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 0521092884 - The Gospel According to Mark  
 C. F. D. Moule  
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## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

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### WHAT SORT OF A BOOK IS IT?

'The Gospel according to Mark' is a title that has been added to this book from very early days; but in itself the book is anonymous: the writer says nothing whatever about himself. The meagre evidence about its origin will be quoted later. Much more important is the question, What is this little book, and what does it contain?

The Christian Church began its existence simply as a handful of people bearing witness to something that they were convinced had happened. They had experienced it, and they were still experiencing it. They called it good news, or, in Greek, *euangelion* (evangel). The old English word used for this is gospel.

Here is an example, from Acts 10: 38-43, of the kind of thing they said when they were announcing this good news—this gospel:

'You know about Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we can bear witness to all that he did in the Jewish country-side and in Jerusalem. He was put to death by hanging on a gibbet; but God raised him to life on the third day, and allowed him to appear, not to the whole people, but to witnesses whom God had chosen in advance—to us, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to proclaim him to the people, and affirm that he is the one who has been designated by God as judge of the living and the dead. It is to him that all the prophets

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*What sort of a book is it?*

testify, declaring that everyone who trusts in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

It was easy enough to expand such an outline of the good news, because there were many anecdotes and sayings of Jesus circulating among his friends. These would be told as occasion arose, to meet difficulties, or to answer critics, or simply because they were interesting; and they had probably begun to be written down separately at a very early date. But Mark's book is one of the earliest examples—perhaps positively the earliest—of an arrangement of these units of tradition into a connected whole.

It is not merely a collection of the sayings of Jesus; indeed, it has more narratives than sayings. But neither is it a life of Jesus, like a modern biography. It is a piecing together of stories and sayings in such a way that they constitute an announcement of 'the good news'. There is no other word for it, therefore, than the gospel—the good news—as Mark tells it, or according to Mark.

It presents its brief anecdotes with impressive directness and simplicity and swiftness. Without any preliminary account of Jesus's birth and childhood, it plunges straight into the story by introducing John the Baptist and recounting how Jesus came to him for baptism. Then, in quick succession, specimens are given of what Jesus did and said, of how the crowds responded but the religious leaders resented him, and of how he trained his small band of close friends and followers. About two-fifths of the whole book is devoted to the closing days of his life; and then the narrative breaks off abruptly at the empty tomb. What follows (16: 9 ff.) is a summary of the traditions about the subsequent events. It is generally recognized that this is a later addition, patched on by some other writer; but it was early enough, even so, to get into the Gospel in its accepted form.

Thus Mark is a little handbook for basic Christian instruction, simple, yet brilliantly dramatic—a stark, powerful presentation of the Christian facts: not a biography, but a portrait of Jesus as the one who not only proclaimed but

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*Some of its characteristics*

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somehow brought with him the kingdom of God. Here is far more than a martyr; here is the triumphant and victorious Son of God. The book was probably written for the leader of some Christian community, to help him in teaching his people and in explaining to inquirers what Christians believed. It may well have been some time before there were enough copies of it to distribute to the leaders of other communities—let alone enough for individuals to possess for themselves. Every copy of a book had to be laboriously produced by hand, and even papyrus, the paper of those days, was not always easy to obtain in quantity.

SOME OF ITS CHARACTERISTICS

An important part of the study of the Christian good news is to compare with one another the presentations of it by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John's version of the Gospel, too, has to be brought in, but his treatment of it sets his book in a special class. Matthew, Mark, and Luke can be most easily compared by using a 'synopsis'—a book which prints the three in parallel columns. The present commentary, however, makes no attempt to do this work of comparison systematically. It is designed, rather, to help you, by explanations and comments, to understand Mark's book in itself. But first, an excellent thing to do is to read Mark straight through at a sitting (it is very short, and even to read it aloud with a group of friends only takes about an hour and a half). If you do this, you can hardly fail to be impressed. Papias, a writer of about A.D. 130, who will be mentioned again shortly, said that Mark's writing was 'not in order'. Whatever he may have meant by that, the arrangement is, in fact, remarkably skilful—some even think that Mark used an elaborate patterning to convey his theological meaning; and, although his Greek is colloquial, the total effect is of extraordinary vividness and dramatic vigour, only enhanced by the restraint and reticence and complete self-effacement of the writer himself.

