

The Argument of the Gospel of Mark

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MBS 745 – Matthew and Synoptic Issues

April 28, 2006

The opening line of Mark sets the pace for the rollercoaster-like account that unfolds in the second and shortest of the four accounts of the life and message of Jesus. Whereas the writer of Matthew opens with a customary genealogy to establish his argument of Jesus as the Messiah King whom the Jews awaited, and Luke begins his account with an introductory paragraph explaining his intent to chronicle the events of the life of Jesus, Mark jumps directly to the punch line. His book is about the εὐαγγέλιου – the Good News. It is about the Son of God announcing that the time is now, the kingdom is here, and a response is required.

The Gospel of Mark has not always enjoyed the prominent position in biblical studies it does today. Likely due to its abbreviated length, the perceived redundancy of material from the other two longer narratives, and the fact that it was not written by an apostle, Mark remained in relative obscurity among scholars for centuries. In fact, Augustine believed it to be a mere abridgement of Matthew's gospel, and the earliest known commentary on the book dates only to the fifth century (Gæbelein, 1984). It was not until the last few hundred years that three different waves of textual criticism turned any serious attention toward Mark.

Holtzmann's source criticism popularized the theory that Mark was the first to be written and that both Matthew and Luke used it as a foundation for their writing (Gæbelein, 1984). This thinking paved the way for the rise of form criticism, in which proponents such as German scholars Bultman, Dibelius, and Schmidt suggest that the gospel was shaped by oral tradition before being collected by the gospel writers (Gæbelein, 1984). This requires a deduction to say "This type of story was probably preserved by the Church because it represented such and such a Christian truth" (Cole, 1977). In the later twentieth century, a new direction for study emerged and was labeled by its chief architect Marxsen as redaction criticism (Lane, 1974). His method turned attention toward the gospel writers as more than mere editors.

*Author*

It is at this juncture where the reader must begin to make several judgments regarding the Gospel of Mark. If indeed the assertion is made that the author of the book is none other than the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10), early traveling companion of Paul (Acts 12:25), and spiritual son of Peter (I Peter 5:13), one must then ask whether his intent was to record a factual, historical account of what Jesus did (as the Markan Priority theory would suggest), or to capture and codify the extant folklore and provide a suitable backdrop for reminiscences of what Jesus said, or whether his aim was to fulfill a particular theological purpose in writing his gospel.

Strictly speaking, the work is anonymous, in that no claim of authorship is inherently made within the letter itself. However, there is strong evidence both in Scripture and in history to support the John Mark whom Luke, Paul, and Peter write about as the author of the gospel. Several characteristics of the gospel imply something about the identity of its author. For instance, the non-literary writing style and syntactical features probably indicate that the author's first language was not Greek, but rather a Semitic language such as Aramaic (Smith). The author also includes vivid details that are unnecessary to the flow of the narrative, an indication that the author is writing from eyewitness accounts (Lane, 1974). These factors are consistent with the traditional view that Mark, a Palestinian Jew, wrote the gospel using Peter as his source.

The internal evidence is corroborated unanimously by all early attestations, including an ancient caption *κατὰ μαρκον* ("according to Mark"), and testimony by Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen (Walvoord & Zuck, 1983). The nearly universal acceptance of Mark as the author of the gospel in light of the fact that he was neither an apostle nor a hero in the first century church lends credence to the validity of the claim and leaves no reason to doubt that John Mark wrote the gospel which bears his name.

