

MARK'S DIMWITTED DISCIPLES

To the early church of the first century, the Gospel of Mark's heresy revolved around a tale of the *dimwitted dozen* – twelve disciples characterized by ineptitude, carelessness and avarice. For this gospel writer, the tragicomedy begins but does not end with Jesus' chosen twelve. The same characterization is extended to cover both followers and enemies of the Son of Man.

Who was this "Son of Man?" One can look back to similar terminology with Daniel of the Old Testament, arguing that "Son of Man" means "one like a person," because he has a human face. His humanity can be sharply contrasted with the beastly emanations around God's throne – notably a lion, bear, leopard, and horned beast. In Mark's gospel, "Son of Man" is used as an indirect title for Jesus himself.

On the surface, Mark's gospel of the Son of Man comes across as a relatively innocuous narrative. Mark's Jesus is a man of action, abruptly moving from one event to another.

When he speaks, Mark's Jesus conveys his thoughts in *short burst* phrases or sentences rather than multi-paragraph discourses. Consequently, the message of Mark tends to be transmitted via the action – including the rapid-fire interactions occurring with those around him.

It is from this action video that the message of Mark's Jesus emerges – often jarring, seemingly contradictory. The message is directed to friends and foes alike – all of whom *just don't get it*.

Whether by design or not, Mark's skewering of Jesus' twelve closest disciples and others around him helps set the post-resurrection stage for two upstarts to claim the mantle of Christianity – Jesus' brother James and then the apostle Paul. But before we travel to these themes, it is useful to begin with a little background information regarding Mark and his gospel.

BACKGROUND OF MARK THE GOSPEL

To believers of both the early and modern church, Mark's gospel receives lesser notice. Most of Mark is also found (plus more) in the accounts of Matthew and Luke. And Mark's abruptness causes many to prefer other less confrontational accounts of Jesus and his ministry.

To the 20th/21st century scholarly community, Mark has taken on greater importance because this gospel is now more widely viewed as the first to be written, not Matthew. If true, Matthew and Luke might then be considered as reactions to possible excesses of Markan views.

Gospel Dating & Authorship: While the author is never directly identified, the widespread view shared by the early Christian church and most fundamentalist churches today is that this gospel was written by John Mark. From the vantage point of first to fourth century Christian leaders and writers, Mark generally was viewed as the second of the four gospels to be written.

However, a considerable number of modern scholars have taken exception to the early tradition, concluding that Mark actually may be the first of the currently available New

Testament gospel composed. With this amended view, Mark is seen as being rooted in the period between Nero's persecution of Christians (64 AD) and the Jewish revolt against Rome (70 AD) – or just after.

The first reference to Mark the gospel writer may come from the author himself. At the arrest of Jesus, only this gospel includes the following brief note: "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." Could this have been John Mark's first encounter with the Son of Man?

Role in the Early Church: The John Mark of the New Testament appears to come from a family of some wealth. As early leader of the post-resurrection church, Peter is arrested, then delivered from prison – coming to the home of the mother of John Mark. The home is described as large enough to accommodate a maid and a number who were inside praying.

Mark traditionally has been viewed as a disciple of Peter. This view is buttressed by the statement attributed to Peter that: "Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings, and so does *my son Mark*."

Mark played a central role as foil to two of the main protagonists of the early church – Peter and Paul. In some ways, the traditional affiliation of Mark with Peter seems a bit odd given: (a) the strong criticism that Peter receives from Jesus in the Gospel of Mark; and (b) Mark's on/off relationship with the apostle Paul.

Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. However, Mark apparently deserted them at Perga (in Pamphylia), returning to Jerusalem.

Paul's subsequent unhappiness with Mark was considerable. The writer of Acts indicates Paul severed his working relationship with Barnabas when Barnabas proposed taking Mark (his cousin) on a second missionary trip. Paul and Barnabas parted company, with Barnabas taking Mark on a subsequent trip to Cyprus.

While not describing why or how, by the end of Paul's life Mark appears to have regained Paul's approval. This is made clear in at least three of the New Testament epistles commonly attributed to Paul – Colossians, Philemon and II Timothy.

Historical Accounts: Mark and his gospel attracted attention from subsequent patriarchs of the early church. As early as the turn of the first century, Clement of Rome refers to a gospel "according to Mark," describing Mark's work as that of an evangelist at Rome. The early second century patriarch Papias offers more detailed comments, based on what he had heard from John the presbyter:

Mark, who had been Peter's interpreter, wrote down carefully, but *not in order*, all that he had remembered of the Lord's sayings and doings. For he had not heard the Lord or been one of His followers, but later, as I said, one of Peter's. Peter used to adapt his teachings to the occasion, without making a systematic arrangement of the Lord's

sayings, so that Mark was quite justified in writing down some things just as he remembered them. For he had one purpose only – to leave out nothing that he had heard, and to make no misstatement about it.

The late 2nd century philosopher-theologian Clement of Alexandria offers additional information on the composition of this gospel. Clement's comments are paraphrased by the fourth century historian Eusebius this way:

He (Clement) used to say that the earliest gospels were those containing the genealogies, while Mark's originated as follows. When, at Rome, Peter had openly preached the word and by the spirit had proclaimed the gospel, the large audience urged Mark, who had followed him for a long time and remembered what had been said, to write it all down. This he did, making his gospel available to all who wanted it. When Peter heard about this, he made no objection and gave no special encouragement.

