

WHO DO YOU
SAY HE IS?



An Introduction to the
Gospel of Mark

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What are the Gospels?

Announcements of the Good News about Jesus

The word “gospel” is an Old English word translated from the Greek New Testament word *euangelion* meaning “good news.” Simply put, the Gospels are an announcement of “good news.”¹ But this immediately raises the question good news about what? Or who?

The first time Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Mark (1:14-15) he says, “The time has come. God’s kingdom has arrived. Repent and believe this good news.” With his usage of the term good news, Jesus is drawing on the prophetic hope of Isaiah spoken several hundred years beforehand. The prophet Isaiah spoke of a time when God’s kingdom would come and be re-established on earth. The kingdom’s arrival would be brought forth by the messiah from the line of King David. Its arrival would be marked out by healings and acts of justice for the poor, signaling the dawn of the new creation. And its coming would provide a means of salvation for all humanity, first for Israel and then for people of all nations.²

So, what is the good news Jesus announces? It is that God’s kingdom, the promised hope spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, has now arrived in his own life and ministry. Jesus sees his ministry as both announcing God’s kingdom arriving and establishing its reign. Jesus’ invitation is to come and place our trust in the greatest news ever shared! Thus, in the Gospel accounts, this good news proclaimed by Jesus himself then becomes the written story announcing the good news about Jesus³ (see Mark 1:1). It is how Jesus inaugurated God’s kingdom on earth through his life and ministry, death, and resurrection.

Ancient Biographies

In *Introducing Jesus*, New Testament scholar Mark Strauss writes, “The first questions readers must ask themselves when approaching any literature is, ‘What am I reading?’ This is a question of genre. . . . Identifying genre is essential for both application and interpretation.”⁴ In other words, understanding the type of literature being read (e.g., poems versus news articles versus textbooks, etc.) is vital for our overall literary competency as readers. As it relates to genre, the Gospels most closely relate to ancient Greco-Roman biographies known as *bioi*.⁵

Although ancient documents, the Gospels maintain several similarities to modern-style biographies. First and foremost, the Gospels seek to record accurate historical information about their main subject. The person of Jesus of Nazareth, the itinerant preacher and miracle worker who lived and taught in first-century Palestine, was a real historical figure. Of this there is no dispute. Accordingly, the biographical accounts of his life accurately record the things the historical Jesus said and did. Second, much like modern biographies, the Gospels recount Jesus’ life through the medium of story. The major events of Jesus’ life, including his birth, major achievements, and the circumstances of his death, are told through a narrative arc. Last, one

major similarity the Gospels share with (most) modern biographies is that they hold up their main subject as a person to be emulated by others.⁶

While sharing common foundational elements with both ancient and modern biographies, how the Gospels differ from both is what makes them unique (a *bioi* plus if you will). First, the Gospels are theological literature. As stated above, their primary proclamation is a theological one: the announcement of the good news of salvation provided by and through the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah. The Gospels present Jesus not as just another great historical figure among many but as the divine Creator God and Redeemer of the whole cosmos.

Next, regarding their narrative nature, the Gospels present Jesus' story as the climatic hinge of history. Other biographies speak of great figures in history and laud their achievements; none are so bold as to represent their subject as the center of all human history! This is the unique claim of the Gospels. As such, biblical scholar Jonathan Pennington likens the Gospels to the keystone of an archway. The keystone holds both sides of the archway together so it can function properly. The Gospels serve as the narrative fulcrum by which the Old Testament metanarrative finds its fulfillment and by which the New Testament writings are brought into proper focus as instructions for the early Jesus communities.⁷ The Scriptures claim that the collective story of all history, both past and future, leads to and flows out of the gospel story.

Finally, the Gospels are intentionally persuasive documents. Unapologetically they call readers to a decision about Jesus. While this does not sit well with our modern social conventions that presuppose biographies as unbiased and neutral, the Gospels clearly desire for their readers to become disciples of Jesus. These biographies of Jesus simultaneously provide accurate accounts of Jesus' life all the while trying to convince unbelievers to become followers of the world's rightful king and lord. As C. H. Dodd contends, "The Gospels profess to tell us what happened. They do not, it is true, set out to gratify a purely historical curiosity about past events, but they do set out to nurture faith upon the testimony to such events."⁸

To help round out the previous two points, Jonathan Pennington, in *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, offers a helpful, comprehensive summary of what the Gospels are:

Our canonical Gospels are the theological, historical, and virtue-forming biographical narratives that retell the story and proclaim the significance of Jesus Christ, who through the power of the Spirit is the Restorer of God's reign.⁹

Fourfold Collective

There are four Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus: The Gospel according to Mark as well as Matthew, Luke, and John. Because each account retells the good news story of Jesus, Christians have historically referred to this fourfold collective simply as "the Gospels."