*Audience*

Just as there is no internal, direct attestation as to its author, there is no internal, direct evidence for the intended readership of the gospel. However, the explanation of Jewish customs (e.g., 7:3; 14:12; 15:42) and the translation of Aramaic expressions into Greek (e.g., 3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 9:43; 10:46; 14:36; 15:22, 34) indicate that they probably were not Aramaic-speaking Jews (Wallace, 1998). Referring to four watches of the night (6:48; 13:35), Mark also employs a Roman system of time instead of the traditional Jewish three (Walvoord & Zuck, 1983). The inclusion of transliterated Latin terms in reference to the military (e.g. *legion* in 5:9; *praetorium* in 15:16; *centurion* in 15:39), the courts (e.g. *speculator* in 6:27; *flagellare* in 15:15), and commerce (e.g. *denarius* in 12:15; *quadrans* in 12:42) implies a Roman destination, as Latin speakers would have been found most readily there (Lane, 1974). Additionally, it is likely that the identification of Alexander and Rufus as the sons of Simon the Cyrene (15:21) is because these men were known to Mark's intended recipients – Roman Christians (Romans 16:13).

There is also substantial external, direct evidence to suggest that the intended readers were Roman Christians. Peter and Mark are believed to have been together in Rome (2 Timothy 4:11, 1 Peter 5:13) where Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus locate the writing of the gospel (Gæbelein, 1984). Eusebius also claims that Papias wrote that Mark composed his gospel for Peter's hearers in Rome (Smith). Though it is impossible to be sure about the composition date, evidence points to the latter part of the seventh decade, likely after Peter's martyrdom in AD 64, but probably before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (Gæbelein, 1984). If he wrote in Rome, either while there with Peter, or perhaps shortly after Peter's death, then Mark probably was writing for the Roman Christians, and possibly to address the crisis in the church around the intense persecution that was beginning to be directed at them during this time.

*Purpose*

According to the apostle Paul, every word of Scripture is inspired and “is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). It follows that God would have caused Mark to write a narrative not merely to chronicle a series of events, but rather to build a theological argument allowing the man of God to “be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17). Two of the other gospel writers elucidate their reasons explicitly within their text – Luke states his intent “to write an orderly account... that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:3-4), and John explains that “these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). Mark, however leaves only implicit clues as to his main purpose for writing.

Mark’s gospel is characterized by action, vividly portraying the non-stop work of Jesus, making frequent use the Greek adverb *ευθεως* (“immediately, straightway”) and the conjunction *και* (“and, also, even”) to tie events together, and giving miracles a prominent place in the record (Hiebert, 1994). His abundant use of the historical present tense, peppered with many personal touches, leaves the impression that the story is unfolding before the reader’s eyes. Mark is careful not only to record the human emotions of Jesus – compassion (1:41, 6:34, 8:2), sighing (7:34; 8:12), indignation (3:5; 10:14), and distress (14:33-34) – but to pay attention to reactions of people around Him – amazement (1:27), criticism (2:7), fear (4:41), astonishment (7:37), and bitter hatred (14:1). He also documents over a hundred different questions, many of them asked *of* Jesus and even more asked *by* Him. After inquiring about others’ opinion He asks, “But who do you say that I am?” (8:20). It could be said that Mark wrote his gospel to invoke a response from his readers to this most important question of all.

Mark thrusts his theological premise before his readers in the very first verse, declaring it to be the ἀρχη (“beginning, origin, basis”) of the gospel, asserting that Jesus is not just the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but the very Son of God. He then portrays Jesus as a sympathetic man, identifying with men, demonstrating compassion for them, and sharing their sufferings. The author devotes a significant portion of his text to the mutually supporting ministries of service and suffering. Two pivotal verses serve as bookends to the central section of the book in which Jesus first lays down the demanding standard of discipleship: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (8:34). He wraps up a series of three passion predictions by reasserting the standard with Himself as the model: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45).

Through his candidly persuasive writing style, his deeply provocative questions, and his dramatic portrayal of the Suffering Servant, Mark leaves little room for the reader to miss his point. His Gentile audience in Rome would no doubt have identified with the themes he develops, being drawn into the story and forced to draw a conclusion about Jesus. If they agreed with their countryman who declared at the foot of the cross, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (15:39), they would then need to determine what to do with Him. Much more than a rudimentary recounting of the events surrounding Jesus, Mark’s gospel can be seen as a clarion call for evangelism and discipleship. The argument of the book will therefore be traced to follow his purpose: Mark discloses the Son of Man as a compassionate savior through His acts of service and acts of suffering to summon unbelievers to become disciples and so that believers would understand what it means to be committed followers of Jesus.

