

OTT Sunday School Lessons

TEACHER'S NOTES

Lesson 1: Introduction to Mark

Mark is the shortest gospel but its size does not diminish its importance. As we will see in this introduction, Mark is most likely the first gospel to be written. Mark was not rushing to beat other Gospel writers to the title of first Gospel. Rather, he was rushing to commit the message to paper for a persecuted church at a time when the original apostles were dying and their teachings needed to be written down for preservation and distribution. Mark Strauss remarks, “Though the most dramatic and fast-paced of the four Gospels, Mark’s was also the most neglected . . . due primarily to the fact that it was the shortest.”¹ Mark’s short gospel, however, is not deficient. His goal was not to tell every story but to produce a document wherein the church might have a record of the Apostle’s gospel message while their actual, verbal teaching was still fresh in the minds and ringing in their ears. Mark did this under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and most likely based his material on the recollections of Peter. His first readers were encouraged and nourished by Mark’s work in writing this Gospel. It is also quite likely that Matthew and Luke turned to Mark’s gospel as a source for their own works. Mark is brief but it is just as important as any Biblical Gospel for each generation of believers.

Authorship

Mark does not identify himself as the author of this work. However, some form of the title “the Gospel According to Mark” appears with this book even in the earliest manuscripts. Thus, it seems that the author was known as Mark in the early days of this Gospel’s distribution. It was also known early on that Mark wrote in conjunction with the Apostle Peter. This gave his work the credibility necessary to be accepted with such esteem in the early church.

The knowledge of Mark as the author seems to be quite common in the early church. Robert Stein notes that the evidence “supporting Markan authorship can be described in general as early, universal, and extensive.”² Many early church leaders and historians attributed this Gospel to Mark in their writings. Some of these include:

- Papias – A Bishop from Hierapolis (in modern Turkey) was also a disciple of the Apostle John. The church historian Eusebius quotes Papias describing Mark as the author of the Gospel who used Peter’s words as his basis. “For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded.”³ Papias recorded this around 140 AD making this the earliest reference to Mark as the author of the Gospel.
- Irenaeus – A Greek Bishop who helped to grow the church in France wrote in around 170 AD that, “Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself also handed over to us, in writing, the things preached by Peter.”⁴
- Clement of Alexandria – This early Egyptian church leader wrote in around 180 AD that, “When, by the Spirit, Peter had publicly proclaimed the Gospel in Rome, his many hearers urged Mark, as one who had followed him for years and remembered

¹ Mark L. Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 20.

² Robert H. Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 1.

³ Robert H. Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 1.

⁴ Robert H. Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 3.

what was said, to put it all in writing. This he did and gave copies to all who asked.”⁵

- Origen – An early church teacher in Alexandria, Egypt wrote around 200 AD that Mark “wrote it in accordance with Peter’s instructions, whom also Peter acknowledged as his son in [his first] epistle.”⁶

Although some scholars have cast doubt on the historical record regarding the authorship of Mark, it seems that the evidence is overwhelming in Mark’s favor. While the author does not identify himself in the Gospel, there is nothing in the material that would disprove Mark’s authorship. Furthermore, if the church was undertaking a coordinated effort to falsely attribute this Gospel to a certain author, they would have chosen a more prominent figure than Mark. In regards to the historical record, David Garland writes that, “the early attribution of this Gospel to Mark is credible. Why would the church want to credit someone who was not one of the Twelve for writing this work if it were not so?”⁷ Mark Strauss agrees when he writes, “Since John Mark was a relatively obscure figure, it seems unlikely that a gospel would have been attributed to him if he had not in fact written it.”⁸

Who was Mark?

While the historical record indicates that someone named Mark is the author, who is this Mark that wrote down the Gospel? This question has caused some considerable debate, especially since “Mark was one of the most common names in the Roman world.”⁹ However, in light of the reports of the early church leaders above, this Mark seems to be a helper of Peter. Based on the historical and Biblical record, the Gospel writer Mark has long been identified as John Mark found in the Book of Acts and mentioned in several epistles.

John Mark is first seen with certainty in Scripture in Acts 12. The setting of Acts 12 is Jerusalem in 41 or 42 AD. Herod Agrippa had been appointed as king by the Roman emperor and ruled over a territory almost as large as that of his grandfather, Herod the Great. Agrippa’s territory included Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. His uncle, Herod Antipas was only the ruler of Galilee but was in Jerusalem for the Passover when Pilate sent Jesus to him for trial. Not long after this, Herod Antipas was accused of conspiracy against the Romans and sent to exile in Spain. When Herod Agrippa took control, he wanted to gain the favor of the Jews and not be seen merely as a Roman appointee. He correctly determined that an attack on the apostles would gain him popularity among the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. He first put to death James, the brother of John. Next, Herod Agrippa arrested Peter and prepared to kill him as well. Late in the night, the miraculous intervention of God through his angel rescued Peter from execution.