Regarding structure, each respective Gospel account shares a common narrative design which emphasizes the same crucial events of Jesus' story. To begin, each Gospel introduces us to Jesus by hyperlinking his story to the Old Testament. The reason? To show that Jesus is carrying the story of Israel (and of all humanity) forward to its climax and culmination. Next, each account guides us along with Jesus, as he moves from town to town, region to region, teaching and performing miracles. Why? The Gospel authors want us to hear how all the various people who interacted with Jesus responded to his words and wonders. In this way, the Gospels challenge us to respond personally to Jesus as well. Lastly, all four Gospels focus huge portions of their narrative on the final events of Jesus' life—his crucifixion and resurrection.

Take the Gospel of Mark for example. Six of Mark's sixteen total chapters (35%) cover the last week of Jesus' life while the other ten chapters (65%) are devoted to three years of his ministry. Why such the emphasis on the Passion Week? Because the Gospels see the cross and the empty tomb as the grand climax of the entire story of Jesus and of all human history.¹⁰

While attempts in history have been made to harmonize these four Gospels into one story, the church has maintained their four-in-one division. For what reason? The Gospels' fourfold nature is part of their genius and appeal.¹¹ As they retell the same overarching narrative, each Gospel author offers their own unique perspective on the story of Jesus by highlighting different themes of his ministry and drawing out different aspects of his character and calling. For example, Luke's Gospel focuses on Jesus' proclivity for the poor and how he brings the good news to the Gentiles, while Mark's Gospel highlights the paradox of Jesus as the unexpected, crucified Messiah. In this way, each Gospel complements the others, helping to provide the reader with a richer, fuller picture of Jesus.

Why are the Gospels Reliable?

Based on Eyewitness Testimony, Oral Traditions, and Accurate Writing

To help us answer this important question, let us first turn our attention from Mark's Gospel account to the introduction of the Gospel of Luke.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4).

Luke's introduction, which reads like other trusted ancient biographies, informs us that the fourfold Gospel collective is first grounded on eyewitness testimonies. The apostle Paul reaffirms this in 1 Corinthians 15 where he challenges any doubters of the events of Jesus'

resurrection to go talk to the actual eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus, as they are still alive and more than willing to testify to their experiences. In other words, Paul challenges the skeptics and critics of his day to cross-examine the Christian claims.

Ancient historiography placed high value on eyewitness testimonies. To an ancient biographer, there was no greater source of truth than an eyewitness. That is because, to an ancient hearer or reader, direct involvement in an event was essential for correct understanding and interpretation of what happened. In other words, you had to be there to understand the meaning of what happened.¹² This information holds even more weight when we realize that Matthew and John were privileged eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry as members of his inner circle of twelve disciples.

From a modern viewpoint, we often place less value on eyewitness testimonies than the ancients. Many modern historians and theologians do not trust the apostolic witness arguing it was neither neutral nor scientifically obtained. However, this argument lacks depth as the nature of all truth, and how we come to possess it, comes ultimately through evaluating and trusting the testimony of others.¹³ To say that the Gospel authors had a vested interest in the retelling of Jesus' story or that they didn't come to their conclusions through the scientific method doesn't negate them as credible eyewitnesses and historians.

Next, Luke alludes to the oral traditions concerning Jesus that preceded the actual writing of the Gospels with the phrases "*servants of the word*" and "*things you have been taught.*" There was a period of time between Jesus' ascension (see Acts 1) and the actual writing of the four Gospel accounts where the stories, teachings, and sayings of Jesus were passed along orally by the apostles within the early church communities.¹⁴ This is an important consideration for holding up the reliability of the Gospels. While most of the Epistles were written before the Gospel biographies, they still assumed the gospel message as well as the teachings of Jesus. Some examples include the epistle of James' heavy reliance on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount teaching, the centrality of the Lord's Supper in the worship services of the Corinthian church, and Paul's rebuke of the Galatians for believing a different gospel than the one they had first heard about Jesus.