- I. Jesus is identified (1:1 – 1:13)
  - A. By the testimony of others (1:1 – 1:8)
  - B. By His own witness (1:9 – 1:13)
- II. Jesus ministers in Galilee (1:14 – 4:34)
  - A. Discipleship call #1 / Growing Popularity (1:14 – 2:12)
  - B. Discipleship call #2 / Growing Opposition (2:13 – 3:30)
  - C. Discipleship call #3 / Teaching in Parables (3:31 – 4:34)
- III. Jesus begins to withdraw from Galilee (4:35 – 8:26)
  - A. Boat episode #1 – Ignorance / Ministry on the other side of the sea (4:35 – 5:34)
  - B. Boat episode #2 – Cowardice / Withdrawal #1 – Ministry to the Jews (6:7 – 7:23)
  - C. Boat episode #3 – Blindness / Withdrawal #2 – Ministry to the Gentiles (7:24 – 8:26)
- IV. Jesus begins the journey to Jerusalem (8:27 – 10:52)
  - A. Passion prediction #1 (8:27 – 9:29)
  - B. Passion prediction #2 (9:30 – 10:31)
  - C. Passion prediction #3 (10:32 – 10:52)
- V. Ministry in Jerusalem (11:1 – 13:37)
  - A. Jesus presented to unbelieving Israel (11:1 – 11:11)
  - B. Jesus judges unbelieving Israel (11:12 – 11:25)
  - C. Jesus rejected by unbelieving Israel (11:27 – 12:44)
  - D. The Olivet Discourse (13:1-37)
- VI. The Passion Narrative (14:1 – 16:8)
  - A. Final acts of service in preparation for suffering (14:1 – 14:42)
  - B. Jesus is handed over to suffer at the hand of the Jews (14:43 – 14:72)
  - C. Jesus is handed over to suffer at the hand of the Romans (15:1 – 15:32)
  - D. Death, Burial & Resurrection (15:33 – 16:8)
- VII. The Disputed Epilogue (16:9 – 16:20)

*Prepare the Way of the Lord*

Mark opens his gospel with a stark prologue to identify Jesus as the Suffering Servant by the three-fold testimony of the apostles, the prophets, and God Himself. Serving as Peter's "interpreter" (or perhaps "translator"), he reflects the personal experiences, witness, and authority of the Apostle in the bold remarks concerning the "beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). In the only direct Old Testament quotation he personally uses (though he will note later on when Jesus quotes from Scripture), Mark also calls on the prophets Isaiah, Malachi, and John the Baptist as witnesses to the identity of Jesus before turning to the irrefutable testimony of God. His readers require neither a lengthy preamble to introduce them to Jesus nor family credentials to validate His Messianic and Davidic claims. Instead, Mark will demonstrate the authenticity of the message of Jesus through His actions.

The first two of these accounts provide the entirety of the narrative encompassing the first thirty or so years of Jesus' life, including His first year of public ministry. His baptism and temptation are the only brief glimpses Mark gives until after the arrest of John the Baptist. They both serve to further identify and authenticate the person and mission of Jesus. Even though He knew no need of repentance, Jesus used this opportunity to identify with His disciples by associating with John's message through baptism, and received a heavenly "stamp of approval" through the sign of the Spirit and the voice of the Father. Mark does not lay out all the specifics of the series of temptations found in the other gospel accounts, but does add his own vivid details regarding the experience, including the fact that it was the Spirit who "drove him out into the wilderness," and that "he was with the wild animals" (1:12,13). Jesus used this encounter to identify with His disciples by providing the ability to "sympathize with our weaknesses, [as one who] has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.*

The writer, having chosen to omit any reference to Jesus' public ministry in the Judean countryside as recorded mainly in John, draws the reader into Galilee, where the next phase of his ministry would be revealed (Pentecost, 1981). Jesus began "proclaiming the gospel of God," and called Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, and John to "become fishers of men" (1:14-20). All the while, his popularity continued to grow as people were "astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority" (1:22). This indicates the first call to discipleship in the gospel, and is followed up by four chronologically-connected miracle narratives extending over a period of days, and demonstrating the authority of Jesus.

