

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

(Study Notes)

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Introduction

DIVISION

1. Preparation for the Public Ministry of Jesus (1:1-13)
2. The mystery of Jesus (1:14-8:26)
3. The mystery begins to be revealed (8:27-9:32)
4. The Full Revelation of the mystery (9:33-16:8)
The Long Ending (16:9-20)

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THE GOSPEL OF MARK

INTRODUCTION

1.

Probably Mark was the first to gather in a “Gospel” the main happenings of Jesus’ life and some of his teachings. Before Mark everything was handed on orally in the preaching of the Apostles and that of their first collaborators. Later there was the need to put them in writing, to offer the community a continuous narration which might be useful for its faith and Christian life.

Mark is considered the inventor of the “Literary Gospel”, as we can see from the beginning, the first verse of his Gospel. It is conceived as a “narration of the Passion of Jesus with a long introduction”. It is Calvary which reveals Jesus’ identity.

The one who has proclaimed the Good News, through his death and resurrection, becomes himself Gospel, good news to be proclaimed and about whom people have to take a decision. We have to pass from the faith in the miracle Worker to the faith in the Crucified One. **This is why this Gospel is called “The kerygmatic catechesis of Mark”.**

Author: This Gospel was traditionally assigned to John/Mark in whose mother’s house in Jerusalem Christians used to gather or assemble. Mark was a cousin of Barnabas (*Colossians* 4:10) and accompanied Barnabas and John in a missionary journey, causing a disagreement between them because he soon withdrew and went back. He appears in Pauline letters (*2 Timothy* 4:11 and *Philemon* 24) and with Peter (*1 Peter* 5:13). Patristic tradition makes him Peter’s interpreter.

Time: it is thought that the Gospel of Mark was written before the year 70 AD in Rome, at the time of impending persecution and when destruction loomed over Jerusalem. It was meant for non- Jewish Christians, unfamiliar with Jewish customs. The book aimed at equipping such readers to stand faithful in the face of persecution (13:9-13) while going on with the proclamation of the gospel.

2.

“The plan Mark follows is the least complex of the Synoptics.

The preaching of John the Baptist plus the baptism and the temptations of Jesus make up its prelude (1:1-13); next comes a period of ministry which, according to the occasional hints, took place in Galilee (1:14-7:23), then a journey by Jesus and his apostles to the district of Tyre and Sidon, the Decapolis, the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi and back to Galilee (7:24-9:50); then the Transfiguration and the final journey through

Peraea and Jerico to Jerusalem where the Passion and the Resurrection take place (10:1-16:8).

A part from individual sequences of fact, this broad outline itself is possibly artificial since it is likely, and to judge by the fourth Gospel fairly certain, that Jesus visited Jerusalem several times before the last Passover of his life. All the same, **this outline, broad as it is, does trace for us an important development which is both factually and theologically significant.**

The general public received Jesus warmly at first but their enthusiasm waned as they found that this gentle and other-worldly conception of the Messiah did not fulfill their hopes.

As a result, **Jesus left Galilee to devote himself to the instruction of a small group of faithful followers**, and the profession of faith at Caesarea Philippi showed that he had secured their faith. This was a decisive turning-point: after it Jerusalem became the focus of attention, and it was there that further opposition continued mounting, only to end in the drama of the Passion and in the final triumph of the Resurrection.

This paradox provides the central interest of this Gospel, i.e. how Jesus, while remaining misunderstood and rejected was at the same time God's triumphant envoy. The Gospel is not particularly concerned with elaborating the Master's teaching, and it records few of his sayings: the real point of its message is ***the manifestation of the crucified Messiah.***

On the one hand Jesus is the Son of God, acknowledged as such by the Father (1:11; 9:7); by evil spirits, and even by man (15:39); he is the Messiah claiming divine rank, higher than the angels, taking of himself the forgiveness of sin, vindicating his power and his mission by miracle and by exorcism.