Furthermore, early church creeds cited within the Epistles themselves (e.g., Philippians 2:5-8; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4) affirm the core Christian beliefs in Jesus' sacrificial death and his bodily resurrection. These oral creeds can be potentially dated to within five years of Jesus himself.¹⁵ All these examples point to the fact that, in the Epistles, we already have the early church proclaiming, teaching, and fleshing out the implications of the Gospels decades before they were actually written.¹⁶ This evidence refutes the suggestion that the stories about Jesus were myths and fabrications developed by the church hundreds of years after his death.

Last, Luke affirms that each Gospel author, including Mark, sought to convey accurate historical information passed down by eyewitnesses and the oral traditions about Jesus. The Gospels claim

to be accurate records of God's dealings in human history through the person of Jesus. As Mark Strauss says,

As an essentially historical religion, Christianity rises and falls on the historicity of core Gospel events: 1) Jesus' words and deeds, 2) his death on the cross, and 3) his resurrection, the vindication of his claims. As the apostle Paul writes with reference to Jesus' resurrection, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14). For Paul, as for the Gospel writers, the historicity of these event confirms the truth of Christianity.¹⁷

Manuscript Evidence

One additional topic of interest when considering the reliability of Gospels is the ancient manuscript evidence. When you read the Gospels in your Bible, you are reading copies of copies of copies of the original manuscripts which were written over 2,000 years ago in a different language. So, the question becomes how can we know with any certainty that the Gospels we read in our Bible bear resemblance to the original manuscripts?

For one, we have more ancient manuscript copies of the New Testament than any other literary work of antiquity. There are approximately 24,000 total manuscript copies of the New Testament.¹⁸ Homer's *Iliad* is the next closest work of antiquity having only 634 copies by comparison.¹⁹ This means that the Gospels were widely copied and broadly circulated as well as meticulously preserved among the church communities in the centuries leading up to the invention of the printing press.

Second, we have ancient manuscript copies of the New Testament written in various ancient languages including Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Coptic, each of which represent different geographical regions that made up the ancient world.²⁰ If the New Testament has been transcribed accurately throughout history, we should expect not only these ancient manuscripts written in different ancient languages to match, but we would expect the Gospels copied into our own language and in our own Bibles to match these ancient manuscript copies. And they do with 99.5% accuracy!²¹

Last, the earliest manuscript copy we have of the New Testament comes from the Gospel of John. It originated in Egypt and has been dated by scholars to as early as A. D. 100-150.²² This manuscript copy is potentially within one to two generations of the original manuscript of the Gospel of John, or what scholars call the "autograph." For the Gospel of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the earliest manuscripts we have date between the second and third centuries. By comparison, the earliest manuscript copy of Homer's *Iliad* comes to us roughly 1000 years after the events it records yet scholars do not question the reliability of its manuscript copies.²³ Ultimately, the manuscript evidence for the New Testament is so strong, that Sir Fredrick Kenyon, former director and principal librarian of the British Museum, had this to say:

The interval, then, between the dates of composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.²⁴

Authorship, Date, & Audience

Who Wrote the Gospel of Mark?

At first blush, asking who wrote the Gospel of Mark might seem like an unnecessary question. The book, after all, is called the Gospel of “Mark.” It seems pretty obvious that Mark wrote this book. However, with a closer look at the Gospels themselves, we learn that the Gospels actually do not have titles. Also, unlike other ancient historical documents, the author of this Gospel nowhere identifies himself explicitly. So, why do we still call it the Gospel of Mark?

As the manuscripts of the Gospel were copied, the scribes began to add “According to Mark” at the beginning, end, or in the margin of the document. They did this because early church tradition identified Mark as the writer of this Gospel. Around A. D. 324, the church historian, Eusebius, wrote of the Bishop of Hierapolis (near Colossae and Laodicea in Asia Minor), Papias. Papias lived during the late first century into the early second century, not long after the closing of the canon of Scripture. In fact, according to tradition, Papias had heard from the Apostle John and was a companion of Polycarp, a disciple of John.