The first two miracles happened on a Sabbath in the town of Capernaum, where Jesus was teaching in their synagogue. When confronted by a man with an unclean spirit, Jesus rebuked him and commanded him to leave. This exercise of authority over demonic forces prompted those around to be amazed and caused his fame to "spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee" (1:27). Upon leaving the synagogue and visiting the house of Simon and Andrew, Jesus performs another healing in removing a fever from Simon's mother-in-law, which caused such a commotion that "the whole city was gathered together at the door" to receive the healing touch from this new teacher (1:33).

If the first two signs hadn't been sufficient to demonstrate the authority of Jesus, the days that immediately followed would remove all doubt. As Jesus led the disciples from town to town to continue His preaching ministry, he was approached by a leper seeking cleansing. As a display of both pity and power, Jesus granted his request, and then sent the man on a long journey to Jerusalem to present himself to the priest there, sending the religious leaders a clear message and probably generating an investigation into His claims (Pentecost, 1981).

Perhaps due to this quandary – if they “declared the leper clean but rejected the One who cleansed him, their unbelief would be incriminating evidence against them” (Walvoord & Zuck, 1983) – a contingency of scribes and Pharisees first appeared on the scene at this point of the narrative and began to turn up the heat. When the crowds pressed in and Jesus was pressed into service for another healing, the religious reconnaissance team was right there to closely observe and pick up on any misstep He might make. Jesus seized the opportunity to publicly assert His authority to forgive sins, effectively drawing up the lines of battle.

Having reached the zenith of His popularity, and with the opposition mounting, Jesus extended a second call to discipleship, this time to Levi (or Matthew). He followed this call not with authenticating signs, but with authoritative answers. They asked, “Why does he eat with tax collectors?” (2:16), “Why... [do] your disciples not fast?” (2:18), and “Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” (2:24). Jesus used their questions to teach about His ministry of service – He had come to convert sinners, not compliment the self-righteous; to bring gladness, not sadness; to introduce the new, not patch up the old (Wiersbe, 1989). Jesus continued to challenge legalistic traditions by deliberately healing a man’s withered hand in their presence on the Sabbath. This incenses them so much they were willing to collude with their political enemies to bring charges against Him. Jesus’ escape to the sea, His earnest pleas not to make Him known, and even a mountain retreat with His disciples could not quell the pressure.

Following the appointment of the Twelve, Mark notes opposition from the two groups of people who were probably in the best position to recognize His true identity. His own family said “He is out of His mind” and tried to restrain Him (3:21). However, the religious leaders sealed their own eternal fate by charging Jesus with something far worse than insanity, rejecting the work of God’s Spirit amongst them and saying “He is possessed by Beelzebul” (3:22).

After Jesus' logical refutation of this accusation, Mark records a third call to discipleship, this time extending beyond the circle of disciples seated around Him to "Whoever does the will of God..." (3:35). Following this clarification of priorities is one of only two extended didactic units in the gospel. The writer likely selected these parables from a larger collection (cf. 4:2, 10, 13, 33) to further illustrate what it meant to be a committed follower of Jesus. In the midst of this teaching, Jesus paused to enlighten His disciples on why He used parables, explaining that the analogies were designed to reveal information to some, while concealing it from others at the same time. In other gospel accounts, He makes it clear that His reasons are partly compassionate, in light of the fact that further revelation merely brings a higher level of accountability. This passage marks the shift from the teaching ministry to the Jews in Galilee and a withdrawal from the region, leading up to His eventual turn toward Jerusalem.

