



MARK

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CHRISTIAN FOCUS



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ISBN 1 85792 905 5

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First published in 1995
Revised and enlarged edition published in 2003,
by
Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House,
Fearn, Ross-shire, IV20 1TW, Scotland.

www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by Alister MacInnes

Printed and bound by
Mackays of Chatham





Introduction

1. How they brought the good news from Jerusalem to Rome 'Jerusalem!' What feelings are aroused by that name!

It is so today, for it is a holy city to the Christian, the Jew and the Moslem. This was also true in Bible times. It stirred the emotions of the Jews. It was the capital of their country. More than this, it was the place where God's holy temple was.

To be away and unable to visit it was agony for the godly Jew. 'As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?' (Ps. 42:1,2). What eager and frustrated longing is concentrated into that word, 'When...?' Meet with God – where? Why, in Jerusalem and at the temple, of course!

Then there were the longer-term exiles, the folk who did not even live in the Holy Land, but who were born of Jewish parents in places like Antioch and Alexandria, like Corinth or Carthage. Many of them saved up for years to make the journey, sometimes in the midst of danger, to be at Jerusalem at the time of one of the religious feasts. Most of all there were the folk in enforced exile in Babylon, six hundred years or so before Christ. One of them wrote, 'If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill' (Ps 137:5).

As we read the Bible it seems to present so many people wanting to get to Jerusalem. Isaiah says, 'The mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it' (Isa. 2:2). The New Testament says, even of Abraham the nomad, that 'he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (Heb. 11:10).

Yet there is one Bible book where the movement is all the other way. In the Acts of the Apostles, Jerusalem is a place of emigration



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not of immigration, not of destination but of exodus. Why?

The secret is to be found in the Gospel of Luke. There is no lack of emphasis there on Jerusalem as a place of destination, in fact of destiny. More than thirty times the name comes, nearly as many as in the other three Gospels put together, and so often with a sense that something of immense importance is going to happen there. You will see this very clearly if you read Luke 2:38; 9:31, 51; 13:33-35; 18:31; 19:11; 21:20-24 and 23:28.

This is why the movement in Acts is outward and not inward. At Jerusalem, the most important events since the foundation of the world – the death and resurrection of Jesus – had taken place, and it was urgent that everybody should know about them. Luke in fact prepares his readers for this at the end of his Gospel, where Jesus says to his disciples about himself as the Christ, ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem’ (Luke 24:47). This then set the theme for his second book.

If you stand at the door of a great newspaper’s printing works at the right time of day, you will see streams of vans going out in many directions, moving with all speed to every point of the compass. Why? To bring the latest news to as many people as can be reached. And what is this news? Why, so often it is about war or famine, about adultery or murder. Martyn Lewis, the BBC news-reader, went on record as declaring his concern that so often what is published and broadcast is bad news, when there is so much good news available.

Here in Jerusalem were men and women with the best news ever to be published. It was not only an urgent matter to get it out; it was their greatest joy. Out they went – but at first they only felt free to take this message to people who shared their religion.

Jesus was the expected Messiah of the Jewish people. They might not accept him, but at least the Christians knew it was right to tell them about him and to seek to win them to faith in him. There was no problem either with proselytes, for these were non-Jews who were attracted to the Jewish faith and had



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gone so far as to become officially Jewish in their religion. But other Gentiles were another matter. The first Christians had all been taught the Old Testament in the synagogues in their earlier days, and the teaching was in the hands of men who were afraid that contact with Gentiles would pollute good Jews. This kind of teaching can go very deep and it cannot have been easy to contemplate acting in a manner contrary to it.

A series of events shook these first Christians out of their exclusively Jewish nest. First of all, Jesus told them that the good news about him was meant for the whole world (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). Then the gospel began to spread among the Samaritans (Acts 8:5-25), the 'mongrel' race who lived between Judaea and Galilee. Finally the Lord gave Peter not only a vision to reassure him, but also immediately after it an opportunity of proclaiming Christ to a group of Gentile enquirers (Acts 10). How then did the gospel get from the capital of Israel to the capital of the Empire? The Acts of the Apostles does not tell us explicitly, but it is easy enough to read between the lines.

Luke tells us that there were Jews and proselytes from Rome present at Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost when the gospel was preached there (Acts 2:10,11). We can be pretty sure that some of them would have been among the 3,000 people who were converted that day (Acts 2:41). Can there be any real doubt that, on their return to Rome, they would establish at least one local Christian church there?

Then, of course, their numbers would swell. This growth would be in part through their own witness to Christ, but there was another important factor. Evangelistic missions were being conducted by Paul and others in the eastern parts of the Empire. At that time it was almost literally true that 'all roads lead to Rome', and there can be little doubt that some of these folk would find their way to that city and, tapping the local 'grapevine', would discover and join the local Christians or else perhaps start another Christian church elsewhere in the city.