According to Eusebius, Papias wrote *Exposition of the Lord’s Oracles* sometime around A. D. 110. In those writings, Papias identifies Mark as the author of his Gospel. Moreover, not only is Mark identified as the author, but Papias says Mark’s Gospel comes from Peter’s eyewitness account of Jesus. “Having become the interpreter of Peter, Mark wrote accurately—not, indeed, in order—as much as he remembered of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had neither heard the Lord nor followed him, though later on, as I said, [he followed] Peter, who gave teaching in the form of [anecdotes].”²⁵ Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, wrote similarly between A. D. 135–202 that “Mark also, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the things which were preached by Peter.”²⁶

If tradition is correct, who then was Mark? We learn of John Mark from the book of Acts (Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37), Paul’s letters (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11), and Peter’s first letter (1 Peter 5:12–13). From these references, we know that “he was ‘John Mark,’ an associate of the two giants of the early church, Peter and Paul, and a member of the primitive community in Jerusalem.”²⁷ This is the same Mark who was a member of the early missionary journeys of Paul and Barnabas, as well as the reason for the split between Paul and Barnabas. However, “Paul’s mention of Mark in his letters . . . reveals that Mark must have redeemed himself in Paul’s eyes.”²⁸ Mark is mentioned “as being with Peter in 1 Pet 5:12–13. In giving

greetings to the recipients, Silvanus is identified as ‘a faithful brother,’ who wrote the letter, and Mark is distinguished as ‘my son,’ who joins the sister church in Babylon (presumably Rome).”²⁹

Not only does tradition tell us Mark was a companion of Peter in Rome; Peter himself says that in 1 Peter 5:12–13. Therefore Mark’s Gospel is an eyewitness account of the life and ministry of Jesus. What we will soon see is that “the Gospels were written within living memory of the events they recount.”³⁰ For Mark, this living memory seems to be that of Peter.

Peter is certainly the most prominent disciple in the Gospel, mentioned by Mark more frequently (proportionally) than by Matthew or Luke. At points in the narrative Peter is the disciple who is the focus, perhaps most notably in his dialogue with Jesus in 8:31–38 (cf. 9:5; 10:28; 11:21; 14:29, 37, 54–72). Furthermore, while Mark frequently “narrates what different characters see and hear . . . the act of remembrance is only attributed to Peter.”³¹

Perhaps the most interesting literary evidence for Mark’s Gospel being Peter’s testimony is the way Mark begins and ends his Gospel. “The first disciple named in Mark’s Gospel, immediately following the outset of Jesus’ ministry is Peter. . . . Peter is named again right at the end of the Gospel, when the women at the tomb are told to tell Jesus’ ‘disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee: there you will see him’ (16:7).”³² Bauckham argues “the two references form an *inclusio* around the whole story, suggesting that Peter is the witness whose testimony includes the whole.”³³

What both tradition and evidence from the Gospel points to is that John Mark was the author of what was Peter’s personal, eyewitness testimony of Jesus of Nazareth.

When Was the Gospel of Mark Written?

Once you have answered the authorship question, it is possible to answer when and where the Gospel of Mark was written. A few controlling factors can help us answer the date question. First, we know that “Peter along with Paul met his death during an intense persecution by Nero of the Roman Christians in A. D. 64/65, the Gospel would have had to have been written subsequent to that time.”³⁴ “The death of central witnesses would have affected the oral rendition of the gospel and would have provided an impetus to create a written narrative.”³⁵

Second, “most scholars assume that Mark was written just before, during, or shortly after the trauma of the Jewish War against Rome that led to the Temple’s destruction.”³⁶ We know from history that the Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Romans in A. D. 70. The temple proves important in this discussion because of Jesus’ prophetic prediction in Mark 13:1–2: “And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.’” Many scholars opt for a date prior to A. D. 70 because Jesus’ prophecy lacks many of the historical details of the

destruction of the Jerusalem temple, suggesting that Mark truly does record his prophecy rather than retelling the details of the event.

Third, almost all scholars agree that Mark is the earliest Gospel, utilized heavily by the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. According to scholars, Matthew was potentially written sometime around A. D. 85 and Luke sometime around A. D. 90. If Mark is one of their primary sources, the Gospel must have been written prior to A. D. 85.