In the parable of the soils, He explains about the preparation required to be a committed follower. Each of the soils receives the same "seed" (the hearing of the Word), but each responds differently based on the condition of the "soil" (the heart). Jesus warns against a hard heart that doesn't permit God's Word to penetrate the surface, the shallow heart that lacks the intimacy accompanying a personal relationship with Christ, and the distracted heart that is choked out by worldly cares, wealthy pleasures, and fleshly desires. The result in all three conditions is soil that produces no lasting fruit, contrasted with the good soil – hearts that "hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold" (4:20).

In the next set of kingdom parables, Jesus continues to focus on the product of being a committed follower. He emphasizes that the message that brings about a transformed life is not to be hidden but to be broadcast; that the Word of God is to be faithfully sown into other's lives so that the kingdom may grow to its fullest potential.

*Let us go across to the other side.*

Up until this point of the narrative, what little Mark has disclosed of the disciples has demonstrated model behavior. They received a call, and they responded. However, with the tactical change and the geographical shift to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the foibles and failures of this band of followers begin to surface. The gospel writer focuses on three separate incidents in a boat, surrounded by the accounts of the Servant's expanding ministry of healing and teaching – mostly now to Gentiles – to further develop his treatise on discipleship.

The first of these episodes on the sea clearly demonstrates the ignorance of the disciples. Even after sitting under His teaching, hearing the authority with which He answered the religious leaders, and witnessing the power of His miracles, they still found themselves cowering in the boat and asking, “Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” (4:41). To help them answer that question, Jesus performed another cycle of miracles before returning to His hometown of Nazareth. He supernaturally provided safety for the disciples on the sea, peace for the Geresene demoniac, relief for the woman wracked with pain, and hope for a man who had lost his daughter. These miracles illustrated how Jesus served all kinds of people and affirmed His authority over natural, spiritual and physical forces.

In stark contrast to the hero's welcome He received upon touching the shore in Capernaum – the word for welcome used in Luke's parallel account gives the impression of a “hearty embrace”(Zhodiatas, 1990) – Jesus was greeted in Nazareth with disregard and distrust. Even though He had been evicted from the synagogue upon His last visit (Luke 4:28-29), they permitted Him once again to teach, but this time refused to take Him seriously, expressing unbelief of His identity, and hindering Him from having any further ministry among them. This would be the last time Mark mentions Jesus teaching in the synagogue.

Following His hometown rejection, Jesus summoned the twelve, reaffirmed their authority to heal and cast out demons, and commissioned them with explicit instructions for preaching the gospel. They were apparently successful enough for reports to reach Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, causing his conscience to wonder if John the Baptist had come back to life to haunt and condemn him (Wiersbe, 1989). Upon disclosing this detail, Mark pauses to recount John's murder for his readers, perhaps considering the narrative to be an important foreshadowing of the suffering that Jesus would face later for the same cause.

After the *αποστολοι* ("sent ones, ambassadors" – the only time Mark uses this designation) returned from their mission, Jesus began another series of withdrawals from the area of Galilee to provide further instruction and testimony. The first was "to a desolate place" (6:31) where He performed two more miracles and continued to have confrontations with the Pharisees. Jesus gave the disciples an initial test of faith, telling them to feed the multitudes, but when they looked only to their own wisdom and resources for a solution, He used the opportunity to teach them about His provision. Hours later, their own strength exhausted by the winds, the second boating incident reveals the disciples' complete lack of courage. As the writer comments, "they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (6:52).

This lack of insight apparently did not end when they reached the shore safely and the Servant continued his ministry of healing. Jesus was again challenged by the Pharisees, this time about the regulations of cleanliness. Jesus exposed their hypocrisy and gave a dramatic lesson on the contrast between the powerful truth of God's Word which produces inner change and the futile external traditions that keep men in bondage (Wiersbe, 1989). After He had silenced the Pharisees, He felt the need to point out once again how obtuse the disciples still were, responding to their questions, "Then are you also without understanding?" (7:18).