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2. The story of Jesus in written form

Was Mark's book the first Gospel to be written? Most scholars think so, although there are some who reckon Matthew earlier. The question is interesting, but it is not of crucial importance. We will assume the priority of Mark.

Here is the start of a somewhat but not entirely new type of literature. A book recently published under the editorship of Richard Bauckham (*The Gospels for all Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, T. and T. Clark, 1998), argues that although the Gospels are not much like modern biographies, because of their almost exclusive concentration on the ministry and death of Jesus, they are similar in many respects to the various biographies produced in the Graeco-Roman world in the few centuries which preceded and followed the ministry of our Lord. Bauckham and his colleagues argue their case persuasively, and there can be little doubt that the Gospels would have been recognised by their early readers as biographies of Jesus. There was however one important difference. Other biographies were not a preaching of good news. After all, the men who were the subjects of them were dead. There was no good news in that. But Mark and the other three Gospel writers were telling the story of Somebody who had conquered death. Their books then were truly Gospels, the proclamation of good news, and so theirs was, in this important respect, a new literary venture.

There is in fact no book that presents us with so many significant beginnings as does the Bible.

Did Abraham realise that he was to be the father of the race that was to be the people of God and the father of the whole family of the faithful? Did Jacob know that the new name God gave him ('Israel') would be the most frequent name found in Scripture and that the nation that sprang from him would be the cradle in which God's Son was born? Did Moses know how important for all future generations was his call from God to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, marshalling them at Mount Sinai to hear God's Law, and taking them to the very

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edge of the Promised Land? We will never know how much each of these men knew about the far-reaching effects of what God was doing through them. The same is true of Mark and the very important book he wrote.

What was his reason for writing it? Obviously it was to tell people about Jesus, although of course many of them would be already well acquainted with certain facts about him.

First of all, of course, it was the actual proclamation of the good news by its preachers that would tell the hearers something about him, for all authentic Christian preaching has a factual basis in the story of Jesus himself. This preaching would not be at first particularly detailed, and there would be a concentration on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Sometimes perhaps some of the events of his ministry would be included in order to show what kind of Person he was.

Then would come the teaching of converts. We know that this actually began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:42). This would probably include more information about Jesus as a Person as well as more teaching about the meaning of his death and resurrection and some of the practical implications of being a Christian (Rom. 6:17). All this was done orally.

It is not surprising to find so many letters in the New Testament. The task of evangelism was urgent and so the evangelists could not stay long after they had planted churches. Inevitably problems would arise, and what more natural than that the local leaders, unavoidably inexperienced, would contact the evangelists to ask their advice? So the letters of Paul and others were written, their purpose being to deal with particular issues of importance to the churches concerned. Such letters would, of course, build on the oral teaching already given, amplifying and further explaining it, and clearing up any problems that were due to misunderstanding.

It was at about this stage that the Gospels began to be written. Jesus himself is the heart of the gospel, for it is essentially good news about him, and so it was desirable that people should know much more about him. This became even more important when





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the original witnesses to those facts began to die. After all, if you love a person, you want to know as much as possible about him or her. So it was with Christians and Christ. We can imagine how eagerly they would devour anything that gave them further insight into his life, his character and his teaching, as well as his death and resurrection. It was most important therefore that anything written should be authentic.

The Gospels were in fact based on eyewitness accounts. Luke saw the importance of this if his readers were to be assured of the truth of what was written (Luke 1: 1-4). In oral transmission through a series of human channels things can go wrong, with the danger of minor (and eventually major) departures from strict accuracy. The cultivation of a good memory was encouraged in the Holy Land in our Lord's day. Moreover, if disciples of Jesus who loved him dearly and believed in him as Lord and Saviour had only a vague memory of what he said and did, then nothing can be certain in this world!

It was not, however, all left even to the retentive memories of the eyewitnesses, for Jesus gave his apostles a special promise that exactly fitted the needs of the situation. He said, 'the Holy Spirit ... will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you' (John 14:26). The Holy Spirit is the great Communicator, and all effective witness to Christ is the result of his work. Jesus called him 'the Spirit of truth' (John 15:26; 16:13), and it was through his work that the apostles communicated the authentic gospel in contrast to all counterfeits (1 John 4:5,6).

Here then, in the Gospels, the Spirit of truth laid a basis for the effective communication of the good news of Jesus not only for the people of the first century but for men and women throughout the entire history of the church. If the gospel was to be proclaimed through future centuries, there would be an abiding need for such authentic written material, and, as we will see, it is probable that from the first the Gospels were intended to be read, not only by the churches that would first receive them, but widely throughout the churches of that day.