Therefore, the evidence suggests that the Gospel of Mark was written sometime after the death of Peter but before the destruction of the Temple, sometime between A. D. 67 and 69.

Who Was the Gospel of Mark Written To?

Finally, we're left to determine to whom Mark wrote his Gospel. With both the author and date suggested, we can confidently say where Mark wrote. Again, church tradition tells us Peter was in Rome, serving as the pastor of that church, when he was martyred by the Roman emperor, Nero. Of course, remember Peter himself said he and John Mark were in Rome in 1 Peter 5:13. From this simple but significant evidence, Rome does seem to be the most obvious answer.

However, it is impossible to know for sure where and to whom Mark wrote. No doubt, Mark's Gospel would have been written for his community in Rome first. However, "the gospel was composed not only for this community but was intended for wider circulation that would contribute to the good news being proclaimed to all nations (13:10; see 14:9). As a result, this gospel transcends its original setting and the setting of all of its readers through the eons because of the power of the theological truth it narrates."³⁷

Unique Features of the Gospel of Mark

How a story is told is just as important as the story itself. Imagine for a moment what Star Wars would be without the opening crawl: "A long time ago, in a galaxy far away . . ." Or what would this iconic opening be like without John Williams' *Main Title Theme*? Functionally, the opening crawl gives contextual history to understand the story. But more than that, it is designed to look and sound epic so as to grab audience attention and promote interest.

We could think of several other ways in which a cinematic story is enhanced by such artistic details. Visual effects, music, even the way directors organize the order of events, tell a story in a way that becomes essential to the story itself; in fact, without these effects, the story may not make sense.

In similar fashion, how Mark tells the Gospel is just as important as the Gospel itself. In a world without film, Mark had his own literary tools to capture attention, and to help his audience see the significance of the story he was telling. However, what may have been more obvious to his audience may not be so obvious to us 2000 years in the future. Understanding the unique features

of how Mark tells the gospel story ultimately helps us understand and appreciate the story of Jesus.

Detail

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels because he tells fewer stories than the other three. However, what Mark lacks in quantity, he makes up for in quality—the stories he does tell are narrated in a fuller, more descriptive fashion.³⁸ For example, Mark mentions James' and John's nicknames in 3:17; he tells us the name of the blind man in 10:46; he also shares details of Jesus' emotional expressions, like sorrow (1:40) and anger (3:5).

Why is this important? Because it gives us a clue as to how Mark was supposed to be read—it was designed to be listened to by an audience in one sitting, then orally transmitted.³⁹ At the time Mark was written, very few people knew how to read; literacy was restricted to a very small socio-economic class. To accommodate long periods of listening, skilled storytellers recounted events in vivid detail to keep things interesting, as well as to aid memorization for further retellings.

And yet, Mark's detail is not elaborate but reflects the language of ordinary, lower socio-economic people; his writing style is not fancy! This tells us that Mark had a message that was designed for everyone, and easily accessible to the underprivileged (which would have been the majority of the population of his time). Mark believed in “keeping cookies on the bottom shelf,” so to speak.

Pace

Mark's Gospel is also characterized by its rapid pace. We recognize pacing in film with the following camera techniques: fast cutting, and accelerated camera movements like whip pans. For music, the musical score will increase tempo. All these techniques can give a sense of increased pace. For Mark, he uses the conjunction “and” (Greek: *kai*), and the word “immediately” (Greek: *euthus*) very frequently to increase the tempo of his narrative. Take a look at Mark 1:9-12 for a brief example:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee **and** was baptized by John in the Jordan. **And** when he came up out of the water, **immediately** he saw the heavens being torn open **and** the Spirit descending on him like a dove. **And** a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son;[fn] with you I am well pleased.” The Spirit **immediately** drove him out into the wilderness. **And** he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. **And** he was with the wild animals, **and** the angels were ministering to him (ESV).