The second withdrawal was “to the region of Tyre and Sidon” (7:24), where the Servant resumed His ministry to the Gentiles by casting the demon out of the daughter of a Syrophenecian woman. It is in this encounter where Mark records the curious banter between Jesus and the woman. After Jesus spoke about not tossing food to the “little pet puppies” (He refrained from using the familiar derogative Jewish term suggesting “dirty scavenger dogs”), her reply did not attempt to deny the special place of God’s children, but merely asked for some scraps of blessing from the table. As a result of the woman accepting His Words and persisting in her plea, Jesus not only met her need, but commended her faith (Wiersbe, 1989).

His third withdrawal was “in the region of the Decapolis” (7:31), where Jesus performed a very private and intimate miracle for a man stricken with deafness and a speech impediment. His displays of empathy toward this man (drawing him aside, pulling him close, gesturing to him regarding His intentions, sighing compassionately) model a personal aspect to ministry that any committed follower of Christ should be challenged to emulate.

As crowds continued to gather and Jesus continued to demonstrate compassionate service toward the Gentiles, the disciples still lacked faith and wondered aloud, “How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?” (8:4). Jesus answered with another miraculous provision. When they embarked on their fourth withdrawal, “to the district of Dalmanutha” (8:10), for their third boating incident, He accused them of being as blind as the Pharisees, rebuking them, “Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?” (8:17-18). Jesus illustrated this principle of spiritual blindness with a dramatic two-stage healing of physical blindness. Their eyes already having been opened, Jesus used the last miracle recorded by Mark in the Galilean ministry to show the disciples their need to see Him more clearly.

*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*

It is at this point in Mark's gospel where the suffering aspect of the Servant's ministry begins to take center stage. In His final withdrawal from Galilee, He took the disciples to the far northern town of Caesarea Philippi before turning His gaze southward to Jerusalem, anticipating the long and agonizing road ahead of Him. It is here where Jesus made the first in a series of three passion predictions, a theme the writer employs through the remainder of his book to manifest what it truly means to be a committed follower of Christ.

Immediately after Peter's famous confession – "You are the Christ" (8:29) – Jesus unveiled the true nature of His Messiahship, explaining that the Servant "must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). In the teaching that followed, He also unveiled a similar truth about the high cost of discipleship. Perhaps as confirmation that His suffering would be transformed to glory, He took three of His closest disciples to the mountaintop and gave them a glimpse of what would ultimately be fully revealed when He comes again to establish His kingdom. Jesus was then joined by Moses and Elijah, and the voice of the Father once again authenticated both the person and the word of Christ, saying "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (9:7).

Through all of the time of popularity, in the face of growing opposition, in the shadow of the cross before Him, even after the transfiguration, Jesus never really stopped serving, healing, and teaching. When presented with a boy who had been possessed by a demon, rendering him deaf and mute, Jesus seized the opportunity to instruct about the faith and prayer required to heal. He showed the disciples that their earlier inability to exercise the authority He had granted was a result of their failure to cultivate their faith through spiritual discipline and devotion, a lesson that needs to be heard by all who would be committed followers of Christ.

The second prediction of the passion was followed by much more instruction to His disciples. He taught about assuming a humble posture in leadership, asserting, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (9:35). He taught about taking drastic measures to avoid sin, suggesting, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off” (9:43). He taught about remaining loyal in marriage, reminding, “So they are no longer two but one flesh” (10:8). He taught about receiving the kingdom with the faith of a child, proclaiming, “To such belongs the kingdom of God” (10:14). Finally, He taught about finding reward in Christ rather than in possessions, warning about the impediment that wealth can be to entering the kingdom and reassuring, “With man it is impossible, but not with God” (10:27).

Peter’s response to this difficult teaching is likely indicative of the hearts of the other disciples. Matthew’s parallel account reveals his materialistic perspective: “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (Matthew 19:27). He still needed a lot of learning to arrive at his later testimony: “... what I do have I give to you” (Acts 3:6).