On the other hand, the Gospel puts great emphasis on his apparent frustration at the hands of many: the mockery or refusal of the public, the antagonism of the religious Leaders, the lack of understanding even on his disciples' part – all the hostile activities that were to lead to the shame of the cross. **It is this “scandal”, this refusal that the Gospel is intent on explaining.**

It does this not merely by contrasting the cross with the crowning victory of the resurrection but also by showing that the hostility was itself an integral part of God's mysterious plan. It was necessary that Christ should suffer and so redeem the human race (10:45; 14:24), since this had been foretold by the Scriptures. Both for himself and for his own followers, **Jesus laid down a way of humility and submission**; but the Jews, expecting a victorious warrior-Messiah, were ill-prepared for this answer to their hope.

The reason why Jesus wanted silence about his miracles and his identity was to avoid an enthusiasm which would have been as ill-advised as it would have been mistaken. Rather than call him Messiah, he used the modest and mysterious expression “Son of Man” (2:10 compare Matthew 8:20).

This cautionary measure is what is called “**messianic secret**” (1:34m) and **is the basic idea of Mark’s Gospel**. It was not something Mark invented: it corresponded to that underlying reality in Christ’s life of suffering which, in the light a faith finally and fully established by the Easter event, the evangelist was able to perceive and to place before us for our understanding.

(This plan is taken from the New Jerusalem Bible)

3.

The Gospel of Mark can be seen as **the narration of the identification of Jesus** as the Christ and the Son of God. This understanding makes more meaningful the narrative centered on the geography: from Galilee and some forays in pagan territory to Jerusalem where the story of Jesus finds its climax and conclusion.

The Gospel starts with the confession of faith of the evangelist (1:1) which contains the titles “Christ” and “Son of God”. Then the title “Christ-Messiah” will be the confession of Peter (8:29). Eventually the title “Son of God” will be at the end of the narration, on the lips of the Roman centurion (15:39).

The taking up of these two titles gives a good division of the narration which is concerned **with the “mystery” of Jesus**. The first step, Peter’s, answers the question: Who is Jesus? The second refers to what type of Messiah he will be. The “mystery” of Jesus explains the insistence in the Gospel of Mark on the “Messianic Secret”.

Moreover, in Mark, the person of Jesus is depicted with an unaffected naturalness: **he reacts to events with authentic human emotion**: Pity (1:44), Anger (3:5), Triumph (4:40), Sympathy (5:36; 6:34), Surprise (6:9), Admiration (7:29; 10:21), Sadness (14:33-34), and Indignation (14:48-49).

4.

DIVISION

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1.

PREPARATION FOR THE PUBLIC MINISTRY OF JESUS (1:1-13)

The first verse contains the whole Gospel. This is original of Mark.

The prophecy attributed to Isaiah is a combination: *Malachi* 3:1; *Isaiah* 40:3; *Exodus* 23:20.

The same Spirit received in Baptism drives Jesus into the desert for radical confrontation with Satan. Jesus prevails: he is surrounded by wild beasts that are tame (*Isaiah* 11:4-9). The angels come to minister to him like to Elijah (*1 Kings* 19:5-7). Jesus comes out from the desert all the more determined to be faithful to God's work and starts the Galilean ministry.

2.

THE MYSTERY OF JESUS (1:14-8:26)

Jesus starts to proclaim the "Gospel of God": this is the time of fulfillment: God's plan for humanity revealed in the Old Testament Salvation History is being fulfilled/accomplished by Jesus' mission.

The beginning of Jesus' ministry brings immediately the call of the Twelve as in Matthew, Luke and John, with different stories but the fact is that Jesus, since the beginning, doesn't want to be alone. In his mission, he is to be helped by others who eventually will continue it.

1:21-45 The account of a single day of ministry of Jesus, on a Sabbath, in and outside the synagogue of Capernaum, combines teaching, healing and exorcizing.