For the original listeners, this technique would have impressed on them a sense of urgency and immediacy to Jesus' actions. While the other three Gospels say more about what Jesus said, Mark is using his style to put a spotlight on what Jesus did, rendering his portrayal of Jesus as one who moves with purpose and urgent mission.⁴⁰

Irony

Situational irony is another distinctive feature of Mark's Gospel. Irony occurs when there is a difference between what is expected and what actually happens. Mark highlights irony in order to show how Jesus often challenges, and sometimes breaks, social stereotypes.⁴¹

One example of irony in the book of Mark is how Jesus's true identity is recognized by the most unlikely characters. For instance, in Mark 1:23-24 the unclean spirits recognize Jesus as the Son of God before the religious leaders do (see 2:6-7). Additionally, those closest to Jesus—his disciples and his own family members—cannot perceive Jesus' mission (see 8:14-21 and 3:21; 31-35), and yet a blind man (10:46-52) and a Gentile centurion (15:39) see it almost immediately. Mark's use of irony is designed to challenge our way of thinking about the world.

Literary Sandwiches

Another noteworthy element of Mark's style is his use of the "literary sandwich." A literary sandwich refers to the way in which Mark "sandwiches" a seemingly random event between two parts of a larger story. Spotting these literary sandwiches is helpful because it provides insight into the meaning of the wider passage.⁴²

For example, one of the most puzzling stories is the healing of the blind man in 8:22-26. In this small story, not only does Jesus spit into a man's eyes to heal blindness, but this action only partially heals the man—it takes Jesus touching the man in order to restore his vision fully. Why does it take Jesus two tries to heal the blind man? The hint to the answer lies in how this story is sandwiched between two stories about faith. In the story immediately preceding this one (8:14-21), Jesus chides his disciples for a lack of comprehension; in the story after it (8:27-30), Peter finally understands Jesus' identity and mission, yet even still, only partially (see 8:31-33). So by placing the story of the blind man between the two stories about faith, Mark alludes to the blinding power of sin, and the restorative, and necessary, power of faith.

Jesus' "Secrecy"

Several times in the Gospel, Jesus forbids others from revealing who he is. On three occasions, demons are told to remain silent about revealing Jesus' messianic identity (1:25; 1:34; 3:11). Jesus also commands others to remain silent after four of his miracles (1:44; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26). Twice the disciples are told to remain silent (8:30; 9:9). Why does Jesus want to keep his identity as messiah a secret?

In 1901, theologian William Wrede believed Jesus' secrecy held the answer to the question of why no one seemed to recognize Jesus as the messiah until after His resurrection. How was it that Jesus' own disciples, as well as his family members, had trouble believing that he was the messiah until after the resurrection (e.g., 3:21 and 8:17)?

To make sense of this, Wrede proposed that the actual Jesus of history never claimed to be the messiah. A key text in Wrede's proposal is Mark 4:11: "To you it has been given the *secret* of the kingdom of God." According to Wrede, the Gospels were deliberate forgeries, and Mark

introduced the “Messianic Secret” to his story to make sense of why no one believed Jesus was the messiah until after his resurrection—Jesus told his closest followers to keep it a secret!

However, one of the major weaknesses of Wrede's proposal is his understanding of Mark 4:11. The word translated as “secret” (Greek: *mysterion*) has apocalyptic overtones. For us, “apocalyptic” probably makes us think of end of the world scenarios, but this isn't what it means for Mark. For Mark, “apocalyptic” means “unveiling” and refers to the way God discloses a truth about something at his appointed time (see Romans 11:25 and 1 Corinthians 15:51 for examples). Rather than a messianic “secret,” Jesus is seeking to control public perception of what his messiahship means (see 8:31-38). The nature of Jesus' messiahship is unveiled at the cross. Jesus' identity as messiah was not one of political power and prestige, but one of humble submission and suffering.

The Ending of Mark

Most English translations of Mark's Gospel contain notes, or visual markers at the conclusion of Mark 16:8. According to the ESV, the translators provide a note that the earliest manuscripts do not include Mark 16:9-20. The translators then provide the text of 16:9-20 in brackets. Mark 16:9-20 is called “The Longer Ending of Mark,” and does not appear in the earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.