As they got closer to Jerusalem, Jesus spoke in plain detail about His impending suffering and death for the third time, delivering some final instructions and an illustration regarding the true nature of discipleship. In yet another demonstration that they don’t fully understand the suffering aspect of the kingdom program, two disciples approached Jesus with a request for a position of honor. He responded by predicting their own future suffering and then correcting their flawed view of what was required in greatness. Twice in this passage, Mark records Jesus asking, “What do you want me to do for you?” (10:36, 51). In the case of James and John, their blindness prompts them to make an impossible request. In the case of blind Bartimaeus, his recognition of Jesus as the Son of David, or perhaps more importantly as  $\rho\alpha\beta\beta\omicron\nu\iota$  (“my Master”), prompts the Servant to respond, “your faith has made you well” (10:52).

*The Servant's Ministry in Jerusalem*

On the very day when the Passover lambs were being selected throughout the Holy City (cf. Exodus 12:3), Jesus entered Jerusalem on “the foal of a donkey,” associating Himself with the prophecy (Zechariah 9:9). What was still not apparent to the crowds of people who hailed the Messiah with shouts of “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!” (11:9) was that He had actually come to present Himself not as a conquering king, but as a spotless lamb, associating with a prophecy of a very different nature (Isaiah 53:7).

After surveying the temple, Jesus left Jerusalem that night for the nearby town of Bethany, where His friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived. In the morning, on the way back to Jerusalem, He took stock of a fig tree, finding it to have leaves, but no fruit. It is significant that Mark places these two inspections back-to-back, for he would go on to recount Jesus performing two symbolic acts of judgment on unbelieving Israel on that same Monday. In a highly visual parable, He cursed the fig tree for having an outward display of vitality, but bearing no fruit. His next order of business was to fulfill the remainder of the prophecy quoted by Mark in the opening lines of the gospel by purifying the temple, “like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap” (Malachi 3:1-3). If any place in Jerusalem was to have genuine spiritual fruit, it ought to have been the temple. However, upon closer inspection, Jesus found only the same sin and hypocrisy He had encountered throughout the rest of His ministry, and responded with the same righteous anger He had directed toward the fig tree.

Jesus used these acts to teach a lesson to His disciples about the genuine fruit of discipleship which He found to be lacking in the temple worship – prayer. He taught about the power of prayer accompanied by belief, and the necessity of prayer accompanied by forgiveness; belief and forgiveness are both fruits that are hard to fake.

The next day (Tuesday), the conflict with the religious leaders resumed when they began to question the authority of Jesus, attempting to trap Him in His words. Mark emphasizes the nature of the confrontation by the repeated use of the word ἐξουσία (“authority, right, power”), which occurs four times in six verses. Jesus answered first with a riddle, presenting them with a logical conundrum, and then with a parable, illustrating their unbelief in rejecting the Messiah. The semantic tricks they tried to play continued to wrangle over the issue of authority. In regard to paying taxes – who has the authority over our money, the Sanhedrin or Caesar? In regard to the resurrection – who has the authority to interpret our law, Sadducees or Pharisees? Jesus thwarted their ambush by asserting the authority of God alone in both cases. He then turned the tables on them and asked them a theological question for which they had no good answer.

The gospel writer punctuates the end of the Servant’s public teaching ministry that day with two warnings. The first warning against the artificial importance of the scribes came as a natural follow-up to the dialogue He had just ended. The second warning against the artificial importance of the rich was prompted by observing the people putting money into the offering box. Using these two examples, Mark identifies two tests of discipleship. How one handles the responsibility of knowledge, particularly as it relates to Scripture, and how one handles the responsibility of money, particularly as it relates to stewardship, will be distinguishing characteristics of the committed follower of Christ.

That afternoon, Jesus took His disciples to the Mount of Olives for final teaching on the kingdom program. He wanted them to understand that the signs that would follow the destruction of the temple (which they did not all live to see!) were merely the beginnings of birth pangs. Only after the Abomination of Desolation, at a time no one knows, would they “see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory” (13:26), so “Stay awake” (13:37).

