14:51-52) was the author of this gospel. The true identity of this first-century stalker, though, is unknown. But there are many facts we clearly know about Mark in Scripture:

- The early church in Jerusalem met in his mother’s home for prayer (Acts 12:12)
- He was the cousin of the missionary, Barnabas (Col. 4:10)
- He accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 12:25; 13:5), but left them in the middle of the journey for unknown reasons (Acts 13:13)
- He was the source of controversy between Paul and Barnabas as they prepared for their second missionary journey. Barnabas wanted to take him again; Paul said ‘no’ since Mark deserted them on the last journey (Acts 15:36-41).
- By the end of Paul’s life, Mark had earned back the Apostle’s respect and trust. For he was found to be in Rome with Paul during Paul’s imprisonment (Col. 4:10; Philemon 24). And later, as Paul knows the end of his earthly life is near, he wants Timothy to bring Mark along when Timothy comes to visit (2 Tim. 4:11).

Even though none of the four gospel books name their author, the early church fathers unanimously accredit Mark with the authorship of this second gospel. According to these men, Mark closely worked with the Apostle Peter and was asked by the people who listened to Peter in Rome to record in writing the teachings of Peter. Thus, Mark did so with Peter’s approval; and according to the church fathers, with much accuracy.¹

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IN SIGHT.

Since Peter’s work in the latter parts of his life was in Rome, it seems likely that Mark’s gospel was written with a Gentile audience in mind. This probability can be further be substantiated by looking at Mark’s style—he explains Jewish customs and defines Aramaic words; he uses the

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Roman time system (which was different than the Jewish); he makes less references from the Old Testament and does not record genealogies (as does Matthew and Luke).

Tradition holds that Peter died a martyr's death around 64-65 AD during Nero's persecution of Christians. Therefore, the Gospel of Mark was probably written in the early 60s.

B. ISRAEL—A POWDER KEG

As noted in the introduction, Jesus Christ came to earth to live a life as a man amongst men. He lived in the land of Palestine under Roman rule.

THE PEOPLE

Ninety-five percent of the Jewish people in Palestine were of the *amhaarteṣ*—"the people of the land." They were very poor farmers and day laborers. Their life was just a life of survival; living from day to day. Therefore, all it took was the weather not to cooperate or armies to start fighting (as was their history for 150 years before Jesus) and the *amhaarteṣ* would be in desperate trouble. The wealthy were the land owners, and these included many Sadducees who were one aspect of the religious leadership of the day.

Also in Palestine were the Samaritans. These were the "hated half-breeds" who lived in the middle of the country, separating the northern area of Galilee from Jerusalem and Judea. They were part-Jewish and part-Gentile descended from the poor and uneducated people who were allowed to remain in the land after Babylon came in and took away all the "high-class" people in the 5th century BC. These people were so hated by the Jews that the Jews would travel around the country rather than through it.

THE RELIGION

Reading through the book of Mark, one will encounter many confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders. Eventually, it will be these Jewish religious leaders who hand Jesus over to the Romans for crucifixion.

One group of these leaders was the **Pharisees**. They were the leaders of the local synagogues which came into the culture since the time of the Babylonian captivity. The Pharisees probably came from the group known as the *hasadim* ("the pious ones") that developed during the 400 year period between the Old & New Testaments. They were known for their teachings, their legalistic piety and zeal for the law and the oral traditions (which they considered to be as authoritative as the law given to Moses). It is believed that there were 6000 Pharisees during Jesus' day.

Another group of the religious leaders were known as the **Sadducees**. They were the leaders of the Temple in Jerusalem who were known for their wealth and their desire to placate the Romans who gave them some authority. The Sadducees did not believe in life after death (Mk. 12:18).

These two groups despised each other. The Sadducees saw the Pharisees as religious nuts and the Pharisees saw the Sadducees as political and religious sell-outs.

JESUS CAME AS A KING WHO LIVED LIKE A SERVANT AND
DIED AS A SACRIFICE; AND ROSE ON THE THIRD DAY TO
LIBERATE HIS PEOPLE FROM THEIR BONDAGE OF SIN.

In spite of these differences, they tolerated each other. Leaders from both groups worked together in Jerusalem as the **Sanhedrin**—a group of 70, made up of priests, scribes and elders, most of whom were Sadducees or Pharisees. The Sanhedrin was the governing council of the Jewish religion and headed up by the High Priest. It was this group that condemned Jesus to die. But since they did not have the authority to kill Jesus, they handed Him over to the Roman authorities for execution.