The Longer Ending of Mark appears to have been added at a later date. According to biblical scholar William Lane notes that very few scholars think that Mark wrote the Longer Ending; yet at the same time, many scholars still resist the idea that Mark meant to end his Gospel at 16:8.⁴³ According to many scholars, Mark 16:8 ends abruptly and awkwardly: “And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

For these scholars, it seems implausible that Mark would end on that note. Lane believes that Mark intended to conclude his Gospel at 16:8: “the present ending of Mark is thoroughly consistent with the motifs of astonishment and fear developed throughout the Gospel.”⁴⁴ Astonishment and fear characterize responses to Jesus' ministry throughout the Gospel. Biblical scholar James Brooks agrees, citing Mark 1:22, 27; 2:12; 4:41; 5:15, 33, and many other places in Mark to show that fear, trembling, and amazement are common responses to the works of Jesus.⁴⁵

Both Lane and Brooks believe Mark intended to end abruptly in order to challenge his readers to ask the following question: “How will I respond to the empty tomb?” Will we share the good news of the empty tomb, or will we say nothing like Jesus' disciples did? In summary, Mark's longer ending is not regarded as authentic to Mark's Gospel, and was likely written much later by well-meaning scribes who wished to smooth out the awkward ending. However, contemporary scholarship is almost unanimous in judgment that Mark intended to end his Gospel on the note of amazement and fear in order to challenge his readers.

The Theology of Mark's Gospel

Mark's theology can be summarized in a number of key themes. While no summary can exhaust the rich tapestry that Mark weaves, there are some identifiable threads sewn through his telling of the gospel.

Divine Sonship

The theme of Jesus' divine sonship is the first theme encountered in Mark. Mark writes, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, *the Son of God*." This theme also forms a climactic conclusion on the lips of the Roman centurion in 15:39: "Truly this man was the *Son of God*!"

James Edwards calls this theme the "theological keystone" to the Gospel of Mark.⁴⁶ To name Jesus "the Son of God" is to convey the idea that Jesus carries divine authority. This idea is made by Jesus in his parable of the tenants in Mark 12:1-12. The vineyard owner's son is the rightful heir to the vineyard, and he carries the authority of his father. Jesus' divine sonship is what gives him the authority to cast out demons, forgive sins, heal on the Sabbath (3:1-6), command the waves (6:45-52), and to cleanse the temple (11:15-19).

Discipleship

Discipleship is an obvious theme in the Gospel of Mark. One could summarize Christian discipleship with the following three characteristics: being "called" by Jesus, being "with" him, and being "sent" by him. In 3:13, Mark wrote, "And he went up to the mountain and **called** to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might **be with him** and he might **send** them . . ."

Three things should be noted here. First, the Greek word for "called" is best translated as "made"; not only does Jesus appoint disciples, he makes them. The theology here is stated elsewhere in John 15:16: "You do not choose me but I chose you, and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide." In essence, Jesus' call creates the disciple.

Second, Jesus' disciples are called to "be with" him. This is significant language for Mark, and is his way of saying that Jesus is the object of Christian discipleship. This contrasts with the Jewish faith whose object was the teachings of Moses. Rather than simply following Jesus' teaching, Jesus himself is the object. This is further emphasized by Mark's presentation of Jesus calling his disciples from a mountain. Today, Mark's mention of a mountain flies over our heads, but it has tremendous significance for his Jewish audience. Just as Americans understood what Martin Luther King Jr. was doing when he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial, so too Jewish readers would have recognized what Mark was doing by presenting Jesus on a mountain. Jesus is like Moses, bringing a new law from on top of a mountain, but this time, the messenger is the message. This teaches us that we cannot define "discipleship" in terms of someone who simply learns from Jesus. A disciple seeks to "be with" Jesus because Jesus is what discipleship is all about.

Third, Christian discipleship is characterized by “being sent.” Importantly, being sent by Jesus comes after “being with” him. This teaches us that a disciple seeks to imitate Jesus. In 3:14 we see his disciples commissioned to do the things Jesus did, like preach and cast out demons. Likewise, in 10:42-45, we are told that Jesus’ disciples should seek to serve, just as he came to serve. Discipleship is characterized by humility. In summary, Christian discipleship is a major theme in Mark, and it is important to pay attention to the way Mark defines Christian discipleship.

Faith

For Mark, faith is not merely a belief in the right things. As illustrated in Jesus’ parable of the sower, having the right beliefs doesn't mean you have good roots. Faith is more than belief because it involves trust. For example, believing that a chair is behind me is not the same as my trust that the chair will hold me when I sit. Similarly, believing **that** Jesus is the Messiah is not the same as believing **in** Jesus as Messiah.