*The Servant's Suffering*

After an undisclosed amount of time had elapsed, Mark picks up the narrative indicating, “It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread” (14:1). However, putting all the pieces of the chronological puzzle together from the various gospel accounts, it is likely that Mark then records the same event which John places “Six days before the Passover,” (John 12:1). It is commonly assumed among modern scholars that the synoptic arrangement is purposefully out of sequence to highlight the contrast between Mary’s adoration and Judas’ treachery (Hiebert, 1994). Other discrepancies in the timeline can be easily reconciled by understanding the differences between how various groups of Jews reckoned a day.

Regardless of the specific day of the week, the writer makes it clear that final preparations for suffering were underway. Mary had anointed Him for burial, Judas had agreed to the terms of the betrayal, and Jesus had instructed the disciples regarding the Passover meal. During this final celebration, the Servant instituted a perpetual ritual to symbolize the very covenant that His suffering would ratify. After supper, they all (except, of course, Judas) went out to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives for Jesus to spend His final hours alone in prayer with His Father. It is in this setting where the suffering began to intensify. Just a few short hours before He would be betrayed by a friend, put on trial by the people He came to serve, and denied by the one who had just pledged undying allegiance, He conveyed to the disciples, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (14:34).

Mark inserts a curious detail into the narrative following Jesus’ arrest. He alone among the gospel writers notes the presence of a certain young man wearing “nothing but a linen cloth” (14:51) who was seized, but escaped naked, ostensibly never to be heard from again. Some suggest this to be an autobiographical mention of John Mark as an eyewitness to these events.

The account of His trial before the Jewish religious leaders marked the first time Jesus acknowledged publicly that He was the Messiah. When asked that direct question, He responded, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (14:62). This admission was sufficient for the Sanhedrin to decide His guilt, but they felt they needed the stamp of approval from Rome, so they delivered Him to Pilate. This ironic twist – Pilate had no basis on which to convict Jesus – ensured that the Servant would suffer at the hands of all He came to serve, both Jews and Gentiles.

After having Him scourged, Pilate sentenced Jesus to be crucified. As if the shameful and agonizing death by exposure, exhaustion and eventual asphyxiation weren't enough, the soldiers also felt the need to torture and mock Him further before leading Him outside the city and nailing His hands and feet to the cross. The abuse and scorn did not even end at that point, as passersby and even those crucified with Him continued to hurl insults, and the executioners employed their usual tactics to prolong His torment. However, Jesus did not allow them the twisted pleasure of having the last word. He had come for this very purpose, and all along had exerted His power at just the right time. He certainly would not have capitulated before finishing His work. In a final display of divine authority, under a supernatural darkness, Jesus cried out in triumph and willingly gave up His spirit.

At the same moment, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (15:38), proving that the ultimate act of suffering had produced the ultimate demonstration of service, restoring fellowship between sinful men and a righteous God. The other gospel writers record other miracles such as an earthquake and men coming out of the graves, but Mark needs only the testimony of a lone centurion, having witnessed the entire scene and drawn the same conclusion with which the gospel opened, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (15:39).

After a hurried burial to avoid waiting until after the Sabbath, the women who had watched Him die brought spices back to the tomb later to finish the job properly. Much to their astonishment, they would never get the chance! An angel intercepted them in the now empty tomb and informed them that Jesus had risen. He sent them out to report this news to the other disciples, but Mark records only that they fled in fear.

The gospel comes to a conclusion much in the same way it was introduced. His abrupt ending was almost certainly the catalyst for early revisionists to append a more traditional epilogue to the narrative, but Mark's original purpose is probably better served by leaving it open-ended. The writer has very skillfully drawn his audience into the story of the Suffering Servant. They have listened to His call to discipleship, observed the spiritual ignorance, cowardice and blindness of His disciples, and witnessed the fulfillment of His passion predictions. All along, they have heard exhortations and seen examples of what it means to be a committed follower of Christ. Now, having been confronted with all these facts, they are faced with a decision. What will you do with the risen Jesus? The gospel is not always packaged up neatly with a tidy little bow. Mark presents it in a rough and tumble kind of way, leaving it up to the reader to answer the most important question of all – “But who do you say that I am?”

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