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*The author*

His story is unadorned and unpretentious, but quite overpowering. It moves with extraordinary rapidity. It vividly sketches in the character of Jesus—strong and without sentimentality, yet gentle and sensitive and tender. But, above all, this is clearly a story, not merely of a wonderful, human life, but of the irresistible, irreversible movement of a divine plan, leading up to an astonishing climax—the empty tomb! And, if you want to bring home to yourself its naturalness and reality, you only have to contrast it with the shallow romances which, quite soon, began to compete (fortunately, without much success) with the Gospels we now have in the New Testament. Such romances may be read in M. R. James's *The Apocryphal New Testament* (1924) or in *New Testament Apocrypha*, translated by R. McL. Wilson, 1963.

By comparison, the dignity, the simplicity, the convincing directness of Mark are vastly impressive. The whole story takes place within a tiny country and in the space of a few years; but its meaning is infinite.

#### THE AUTHOR

And now, what is known about the origin of this astonishing little book?

In about A.D. 320, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, wrote in Greek a history of the Church. Eusebius reports that Papias, who was bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor in about A.D. 130, had recorded a tradition that Mark's Gospel was a translation into Greek of the teaching which the apostle Peter had given in Rome. Peter himself, then, presumably used Hebrew, or Aramaic (a language similar to Hebrew) and addressed groups of Jews who used these languages. It is generally assumed that the Mark who wrote the Gospel was the young man called John Mark in Acts (12: 12, 25; 15: 37, 39), who was indeed a companion of the apostles. This identification is not inevitable—Marcus was not an uncommon name—and the degree of this Gospel's attachment to the body of traditional information

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### *Theological questions*

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about Peter has been questioned. But parts of it do, in fact, read like a direct, eyewitness account; and a recently discovered copy of what seems to be a genuine letter of Clement of Alexandria (about A.D. 190), also speaks definitely of Peter's notes as forming part of Mark's material.

Mark is very widely believed to have been written earlier than Matthew or Luke, but much hard thinking about this question is still going on, and rather startling new ideas may yet emerge. On any showing, however, Mark's Gospel is separated from the events it describes by, at most, a generation—perhaps less. Peter was martyred round about A.D. 60. Even if the Gospel was put together after that, it is not much later. At the latest, it cannot have been written more than some thirty to thirty-five years after the death of Jesus; and the traditions it draws on take us, in some cases, right back to the very words of Jesus himself.

The newly discovered letter of Clement of Alexandria, already alluded to, declares that, besides the Gospel which we know, Mark wrote another, expanded version, containing more mystical material for the exclusive use of those who had made progress in the Christian life. He even quotes two sections purporting to come from this secret, 'mystic' Mark. Despite Clement's statement, it is doubtful whether it is authentic Mark that he quotes—any more than 16: 9–20 are authentic (see notes there). But this is, at any rate, an interesting addition to the traditions.

#### THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Many theological and ethical questions of front-rank importance are raised in Mark's small book. So far as possible, these are discussed in the commentary. The following list shows where the main discussions occur:

Allegory and parable, 32 f., 56, 93 f.  
 Apocalypse, 101 ff.  
 Apostles, 30 f.  
 Authority, 22, 73, 93