Towards the end we have the "Messianic Secret": Jesus forbids people to publicize his miracles. They disobey and he hides.

Chapter 2-3:6 Series of conflicts: since the beginning, Jesus finds opposition.

2:18-22 Jesus is the bridegroom: the metaphor of marriage concerns God (Yahweh) and the people. Jesus, saying he is the bridegroom, takes the place of God. The same happens about the Sabbath (2:28) and about the Son of Man who can forgive sins: Jesus takes the place of God because he is God. He does this for the Sabbath but not arbitrarily but in order to do good! Again, Jesus presents himself like God who doesn't rest on a Sabbath (Cf. *John* 5:17). Consequently, we ourselves are not bound by the Sabbath rest if we need to do good which we cannot avoid or delay.

3:13-19 The choice of the Twelve. Simon is called Peter by Jesus and he always appears first in the list of the Twelve (*Matthew* 10:2; *Luke* 6:14; *Acts* 1:13; *1 Corinthians* 15:5-6). Even in John, where the list is missing, but the Twelve are present and Peter has the first place (*John* 6:67-71).

3:39 The sin against the Holy Spirit is called an everlasting sin which cannot be forgiven because it is a direct assault against the truth: it attributes to Satan who is the power of evil what is the work of the Holy Spirit, namely victory over the demons. Similarly, every other direct attack against the truth of God, as long as it lasts, is unforgivable, it goes directly against the Holy Spirit.

3:31-35 (and 6:3) The brothers and sisters of Jesus: it stays for “relatives”, see paper I have written a propos.

4:11-12 The purpose of the parables: they can be understood only by those who are prepared to explore their meaning. So, they enlighten and hide at the same time. The quotation is from Isaiah (see *Matthew* 13:10-15). To understand them is a gift from God not only the result of our commitment. In Semitic fashion, both the disciples’ understanding and the crowd’s obtuseness are attributed to God. Both the present and the future action of God, from the initiation to the fulfillment of the kingdom, is presented through the parables.

4:38 Jesus is asleep on a cushion: a detail typical of Mark’s way of narration.

5:11 The tending of pigs, animals considered unclean by Mosaic law (*Leviticus* 11:6-7) indicates that the people were Gentiles.

5:21-43 Jairus’ daughter and the woman with hemorrhage: one story within another: it occurs several other times in Mark’s Gospel (3:20-30; 3:31-35; 6:14-29, 11:12-25; 14:53-73).

6:7-13 The mission of the Twelve: it has slightly different details in the other Synoptic Gospels. It is a trial-mission, so, the guidelines do not have an absolute binding force: they aim to show the spirit which should inspire the Apostles, like simplicity, poverty, etc...

6:11 “Shaking the dust”: the summoning of people is not optional, but engages the responsibility of the listeners.

6:14-16 The various opinions about Jesus anticipate the theme of his identity which is still a mystery and the climax of its revelation will be in 8:27-30.

6:34-52 The two great miracles of the loaves and the lake are together in Mark, Matthew and even John.

7:1-23 Controversy about the traditions of the Elders: the Pharisees mind about external purity, external worship and keeping the letter of the law; Jesus minds about the true moral intent of the divine law. It is a new concept of cleanliness.

7:11 “Qorban”: a formula for a gift to God, dedicating the offering to the temple, so that the giver may continue to use it for himself and not give it to others, even needy parents.

7:19 “In this way, Jesus declared all foods clean”. This absolute assertion is found in Mark alone. Jesus’ position was not immediately followed by his disciples: Cf. *Acts* 10, Peter’s reluctance to kill and eat...

7:27-28 “Children fed at table”: Israel has the priority, but not exclusivity. The priority will be respected also by the Apostles in their preaching (see *Acts*).

8:1-9 Second miracle of the loaves: this happens in pagan territory and again has some Eucharistic traits...Jesus is for all, the Eucharist is for all.

