

“Who Jesus Is, According to Mark”

Mark 10:43b-45 (NRSV)

By John Gill

Who is Jesus? That is the most basic question that all of us must answer. Was he a confused person with delusions of grandeur (like most of his contemporaries believed) – a man with a Messiah Complex that he lived out, even to the bitter end? Was he just a good man (and nothing more, as most people today would assert) – a man who was a great teacher, showing us how we should live with one another? Or was he really who he claimed to be – the Son of God, who came as a man to live our life and die our death, so that by his resurrection, we could have the chance at eternal life? “Who IS Jesus?” Yes, it matters very much how we answer that question.

That’s why during this season of Lent, I will be preaching a series on “Who Jesus Is,” according to each of the four Gospels we have in the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written to try to help us answer that very question. Each Gospel-writer offered his best attempt at passing on to us the story of the life of Jesus. But they didn’t just give us a timeline of events the way a historian or newspaper reporter might do. No, in the way he went about telling the story, each Gospel writer reveals something unique about the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Just as a diamond has many facets, and is beautiful no matter which angle you look at it, so the Gospels each look at the story of Christ from a unique perspective – viewpoints that are somewhat different, yet give us a fresh insight into the beauty of Jesus Christ, and the good news he brings.

The Gospels were not mere historical accounts – they were documents designed to convince the reader that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God who takes away our sin, and give us a new and eternal life. The Gospels were meant to be more than “news.” They were to be “good news.”

In fact, that is what the word “gospel” means. The word “Gospel” has Germanic roots: “Gut” (meaning good) and “spiel” (meaning story or news). The Gospel is the “Gut-spiel” of what God has done for us in Christ.¹

Before we begin our look at the first Gospel we will be considering, I think it would be helpful to share with you a few things about “Gospels” in general. Forgive me if this sounds academic, but it is important that we understand some things about the Gospels themselves – you’re about to go to seminary, “Introduction to the New Testament.” Ready?

Why do we have four Gospels? Don’t they all say about the same thing? Why didn’t they just pick one to include in the Bible, or blend them all together into one story? Those are fair questions.

It is believed that the writers of our Gospels were motivated to record the story of Jesus’ life because eye-witnesses to the ministry of Jesus were dying-off, and there was real concern that the treasure of Jesus’ teachings and the stories of his life might be lost with their passing. In the early days of the church, there was an expectation that Jesus would return almost immediately, so there was no reason to write anything down – the stories were shared orally. But Jesus didn’t come as quickly as expected, and so efforts were made to record the good news for the benefit of future generations. The very first to take that step was a follower of Jesus named John Mark – or just “Mark” for short. That is why we are beginning our series with Mark, rather than Matthew, even though Matthew appears first in the Bible. Scholars are in unanimous agreement the Mark is the first of the four to be written.

In fact, scholars believe that Mark was not only first, but that his gospel was used by both Matthew and Luke as the template for their own gospels. Mark lays down the timeline of Jesus' ministry that Matthew and Luke follow. Mark is by far the shortest gospel and features the actions of Jesus during his ministry, rather than focusing on his teachings and sayings. In fact, Mark describes a Jesus in constant motion, who moves abruptly from event to event, often dealing with people brusquely. While clearly divine, Jesus shows the world the full range of his emotions, revealing the human side of his nature. For example, Mark loved the word "immediately" and uses it 41 times. But the urgency of his Gospel also is reflected in the grammar he chooses to use. Our English translations of the Greek have cleaned the text up, but in the original language, Mark often writes in what's called "the historic present;" Instead of saying "she said to me" and "I said to her," Mark would say, "she says to me" and "I says to her..." In the original Greek, Mark uses the "historic present" 151 times! From the beginning of his gospel with Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, to the empty tomb, Jesus is relentless, constantly on the move toward his rendezvous with the cross.³

We believe Matthew and Luke based their Gospels on Mark because nearly all of Mark can be found in both Matthew and Luke, often nearly word for word. 90% of Mark's text appears in Matthew – 50% of Mark's text appears in Luke. Of Mark's 661 verses, only 31 do not appear somewhere in Matthew or in Luke.³ That's why these first three Gospels are often referred to as the Synoptic Gospels, (synoptic has the same root word as "synonym," meaning similar). They all follow Mark's timeline of Jesus ministry and the events of Holy Week.