In response to Peter’s arrest, the church in Jerusalem gathered for prayer. In Acts 12:12-17, many believers met to pray in the home of a lady named Mary. Since “Mary” was such a common name for women during this time, it is difficult to connect this Mary to other Marys in the Gospels. Any such connection is speculation at best. This Mary must have been a woman of some wealth since she had a gated home large enough to accommodate a many people for meetings. She also had at least one servant. Craig Keener notes that early church congregations or groups would often meet in “the homes of well-to-do people with enough space to accommodate them.”¹⁰ Peter rushed to her house after his miraculous deliverance from captivity and reported his testimony to the astonished crowd. Luke also tells us that this Mary had a son who was most likely there that night. His name was John Mark (Acts 12:12). Since Mary husband’s name is not mentioned, it is assumed

⁵ Mark L. Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 29.

⁶ Robert H. Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 3.

⁷ David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 27.

⁸ Mark L. Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 30.

⁹ David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 27.

¹⁰ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 1893.

that he was either an unbeliever or dead. Many, like Keener, see textual evidence that Mary was a widow.¹¹ Thus, it is very possible that John Mark's father was not part of John Mark's story at this point.

Mary is identified as "the mother of John, also called Mark" (Acts 12:12). This indicates that Mark was well known among the believers generally. If Mary's son had been relatively unknown, perhaps Luke would have omitted this reference. As John Polhill points out, "It is unusual that Mary was identified through Mark; usually the child was identified by the parent." Polhill says that the possible explanation is that "Mark was the better known of the two in Christian circles."¹²

Acts 11:27-30 and 12:25 indicate that Paul and Barnabas had come to Jerusalem around this time with an offering from the church in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas had been serving together in Antioch at a church planted by some of the believers who fled Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen (an event partially overseen by Paul himself). The church in Antioch had now sent an offering to support the believers in Jerusalem. Most likely, Paul and Barnabas were not in Jerusalem for the prayer meeting described in Acts 12:12-17 but it was very likely that they stayed in the same house (the home of Mary and John Mark) since they were relatives of Barnabas.¹³ No doubt, they were told the amazing story of Peter's deliverance by the eyewitnesses.

By Luke's account, we see that from the beginning of Mark's story he is surrounded by the great leaders of the church. Peter rushes to Mark's home to share his dramatic testimony. Paul and Barnabas most likely stay in this same home he and Mark were cousins according to Colossians 4:10. Later, Mark would join his cousin and Paul when they returned to Antioch from Jerusalem (Acts 12:25). Craig Keener suggests that "Mark may have wanted to serve Barnabas and Paul as something of a disciple."¹⁴

John Mark, like many Jews in his day, had two names, one from his Jewish heritage and one from the Greek or Roman culture. Henry Swete notes that "the New Testament bears witness to the readiness of the Palestinian Jew to adopt or accept a secondary name, whether of Aramaic or foreign origin."¹⁵ Peter was also called Simon and Cephas. Saul was also called Paul. John Mark falls into this tradition. John was his Hebrew name (*Yehohanan*) while Mark (*Marcus* in Latin) was a name of Roman origin. These names identify Mark as a man of two cultures: he was an ethnic and religious Jew living in a territory dominated militarily and economically by the Roman Empire. As a member of a family with some wealth, John Mark would have been well educated and taught to read and write in the Greek language, the common language of the nations in the Eastern Roman empire.

Sometime around 44 AD (when Herod Agrippa died) Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with John Mark (Acts 12:25). Mark had the benefit of living in two vibrant Christian communities of the early church: Jerusalem and Antioch. Several years later, Paul and Barnabas were called by the Holy Spirit to be missionaries and were sent out on a missionary journey which began in Cyprus, the homeland of Barnabas. They also took Mark with them as helper (Acts 13:5). After an intense conflict with a Jewish sorcerer named Elymas Bar-Jesus, Mark abandoned the team and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13) so after the team left island of Cyprus. Although the exact reason for Mark's departure is not written, the Greek word used by Luke to convey Mark's withdrawal could be used to describe one turning away in fear or in rejection. Either way, Craig Keener notes that "abandoning a mentor was also viewed as a form of unfaithfulness."¹⁶ In Acts 15:38, Paul described Mark's action as desertion.

¹¹ Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 2, 1893.

¹² John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 1992), 281.

¹³ F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 258.

¹⁴ Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 2, 1981 - 1982.