8:11-13 The demand for a sign is an excuse which hides the lack of faith. We have the precedent in the Old Testament, *Numbers* 14:11. Jesus’ depth of disappointment reveals his true humanity. The disappointment of Jesus extends to the disciples as we see in the following passage about the leaven of the Pharisees (14-21).

8:22-26 The blind man of Bethsaida: the cure is gradual and entails some gestures like putting saliva in the man’s eyes: it may mean the gradualness of the recognition of the Christ by the disciples and a symbol of the sacraments.

3.

THE MYSTERY BEGINS TO BE REVEALED (8:27-9:32)

8:27-30 A turning point: Jesus’ identity is partially recognized as the Messiah in Peter’s confession, but still under “messianic secret”.

8:31 The “Son of Man” is a title rather mysterious from *Daniel* 7:13-14. There it means the “Saints of the Most High”, the faithful Israelites who receive the kingdom from God, The “Ancient of Days”. Here it means simply “a human being”. This is how it is understood in the New Testament: Jesus’ humanity is the condition of his capability to undergo Passion and Death.

8:34-38 The conditions for discipleship: taking up one’s cross. This is more understandable by the disciples after Jesus gave the example dying on the cross. The axiom about losing one’s life is also in John (12:25) as well as in Matthew and Luke. Which proves that it is among the “ipsissima verba Jesu”.

9:1 Mysterious but probably referring to Jesus' Paschal Mystery and the coming of the Holy Spirit and the constitution of the Church.

9:2-8 The Transfiguration happens few days after the first announcement of the Passion: it counterbalances the harshness of the coming Passion with a glimpse of the Resurrection.

9:5 Moses and Elijah represent the Old Testament or better the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets, of the Scriptures.

9:21-24 In other contexts, Jesus praises the faith, here he challenges people to believe. Beautiful prayer of the father of the epileptic boy: "I do believe but help my unbelief (or my little faith)".

4.

THE FULL REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY (9:33-16:8)

9:42-48 No sacrifice is too great to avoid the total destruction of Gehenna. These words of Jesus must not be taken literally: they are a paradox meaning to show the need of being determined in our faithfulness in God's law.

9:49 Salt is symbol of wisdom which purifies like fire i.e. the journey of purification of Jesus' disciples.

10:1-12 In Mark the law of the indissolubility of marriage is without exceptions.

10:23-27 In the Old Testament, wealth and material goods are considered a sign of God's favor. The words of Jesus (23-25) provoke astonishment because they go against the accepted conviction. Money, wealth, power give a false security. The true security is only God's goodness. Salvation is a free gift. Wealth can become an obstacle on the way.

10:38 "To drink the cup" is to accept the destiny assigned by God (*Psalms* 11:6; 16:5). Jesus' baptism is to be his crucifixion and death for our salvation. This is the "service" of Jesus.

10:45 "Ransom": liberation by paying some price. Here Jesus pays with his life offered for all. "Many": doesn't mean that some are excluded, but it designs the collectivity (the many) who benefit for the service/sacrifice of the one (see implied the reference to the "Servant of Yahweh" of Isaiah).

11:1-11 The disciples prepare Jesus' solemn entrance, according to Jesus' instructions as they will prepare for the Passover meal. In John, it is the people themselves who prepare Jesus' solemn entrance, while the disciples do not understand.

“Hosanna”: literally and originally means: “O God, grant salvation... then it became an acclamation of welcome.

11:12-14 Jesus looking for fruits in the barren tree reminds us of the same circumstance in the prophets: *Jeremiah* 8:13; *Hosea* 9:13, both positive and negative. Now, the fig tree is the symbol of Israel who refuses to believe. Jesus curses the fig tree: this is a “parable in action”, representing Jesus’ judgment, see also the following parable of the Tenants of the Vineyard (12:1-13).

12:1-12 An allegory where every details has a symbolic meaning. The tenants/farmers are the leaders of Israel; the owner of the vineyard is God; the messengers are the prophets/John Baptist; the son of the owner is Jesus; The punishment and the transfer to the new Israel: the Church of the Gentiles.

