



Mark 15:39

MARK

Background File

The writer of this Gospel, according to tradition, is Mark (a companion of Peter and Paul mentioned in Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37-39; Col 4:10, 2 Tim 4:11, and Phlm 24), who would have written in Rome during the 60s C.E. We cannot be certain of this claim, but evidence from the Gospel itself suggests that it was written for a community of Christians situated within the Roman Empire but outside of Palestine, sometime around the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

What's the Story?

Mark was the first to assemble the various stories that were being told about Jesus and compose a written document that he calls a “gospel.” He not only had to figure out a way to bring the pieces together to tell the story, but also to provide a faithful perspective for understanding Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in a way that spoke to the people’s situation.

Mark’s Gospel is structured around three key scenes: Jesus’ baptism, transfiguration, and crucifixion. In each of these scenes, Jesus is declared to be God’s Son, but it is only with that final confession by the centurion at the cross that Jesus is fully revealed as the crucified Messiah.

The story begins in the wilderness near the Jordan River, but most of Jesus’ ministry occurs in the northern region of Galilee (see Map 12, p. 2109). The story has a fast pace as Mark reports events “immediately” happening one after another. Jesus occasionally ventures into Gentile (non-Jewish) regions to the east and north. At Caesarea Philippi, far to the north, Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah (8:29). This high point is matched by the first of Jesus’ three predictions regarding his death and resurrection. By 10:1 Jesus is back in the Judean wilderness, east of the Jordan River, and in 11:1 he is approaching Jerusalem. While chapters 1-10 may reflect up to three years of ministry, chapters 11-16 record the events of a single week. The pace slows, but the action intensifies. The entire story leads to the cross, but it also leads from the cross back into mission, as the disciples are directed to return to Galilee, where they will again see Jesus.

What's the Message?

This book is the only one in the Bible to clearly label itself as a “gospel” (the “good news” of 1:1). It provides one way that we understand this term—as a *story* about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

This Gospel, however, is not meant to simply convey information about Jesus. It is also intended to create and strengthen faith in Jesus, to develop true disciples of Jesus. It was written at a time when Christians needed to define who they were in connection to their Jewish heritage. They were also experiencing challenges, if not outright persecution, from the prevailing Greco-Roman culture. In effect, Christians were struggling with a question we often face today: If Jesus Christ did such wonderful things and has overcome death in his resurrection, why can things often be so bad for us today?

It is tempting to respond to this question by highlighting the glorious aspects of Jesus' ministry: his authority, his miracles, and the transfiguration. Mark, however, consistently focuses our attention on the cross. Jesus is indeed the Son of God, but this is not truly realized except in his serving, suffering, and death. Jesus is indeed the hoped-for Messiah, but we only fully realize *how* he is making God's kingdom present when we experience him as the crucified Messiah.

This Gospel also serves as *good news* that the story of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection provides shape and meaning for the faith and life of Mark's first readers as well as for us. As faithful disciples of Jesus, it is precisely in serving, in being last, even in dying for Christ's sake, that we discover the true meaning of life.

The Proclamation of John the Baptist



1:1 good news...Christ: The good news or gospel can refer to the message Jesus preached, the message about Jesus, God's saving news for us preached by Jesus and all Christians. "Christ" is the Greek term for the Hebrew word *Messiah* which means "Anointed One." Pouring oil on someone's head was a way of designating that person as one chosen by God to rule over Israel (see 1 Sam 9:16, 16:3; Ps 89:20).



1:2-3 Prepare the way of the Lord: The quoted words are from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3.



1:4 baptism: There were a variety of Jewish baptisms or washings before baptism became a Christian sacrament. John the Baptist is unique in that he connects baptism with repentance and offers it to all people as a sign of commitment.



1:6 John was clothed: The description of John's clothing connects him to the prophet Elijah (see 2 Kgs 1:8).



What is baptism? Martin Luther writes, "Baptism is not simply plain water. Instead, it is water used according to God's command and connected with God's word." It is, says Luther, "a grace-filled water

1 The beginning of the good news^a of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.^b

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,^c
"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,^d
who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"

⁴John the baptizer appeared^e in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with^f water; but he will baptize you with^f the Holy Spirit."

The Baptism of Jesus

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out

^a Or *gospel* ^b Other ancient authorities lack *the Son of God* ^c Other ancient authorities read *in the prophets* ^d *Gk before your face* ^e Other ancient authorities read *John was baptizing* ^f Or *in*