¹⁵ Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), xiv.

¹⁶ Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 2, 2030.

In Acts 15, we see that Peter had also returned to Jerusalem and it is likely that Mark and Peter started working together in the ministry after Mark deserted Paul and Barnabas. It is clear in 1 Peter 5:13 that Mark was with Peter in Rome and based on the historical record above, Mark worked with Peter as a translator and scribe.

In 49 AD, Paul and Barnabas also return to Jerusalem for a meeting of church leaders known as the Jerusalem Council (found in Acts 15). They most likely reunited with Mark during this time. When Paul and Barnabas return from Jerusalem to Antioch, they decide to set out on a second missionary journey. Barnabas expresses his desire to include Mark once again. Paul, however, was not willing to invite Mark into the team. F. F. Bruce suggests that in Paul's eyes, Mark's desertion "revealed some defect of character which made him unfit for such work." On the other hand, "Barnabas discerned promising qualities in his young cousin which could be developed under his care."¹⁷ This deliberation over Mark brought Paul and Barnabas into such a big dispute that they part ways over this issue (Acts 15:37-40). Barnabas took Mark with him and they returned to Cyprus. Paul recruited Silas and they go to Galatia. The Bible does not explain how, but we know that Paul and Mark do reconcile as Paul speaks positively of Mark in 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24.

Based on Paul's references to Mark in 2 Timothy and Philemon and Peter's reference to Mark in 1 Peter 5:13, we are able to place Mark in Rome near the time of Paul and Peter's execution. Reliable church tradition, such as the letter of 1 Clement of Rome, indicates that Paul and Peter died during the reign of Emperor Nero in 64 AD. Nero instigated mass persecution of Christians to divert attention away from rumors that Nero had started the fire that burned most of the city of Rome. Nero blamed this on the Christians and stirred up suspicion and violence against them. Church tradition indicates that Peter was also martyred in Rome shortly after. Mark was introduced to the church when Peter was miraculously saved from death. It appears that Peter's imminent execution was a catalyst for one of Mark's greatest contributions to the church, the writing down of the Gospel message.

One interesting record from early church history was a comment about Mark's nickname. Robert Stein reports that Mark was known in the early church as "Stumpfinger" because "for the size of the rest of his body he had fingers that were too short."¹⁸

Other Traditions About Mark

Some church traditions about Mark do exist but have not been mentioned above because they have been identified as questionable, unreliable, or unverifiable. We will consider a few of those traditions below.

Some traditions hold that Mark's family home in Jerusalem was the location of the "upper room" and thus the setting for the events in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost. This is possible but not certain.

The Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt claims that Mark started their church in Alexandria about 20 years after the ascension of Jesus. This would have been after his second mission journey with Barnabas described in Acts 15:39. After planting the church in Egypt, the tradition reports that Mark returned to Jerusalem and then traveled to Rome to assist Paul and Peter at their request. This tradition is somewhat affirmed by Eusebius when he wrote in 324 AD that "Mark was the first to be sent to preach in Egypt."¹⁹

According to Catholic tradition, Mark returned to North Africa during Nero's persecution and after the deaths of Paul and Peter. Thus, Mark is often called the founder of Christianity in Africa. This tradition says that Mark died in 68 AD after being tied with a rope and dragged through the streets until he was dead by pagans who violently rejected the Gospel message.

¹⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts*, 319.

¹⁸ Robert H. Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 3.

¹⁹ Robert H. Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 4.

One of the most interesting traditions about Mark claims that he was the young man mentioned in Mark 14:51-52. This young man was following Jesus around Jerusalem and went along with him and the disciples to Gethsemane. He was only wearing a linen garment. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, they also grabbed this young man. The man struggled out of his close to escape and left with the soldiers holding his garment. Thus, he fled naked. The evidence that supports this as Mark is as follows:

- This story is only mentioned in Mark's Gospel. Perhaps Mark was the only Gospel writer who had this information. Mark wrote this from his own personal experience as the boy.
- This event happened in Jerusalem and Mark lived in Jerusalem.
- Mark was a fairly young man in Acts so he would have been even younger when he followed Jesus.

Though this is a compelling tradition, the evidence for this boy being Mark is circumstantial. It cannot be proven or stated with certainty.

Mark's Sources of Information

We have established that the author of Mark is very well likely John Mark from Acts 12. However, the only evidence that he even met Jesus in the flesh is the distant possibility that he was the young man mentioned in Mark 14:51. Even if Mark was an eyewitness to Jesus' final days in Jerusalem before the crucifixion and resurrection, it is not seen at all in Scripture where Mark spent time with Jesus absorbing his teaching and watching his actions. How, then, did Mark come to write a Gospel?

