

## Excursus: Stories of Jesus in Mark

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*The pervading themes running through the four literary compositions of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are of a Christological nature. Messianic themes or motifs are found in the Gospels in the names or titles ascribed to Jesus in his sayings, his stories or parables, his discourses and debates, in the reactions of the people to him, in his miraculous deeds, and in the narrative comments of the authors of these compositions. The themes of greatest significance in the Gospels are those having to do with the messianic identity of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the primary emphasis of the stories found in this composition. This is demonstrated in the following excursus on the stories of Jesus in Mark.*

The Gospels of the New Testament Scriptures are titled under the names of the tradition associated with their historical authors: Mark is associated with the Apostle Peter based on the comment found in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, written in AD. There we find a story of how Mark, being a companion of Peter, during the last years of his life, was encouraged to write down the stories he had heard from Peter. This tradition tells us where the Gospel of Mark began and why. It is acknowledged by any credible NT scholar that Mark's text is found in both Matthew and Luke's Gospels. Mark's Gospel must have become so well known and used by the early church that it was considered credible to Matthew, who used Mark's Gospel as the basis of his and added his own recollections and stories, which are not found in Mark. It is clear that Mark's collection of these stories being used by Peter in his preaching and teaching was the first in this new genre called an *euangelistes* - gospel.

## The Gospel According to Mark

Mark's Gospel is believed to have been written somewhere around 65 AD after the death of Peter and Paul in Rome. This is based on several writings from the second century wherein the writer was encouraged to give the stories being told orally into some form wherein they would be preserved for the future and would provide a written record of the stories of Jesus to be used in the ongoing efforts of evangelizing the pagan world.

For the past thirty years the messianic stories, which originated with the apostles had been told throughout the Mediterranean world. Now they were being put to death. Church leaders of the second century church, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria, state that John Mark, the nephew of Barnabas, who had been a companion of Peter in the later years of his life, had been encouraged, after Peter execution in Rome in 65 AD, to commit to writing the inspired story which was taught and proclaimed by Peter.

It is interesting to note that the way Mark's Gospel is laid out, giving it a striking similarity the sermons of Peter in Acts of Apostles. Peter's sermons do not begin with the birth of Jesus, nor do they mention his genealogy. Rather, they tell of the appearance Jesus in Galilee, his preaching, his popularity, the controversies that arose, his significance as a teacher and worker of miracles, his final conflict with the Jewish hierarchy, his arrest, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Reading the sermons of Peter in Acts 2, 3, 4 and 10, one sees the same development of this messianic story, especially so with the points of emphasis made by Peter in his sermons, i.e., the recognition of Jesus by the people of Galilee and Judea as a prophet come from God, the rejection of him by the Jewish hierarchy and their role in the death of Jesus. But in every case Peter follows the mention of Jesus' crucifixion with a declaration of the vindication of Jesus by God in raising him from the dead, thus declaring him to be the Messiah.

## The Jesus of Mark's Gospel

The Jesus of Mark's Gospel is developed through the stories of Mark in way that reveals his identity from story to story until he is fully recognized on the cross as "the Son of God." His resurrection establishes this beyond question. He appears to a number of his disciples then ascends into heaven where he is seated at the right hand of God. In the first half of Mark's Gospel (chapters 1:1-8:26), Jesus is portrayed as a Galilean Rabbi very well received by the people of Galilee. Then, from 8:27ff, Jesus' role shifts to that of the suffering servant of Isaiah who has set his face toward Jerusalem to die for the people.

That the identity of Jesus as the Messiah was not fully realized until his resurrection is a theme of the preaching of Peter, as may be seen in the early chapters of Acts of Apostles. In fact, the Jesus of Mark's Gospel is presented in much the same way Peter presented Jesus in his messianic speeches or sermons. In Acts 2, Peter tells his audience that they were witnesses of the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Hebrew Scriptures that God would manifest his power in "the last day," in accordance with the prophecy of Joel 2, and this was being done by Jesus of Nazareth, who was now at the right hand of God reigning as Lord and Christ.