To Mark's chronology, Matthew and Luke then added the teachings of Jesus that apparently had been unknown to Mark, or for whatever reason, Mark left out. In fact, when you compare Matthew and Luke side by side, it becomes obvious that there is a large collection of teachings of Jesus that Matthew and Luke share - again, nearly word for word. That has led scholars to theorize that, in addition to Mark's Gospel, Luke and Matthew both had access to a document that has since been lost - a source that included many of the teachings of Jesus. Scholars refer to this theoretical source as "Q," from the German word "quelle" which means "source."

So, we believe that Matthew and Luke used both Mark and this "Q" source when putting their Gospels together.

Of course, both Matthew and Luke also each have their own unique material that is found nowhere else, traditions and stories they were aware of, and included in their telling of the good news of Jesus. For instance, Matthew and Luke are the only two Gospels that tell the stories of Jesus' birth, but they tell completely different stories – Luke tells of the angel's appearance to Mary, and the story of the shepherds coming to the manger – Matthew tells of the angel appearing to Joseph in a dream, and the journey of the Wise Men to see the Christ Child. Both important traditions, but very different, indeed. So, as you see, there are great similarities - and great differences - in the synoptic gospels.

But then there is John. As we will see when we conclude our series, the Gospel of John contains almost none of the material found in the synoptic gospels, but instead reflects a totally different tradition about the life of Jesus. John's chronology of events is quite distinct, and the sayings of Jesus are completely unique. Obviously, John either didn't have access to Mark or "Q," or, he chose not to use them. He offers us a completely new perspective on "who Jesus is."

So, that is a quick overview of the four Gospels, and why they are alike in some ways, and very different in other ways. Each Gospel reveals something special about "who Jesus is."

Now let's turn our attention to the first Gospel to be written down: The Gospel of Mark.

Who was Mark? The author of this Gospel was born in Jerusalem. In fact, we read quite a lot about him and his home during the early days of the Christian Church. We know, for instance, that his mother, whose name was Mary (yet another Mary), opened her house so that the early Christians could meet there. In the Book of Acts, chapter 12 (12:12), we read that when Peter was released from prison, he immediately sought refuge in the house of Mark's mother, Mary. What's more, there are some scholars who believe that the Last Supper may well have been held at the house of Mary and her son, Mark.

That's because Mark (and only Mark) includes a very odd detail about the events of that night. He says that, when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane after the last supper, (and I quote) "a certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked." (end quote) Surely, the young man was Mark himself. The young son of Mary must have overheard Jesus speak to the disciples about his impending arrest and death, so he left his bed, wearing only his night clothes, to follow Jesus to the Garden. If this is true, then Mark, while not technically one of the 12 Disciples himself, had seen and heard Jesus in the flesh, and may have been a witness to the events of Holy Week.²

The next we learn of Mark is as a young companion of the Apostles on their missionary travels. The Book of Acts tells us that Mark accompanied his uncle, Barnabas and the Apostle Paul on Paul's first missionary journey. But Mark is not very successful (perhaps he was immature or homesick), He abandons the mission and returns to Jerusalem. Paul is upset that Mark deserted the mission. The next time Paul and Barnabas were about to set out on a missionary trip, Mark wanted to go along again. But Paul refused to allow him. This led to a dispute between Paul and Barnabas. The result was that Paul and Barnabas split up. Paul took Silas along with him, while Barnabas took Mark. Because of his uncle's faith in him, Mark ultimately became a great missionary in his own right.²

We don't hear much more about him, but tradition seems to indicate that Mark became a companion of the Apostle Peter. Peter himself hints at this in his first letter (5:13), He writes, "Your sister church here in Babylon (Rome) sends you greetings, and so does my son Mark."

We have every reason to believe that the Gospel of Mark is actually based on the memories and teachings of the Apostle Peter. Mark's Gospel is the only one to give us little details that only Peter might have known. For instance, in several places, when Jesus speaks, Mark actually renders Jesus' words - not in Greek like the rest of his Gospel, but in Aramaic - the language Jesus actually spoke. He also is the only one to tell us that, when Jesus was with his Disciples on the Sea of Galilee in the midst of a storm, Jesus was asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat. And, it is Mark who tells us that when the disciples were arguing over who is the greatest, Jesus didn't just use a child as an example, but actually took the child into his arms.³ These are details only an eye witness could know.