First, we see that Mark was acquainted with the early apostles and church leaders as they used his mother's home as a meeting place. Since all of the early proclamations of the Gospel were oral, Mark certainly heard the apostles and leaders convey the sayings and actions of Jesus.

Second, it is known from both Scripture and reliable historical records that Mark was a colleague in the ministry with Peter and Paul. He certainly heard them teach and preach often. These men were able to pass on to him with authority the messages and miracles Jesus provided. In the historical record, Mark is often connected with Peter. William Lanes notes that "an unbroken tradition affirms that the evangelist was intimately associated with the apostle Peter and that the contents of this Gospel depend significantly upon the message he proclaimed."²⁰ This is also seen in the Gospel by Mark's frequent descriptions of or references Peter:

Mark 1:16-18, 29-31, 36

Mark 3:16

Mark 5:37-43

Mark 8:29, 31-33

Mark 9:2-8

Mark 10:28-31

Mark 11:21

Mark 13:3-37

Mark 14:27-42, 54, 66-72

Mark 16:7

Third, it is true that Mark lived in Jerusalem and probably had some first-hand information to share about Jesus. Ajith Fernando writes, "As a resident of Jerusalem Mark may have had an eyewitness knowledge of events in the gospel story, especially relating to the Passion narrative."²¹ It is true that a significant portion of Mark's Gospel is given to describing the week of Jesus' crucifixion. Perhaps Mark was able to give emphasis to this part of the story because he saw some of it with his own eyes.

²⁰ William L. Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 7.

²¹ Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 375.

Ultimately, we understand that Mark did not invent or guess the content of his Gospel. Rather, he compiled what he had studied heard from reliable and authoritative sources over his lifetime.

When did Mark Write?

Mark does not give the exact date of writing nor does he give us many textual clues about when he wrote. Based on the historical record, we can be fairly confident that Mark wrote near the time of Peter's death. The historical record is unclear if Peter was still alive when Mark wrote. Perhaps it is best to consider that Mark began the process when Peter was still alive but completed or finalized the work after Peter's death. Even though Mark saw Peter miraculously rescued from execution once before in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), Mark probably understood that the possibility of Peter's execution in Rome was great and imminent. This was likely a strong motivation to start writing down the messages that the Apostles preached and taught. We understand that Peter's death came soon after Paul's in the city of Rome during a time of heavy persecution. Douglas Moo writes that "early and, it seems, generally reliable tradition has it that Peter perished, with Paul, in the persecution of the Emperor Nero in Rome (AD 64-65)."²²

In light of this we can assume that Mark wrote in the mid to late 60s AD (64 – 69 AD), about 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Where did Mark Write?

Although a minority view places Mark in Egypt or Israel, the majority opinion and most evidence points towards Rome as being the place of writing. While Mark may not have lingered in Rome after the death of Peter and during Nero's persecution, he probably remained close to Rome to both complete his writing and carry on his ministry. Robert Stein summarizes that "the association of the Gospel of Mark with Rome found in the early church tradition is quite weighty and receives support from several quarters"²³ as we will see below.

To Whom did Mark Write?

While Mark did not identify a specific audience or recipients, we can infer from the historical record and internal evidence that Mark intended his Gospel to be read first by the Christians in and around Rome. Though there is some debate on the issue, this is the majority view. William Lane notes that "the Gospel of Mark reaches its climax in the confession of Jesus' deity by a Roman centurion. Roman Christianity found in the Gospel an account peculiarly appropriate to its life and problems."²⁴

The internal evidence supporting Rome as the immediate audience is that fact that in the Gospel of Mark, the author always translated the Aramaic phrases which he included in his writing. The Gospel is written in Greek except for a few statements which were recorded by Mark in Aramaic. Aramaic is a language in the same family as Hebrew and it was the common language in the areas of Syria, Palestine, and Israel during the time of Jesus. Most likely this was the language Jesus usually spoke. The Aramaic phrases found in Mark are:

Mark 5:41 – *Talitha kourai*

Mark 7:11 – *Corban*

Mark 7:34 – *Ephphatha*

Mark 14:36 – *Abba*

Mark 15:22 – *Golgotha*

Mark 15:34 – *Eloi, eloi, lama, sabachthani*

(also possibly Mark 3:17 – *Boanerges* and Mark 10:46 – *Bartimaeus*)

²² Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Peter, Jude* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 22.

²³ Robert H. Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 11.

²⁴ William L. Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 25.

Mark's translation of these Aramaic words indicates that his audience knew Greek but not Aramaic. Thus, they were most likely outside of Israel and Aramaic speaking regions. This further supports Rome as the immediate audience and place of writing.