Third century theologian Origen also commented on the circumstances of Mark's composition, noting that Mark: "... followed *Peter's instructions* in writing it." The fourth century church historian Eusebius suggests that Mark may have written his gospel under a bit of duress:

So brightly shone the light of true religion on the minds of Peter's hearers that, not satisfied with a single hearing or with the oral teaching of the divine message, they resorted to *appeals of every kind to induce Mark* (whose gospel we have), as he was a follower of Peter, to leave them in writing a summary of the instruction they had received by word of mouth, nor did they let him go till they had persuaded him, and thus became responsible for the writing of what is known as the Gospel according to Mark.

Eusebius also notes that Mark served as bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, around whom a large following of men and women was established, practicing "an extremely severe rule of life." This may have placed the seeds of divergent practices between later ascetics versus a more pragmatic and orthodox church leadership. In this comment, we sense the paradox presented by Mark and his Jesus – with elements both of action and mystery.

DIMWITTED DISCIPLES

There are at least a couple of dozen interactions between Jesus and his disciples that Mark records. In all but one instance, Jesus is portrayed by Mark as dismissive – if not demeaning – in attitude towards his disciples.

A typical example occurs the evening after Jesus feeds the 5,000. The disciples take to a boat; Jesus arrives by walking on water. The disciples are terrified. All three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) record that Jesus calls out: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Only

Mark adds this editorial note: “And they (the disciples) were utterly astounded, for they *did not understand* about the loaves, but their *hearts were hardened*.”

There are several such incidents where the accounts of Matthew or Luke suggest a more positive view of the disciples than does Mark. Another noteworthy example is provided by Jesus’ response to the disciples’ request for a private interpretation of the Parable of the Sower. Alternative versions of Jesus’ response as told by the three synoptic writers follow:

Mark: “Do you not understand this parable? Then *how will you understand* all the parables?”

Matthew: “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”

Luke: “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables...”

In other words, while Mark’s Jesus is critical of the disciples’ question, Matthew and Luke portray a Jesus who is pleased to share secrets of the kingdom with his select dozen.

Jesus’ response to a group of children and their parents provides a third example. All three synoptics have Jesus asking the children to come to him; only Mark also reports that Jesus was indignant with the disciples for trying to keep the children and their parents away.

Mark’s Jesus comes across as dismissive not only toward his disciples but his larger public. For example, Mark has Jesus saying that he talks in parables in part so that those “outside” “may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand, *so that they may not turn again and be forgiven*.” Luke’s gospel deletes the hardened (*italicized*) portion of Jesus’ statement.

A final example occurs with the conclusion of Mark’s gospel – which ends before the risen Jesus even re-establishes contact with his disciples. The earliest extant manuscripts of this gospel end with an angel telling the women who visited the tomb: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, *just as he told you*.” Subsequently, the women “...fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

And so the gospel account (in its earliest form) abruptly ends – with the women, the disciples and the rest of us left to figure out the meaning for ourselves.

Acceptance of Mark: Christian writers of the first and second century generally give less play to Mark than other gospels. Not only are most of the events recounted by Mark also found in the lengthier synoptics, but Mark is also less favored as a text because it appears to be doctrinally *light*. Specifically missing from Mark are the extensive discourses (or sayings) of Jesus that provide more insight into his views or theology.

At first blush, Mark's Jesus appears strong on action, weak on thought. Yet this conclusion misses the well-crafted narrative, clearly meant to leave certain impressions on the reader. To his readers, Mark appears to have wanted to convey the sense of a man of action and mystery, albeit surrounded by adherents (both men and women) who just never quite seem to get it.

MARK IN SUMMARY

Far from being a simple narrative, Mark's terse gospel is carefully crafted, generating powerful undercurrents pushing their way down through the last two millennia. Mark's Jesus is a man set within yet apart from the milieu of the last decades of temple Judaism.

Jesus is routinely misunderstood by what are routinely portrayed as *dimwitted disciples*. If his disciples don't understand, how much less so will he be understood by the general public – to whom Jesus deliberately speaks in parables to be sure they won't get it.

While it is unclear whether Mark was written before or after the writings of Paul, Mark's gospel does provide useful cover for the teachings of Paul. As an outsider, Paul's ministry depends on confronting and ultimately superceding the influence of Jesus' original disciples.

Paul's ascendancy certainly is not hurt and may well have been abetted by a gospel portraying the initial Church leaders as ones not much deserving of emulation. It is the doctrine of Paul's Jesus – experienced via a blinding vision – that has lasted down through two millennia.

With inept disciples, it is Jesus' brother James and then Paul the convert who step in to fill the void. And subsequent to the execution of James, Paul is essentially granted an unchallenged license to interpret (or reinterpret) the message of Jesus as he sees fit.

While not directly claiming divinity for Jesus, Mark's portrayal of the disciples goes a long way to set the Son of Man apart from mere man. Mark's God is a task-oriented deity. This is divinity focused on delivery of "good news" – aimed at preparing us for the kingdom of God. And, paradoxically this is a God whose own son beseeches the almighty God in endearing terms even at the point of death – as "Abba (or daddy), father."

If there is an *upside* to the heresy of Mark's gospel, this is it. The church of believers is not to place full reliance in other earthly leaders – even those closest to Jesus.

The *downside* is that the message of those closest to the Son of Man could be readily swept aside by other upstarts who had little or no direct contact with the earthly Jesus. We are left with an unknown: If early church leadership would have remained in the hands of the remaining eleven disciples, what might be different about the Christianity we know and practice today?

Adapted from the "The Heresy of Mark: Dimwitted Disciples," further detailed in the ~360 page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*. For more, check out www.jesustheheresy.com.