The *amhaarteṣ* were looked down upon by their religious leaders, especially the Pharisees. They were unlearned in the law and unable to know, remember and keep every little law and tradition. In the midst of the common person's quest for survival, the Pharisees further laid upon them a very heavy legalistic burden of "worshipping" God. To be right before God, the people had to fully obey the *Torah* (Mosaic Law) and the oral traditions—which was totally impossible. The Pharisees, though, paraded around like they kept the laws, thus, throwing more contempt and guilt upon the common person. Therefore, many did not even try and the Pharisees saw them as "unclean" before God and hopeless.

And on top of all that, the people were getting cheated by their religious leaders at the Temple when they brought their sacrifices. They were told their offerings were not acceptable, but that they could buy an acceptable offering from them; of course, at an inflated price (many times their "unacceptable" offering would be shuffled through and sold to someone else).

THE POLITICS

When Jesus walked the earth, the Romans were in charge of most of the known world, including Palestine. And the Jews hated it. The Romans brought in their military and installed their own governors and "kings."

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The Roman soldiers were a constant reminder of the occupation. They were known for making the Jews do menial tasks for them, known for extortion and for blackmailing money from the populace to supplement their pay.

Not all despised the Romans for some Jews were convinced to be “tax-farmers” or publicans, tax-collectors on behalf of Rome. Jewish men would “bid” to land a tax-collecting job—promising to give Rome a certain amount, with anything over and above going into their own pockets. The taxes that actually went to Rome were then used to build temples and shrines to their gods. And for other purposes the Jews believed were immoral. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the day, noted that the typical *amhaartezi* in Palestine paid 40% of their income in taxes.

In spite of the occupation and heavy taxes, the Romans did bring in a relative peace to Palestine. There had been constant fighting between armies and governments for this important area of the Middle East for over 300 years. So the Roman occupation brought an end to much of that type of turmoil and unrest.

But the situation in Palestine was a powder keg. Jewish Zealots were constantly on the prowl looking for any opportunity to attack the Romans, revolt and drive them out of the land. And the Romans were ready to move in at any sign of civil disturbance and forcefully restore order. The common people, caught in the middle, struggled to survive—physically, emotionally and spiritually. They overburdened with taxes, daily needs, and oppressive “religious rules” with no hope in sight.

It was this world “Jesus Christ, the Son of God” entered into on the night the angel announced to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10b-11).

C. JESUS—THE SON OF GOD

Mark 1:1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mark opens by proclaiming this book is the “gospel of Jesus Christ.” It is the “good news” or “joyful tidings” about Jesus. In his writing, Mark does not include the birth of Jesus or any of Jesus’ childhood; he starts right off with the preaching of John the Baptist and the beginnings of Jesus’ ministry.

Note the names and titles Mark opens his book with:

- **Jesus (Ἰησοῦς)**—His name is transliterated from the Hebrew version, “Joshua”. It means “Yahweh is salvation” or “Yahweh is the savior.” This was His human name given by His earthly father, Joseph, who received the name from an angel from God (Matt 1:21, 25).
- **Christ (Χριστός)**—This title means “anointed one” or “Messiah”. It is used in the OT concerning the priests who were anointed, especially the High Priest (Lev. 4:3, 5, 16); and also of the prophets “the anointed of God” (Psa. 105:5); and of the king of Israel (1 Sam. 1:10; 2 Sam. 1:14). For Jesus, this is the title of His position as ruler of God’s coming kingdom.
- **Son of God**—This title describes His unique being. Jesus the Messiah was not just another man whom God had sent to accomplish a certain task or proclaim a message to His people. Instead, Jesus the Messiah was divine. He is a unique being (fully man and fully God) with a unique relationship with God (eternal sonship).

The rest of Mark’s gospel will be an explanation, demonstration and proclamation of this glorious title (look ahead to Mk. 5:7; 9:7; 15:39).

CONCLUSION

With an introduction like this, one would think that the beginning of the good news of the arrival of the Messiah, the Son of God is the start of a great majestic dynasty for the Jewish nation. And that was the Jewish mindset. They believed and anticipated a coming Messiah who was going to restore their rightful place among the kingdoms of the earth—and that place would be above all the others. They were expecting a great king like David who would bring power, peace and prosperity to them.

And Jesus Christ did come as a great king, but offered a kingdom totally different than what they expected. He came offering something they truly needed, not something they thought they needed. You see, Jesus came as a King who lived like a servant and died as a sacrifice; and rose on the third day to liberate His people, Jewish and Gentile, from their bondage of sin (2 Cor. 5:21).

That message is the “joyful tidings of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.”

Mark 10:45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 3-6.