Finally, Mark uses several phrases that would be familiar with Latin audiences. These are called "Latinisms"²⁵ and some examples include "denarius" (a Latin term for a silver coin in Mark 6:37; 12:15; 14:5) and "penny" (another Latin monetary term in Mark 12:42). Latin military terms were also used including "legion" in Mark 5:9, 15; "centurion" in Mark 15:39, 44, 45; and "praetorium" in Mark 15:16. In total, around 25 Latinisms can be found in Mark's Gospel. This frequent choice of vocabulary could very well indicate a Latin or Roman audience.

The biblical evidence shows that the church in Rome was not planted by Paul. The gospel was perhaps first carried to Rome by those who heard the preaching of the Gospel on the day of Pentecost when Romans were specifically mentioned as being in the audience (Acts 2:10). When Paul writes to the church at Rome, he mentioned Aquila and Priscilla (Romans 16:3) who were from Rome and most likely returned to help spread the Gospel there (Acts 18:2). Thus, we see even in the church at Rome there were Jewish converts leading the way. However, Paul's emphasis on Gentiles in Romans 1:5, 13; 2:24; 3:22; 9:30; 10:12) seems to indicate that Gentiles were a significant part of the church as well. Rome was, in fact, the capital of the Gentile Roman Empire. Yes, the Gentiles to whom Mark wrote seem to have a knowledge of the Old Testament because Mark includes references to Old Testament events or quotes with no explanation. Thus, these Gentiles were perhaps God-fearers (Gentiles who worshipped Yahweh) or long-term believers previously exposed to Old Testament teaching as part of the ministry of the Church. In light of this, we can be confident that Mark wrote to an ethnically mixed audience. In fact, Mark Strauss sees Mark writing to a "predominantly Gentile" audience.²⁶

Why did Mark Write?

It is reasonable to assume that Mark's purposes for writing are connected both to the immediate needs of his surrounding Christian community and the long-term growth and success of the church at large. As Nicholas Perrin writes, "One must imagine that [Mark's] agenda was driven in part by the situational needs of his audience. At the same time, being among the first to write the Jesus story, he likely would have thought of his task as transcending the immediate concerns of his target audience."²⁷ Many have speculated about the exact reasons and circumstances that motivated Mark to write his Gospel. However, some reasons are made clear in the text and in the historical record.

The primary purpose for which Mark wrote was to communicate the Gospel message first given by Christ Jesus and then proclaimed by the original Apostles. The Apostles were the most reliable and authoritative voices in early Christianity. Their teachings and preaching were the foundation of the early churches and the only physical connection between many believers and their Savior. Yet many of the original Apostles were dying. John Mark was in Jerusalem when James was executed by Herod Agrippa. This was the first original Apostle to be martyred. When he died, an eyewitness to the teaching and miracles of Jesus was extinguished and this was a major blow to the church. Now, with the execution of Paul and Peter, Mark knew the time had come to write down what these men had been proclaiming so that others could know their teaching. William Lanes writes Mark's response to the killing of the Apostles was to bring "together a witness document designed to preserve the apostolic tradition and to strengthen the Church in thei

²⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 11.

²⁶ Mark L. Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 36.

²⁷ Nicholas Perrin, "Mark, Gospel of," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, & Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 561.

crucial situation.”²⁸ We also believe that it was the Holy Spirit who called Mark to this task, inspired him to write, and enabled him to authoritatively complete the work for the benefit of the whole Church so that God’s Word may endure for future generations.

Another reason for Mark to write was to encourage and strengthen those suffering persecutions on account of their decision to follow Christ. Christians were being persecuted by local governments and Roman imperial forces. The book of Acts demonstrates how both Jewish authorities and pagan communities persecuted believers. Reliable historical records also indicate that by 63 AD, Roman policy marked Christians for persecution.

For the Jews, the acceptance of Jesus as God and Messiah was unacceptable. Any Jewish person who confessed belief in Jesus as the Messiah would be chased out of the synagogue and even the Jewish home or community to which he or she belonged. Mark saw firsthand in Jerusalem how Jewish leaders attacked Christians.