3. Two men write a Gospel

Who was Mark? His full name was John Mark and we find Luke mentioning him in Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5,13 and 15:37-39. His mother seems to have been a well-to-do early Christian, for her house was big enough for many Christians to join together in prayer (Acts 12:12).

As a study of these passages will show, he had failed at first as a missionary. He was a member of the team of evangelists who worked together on Paul's first missionary journey, but, for reasons unknown to us, he left the work at Pamphylia in southern Asia Minor, much to Paul's annoyance (Acts 15:37-39). Eventually however he came to be warmly regarded by both Paul and Peter (Col. 4:10; Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11; 1 Peter 5:13). The letters in which he is mentioned were probably all written in the early sixties of the first century, more than a decade later than his defection from the missionary group. It would be most interesting to know what happened in the intervening years and how he came to link up with Paul again and also with Peter, but we have no information about this.

The story of his life is, however, a great encouragement to Christian workers who feel they have failed. Here was a man who was given another opportunity, and what a great work he did! He may not have won many people as a missionary, but we can never estimate how many may have been brought to faith in Christ through his Gospel.

If his mother was a Christian at a comparatively early stage of things, what was he doing during the ministry of Jesus? It is possible that he actually appears at one point in the story itself as he tells it in his Gospel. His account includes the brief appearance of an unnamed character whose inclusion in the story has no obvious purpose (see the comment on 14:51,52). Could this be Mark? Many writers on his Gospel have thought so.

At first sight, the writing of a Gospel by somebody like Mark might seem to raise a problem. After all, the promise of Jesus that the Holy Spirit would quicken their memories was made to his apostles, not to all and sundry, and, even if he was an early



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disciple of Jesus, Mark was not an apostle. Are there any grounds for extending the relevance of the promise to somebody like him? Yes, there are!

The life of Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, bridged the First and Second Centuries. He was a companion of that great Christian martyr Polycarp, who had sat at the feet of the apostle John, and he is very likely himself to have heard John. Extracts from his writings are quoted by Irenaeus and by Eusebius of Caesarea, the first great church historian after Luke. Papias said that John (probably the apostle of that name, but possibly somebody closely associated with him) had said that Mark became Peter's interpreter and that he had written down what Peter had preached of the words and deeds of the Lord Jesus. Early writers also say Mark wrote his Gospel in Italy, while others narrow this to Rome. They differ, however, as to whether this writing took place during Peter's lifetime or after his death. If Peter's memories are behind the Gospel of Mark, then the relevance of the promise of Jesus to this Gospel is obvious.

Peter calls Mark, 'my son Mark' (1 Peter 5:13), suggesting that there was a strong spiritual bond between them. This is not a bit surprising, for Peter too was a failed disciple who was restored and given another opportunity of service (John 21:15-17). What experience of the grace of Christ they had between them!

Simon Peter had been introduced to Jesus by his brother Andrew very early in the ministry of Jesus (John 1:41), even before being called from his nets to follow him (1:16,17). He followed him throughout his ministry, and was also present on several occasions when the Saviour had only a few of the disciples with him (5:37; 9:2; 14:33, and perhaps 13:33). It was he who, at Caesarea Philippi, voiced the conviction of the disciples that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God (8:27-29; cf. Matt. 16:16), the very conviction which was in Mark's heart throughout the writing of his book (1:1).

Peter followed Jesus devotedly, but he refused to accept his teaching that he was destined for a death that would follow



rejection by the religious leaders (8:31,32), and, despite his protestations of loyalty to death (14:27-31), failed him in the hour of crisis by a threefold denial (14:66-72). Such was Christ's gracious forgiveness, however, that it was Peter who, on the Day of Pentecost, preached the first Christian sermon (Acts 2).

Peter comes across to us in the Gospel narratives as a vigorous, impetuous character (e.g. see Matt. 14:28; John 18:10; 21:7), who sometimes spoke before he thought (Matt. 17:24-27). No doubt his accounts of events in the life of Jesus would be very graphic, and many of the stories in Mark are dramatically told, as we will see.

There have been some attempts to locate the writing of the Gospel in Galilee or in Antioch, but over the years a majority of scholars has accepted that it was written in Italy, probably in Rome, with Roman Christians as its first readers. Mark 15:21 says that Simon of Cyrene was the father of Alexander and Rufus, and if this Rufus is to be identified with a man of the same name referred to in Romans 16:13 (which, of course, can be neither proved nor disproved), Mark was making a point that would greatly interest Christian readers in Rome. Also he uses some Latin words, such as 'Legion' in 5:9 and 'Praetorium' in 15:16, in addition to which he explains Aramaic words and phrases for his readers in passages like 5:41, 7:11 and 15:34. As we shall see, too, his selection of material and his presentation of it would certainly appeal to Romans.