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*Theological questions*

- Baptism, 9 f.  
 Baptist, 8 ff., 13, 49 f., 93  
 Cleanness and uncleanness, 21, 55 f.  
 Corban, 55 f.  
 Cross, 67, 125  
 Curtain of the temple, 127 f.  
 Death of Christ, 84 f., 111 f., 115, 127 f.  
 Demons and possession, 17 f., 32, 42, 72  
 Divorce, 77  
 Doctors of the Law or Scribes, 18, 22, 98, 100  
 Faith, 16, 22, 47, 73, 85  
 Fasting, 26 f.  
 Father and Son, 3, 11 f., 70, 93 f., 109, 117, 128  
 Gehenna, 75 f.  
 Gentiles, 57 f., 60, 89, 118  
 Gospel, 1 f., 8, 14, 112, 133 f.  
 Hell or Gehenna, 75 f.  
 Holy One, 18 f.  
 John the Baptist, 8 ff., 13, 49 f., 93  
 Kingdom of God, 13 ff., 38 f., 66 f., 68, 79, 83 f., 86 f., 99, 115, 118  
 Last Supper, 114 ff.  
 Law, 18, 25 ff., 55 f., 62, 77, 98 f.  
 Leaven or yeast, 39, 62  
 Life, 75 f., 80 f., 84 f.  
 Messiah, 13 f., 64 ff., 70 f., 75, 86 f., 99, 104, 123 f.  
 Miracles, 15 f., 17 f., 21 ff., 32, 41 f., 44 ff., 47 f., 52 f., 58 f., 60 f.,  
 62 f., 69, 72 f., 90 f.  
 Parable and allegory, 32 f., 56, 93 f.  
 Passover, 86, 110 f., 114 ff.  
 Pharisees, 25 f., 60 f., 62, 96, 111 f., 119  
 Possession and demons, 17 f., 32, 42, 72  
 Punishment and reward, 80 f.  
 Ransom, 84 f.  
 Resurrection, 45 f., 97 f., 132 ff.  
 Reward and punishment, 80 f.  
 Sabbath, 18, 21, 27 f., 131  
 Sadducees, 97 f., 111, 119  
 Satan, 11, 16, 32, 66 f.  
 Scribes or Doctors of the Law, 18, 22, 98, 100

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*The Coming of Christ*

MARK I: 1-8

Scriptures, 58 f., 116, 119 f.  
 Son and Father, 3, 11 f., 70, 93 f., 109, 117, 128  
 Son of God, 3, 11 f., 70, 93 f., 109, 117, 128  
 Son of Man, 23, 28, 65 ff., 84, 107 f., 123  
 Synagogue, 18, 44, 89  
 Taxes, 96 f.  
 Temple, 18, 89 f., 104, 106, 127 f.  
 Temptation and testing, 11 f., 60, 66 f., 117  
 Transfiguration, 67 f., 69 ff.  
 Trial of Jesus, 123 ff.  
 Triumphal entry, 86 f.  
 Twelve, 26, 30 f., 35, 47  
 Uncleanliness and cleanness, 21, 55 f.  
 Unforgivable sin, 32  
 Yeast *or* leaven, 39, 62

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*The Coming of Christ*

THE FORERUNNER'S CALL TO PENITENCE;  
 HIS WITNESS

HERE BEGINS THE GOSPEL of Jesus Christ the Son 1  
 of God.

In the prophet Isaiah it stands written: 'Here is my 2  
 herald whom I send on ahead of you, and he will prepare  
 your way. A voice crying aloud in the wilderness, 3  
 "Prepare a way for the Lord; clear a straight path for  
 him." And so it was that John the Baptist appeared in 4  
 the wilderness proclaiming a baptism in token of repent-  
 ance, for the forgiveness of sins; and they flocked to him 5  
 from the whole Judaeon country-side and the city of  
 Jerusalem, and were baptized by him in the River Jordan,  
 confessing their sins.

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MARK I: 1-8

*The Coming of Christ*

- 6 John was dressed in a rough coat of camel's hair, with a  
 leather belt round his waist, and he fed on locusts and  
 7 wild honey. His proclamation ran: 'After me comes one  
 who is mightier than I. I am not fit to unfasten his shoes.  
 8 I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with  
 the Holy Spirit.'

\* 1. *Here begins the Gospel.* As we have seen (pp. 1-2) Mark's book has come to be called a Gospel because it contains *the* Gospel—the announcement of the Christian good news. It is this latter meaning of Gospel that is here intended. The starting-point of this good news is defined in Acts 1: 22: it is 'from John's ministry of baptism . . .'; and again, in Matt. 11: 12, Luke 16: 16 and John 1: 6, John the Baptist is taken as the starting-point. So here in Mark, it is John with whom the story begins.

