

Gospel of Mark, The First Written Gospel (Introduction)

Word of Testimony--For the first few decades after Christ's ascension, there was no full written gospel record. The message was received by the word of the testimony of the apostles. Acts 15:7 **After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them...in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.** During those years, the redemptive message was being proclaimed by eye witnesses to the facts of the gospels, 1 John 1:1-3 **What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life— --- 3 what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.** The importance of eye-witnesses, who could legally establish the truth of the gospel author's writings from what they'd seen and heard was critical to establish the reliability of the New Testament (see Luke 1:1-4). Paul highlights the importance of the more than 500 eye-witnesses to Christ's resurrection, saying in 1 Cor 15:5-6 **5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 After that He appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; 7 then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;** But, there was a problem--sooner or later all of these witnesses were going to pass away, and if their testimonies were not written down, then they would be lost. The book of Mark records the earliest account of the events witnessed by the disciples, in written form. **John Mark**-- Mark was born some ten to fifteen years after Jesus of Nazareth and Saul of Tarsus, so he may have been in his mid teens at the time of the crucial events of Jesus' public ministry. His parents gave him the Hebrew name of John (Johanan, "Jehovah is gracious"), and his Roman surname of Mark followed the gentile convention of surnames. In a Gentile environment he would be called by his Roman name. The fact that his Hebrew name is never used in the epistles shows that the Gentile world was his main sphere of activity. Col 4:10 indicates that Mark was a cousin of Barnabas, a key person in Acts 4–15. Mark's mother Mary was a devout woman of prosperous means. Her home, which may have been located in the Valley of Kidron very near the Garden of Gethsemane, was dedicated to God. Peter came here after he was set free from prison by God's angel in Acts 12:14, when the servant girl Rhoda ...**14 When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate.** So, when the disciples were being arrested and imprisoned, and beaten, after James the Elder had been slain by Herod Agrippa, and while Peter was in prison for the testimony of the gospel, their house was the meeting place for the disciples.

Authorship and Date--An unbroken tradition puts John Mark forth as the Gospel's author, who would have been in Rome with Peter at the time of the crisis under Nero, likely between A.D. 64-70.

Historical Setting, Audience and Purpose—A disastrous fire that swept Rome in the summer of A.D. 64. After raging unchecked for more than a week it was brought under control, only to break out a second time. Popular resentment was fanned by widespread rumors that the fire had been officially ordered. Suetonius charges that Nero "set fire to the city so openly that several former consuls did not venture to lay hands on his chamberlains although they caught them on their estates with tow and firebrands. Tacitus is more cautious. He states tersely, "Disaster followed. Whether it was accidental or caused by the emperor's criminal act is uncertain—both versions have supporters." He reports that "no one dared fight the flames; attempts to do so were prevented by menacing gangs. Torches, too, were openly thrown in, by men crying that they acted under orders." Nero placed the blame squarely upon the Christians. Tacitus: Nero fabricated scapegoats—and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called) ... 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. The victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest. Since the church was facing such persecution and martyrdom, Mark not only wanted to preserve the eyewitness accounts, but to strengthen Christian faith and proclaim the gospel effectively by demonstrating that Jesus' teachings spoke directly to them as individual believers, to strengthen and support them in their hour of need.

Comfort in Persecution and Suffering--When Roman believers received the Gospel of Mark they found that it spoke to the situation of the Christian community in Nero's Rome. Reduced to a catacomb existence, they read of the Lord who was driven deep into the wilderness (Ch. 1:12.). The detail, recorded only by Mark, that in the wilderness Jesus was with the wild beasts (Ch. 1:13) was filled with special significance for those called to enter the arena where they stood helpless in the presence of wild beasts. In Mark's Gospel they found that they could experience nothing in the suffering from Nero, that Christ had not endured before them. Like them, he had been misrepresented to the people and falsely labelled (Ch. 3:21 f., 30), and betrayed, turned in by one from within their circle of intimate friends--one of the Twelve had been **"Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him"** (Ch. 3:19). When the gospel of Mark was read at Christian gatherings, they could understand that Jesus had spoken openly of the persecution that could be expected in the Christian life. While Jesus promised his followers **"houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands,"** Mark noted that he had added the qualification, **"with persecutions"** (Ch. 10:30). He had warned of the day when those who followed him would be handed over to councils to be beaten because of their association with him. Jesus had not withheld the cruel truth that brother would betray to death brother, and the father his child, and children their parents, and that his followers would be hated by all men because they represented him. (Mark 13:9-13). Knowing that Jesus had said that this would be the case, it gave them comfort that God still had them in the palm of His hand, and that He was still on the throne, just like it does for us. Jesus spoke of bearing one's cross; and today we think of this as persecutions and troubles, but to the Romans who first heard this, the horrific scenes that they had encountered, seeing the suffering of those who were crucified on Roman crosses endured, meant that Jesus' words carried horrible weight and force. They knew what crucifixion meant.

The Suffering Servant--Mark presents Jesus as "The Suffering Servant" from Isaiah. He doesn't quote Isaiah, since his mostly gentile audience wouldn't be familiar with this Old Testament prophet. Instead, he demonstrates that Jesus is their fulfillment, describing the service, suffering, and exaltation of Jesus, the Servant of the Lord, the meek and gentle Messiah.

1) God's Servant, Jesus, the Messiah, always did the will of the Father, faithfully completing all the work He is given to do (cf. Luke 13:32; John 17:4, John 4:34; 6:38).

2) Jesus never sought to please Himself but always to please God (John 5:30).

3) Jesus finished the work that God had sent Him to do (John 17:4).

4) Jesus came to glorify the Father (John 13:31; 17:4).

See Isaiah 42:1-9, Isaiah 50:4-22, Isaiah 50:4-11, Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

For instance, Isaiah 52:13-53:12 describes the suffering and triumph of the Servant of the LORD. It is also one of the most detailed passages in the Old Testament concerning the death and resurrection of the Messiah. The song begins with a promise that the Servant will be exalted (Isaiah 52:13), but then immediately turns to a description of extreme violence: **"His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness"** (Isaiah 52:14). The Messiah will be **"despised and rejected by mankind"** (Isaiah 53:3). When He is brutally punished, people will assume that He is being afflicted by God (verse 4). But it also makes it clear why He endures such persecution: **"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed"** (verse 5). It is our iniquity being placed on Him that explains His suffering

(verse 6). Verse 7 predicts that the Messiah will be silent before His accusers (cf. Matthew 27:14). Verse 9 says that, although the Servant of the Lord is innocent, He will die with the wicked and be **“with the rich in his death.”** Isaiah 53:10 tells us why the Servant dies: **“It was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and...the Lord makes his life an offering for sin.”** This is the substitutionary atonement. His life for ours. So, Mark’s task is to encourage Christians, and especially gentile, Roman Christians, in a climate of uncertainty, persecution, and martyrdom illustrates why he chose this viewpoint. Mark’s gospel is one of action, speaking of Jesus in the present tense, as Jesus continues to speak and act meaningfully in crisis and persecution, and is the ever-present help in times of trouble. So Mark presents us with a very succinct, orderly, and straightforward account of Jesus’ mission, emphasizing the crucifixion, and also the Resurrection. Mark is the Gospel account which most demonstrates Jesus as a man of action, describing what He did and the authority and power that He has from God, which would resonate with his Roman audience. Mark presents Jesus as the suffering servant of God, but carefully demonstrates that it was Jesus’ humility of character and fidelity to His mission that caused Him to serve; that He served because of strength, not weakness.