If, as most scholars think, 'Babylon' in 1 Peter 5:13 is a disguised name for Rome (cf. Rev. 17:9, where the seven hills clearly symbolise Rome; Rev. 17:18; 18:2), then Mark and Peter were in Rome together at the time Peter's first epistle was written. No doubt, as the early church writers suggest, Mark would have learned a great deal about Jesus from Peter's preaching, but there were probably other things Peter would want to tell Mark in preparation for that time when the latter would commit all this material to writing for posterity.

I live in Glasgow, a city with many tenement flats. Some of these are very fine buildings, designed by great architects, while



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others of course are poorer in quality. Who invented tenements? The Romans! The residential parts of the city of Rome were crammed with tenement dwellings. I imagine Peter and Mark sitting together at a rough table in a small flat, perhaps about the size of a Glasgow 'single end' (a one-room flat), or, if they had family with them, something somewhat larger, the older man talking animatedly and the younger one writing down what he was saying. Over it all, unseen but real, the Spirit of truth was presiding.

It is not surprising then to find that Mark omits a number of events recorded in other Gospels, events which might appear to show Peter in a good light. So Mark does not tell us that Peter walked on the water (Matt. 14:28-29), nor does he record the promise Jesus made to Peter after he confessed him at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:17-19), nor his visit to the empty tomb after the resurrection (John 20:2-7). On the other hand, Mark does record the rebuke Jesus gave Peter (8:32-33), Peter's comment to his Master on the Mount of Transfiguration (9:5,6) and gives a very full account of Peter's denial of Christ (14:66-72). These omissions and inclusions are consistent with the attitude we might expect of a disciple who had failed but had been restored and forgiven by his Lord.

There were probably other sources for Mark's account too. He and Barnabas were cousins (Col. 4:10) and fellow-workers (Acts 15:39), and some have thought the reference to Barnabas as an apostle (Acts 14:14) may suggest he was one of the larger group of missionaries Luke tells us Jesus sent out during his ministry (Luke 10:1ff). If so, he too would have known much about the life and teaching of Jesus and he would have been as eager to share this information as Mark to receive it.

When was the Gospel written? There has been some debate about this. If it was after the death of Peter, this most likely puts it after Nero's persecution, which took place in AD 64 and 65, but probably not long after. If it was written before it, it may have been penned as early as AD 45. Most scholars have been inclined to place its writing in the late sixties.





4. How to tell the story for Romans

The vigorous style and graphic telling of the story have made Mark's Gospel popular in today's church, the church of the television and tabloid culture. It is an excellent Bible book to put into the hands of somebody who is not yet committed to Christian discipleship, but who is interested in Jesus and wants to know more about him.

What did the Romans need and how did Mark present the good news of Jesus to them in a way that related to their concerns?

He gave them facts. They were practical people. There were philosophies current at Rome but they tended to be the more practical ones, not simply speculations about life, but prescriptions for actually living it. They had little interest in theories that could not be translated into practice. Dr Samuel Johnson was once told about a philosophy that denied the existence of matter. Immediately, he kicked a stone, and said, 'I refute it thus!' Whether that was an adequate rejoinder or not, he could easily have been a Roman!

They were also very interested in law, and so were concerned with evidence and how its truth could be established. To them, it would matter a good deal that Jesus was real, and that his cross and resurrection took place in such a way that their truth was accessible to and could be established by witnesses. All this they would get from the Gospel of Mark. The vividness of the account also contributes to our sense that the story had come from an eyewitness.

He gave them action. Typically, the Romans were people of action. They got plenty of it in Mark's book. A glance at the first chapter will indicate how much movement there is in it. 'Jesus came from Nazareth (v. 9) At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert (v. 12)... Jesus went into Galilee (v. 14) ... as Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee (v. 16) ...' and so on.

This constant activity is often underlined by the use of the





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word *euthus*, a great favourite of this Gospel writer, which the NIV sometimes translates in different ways, such as ‘at once’ (e.g. 1:12) or ‘without delay’ (e.g. 1:20). Sometimes unfortunately it does not translate it at all, as in 1:10. It is true that in Mark’s use it may not always suggest absolute immediacy, but what it always does is to give a sense of action, and so it is surely important for it to be translated! In this way, the reader is encouraged to visualize the swift activity that characterizes the whole account.