With that said, we can take comfort in knowing that faith does not have to be perfect. The Gospel of Mark is full of examples of imperfect, and even failed, discipleship (14:66-72). In Mark, we see that faith comes by continual hearing, receiving, and trusting (4:10-20). Even when faith is incomplete, it is still saving faith (8:27-33; 9:24).⁴⁷ In summary, faith refers to a quality, not a quantity.

Eschatology

“Eschatology” comes from the Greek word for “last things.” For those of us who were raised in evangelicalism, “last things” make us think of a final moment in history when Jesus returns, a time that has not occurred yet. While eschatology does include Jesus’ second coming, eschatology also includes Jesus’ first coming. In fact, Jesus’ first coming is the beginning of the end. Mark 1:15 provides us Mark’s eschatology: “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” Biblical eschatology, simply put, is the Christian view of history in light of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul puts it like this:

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. For by him all things were created, on heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-20).

While the fullness of God’s plan is not fulfilled yet, Jesus’ first coming, his teaching, and his ministry, represent the beginning of God’s final plans.

One of the first stories in Mark is Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (1:12-13), which functions like the "Duel of the Fates" does in *Star Wars: Episode 1*. Jesus' temptation represents a cosmic battle between good and evil,⁴⁸ and ultimately demonstrates that Jesus is the blameless Son of God. What happens after this story further demonstrates that the powers of evil are coming to an end: Jesus casts out demons (1:21), cleanses the unclean (1:40-45), heals the sick (2:1-12), and ultimately defeats death (16:1-8). In summary, Jesus' first coming is God's establishment of his kingdom on earth.

A final word must be said about Mark's eschatology. Christians should never lose sight of how God establishes his kingdom on earth. Mark's eschatology challenges us to die to ourselves in Christ-like imitation (8:34). Mark's eschatology is further echoed in John's apocalypse: "And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Revelation 12:11). We, like Peter, may find it difficult to think that a suffering and dying messiah could have anything to do with how God sets up his kingdom. But this is precisely how God does it, and by doing so shows us what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom of God.

Endnotes

- ¹Jonathan Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 3-5.
- ²Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 14-16.
- ³Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 7.
- ⁴Mark L. Strauss, *Introducing Jesus: A Short Guide to the Gospels' History and Message* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 10.
- ⁵Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 22-23.
- ⁶Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 33-34.
- ⁷Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 231.
- ⁸C.H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel* (New York: Scribners, 1938), 15, cited in Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 104.
- ⁹Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 35.
- ¹⁰Tim Mackie, *How to Read the Gospels: Study Notes* (Portland: The Bible Project), 4-7.
- ¹¹Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 134-135.
- ¹²Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 100.
- ¹³Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 101.
- ¹⁴Strauss, *Introducing Jesus: A Short Guide to the Gospels' History and Message*, 152.
- ¹⁵Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 37.
- ¹⁶Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 234-235.
- ¹⁷Strauss, *Introducing Jesus: A Short Guide to the Gospels' History and Message*, 11.
- ¹⁸Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 66.
- ¹⁹Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 63.
- ²⁰Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 62.
- ²¹Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (1968: reprint, Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 361, cited by Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 69.
- ²²Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 64-65.
- ²³Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 63.
- ²⁴Frederic Kenyon, *Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), quoted by Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 66.
- ²⁵Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15, cited in David E. Garland, *A Theology of Mark's Gospel*, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 54.
- ²⁶Irenaeus, *Hare.* 3.1.1, quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.8.2-3, cited in Garland, *A Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 59.

²⁷Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, vol. 34a of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), xxviii.

²⁸Garland, *A Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 51.

²⁹Garland, *A Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 52.

³⁰Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 7.

³¹Peter Orr, *The Beginning of the Gospel: A Theology of Mark*, *New Testament Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), 19.

³²Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 124–125.

³³Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 125.

³⁴Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, xxxi.

³⁵Garland, *A Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, 82.

³⁶Garland, *A Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, 81.

³⁷Garland, *A Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, 80.

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³⁹R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans's Publishing in the UK, Paternoster Press, 2002) 9.

⁴⁰Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 10-11.

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⁴²France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 19-20.

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⁴⁴Lane, 592.

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⁴⁶Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 15.

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