As the church expanded beyond Jerusalem, other communities and authorities persecuted Christians for various reasons. Some persecuted Christians because it was advantageous politically. If the majority in a city or region opposed Christians, it was popular for the leadership to oppose them as well. Others persecuted Christians because they represented an affront to polytheistic religious systems. The Christians, like the Jews, promoted and mandated the worship of one God which seemed unreasonable and dangerous to those who worshipped many gods. For others, Christians were a convenient scapegoat to use whenever necessary. These suspicious minorities could be easily blamed for arising problems. Nero did exactly this in 64 AD after the great fire of Rome. Persecution of Christians has been sporadic until Nero decided to assign blame for the fire on the Christians. The fire burned for over a week in two waves. Among the city’s 14 wards, three were completely destroyed while seven others were heavily damaged. While some felt the fire was an accident, many saw Nero as being the cause of the fires. The rumors that Nero intentionally started the blaze in order to imitate new building projects spread as quickly and broad as the fire itself. When Nero could not put down the rumors, “a scapegoat had to be found. Blame for the fire was placed squarely upon the Christians.”²⁹ This set off a systematic persecution of Christians which resulted in the execution of Peter, Paul, and countless others. The persecution was brutal. Tacitus, an unbelieving Roman historian, described these dark days:

“First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned – not so much for incendiarism as for their anti-social tendencies. Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals’ skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. Nero provided his gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the Circus, at which he mingled in the crowd – or stood in a chariot, dressed as a charioteer. Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man’s brutality rather than to the national interest.”³⁰

By the time Mark wrote this Gospel, Christians were consistently the targets of persecution and mistreatment and it was understandably discouraging. Peter and Paul both recognized this in their letters (1 Peter 1:6; 2 Timothy 3:12-13). There is no doubt that this was a challenge to the faith of new and early believers. The book of Hebrews even indicates that some were beginning to waver and fall away in response to severe persecution (Hebrews 2:1-4; 12:1-13). Mark wanted to offer something to support the believers through their persecution. Indeed, we see in Mark an emphasis on Christ’s journey to and death upon the cross. The story of Jesus’ trials, sufferings,

²⁸ William L. Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 18.

²⁹ William L. Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 14.

³⁰ William L. Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 14.

persecutions, and death would certainly be relatable to the first readers. The story of Jesus' victory and resurrection would certainly be a source of hope to the first readers. Even now many can find hope and help in the story of Jesus.

William Lane describes Mark's Gospel as a "historical narrative oriented around a crisis – the death of Jesus the Messiah. There are valid reasons for believing that the Gospel was written for people who themselves confronted a crisis not dissimilar to the one faced by Jesus. . . . When Roman believers received the Gospel of Mark they found that it spoke to the situation of the Christian community in Nero's Rome"³¹ Mark Strauss writes that "Mark's gospel was almost certainly written to a suffering and persecuted church. Its stands as a narrative call to discipleship or those facing trials, persecutions, confusion, and suffering."³²

Discipleship seems to be a third reason that Mark wrote. His writing reveals his desire to offer to the church a model for discipleship. Its possible that Mark saw this as a document that would aid in discipling believers. As Ben Witherington writes, "Mark's Gospel is the textbook which has gathered up the memoirs or memoranda or recollections and presented them."³³ The original Apostles, like Jesus, raised up disciples. John Mark was even a disciple of the Apostles and most likely understood that discipleship was a key in sustaining believers for the long-term. This Gospel would act as a substitute for the Apostles so that future Christian leaders could draw from their witness and teaching as they made new disciples. This is a purpose for which the Gospel is still used today.

Even though Mark does not seem to be addressing any false teaching in particular, it is helpful to note that Mark's Gospel would have been a source of right theology for the early church and one of the first standards by which the church could determine whether a message concerning Jesus was genuine or fake. Paul often addressed false teaching in the churches through his letters so we know there was a need for authoritative material to combat heresy. Perrin sees Mark as "laying the theological groundwork for the burgeoning movement as it continued to expand across the Mediterranean world."³⁴

What did Mark Write?

The remainder of this study in the Gospel of Mark will examine exactly what he wrote. However, there are a few broad descriptions that we should consider concerning this book.

First, the genre of this work is known as Gospel. The word genre simply means classification of literature. The New Testament has four genres (Gospels, History, Letters, and Apocalypse). We will discuss more about the meaning and nature of Gospels in the next section of notes. The relationship between the four Gospels is discussed below in the section on the "Synoptic Gospels."

Second, although our modern Bibles organize the material into chapters and verses, this was not the way Mark wrote originally. The chapter and verse numbers were added over 1,000 years later to aid in Bible study. Thus, as we study the text we will sometimes diverge from the chapter and verse divisions of the book.

Third, Mark's Gospel contains the least red letters of all the Gospels. Of course, in many Bibles, the words of Jesus are printed in red to distinguish them from the other text (even though we recognize that all of God's Word in the Bible is inspired, authoritative, and valuable). Ben Stein points out that "Mark is not primarily a collection of Jesus' teachings . . . It is rather a Gospel concerning the person, deed, and acts of Jesus." Stein continues, "Mark is certainly not devoid of

³¹ William L. Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 1, 15.