It has also been pointed out that another of Mark’s favourite words, the verb *archesthai* (‘to begin’), which occurs about twenty five times, also stresses action. So, for instance, in 1:45, the cleansed leper ‘went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news’. The impression gained is that he lost no time in making a start. This verb is particularly frequent in the two chapters which, despite recording the passion of Jesus (and in English the words ‘passion’ and ‘passive’ are connected), are actually full of activity (14:19, 33, 65, 69, 71; 15:8, 18). Once more we notice that the NIV does not always render the word.

The fact that this Gospel contains less of the teaching of Jesus than do the others also contributes to the sense of constant action, for teaching not only takes time to give but space to record, and it has the effect of slowing down the action.

He gave them order. This too was a Roman concern.

It is strange that Papias tells us that Mark does not record the life of Jesus ‘in order’. What did he mean by this? In the same context there is a reference to Matthew, and it may be that Papias noticed the absence of major blocks of teaching in the Gospel of Mark in contrast to that of Matthew. Perhaps he was referring to such features as the use of a ‘flashback’ when the story of John the Baptist’s death is told in 6:14-29. Another possibility is that he noted some differences in the sequence of events between Matthew and Mark and assumed that Matthew was the more chronologically ordered.

Yet order there certainly is, mostly of a thematic kind. For





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instance, 2:1-3:6 shows Jesus in debate, as also does 11:27-12:37, while 4:1-34 consists entirely of parables of the kingdom and 4:35-5:43 records a number of miracles in which Jesus rescued people from impossible situations.

He showed them a Man of Power. Like so many people with a strong military interest, the Romans had a great respect for the man who could command the allegiance of others and who demonstrated authority and power.

Jesus is presented in this way. His authority is shown as he commands the winds and the waves, as he calls men to follow him as his disciples, as he drives men and beasts out of the Jerusalem temple. He puts forth power as he heals diseases, casts out demons, raises the dead and then emerges from the tomb himself. Here is a great Leader, whose authority and power were shown in ways that went well beyond those of Julius Caesar or Augustus.

There are points of similarity between the military ideals of the Romans and the messianic ideals of the Jews, for to the Jews the Messiah would be a man of power. Certainly that power was differently expressed in our Lord's fulfilment of the messianic hope than it was in the form that hope took in the Judaism of his day, but the element of power was certainly an important common factor.

Yet it must be said that the Christian message not only relates positively to many of the concerns of its hearers, but it also challenges them deeply. In his Areopagus address, for instance, the apostle Paul is at one with the Epicureans in teaching divine creation of the universe, and with the Stoics in teaching the presence of God everywhere, but he cuts right across them both by proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 17:16-32). So, in his Gospel, *Mark showed his readers a Man of Suffering.* What Roman bridegroom would have allowed himself to be snatched away from his bride (2:20)? What great Roman leader would have warned his followers that he was going to the capital city voluntarily to face certain death (10:32-34)? It was not for





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this that Julius Caesar crossed the River Rubicon. What Roman leader would have allowed himself to be captured, tried and executed without putting up even a token resistance?

So, in its teaching about the sufferings and death of Jesus, Mark's Gospel counters both the triumphalist militarism of the Romans and the triumphalist messianism of the Jews. No wonder the kingdom of God as preached by Jesus and incarnated in him, its King, has been called 'the upside-down kingdom', except, of course, that God's way, so different from man's, is always the right way.

It was our Lord's concept of the style of messiahship that Peter found so difficult to accept (8:31-33). Because of this, it is remarkable that the Gospel of Mark, written under strong Petrine influence, should make the suffering messiahship of Jesus such a leading theme. In its first half the reader is led with the disciples to understand Jesus as the Christ, while in the second half he is confronted first by predictions of suffering and then by the fact of it.

This of course harmonizes with the teaching of Peter's first epistle, where the sufferings of Christ and his glory through resurrection so often occur together and always in that order (1 Peter 1:11; 3:17-21; 4:13; 5:1). Glory for Jesus there certainly was, but never instead of but always by means of his sufferings. This shows how thoroughly Peter's thinking had been transformed by God since the time when he rejected the very idea that Jesus would suffer.

Glory through suffering voluntarily borne! Here is God's own presentation of what it is to serve Him – both in the unique work of the Messiah and also as a pattern for the Christian disciple.

5. A Gospel for all Christians – and through them for the whole world

Was the Gospel of Mark intended only for Christian readers in Rome? By no means! The characteristics of it which would give it a special appeal to those who were Romans in the

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narrowest sense, that is, who were citizens of the city of Rome itself, would also give it a wide appeal wherever there were Romans and so throughout the whole empire. But we cannot limit it even to them. Bauckham and other contributors to his book have argued that each of the Gospels was intended from the first to be read widely throughout the churches, and that they were intended to be read first of all by Christians and then to be used by them for evangelistic purposes (see page 10).

