

## The Gospel according to Mark

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Almost all that we know about the life and the teaching of Jesus comes from the four gospels. In ordinary life if several people are recounting the same incident the account will be different: one may be dull as ditchwater and another riotously funny. A policeman's account of a traffic accident will be quite different from that of the mother of the person injured. We cannot be sure that any of the four gospel-writers ever saw Jesus – I will say more about that later, but Mark certainly never claims to have met Jesus. The stories were told and re-told by those who were spreading the Good News about Jesus.. At a certain time, probably when the first generation of followers of Jesus were getting old, someone must have come to some Christian called Mark (and it was a very common Roman name) and said, 'Mark you are a gripping story-teller, will you please collect and write down the stories about Jesus which we all know.'

Mark has his own technique of telling a story. He has favourite expressions, like 'at once' (11 times in chapter 1, giving an air of urgency to the whole account). He likes to zoom in on a visual object: Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the *cushion*. The fierce demoniac at Gerasa snapped the *CORDS* and rubbed away the *fetters* which were meant to hold him. Herod's soldier comes in, brandishing the bleeding *head* of John the Baptist.

Mark often adds a little explanation afterwards, as though he had forgotten to say something. The first disciples left everything, 'for they were fishermen' (I forgot to tell you). The women at the tomb were worried about the weight of the stone, 'for it was very big' (I forgot to tell you).

Mark does not tell the story necessarily in chronological order. He likes to group things. So he begins Jesus' ministry with a sample day of Jesus working on the Sabbath in Capernaum (1.21-45). He balances a group of early controversies with the Jewish leaders in Galilee at the beginning (2.1-3.6) with a group of controversies with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (11.27-12.40) at the end. He groups a collection of parables in chapter 4.

A special technique in Mark is sandwiching. He often puts one little story between the two halves of another to show that they belong together. So he puts the incident of the woman with a haemorrhage between the two halves of the raising of Jairus' daughter to stress Jesus' care for women. He sandwiches the cleansing of the Temple between the two halves of the withered fig-tree and its comment, to show that the Temple worship was withered and pointless, would never more bear fruit, any more than the withered fig-tree would. He sandwiches between the parable of the sower and its explanation the explanation of why people could not understand the parables: because Isaiah had already said that Israel would listen and listen, look and look, but not understand (an explanation which must have been common in the first generation of Christians, because it comes also at the end of Jesus' ministry in John and in Paul's final appeal at Rome in the Acts of the Apostles).

However, the most special technique of all in Mark's story-telling is irony: he is working on two levels, the level of the actors in the story and the level of the hearers or readers of the gospel. So when the first disciples follow this casual passer-by at the lakeside, they have no idea what they are doing – there is no suggestion that they had been present at the baptism of Jesus - but we, the readers, know. When the Gerasene demoniac calls out, 'What do you want

with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God', the hearers on the ground do not seem to hear – but we know what this means. When the high priest's servants mock Jesus as a prophet we know that at this moment Peter is fulfilling the prophecy that he would betray Jesus. When the centurion at the foot of the cross appreciatively says, 'In truth this man was Son of God', we know the full meaning of his words. So linguistically Mark's writing is primitive enough – he writes in the rough language which would have been used by the slave classes (including Christians, of course) all round the Mediterranean - but his patterning is far from primitive; indeed it is highly sophisticated.

The most salient pattern of all is the slowness of the disciples to understand who Jesus is. The turning-point is at Caesarea Philippi (8.27-30). Before then Jesus has three times (and each time on the Lake of Galilee) upbraided them for their failure to understand, 'Do you *still* not understand?' Then the blind man of Bethsaida receives his sight in two stages (a highly symbolic placing of the story), and at last Peter blurts out, 'You are the Messiah'. But they still do not understand what this means: they have the common understanding of 'Messiah' as a triumphant king. So Peter cannot tolerate the idea of Jesus suffering and Jesus smacks him on the wrist, 'You have the wrong idea of the Messiah: the Messiah can reach his resurrection only after suffering and death' – a prophecy repeated three times to the disciples, and each time misunderstood or simply ignored. Why this stress, which dominates the whole gospel? Is it because the idea of a suffering Messiah was so paradoxical at the time? Or is it because we all, all the followers of Jesus, find it so difficult and uncongenial to accept the idea that we too must share the sufferings of Jesus?

The other idea which dominates the gospel (or is it a factor in the same idea?) is the gradual revelation of who Jesus is. He rejects any messianic title offered. Only at the baptism does the reader hear, 'You are my son, the beloved'. But what does this mean? Jesus is not physically son of God, as though generated by God in the way that we were generated by our fathers. 'Son of' has a far wider meaning – in English like 'son of the soil' for a true, devoted and dedicated farmer – or like the meaning of a loving mother, 'You really *are* your father's son'. The whole gospel is dedicated to showing what it means to be son of God. We have to watch out for the way he behaves, for his teaching and his wondrous powers. So Jesus himself points out the difficulty of the idea that the Messiah is son of David (12.36). No one seems to hear when the unclean spirits cry out 'You are the son of God' (3.11). He refers to himself only obliquely as 'son of man', and what does that mean? In Hebrew it is often used to stress the earthiness and reality of a human 'son of man' - nothing special about *him!* In Jesus' own language of Aramaic it can be no more than a tentative self-reference, as we use 'one' in 'one often thinks that...', not wanting to stress one's own part or any special insight. Or is he referring to the Son of Man in Daniel 7.13, a figure in the prophet Daniel's heavenly vision, when Daniel sees 'one like a son of man' coming to God on the clouds of heaven and receiving from God all power on earth? This would fit with Jesus' claim that the Son of man (himself) has the power to forgive sin and also that he is Lord of the Sabbath – both divine prerogatives, both early in Mark's narrative (2.10, 28).

We learn only gradually who Jesus is, and repeatedly Jesus tells his followers not to declare him openly 'till the Son of man has risen from the dead'. They will not understand him and his Kingdom well enough to pass on the message until they have witnessed the death and resurrection of Jesus. The climax builds up as he finally journeys towards Jerusalem. Southwards down the Jordan Valley till they reach Jericho. As they are leaving Jericho they

turn right and start eastwards up the steep ravine, the Wadi Kilt, towards Jerusalem, a mere three hours' walk. As they leave, Jesus is insistently hailed by Bartimaeus as 'son of David'. Jesus restores his sight and he follows them along the road (10.52). Then the real climax is in the set scene before the high priest, who asks Jesus, 'Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?' Jesus replies incrementally, 'Yes, and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven'. At last the identity of Jesus becomes clear, for Jesus is claiming to share the sacred mobile throne of God. It is for this so-called 'blasphemy' that he is condemned.