³² Mark L. Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 20.

³³ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 11.

³⁴ Nicholas Perrin, "Mark, Gospel of," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, & Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 561-562.

information concerning what Jesus taught but it concentrates primarily on who Jesus is and what he did.”³⁵ As you study the Gospels you will find that even though the writers often cover similar material, they each have different emphases. For Mark, the emphasis was more on describing and defending Jesus’ identity. This does not make Mark less important. Rather, Mark’s Gospel and emphasis are equally valuable to the others for each Gospel contributes to our whole understanding of Jesus and his message. Indeed, Mark’s testimony is different but just as important.

How did Mark Write?

Mark’s style of writing seems to indicate urgency or speed. Mark Strauss notes that Mark “writes with a fast-moving, dramatic style.”³⁶ He seems to be telling the story quickly, possibly sensing the great need for the Gospel to be written down and distributed so others can hear and know the message of Christ Jesus. Mark frequently uses the Greek word *εὐθὺς*³⁷ which is often as “immediately” to keep the story moving as he wants to take his readers to the cross and resurrection of Christ.

Mark did write with urgency but he did not write with flattery. Although Mark worked with Peter and perhaps knew several other original Apostles, he does not hold back in communicating how they often failed to understand or follow Jesus properly. Nicholas Perrin even comments that “there is no other Gospel in which Jesus remains so misunderstood and so fiercely resisted by all manner of people, including at times his most devoted followers.”³⁸ Mark is not writing to exalt the disciples. He wants to emphasize Jesus. Mark Strauss notes that in this Gospel, “the model for discipleship is not the Twelve, who repeatedly fail, but Jesus himself, who alone remains faithful to God’s purpose.”³⁹

Mark originally wrote in Greek. Having been from a family with some wealth, he most likely had a good education where he learned to write in Greek. Craig Keener reports that “Mark is written in the most basic Koine Greek from the eastern Mediterranean world.”⁴⁰ Though Mark’s use of the Greek language is more advanced than John, Perrin notes that “Among the four Gospels, Mark is the most inelegant in terms of style.”⁴¹ The abruptness of the beginning and ending of Mark’s Gospel is an indication of his hasty work; he wanted to quickly get the story written and circulated. He was perhaps more concerned with efficiency than elegance when he wrote. Nevertheless, Mark is able to immediately grab the reader’s attention and keep it with his fast-paced storytelling and narration. Mark Strauss reminds us that “the gospel has been primarily heard rather than read for most of church history”⁴² and Mark’s Gospel caters to this audible method of receiving the message.

Mark also writes in a pattern called a “triad”⁴³ where he records stories or events in groups of three. While these stories each have an individual message or intent, we can find a deeper level of meaning when we view them together.

³⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 41.

³⁶ Mark L. Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 46.

³⁷ Used 41 times in Mark’s Gospel.

³⁸ Nicholas Perrin, “Mark, Gospel of,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, & Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 553.

³⁹ Mark L. Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 42.

⁴⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 127.

⁴¹ Nicholas Perrin, “Mark, Gospel of,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, & Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 556.

⁴² Mark L. Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 47.

⁴³ Mark L. Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 48.

Mark and the Synoptic Gospels

The first three Gospels in the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are called the Synoptic Gospels because they share so many similarities, both in content and in actual wording. The term “synoptic” means “seen together.” The first three Gospels are very similar when they are seen together. As Robert Gundry points out, “Matthew incorporates nearly all of Mark, Luke about one-half.”⁴⁴ Additionally, much material is shared by Matthew and Luke but not by Mark. This includes some very memorable teachings from Jesus. Since the Gospels were written by different people more than 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is difficult to imagine that the similarities exist without a connection. Gundry summarizes how many explain the formation of the synoptic Gospels: “Matthew and Luke based most of their narrative on Mark, drew most of Jesus sayings, or teaching, from a lost document designated Q, and added distinctive material of their own. . . Similarities between Matthew and Luke in teaching material not contained in Mark have led to the positing of a second document, Q, thought to be an early collection of Jesus’ sayings.”⁴⁵ This “Q” source may also reflect a widely known oral teaching or tradition in the early church that both Matthew and Mark used. The existence of an actual “Q” document has never been proven and cannot be verified.