Does this mean then that we should no longer look for particular themes or emphases relevant to Romans? Not necessarily, but it does mean that we should not interpret the book as if it was intended for them alone.

What would happen to the Gospel after it was written?

There can be little doubt that it would be eagerly sought after, not only in Rome itself, but also in other churches once its existence became more widely known. Because there is some truth in the saying that all roads led to Rome (and therefore also from it) a highly significant Christian document read and used in the church there was sure to become known more widely quite quickly, and copies would begin circulating extensively among the churches. It seems likely that such a wide dissemination was intended by the author himself.

What at first sight is rather surprising is the fact that it soon became quite neglected, being overshadowed especially by the Gospel of Matthew. In fact there were understandable reasons for this. After all, Matthew was an apostle whereas Mark was not. Matthew's Gospel contains virtually everything that is in Mark and it gives a lot of extra material. In addition to this, Matthew emphasises the gospel's link with the Old Testament, and, for a while, the church was very eager to win the Jews for Christ, so that his Gospel would constitute a powerful tool in Jewish evangelism. Eventually the idea began to circulate that Mark was simply an abridgement of Matthew. Rarely does it seem to have been noticed that although Mark is briefer than Matthew, he often gives more detail about the events he does record. For an example of this, compare the records of the



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feeding of the five thousand in Matthew 14:13-21 and in Mark 6:32-44.

This comparative neglect lasted for a long time, but in the nineteenth century there was a major renewal of interest in Mark, largely due to the fact that it was now thought to be the earliest of all the Gospels, and this century was a period when there was an intense interest in history and particularly in origins.

There is no doubt too that the Gospel has come into its own in a new way today because of changes in western culture and means of communication. Although there has never been a period in history when so much information has been available to readers, and although through the Internet this has become available on the grand scale to large numbers of people, there are many today who read very little, who never even open a newspaper and whose attention span becomes increasingly limited to the 'soundbite'. There can be little doubt that television is chiefly to blame for this. Many books for adults are now difficult to distinguish from those intended for children for both are increasingly characterised by simple language and the incorporation of many pictures. Here is a cultural situation tailor-made for such a book as the Gospel of Mark, in which there is constant action, in which there is swift transition from one event to another, and in which there is a great deal to appeal to the eye of the imagination.

6. Some literary features of the Gospel

It is always interesting to see how a writer develops his theme and how he gives added interest and significance by presenting features that recur from time to time, so that they may be picked up by the careful reader and so may highlight the unity of the whole work. Without doubt, Mark did this kind of thing.

He was very *selective*. At the conclusion of his Gospel, John observes that the whole world could not contain the books that might have been written about Jesus (John 21:25). Obviously Mark, like the other three evangelists, has his own particular points of emphasis, and these determine his selection. Yet it is

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amazing how little of the life or even of the ministry of Jesus is actually recorded by him. He gives us enough notes of time to enable us to see that when we add together 1:21-38; chapters 4 and 5, 6:30-56, 8:27-9:29 and chapters 11 to 16, these together cover less than twenty days, and yet they constitute well over half the Gospel. Twenty days out of a ministry of over three years and a life of over thirty! It is quite clear from this that his intention was not by any means to give a full record of the life or even of the ministry of Jesus, but simply to select events and sayings that reveal the Person, character, teaching and work of Jesus in a way that would evoke faith and obedience.

Even though his Gospel is the shortest of the four and so he had to be even more selective than the other writers were, it is surprising to find that he often gives *more detail about some particular events* than they do. Undoubtedly he wanted to stimulate the imaginations of his readers, and detail helps in this, for it aids our inner eyes. For instance, he gives the story of the encounter of Jesus with the Gadarene demoniac in twenty verses (5:1-20), whereas Luke takes only fourteen and Matthew as few as seven. This can also be seen if the parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke are consulted in relation to the story of a healing and a raising from the dead in 5:21-43, and that of the feeding of the five thousand in 6:33-44.

He gives us *summaries of the activity of Jesus* during certain parts of his ministry, for example in 1:15 and 39, 3:7-11 and in many later chapters. These are always brief, and are probably given both to balance the strong selectivity of other parts of Mark's book and to indicate how full the ministry of Jesus actually was.

A somewhat similar phenomenon relates to the teaching of Jesus recorded by Mark. It is true that he gives less space, even proportionately, to this teaching than the other three evangelists, but there are *a very large number of brief and memorable sayings*, sentences that stick in the mind and that are deeply thought-provoking, so that the reader of this Gospel may be almost as well placed to grasp the main features of our Lord's





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thought as those who have read one of the others.