2-5. John's preaching *in the wilderness* is itself treated as a sign that he is the destined forerunner of some special action on the part of God, because it links him with a well-known passage in the Old Testament which expressed confidence that God was going to take such action. Isa. 40: 3 says: 'There is a voice that cries: Prepare a road for the LORD through the wilderness, clear a highway across the desert for our God.' It was easy, in the original Hebrew or in the Greek version, to read 'through (literally in) the wilderness' as though it went with 'cries', and thus corresponded to John's situation. The recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls provide evidence for a Jewish monastic community in the barren, rocky land between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea who applied this same quotation to themselves, and it is possible that John may himself have been associated with them (see Luke 1: 80, 'he lived out in the wilds until the day when he appeared publicly . . .'). If so, he very literally appeared *in the wilderness*, though the Greek word *erēmos*, here translated wilderness, does not everywhere in the Gospels seem to mean more than the uncultivated land



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MARK I: 1-8

outside towns. The corresponding word in the Old Testament indicates 'pasture-land', the areas in which the flocks were led by the shepherds.

The other Old Testament quotation, *Here is my herald whom I send on ahead of you* (verse 2), comes, not from Isaiah at all, but from Mal. 3: 1 ('Look, I am sending my messenger...', though Exod. 23: 20 has it also, for 'angel' there is the same, in Hebrew, as 'messenger'). The fact that the two quotations are both ascribed to Isaiah may mean that they occurred side by side under a single heading in some collection of prophecies. About the meaning of the Malachi passage (including Mal. 4: 5), see the comment on 9: 2-8 below.

4. There has been much discussion of the origin and meaning of John the Baptist's baptism. Bathing or sprinkling with water is a very widespread religious symbol for purification. Within Judaism, the Dead Sea sect just mentioned seems to have used it frequently; and bathing in water is known, at least later, if not already by the time of the Baptist, to have been part of the ceremony by which a Gentile convert to Judaism was admitted into the community of Israel. Besides this, sprinkling with clean water was already familiar from Ezek. 36: 25 etc. as a figurative expression for the moral cleansing of the nation by God: '... I will sprinkle clean water over you, and you shall be clean from all that defiles you; I will cleanse you from the taint of all your idols.' Thus, the Baptist, who was so called because of his symbolic use of water, was in this way evidently giving dramatic, visible expression to his call to repentance. Those whose consciences responded to John's call to moral reform submitted to being dipped in the river—John had come from 'the wilderness' to the River Jordan for the purpose—as a sign of their response. Luke 3: 7-14 gives some account of the sort of sins of which he summoned his hearers to repent.

6-8. But this rugged prophet not only called for moral reform: he announced that someone infinitely greater was to follow him and that he would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

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John's mission was thus essentially a preparation for something greater still. The Jewish historian Josephus, in the *Antiquities of the Jews* (Book XVIII, 116-19), written about A.D. 93, describes John as baptizing, and preaching morals. He is silent about this other side of his message, except that, in noting that Herod executed John as a potential revolutionary, Josephus bears indirect witness to a message concerned with Israelite nationalist hopes. John was a preacher of morals, but had a message also for Israel's future. There is more about John the Baptist in 6: 14-29.

Baptism *with the Holy Spirit* is a striking phrase. The Holy Spirit is God himself at work among his people, and it is impossible for a person literally to have the Holy Spirit poured over him like water. But the Baptist evidently meant that the great coming One would not merely cleanse with water but would bring to bear, like a deluge, the purging, purifying, judging presence of God himself. Christians, looking back on these events, often contrasted John's water-baptism with this even more powerful purging and refining—this smelting fire. In Acts 1: 5 the risen Christ says: 'John, as you know, baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. . .'; so, in Rom. 8: 9, St Paul says outright: 'if a man does not possess the Spirit of Christ, he is no Christian'. In Acts 2: 1 ff. the beginning of the Church's active life is marked by dramatic signs of the coming of the Spirit; and this is hailed (Acts 2: 16 ff.) as the fulfilment of Old Testament expectation as expressed in Joel 2: 28 ff.: 'Thereafter the day shall come when I will pour out my spirit on all mankind. . . I will show portents in the sky and on earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. . .' Thus John the Baptist's baptism was recognized as marking the threshold of the kingdom of God, but not the full entry into it. As Jesus said, 'the least in the kingdom of Heaven is greater than he' (Matt. 11: 11; cf. Luke 7: 28). \*