As the other Gospels became known and available to the early churches, it appears that Mark’s Gospel became less prominent. The churches may have used it less due to its size as the shortest Gospel. Eventually, some believed that Mark was just an abbreviated form of Matthew. However, there is substantial evidence that Mark was written first:

- Luke mentions in Luke 1:1 that others had written down the Gospel before him.
- Matthew and Luke both deviate slightly from Mark’s Gospel but they do not often deviate in the same place or way. When Matthew deviates, Luke will stay with Mark’s version. When Luke deviates, Matthew will stay with Mark. As Stephen Harris notes, “This pattern strongly suggests that Mark is the determining factor in the Synoptic’s version of the principal events in Jesus’ story, that his Gospel was the basis for the other two.”⁴⁶ (For examples: Matthew 21:19 and Mark 11:13-14 describe Jesus and the fig tree while Luke omits the story. Then, in Mark 10:46 and Luke 18:35, Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus while Matthew omits the story. Matthew omits a story that Mark and Luke tell while Luke omits a story that Mark and Matthew tell. This is one indication that Mark is the common source for the two.)
- While Mark’s Gospel is shorter, the individual episodes or stories in the Gospel are often longer than Matthew and Luke. A. D. Baum reports that “In the material that Mark has in common with Matthew, Mark’s text is about 2,000 words longer. In the material that Mark has in common with Luke, Luke’s text is about 1,500 words shorter. As a rule, Mark’s reports about the same incidents are more detailed than the accounts offered by Matthew and Luke.”⁴⁷ Stephen Harris points out one example when he writes, “Whereas Mark takes ten verses to narrate Jesus’ cure of the woman afflicted with a chronic hemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34) Matthew tells the story in only three verses (Matthew 9:20-23) . . . in this and numerous other instances, Matthew appears to have abridged Mark rather than the other way around.”⁴⁸ Matthew and Luke most likely edited some of Mark’s material for use in their own Gospels.
- When Matthew and Luke expand Mark’s stories, it is to give greater understanding or additional information such as the temptations of Jesus. While Mark mentions the

⁴⁴ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 68.

⁴⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 68.

⁴⁶ Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 103.

⁴⁷ Armin D. Baum, “Synoptic Problem,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, & Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 911.

⁴⁸ Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 103.

temptations of Jesus in Mark 1:12-13; Matthew and Luke describe the specific temptations. It seems that they were building on the foundation laid by Mark rather than Mark telling an abbreviated version of Matthew or Luke's Gospels.

- Major aspects of Jesus teaching are not included by Mark. This includes the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes. It is not likely that Mark chose to copy Matthew or Luke and exclude those sections. Rather, it is most likely that Matthew and Luke, with more time and space to write, chose to add those to the foundational stories that Mark originally wrote.
- As Robert Stein observes, the greater eloquence of Matthew and Luke is most likely that result of "Matthew and Luke improving on Mark's grammar and style [rather] than Mark choosing to 'worsen' the better grammar and style that he found in Matthew and/or Luke."⁴⁹ Ben Witherington agrees when he writes that "Matthew and Luke deliberately smooth out the harsh, rough edges of Mark's grammar."⁵⁰

Although some do argue that Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote in complete independence of one another, the majority opinion is that Mark wrote first and both Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source to aid in their own writings. Matthew and Luke seem to have used an additional source (commonly referred to as "Q" by Biblical scholars) because they both share similar stories that Mark does not include. Matthew and Luke also include information that is unique to their own Gospels from their own source or sources. For example, Luke is the only one who records the birth narrative from Mary's perspective which possibly indicates that he interviewed Mary for his Gospel. Based on the content of John and the historical record, we can safely say he did write intentionally independent from the Synoptic Gospels to supplement the Gospels with additional important and eyewitness testimony.

Ben Witherington asserts that the understanding that Mark wrote first is "as close to a certainty as one can imagine in scholarly discourse."⁵¹ The use of Mark as a source for Matthew and Luke does not diminish their contributions to telling the Gospel story. In regards to the value of the first three Gospels, Fee and Stuart write "Even though the first three are 'synoptic' (seeing Jesus through common eyes), and Mathew and Luke use Mark in their telling of the story, they strike out on their own individual paths – all telling the same story, but each with hi own concerns and emphases for the sake of his implied readers."⁵²

For this study of Mark, we will accept the majority view that Mark wrote first in order to record the teaching of the Apostles, primarily Peter. He wrote near the time of Peter's death and wrote with some haste in the midst of persecution in Rome. Later, when Luke and Matthew wrote their Gospels, they used Mark's Gospel as a source and outline for their own. They cleaned up his Greek and abbreviated his stories but still honored the first Gospel to be written as they prepared their own in order to include additional witnesses and sources. They did not seek to compete with Mark but build on top of his initial faithful efforts to accurately convey and preserve the messages and story of Christ Jesus.

⁴⁹ Robert H. Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 16.

⁵⁰ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 19.

⁵¹ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 19.

⁵² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 267.