To get you started on studying these, read 1:15 and 2:17. Paradoxically, detailed stories and brief sayings have a similar effect on the reader, fastening on to the memory.

A major feature is *the way he puts two events together to show either a comparison or a contrast between them*. He never spells this out explicitly as a principle he used in his arrangement of the material, but it occurs so frequently that it could hardly be unintentional. It is therefore worth looking at in some detail. In 3:20-30, for instance, there is a contrast between the concerned attitude of the family of our Lord, 'He is out of his mind' (v. 21), which presumably arose out of loving concern for him, and the blasphemous suggestion of the teachers of the law, 'He has an evil spirit', (v. 30), which undoubtedly revealed their antipathy to him.

In chapter 5, the stories of the woman with the constant bleeding and that of Jairus and his daughter are interwoven, and this makes the contrast particularly evident. In the woman's case, her approach to Jesus was a very secret one, whereas Jairus was quite public in his appeal to him. There is also a probable contrast between the social standing of the two persons, showing clearly that Jesus was prepared to interrupt a journey to a synagogue ruler's home in the interests of an unknown woman.

In chapter 7, there is a fairly lengthy account of the teaching Jesus gave the Pharisees, the crowd and his disciples on the subject of uncleanness. In this he showed his opposition to some features of Pharisaic casuistry, and he identified the inner cleanliness of the heart as far more important than externals. This is followed immediately by the story of the simple faith of the Syro-Phoenician woman, who was a Gentile as distinct from these Jewish separatists. Other examples of this feature of the Gospel will be pointed out in the relevant chapters of the commentary.

The reader may become aware of *certain themes which are gradually built up* as the Gospel progresses. The most striking is the motif of the death of Jesus. This is introduced first of all





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as a violent human act (2:19), and the reader becomes aware of a gradual build-up of opposition to him. In the centre of the Gospel Jesus begins to teach that although he would die as the result of human malignity, there was also a divine necessity in his death (8:31, etc). He then goes on to explain its inner meaning as ransom and covenant (10:45; 14:24), before the whole theme reaches its consummation in the event itself and especially in the awful cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (15:34)

The promise of Jesus in 10:29-31 that disciples losing families for his sake will gain families, appears to build on the concept of a spiritual family introduced in the teaching he gave as recorded in 3:31-35. The teaching about parables in chapter 4, which contains an interpretation of one of them, may be set there as a key for the understanding of later parables. This same passage reveals something of the spiritual dullness of the disciples, which often comes to the fore as the story proceeds further. Jesus gives teaching and rebukes the disciples' lack of understanding after the feeding of the four thousand, in which he makes reference to the earlier feeding of the five thousand.

7. Mark's Gospel and the rest of the Bible

People who begin to read the Bible seriously soon become aware of what is called 'inter-textuality'. This is the fact that there is a unity to the Bible, that its every book exists as part of an amazing corpus of inspired literature. This means that Biblical books need to be studied not only as separate entities, to discover their distinctiveness, but also together, for there is a sense in which these books inhabit each other, not in the way concentric circles do, but in the way different coloured strands may be woven together in a piece of cloth. This feature of the Bible has also been likened to a web in which no gossamer thread exists on its own but always in connection with other threads, or to a beautiful building in which every part is seen to have greater loveliness when viewed in the context of the whole edifice.

All this is profoundly true of the Gospel of Mark. On the





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face of it this is a simple piece of literature, the story of a great life, in fact of the Supreme Life, told with artless ingenuousness and without any attempt to theologise. So then it might be thought that nothing lies beneath the surface. To take a modern saying out of its usual advertising context, 'What you see is what you get.' There have in fact been some periods in the history of the Christian church when it has been somewhat neglected because of this.

Some years ago another man and I were talking together about art. I mentioned an artist whose pictures I happened to like and asked him what he thought of them. 'Not much,' he said. 'He only painted what he saw and he didn't see very much.' I am not at all sure that he was right. I have looked at the pictures of this artist a number of times since, and I see more and more in them. Perhaps then the one who did not see much was my friend rather than the artist himself.

For a long time, Biblical scholars viewed Mark's Gospel somewhat in this way, but today it is recognised that there is a depth to this book and that it cannot be lightly dismissed. We are used to thinking of Paul and John as theologians, but this is also true of Mark. This does not mean that he interpreted theological events and teaching that were essentially non-theological, thus introducing distortion. Nor does it mean that he intended his Gospel to be interpreted allegorically rather than literally, even though some scholars have thought, often quite gratuitously, that this was his chief literary motive. Rather we need to recognise that the amazing events themselves, events to be valued because of their historical nature, also cry out for theological interpretation and that the Gospel writer was well aware of this. The statements that Jesus, a Man, was the Son of God (1:1) and that his death was not just the result of human malice but that it was 'a ransom for many' (10:45) are about as theological as you can get.