Mark was Peter's protégé who would have heard Peter preach and tell about Jesus for many years. When Peter died in the persecution of Christians under the Emperor Nero around the year 67, Mark would have felt compelled to record the story of Jesus as Peter had recounted it to him.² In fact, many scholars date the writing of Mark around that time - sometime before 70 A.D.

This means that the stories Mark tells are probably based on the eye-witness accounts told to him by Peter. It also means that the way Mark answers the question, “Who is Jesus,” reflects how the Apostle Peter himself might answer that question.

So, who is Jesus, according to Mark (Peter)? To answer that question, we will need to consider the situation of those for whom this Gospel was written.

You see, the Gospels were each developed at different times and in various locals, meant to be read by different audiences. For instance, the way you might tell the story of Jesus to Jews who had spent centuries awaiting the arrival of a Jewish Messiah might be very different from the way you would tell the story to Gentiles, who were unfamiliar with Jewish Scripture. And, since the Gospels were written over the span of many years, the choice of stories you include and the emphasis you put on them might vary, depending on whether or not your readers are going through a time of great persecution, or a time of relative peace and tolerance.

In the case of Mark, his Gospel was written to the Christians living in Rome, not long after the martyrdom of Peter and Paul, when they were experiencing great persecution and the temptation to compromise their faith.

Therefore, it shouldn't come as a surprise to us that Mark's Gospel highlights the suffering of Christ, who is victorious in spite of (and even because of) the sacrifice he was willing to make. A full 40% of Mark is dedicated to the final week of Jesus' life – what we call “the Passion of Christ.” For Mark, Jesus is the Suffering Servant whom the Prophet Isaiah wrote about, by whose sacrifice we are made whole.

Mark's point seems to be that we cannot understand who Jesus is, and cannot therefore be his disciples, until we realize the centrality of suffering in Christ's mission – and in ours. Jesus is not a messiah of earthly glory, but one driven by a love who is willing to suffer for God and for others. According to Mark, Jesus was glorified on the cross of Good Friday as much as he was glorified in the empty tomb of Easter morning. In Mark, the emphasis is clearly on the crucifixion, even more than the resurrection which is only briefly mentioned in the earliest versions of Mark's gospel. Only later versions embellish Mark's ending with resurrection appearances to make the ending of Mark's Gospel more satisfying.

In the way Mark tells his story of Jesus, it is clear that he sees the Cross as the central event of Jesus mission. If you were to try to summarize Mark's gospel in one sentence, it would be this: The way of the cross is the only way to glory.⁴

Mark is making the point that, just as Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself in service to others, we must be willing to do the same. For it is in the willingness to give of ourselves that God is glorified.

Sometimes we sing a hymn that summarizes beautifully the theme of Mark's Gospel: “Take up thy cross' the Savior said 'if thou wouldst my disciple be. Deny thyself, the world forsake, and humbly follow after me.... Take up thy cross and follow Christ, nor think 'til death to lay it down; for only those who bear the cross may hope to wear the glorious crown.”

That is the challenge we hear from Mark's Gospel. As followers of Jesus, we also will be asked to make great sacrifices, or even to suffer, for our faith. But if we hold fast to our beliefs, Mark says, God will give us the victory, just as Christ was victorious.

So, “who was Jesus,” according to Mark? The Christ of Mark’s Gospel tells us himself:

“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ... For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

That is who Jesus is, - according to Mark.

¹ Copyright © 2007 Nathan L. Bostian. <http://theomedy.blogspot.com/2007/09/tale-of-four-gospels.html>

²Phillips, J. B. Peter’s Portrait of Jesus. Abingdon. c. 1976

³Barclay, William. The Men, the Meaning, the Message of the New Testament Books. Westminster Press. c. 1976

⁴Amoss, Jr., George. Introduction to the Christology of Mark’s Gospel. c 1979.
<http://www.qis.net/~daruma/mark-c.html>