Peter's speech in Acts 3 develops in the same way, as well as that of his speech to the Sanhedrin in Acts 4. His speech to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:36-43) also follows the outline of Mark's Gospel. He begins with Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, his anointing of the Holy Spirit, his Messianic ministry of doing good, healing the oppressed, and his exorcisms of the demonic forces which had taken control of peoples lives; all of which led the people to believe he was a prophet. Jesus was, however, put to death by the rulers of the people. "But God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen," states Peter, and all this was in fulfillment of the Scriptures.

## Names and Titles of Jesus in Mark

The names or titles used to identify Jesus in Mark's Gospel, which is a key to how he was perceived by those using those titles, is consistent with developmental nature of Mark's Christology. A curious feature in some of Mark's stories is what had been identified as the theme of the messianic secret. On occasion, when Jesus is identified as the Messiah or the Son of God, he instructs the one identifying him to keep his identity a secret. This behavior of Jesus is consistent with the way Mark presents the identity of Jesus of Nazareth; i.e., it is for the purpose of keeping Jesus identity secret until he is ready for it to be revealed.

The most frequent designation for Jesus in Mark is his historical or common name, "Jesus," used 76 times in Mark. The second most frequently is "the son of man," which is the title Jesus uses to identify himself with his fellow human beings. This title is found 13 times in Mark, and is used consistently by Jesus throughout the messianic stories of this Gospel as a link between himself and others (i.e. as a *benAdam* - son of Adam - a human being), yet he also uses it to speak of a somewhat esoteric figure who was going to die. The third most frequent title used to address Jesus is "Teacher," used 8 times (also "Rabbi" 4 times), an address toward or to speak of Jesus. Jesus is called "the Christ" 7 times, is called "Lord" 7 times, and "King of the Jews" 6 times. He is called "the Son" or "the Son of God" 6 times, "the Son of David" 4 times, and is called "a prophet" twice.

What does all this tells us? In these titles and their locations throughout this Gospel, we see Mark showing his reader what the people of Galilee and Judea thought they were seeing when they saw and heard Jesus of Nazareth. Most people saw him simply as Jesus, others saw a Teacher or Rabbi, and others thought they saw the Messiah/Christ; i.e., the Son of David, the King of the Jews. Some called him Lord, some saw a prophet, while others saw the Son of God, but he is a Roman centurion. What caused some people to see him differently than others saw him has a great deal to do with the presuppositions out of which each individual heard and viewed Jesus. Those who longed for a Messiah saw in Jesus the answer to

their prayers, but those who did not see him as the kind of Messiah they wanted to appear chose not to see him as anything more than a curiosity. It is the same today.

How one sees Jesus depends on what one wants to see or does not want to see. To believe that Jesus is the Messiah, to accept him as Lord and confess belief in him as the Son of God, has consequences. If he is who he appeared to be, then he was capable of delivering the one believing from the condemnation of adamic existence and will give them new existence in Christ, which leads to eternal life. Given this scenario, why would one not believe in him? Maybe its because they do not want any other existence than their adamic existence, which is an existence characterized by the disbelief and rebellion of the first Adam.

## Conclusion

This presentation of Mark's Gospel as a development of messianic stories should help set the stage for a study of any of the Gospels as stories. To approach them as theological compositions only sets the reader at a distance from the ease of access that is possible by seeing them as what they are, stories.

Anyone can listen to a story. Everyone enjoys hearing or reading a story. Most of us enjoy telling a story, whether about ourselves or someone else. The beauty of all lies in the fact that everyone knows what a story is and how to recognize a good story. It is just one step from this to seeing how easy it can be to analyze a story; or, perhaps, we should say, "take a story apart." That is what story analysis is all about, i.e., taking it apart and looking at the various features that make it a story.

The gospel is simply "God's story." The Gospel of Mark is simply a story of collected stories making up a "Godstory" - a story of God. With this approach, the reader can enter into the stories of this Gospel, make the story of Jesus his or her story, and themselves *become storytellers of the greatest and most wonderful story ever told.*