

The Gospel of Mark

Mark 1:1-8:30

The Structure of Mark

- A. The Announcement of the Messiah (Mark 1:1-1:13)
- B. Power of the Messiah (Mark 1:14-8:26)
- C. The Apostles' Affirmation of the Messiah (Mark 8:27-8:30)
- D. The Suffering Messiah (Mark 8:31- 15:47)
- E. The Victory of the Messiah (Mark 16:1-8)

The Announcement of the Messiah (1:1-1:13)

Introduction

The Gospel of Mark begins very simply and profoundly with: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1). The first word of the Gospel is “beginning”. In Jesus Christ, the world is experiencing a New Creation. For that reason Mark calls his book “good news”, (Greek: euangelion). The long awaited hope of Israel for the Messianic Age is breaking forth for the entire world in Jesus (see Isa 52:7, 61:1-3). The title “Son of God” is a royal title that identifies Jesus as the messianic King of Israel. And in the context of Rome and the Roman Empire, it names Jesus as the rightful ruler of the entire world—even over Caesar!

John the Baptist

Because Mark’s gospel is written primarily for Gentile Christians living in Italy he uses Old Testament quotations much more sparingly than the Gospel of Matthew. However, right out of the Gate he quotes a compilation of prophecies to identify John the Baptist as the divinely ordained forerunner of the messiah who would “prepare the way”. The nature of his preparation was a call to repentance (literally turning) through moral and spiritual transformation symbolized dramatically by re-entering the waters of the Jordan river in a new entrance to the promised land.

Jesus baptism is the inauguration of the messianic age. Mark uses much more dramatic language where the heavens were “torn open”. Many Hebrews believe that the heavens had been shut to them and that the Spirit of God had withdraw and closed off. But with Jesus Baptism, the Spirit was back, powerfully so. The divine voice identifying Jesus as “my Son” signifies that Jesus is the Son of God by Divine authority and not by the self exalted will of man. As the Gospel, unfolds many will come to agree with this central claim of the Gospel that “Truly this man is the Son of God!” (15:39)

The Temptation

Like the dramatic language of the “tearing open” of the heavens with Jesus baptism, Mark describes how “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness”. Mark uses the term “immediately, or “at once” some 40 times as a rhetorical device to convey the need for haste and fervency for the reader in accepting the message of the Gospel. In this case, the drama points to the war between God’s son

and God’s adversary. As Paul would say, “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12 ESV) The mention of “wild animals” could have had very practical mention for the Roman Christians who could be martyred by wild animals. The Roman historian Tacitus spoke of the savagery of Nero in his persecution of Christians in the sixties AD: “they were covered with the hides of wild beasts and torn to pieces by dogs.”¹⁷

Power of the Messiah (Mark 1:14-8:26)

Mark will proceed to tell the story of Jesus ministry in Galilee in three cycles of narrative and teaching an early Galilean ministry, a later Galilean ministry and then the withdraws from Galilee.

Cycle 1: Early Galilean Ministry (1:14-3:6)

Cycle 2: Later Galilean Ministry (3:7-6:6a)

Cycle 3: Withdraws from Galilee (6:6b- 8:21)

Cycle One: Jesus’ Early Galilean Ministry (1:14–3:6)

The Gospel in a nutshell (1:14-15)

Mark describes the beginning of Jesus ministry in Galilee. He summarizes the content and expected response to the Gospel, or Good News:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (1:15)

Jesus call to repentance and believe in the Kingdom of God (by believing its King) is not only issued to Jesus first hearers. It is a sovereign summons of the King to all who would read Mark’s Gospel.

The First Responders (1:16-20)

The first to respond the royal summons were two fishermen, Simon (Peter) and Andrew his brother followed by James and John the sons of Zebedee. Three out of these four, Peter, James and John would form the inner circle of what would become the 12 disciples. Their vocation of fishing would now be put to use for the Kingdom. Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” They *immediately left their nets and followed him!* (1:18)

Authority in Word and Deed (1:21-45)

The narrative of Jesus ministry begins with his teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum. The people recognize a distinction between Jesus and the religious leaders: “he taught them as one who had authority.” (1:22) His advent in to Capernaum also drew the attention of the demonic world. With fighting words the demon challenges Jesus and loses. Again the people are amazed, “What is this? A new teaching and with authority!” The distinguishing characteristic of Jesus is authority, Greek *exousia*.

¹⁷ Tacitus, Annals 15:44

Jesus will continue to exercise this authority over the scribes, the demons and even diseases. He demonstrates his authority with the healing of Simon's mother-in-law (1:29-34). However, in the peoples eyes the works of authority and power, over shadowed the announcement of the authority of the Kingdom. Jesus refocused the disciples by reasserting the primacy of preaching the gospel of the kingdom. (1:38) With his cleansing of a leper (1:40-45), it became difficult for Jesus ministry to openly take place in the towns.

Confrontations with Religious Leaders (2:1-3:5)

The announcement of the Kingdom and the displays of power became increasingly threatening to the Jewish leaders. In a confrontation in Capernaum, Jesus again asserts his divine authority in pronouncing the forgiveness of sins upon a paralytic. The scribes rightly ask, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (2:7) Indeed! In order to validate his "authority to forgive sins" (2:10) Jesus heals the man of his paralysis with the command of royal authority: "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." The people continued to be amazed but this was just the beginning of the confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees.

They will question his associations (2:16) in eating with tax collectors and sinners. Over his excessive celebrations rather than fasting. But the primary confrontation comes over Jesus claim to have sovereignty over the Lord's day, the Sabbath.