12:35-37 Jesus doesn’t deny the Messiah’s descent from David, but implies that he is something more, of divine origin, since David calls him “Lord”.

12:41-44 The Poor Widow’s Contribution. She is the symbol of the *Anawin*, the poor of Yahweh or the childlike, the ones who inherit the kingdom: God is their only treasure.

13:3-37 The Eschatological Discourse joins the fall of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70, with the end of the world and the Last Judgment. To be noted:

- There is announcement of persecutions and the way believer should face them;
- There are exhortations about watchfulness and being ready;
- There are indications: v.10 “The Gospel must be preached...”: the period of the Christian Mission; v. 14 “The desolating Abomination” refers to the destruction of the temple by the Romans (as Antiochus Epiphanes had done: *Daniel* 9:27).
- “Those of Judea must flee to the mountains”: this is what actually happened during the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans: the Christians left the city and fled.

28-31 This will happened before the disappearance of the first generation of Christians.

24-27 The end of Jerusalem foreshadows the end of the world and the Last Judgment. The apocalyptic signs in the sky and the coming of the Judge, the Son of Man (*Daniel* 7:13-14). This what also Jesus told the High Priest during his Passion, identifying himself with the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One (14:61-62).

Chapter 14: 1-2 The Feast of the Unleavened Bread was the celebration of the Passover: the liberation from the slavery in Egypt.

14:3-9 The Anointing of Bethany: see the difference with John 12:1-6, where the woman is Mary, sister of Martha, and the place is their house. May be they are two different episodes.

14:18 Judas: Jesus contrasts the intimacy of table fellowship at the Passover Meal with the treachery of the traitor (*Psalms* 41:10).

14:12 Difference with John 19:14. John is correct: he sees the Passover of Jesus in the condemnation, at noon on Friday, hour in which the Passover lambs are slaughtered. The Passover Meal was in the evening (already Sabbath): this is why the body of the crucified were taken down from the cross. For the Synoptic, the account of the Last Supper and the Institution of the Eucharist happened during the Passover Meal: we may think that Jesus anticipated the Passover Meal on Thursday night. It was his Passover Meal.

14:22-24 The actions and the words expressed within the framework of the Passover Meal and the transition to the New Covenant, the sacrifice of himself through the offering of his body and blood in anticipation of his passion and death.

14:27 The quotation is from *Zechariah* 13:17. Even in John, Jesus announces that they will be scattered and will leave him alone but then, after his resurrection, he will gather them in Galilee (John 21).

14:36 “Abba”, Aramaic for “Father” (Dad, Daddy): Jesus’ personal way of addressing God with filial intimacy. This will be also the way of the brothers of Jesus as in *Romans* 8:15 & *Galatians* 4:6.

14:51-52 The young man who runs away naked is thought to be Mark.

14:53-65 Mark brings Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin immediately after the capture during the night. Luke puts it in the following morning. The affirmation of Jesus, answering the question of the High Priest, is the reason of his condemnation. In John, there is no formal session of the Sanhedrin, but the reason of Jesus’ condemnation is the same (*John* 19:7).

15:25 Jesus is crucified between 9am and 12 (the third hour); the other Gospels put the crucifixion at 12 noon and all the death of Jesus at 3pm.

15:39 The Confession of the Centurion: the Centurion repeats the theme of the beginning of the Gospel (1:1). It indicates the fulfillment of the Good News. The Centurion may be regarded as the first fruit of the Passion and Death of Jesus.

16:1-8 The Gospel ends abruptly with the women going home afraid, after the announcement of the resurrection by the Angels. Maybe original manuscript truncated.

THE LONGER ENDING (16:9-20)

It is by a different writer and looks like a summary of Luke and John. It is however ancient enough (2nd century) and accepted in the Canon. There is also a “Shorter Ending” in some of the manuscripts.

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