Lord of the Sabbath

The occasion for the confrontation comes as the disciples of Jesus are plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath. The Pharisees called it "unlawful". Jesus begins his rebuttal by alluding to David, who as the future King of Israel had the authority to eat the bread of Presence in the temple. (1 Sam 21:1ff) The second point he makes is about the Sabbath being a gift for humanity and not an oppressive tyrant over humanity. But the most significant claim was this:

The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. (Mark 2:28)

The Lord of the Sabbath is God, and Jesus was identifying himself as God. Clearly this has been Mark's indirect story line all along with Jesus exercising authority in teaching, preaching and healing, with forgiving sins, with driving out demons. The religious leaders have already accused him once for blaspheming (2:7). The healing of a man's withered hand on the Sabbath sealed their animosity and purpose to "destroy him" driving them to be in league with the pseudo-royal establishment the Herodians. (3:6)

Cycle Two: Jesus' Later Galilean Ministry (3:7-6:6a)

Introductory Summary: Jesus' Activity in Galilee (3:7-12)

In the second cycle of ministry in Galilee, Jesus continues to engage the demonic forces with power and authority. They know exactly who Jesus is: the Son of God (3:11 cf. 1:24, 5:7) But Jesus would not have his mission thwarted by evils agenda and timing. He strictly ordered them not to make him known. (3:12)

Jesus Family

With the appointment of the twelve apostles, we see a tension developing between the family of birth origin and the family of God. Jesus' own family thinks he "has gone out of his mind". Indeed, this is not too far off from what the scribes were saying about him, not that he was crazy, but that he was in league with Satanic forces. Whether calling him a lunatic or a satanic deceiver, the children of Israel were missing the Kingdom of God. Jesus identifies the true children of the Kingdom as the "ones who do the will of God." (3:35)

The Command to Listen! (Kingdom Parables) (4:1-34)

The problem with Jesus rejection by his own family and the scribes was they did not listen! The Parable of the Sower is a parable about parables. Jesus explains to his disciples why some people believe and respond to the message of the Kingdom and some do not. The Parables of the Lamp speaks to the call of the kingdom to speak the truth. The growing seed and the mustard seed reveal the temporal bound and progressive nature of the Kingdom of God. The emphasis is on hearing and understanding. The use of parables would be very helpful for the spread of the Kingdom in Rome. They could openly proclaim the kingdom through parables, but then secretly explain the meaning to the committed disciple "privately". (4:34)

Demonstration of Jesus' Divine Authority (4:35-5:43)

Who is this?

The calming of the Storm demonstrates Jesus' divine authority over nature. The disciples are realizing that that the one "in the boat" was more fearful than the chaotic power of wind and sea outside the boat. The reader is left to wrestle with the question: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (4:41)

Power to overcome the Unclean

Three incidents are told that Jesus' authority over the unclean. The first is the man with the "unclean spirit"(5:2). Jesus powerfully drives the demonic "legions" out of the man and into a herd of two thousand pigs which are then drowned in the sea. The story reveals Jesus authority over all unclean occupying armies. The King is at war with the legions—but the power is driving out the unclean spirit of war.

The second two incidents involve two females, a dead young girl and an older woman with a discharge of blood. Jesus is touched by and touches these unclean women. Unclean usually is the contagion. Unclean usually has defiling power over the clean. But in this case, Jesus clean overcomes the unclean. His power goes to the unclean elderly woman with the discharge. And with the little girl, Jesus overcomes the unclean power of death by touching her dead body and conveying life. Jesus has the power to make the unclean—clean. What would that say to a Roman Christian?

Unbelief

In Jesus hometown of Nazareth, the people tried to bring him back to simply being “the carpenter” and “son of Mary”. They took offense at him. And Jesus marveled at them for their unbelief. (5:6)

There appears to be a major shift in focus on Jesus part with the rejection in Nazareth, the sending of the Twelve (6:7-13) and the news of John the Baptist beheading. (6:14-29) Jesus begins to withdraw from active ministry in Galilee. The focus is gradually turning toward intensification of persecution and the eventually the cross.

Cycle Three: The Withdrawal from Galilee (6:6b–8:21)

Jesus began to seek out a “desolate place” of withdraw with his disciples. (6:30-32)

The crowds follow them. In a place of mass desolation, Jesus is filled with compassion, because they were like “sheep without a shepherd”. He was their rightful King and he would provide for them as YHWH provided for his people in the wilderness.

Walking on Water

Yet the disciples failed to understand, again, that God was in their presence in the person of Jesus, who “passes by” on the waters like the God did Moses and Elijah. But instead of terrifying them with his Glory, he joins them in the boat and calms their hearts with his presence.

Pharisees Confronted: Clean Vs. Unclean (7:1-23)

Confrontation with the Pharisees (7:1-13) reaches its head when they note some of the disciples not washing their hands in accordance with Jewish tradition. The Jewish leaders had failed to truly understand the point of God’s laws. The ultimate aim of the commands was not external cleanliness but internal holiness of the heart. The true disciple must learn how to deal with the inward defilement.

With Jesus healing of the Syrophenecian woman and the deaf and dumb beggar in the Gentile Decapolis, he reveals that he is Lord and Savior of all people not just the Jews. This would have particular significance to Mark’s Roman hearers. The disciples continue to stumble to understand the message of Jesus after Jesus feeds the 4000. What is the significance of the left over baskets, 12 and then 7? Jesus is the Lord of Israel (12) and he is the Lord of the Creation (7). Jesus is YHWH, the creator and giver of life.