*Mark and the Old Testament*

Somebody who reads the Gospel of Mark for the first time is immediately made aware of the fact that the story of Jesus has important links with the Old Testament. In Chapter 1, verses 2 and 3 consist of quotations from the Old Testament. John the Baptist and Jesus are both shown as preaching for repentance, and this is highly reminiscent of the type of ministry the Old Testament prophets had, while the garments of John described in verse 6 remind the reader who knows his or her Old Testament of the clothing of Elijah the prophet.

There are quotations from various parts of the Old Testament, but especially from Isaiah and the Book of Psalms. These are in fact the two books most quoted within the whole New Testament, so that it is evident the writers believed them to be particularly eloquent and extensive in their testimony to Christ. There are many other passages which require a knowledge of particular parts of the Old Testament for their understanding. Why, for instance, is Jesus said to cleanse a leper, when it is obvious that what happened was a healing (1:40-45)? Because of the way the Old Testament views leprosy. When Jesus says, 'Only in his home town, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour' (6:4), we need to read the Old Testament to find concrete examples of this.

A person's constant reading is bound to affect his or her writing style, through absorbing much from the literature read, largely in an unconscious fashion. Mark, like the rest of the New Testament writers, would have known the Old Testament quite deeply. Some of the narrative parts seem to have affected his own narrative style. This is particularly true of the events concerning Elisha which are recorded in Second Kings. Here we read that time and again God used Elisha to bring blessing to many different people facing a great variety of distressing circumstances. This reminds us of the miracle series in Mark 4:35-5:43 and the constant movement of the Elisha narrative from one story to another is so like Mark's Gospel.





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Mark and the other Gospels

Although there is a great deal of common ground between the four Gospels and especially between the three Synoptic ('seeing together') Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, there are significant differences also, for each writer had his own readership, his own emphasis, determining his own selection of material. This is one of the factors giving the Gospels their perennial interest. What is known as the 'Synoptic Problem', a consideration of similarities and differences and of attempts to explain them, has brought a vast literature into being. The discussion is often highly technical and it is outside the purpose of this commentary to deal with the issues in detail. Interested readers are recommended to consult articles on the Gospels in the *New Bible Dictionary*, the *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible* or in Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* or D.A. Carson, D.J. Moo and L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*.

Whatever the processes which led to the writing of the four Gospels as we have them, Christians believe they were produced under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit in accordance with the promise of Jesus to his disciples in John 14:26: 'The Holy Spirit ... will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.' Two of the traditional authors of the Gospels, Matthew and John, were present when that promise was given, Mark and Peter, as we have seen, were friends, and Luke, a companion of Paul, refers to what was 'handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word' (Luke 1:2).

Mark contains little that is not either in Matthew or in Luke. Can we then dispense with it altogether? By no means! The account of the life of Jesus given in this Gospel is characterised by great vigour of presentation, by vivid description, and by concentration on essential facts which are at the heart of the New Testament message, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Although formerly people interested in the Christian faith but as yet uncommitted to Christ were encouraged to start their New

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Testament reading with the Gospel of John, it is more common today to suggest Mark, and for understandable reasons. As we have suggested already, its vividness means that it is undoubtedly the Gospel for a television and tabloid age

If we compare Mark with Matthew, we find that the latter gives much more of the teaching of Jesus, including some fairly long discourses, notably the Sermon on the Mount. Also Matthew emphasises the Old Testament background to the good news of Jesus. Yet an examination of the teaching of Jesus in Mark's Gospel will show that his terse and memorable aphorisms contain virtually all the themes presented at greater length in Matthew. Also there are quite enough quotations from the Old Testament (beginning in the second verse of the Gospel) to show clearly that Jesus is its fulfilment.

Luke's Gospel is notable for the many parables it gives, some of them distinctive to this book and in many cases among the best-known and best-loved of those told by the Saviour. Yet Mark highlights the importance of concentrated listening and of the spiritual understanding of parables and provides, in his account of the Parable of the Sower, an example of parabolic interpretation from the lips of Jesus himself. Luke gives more information than the other Gospels about the final journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, and thus builds up the reader's awed anticipation of what is to happen there, but Mark's briefer approach means that the crucial events of Passion Week are especially emphasised because they occupy such a proportion of the whole book. Luke gives some fascinating pen-portraits of individuals who come into the story, but Mark can do this too. What a picture he paints of the poor demoniac Jesus met after crossing the lake! Just five verses (Mark 5:1-5) and yet the presentation is unforgettable.

What about the Gospel of John? This is undoubtedly, *par excellence*, the Gospel of the Son of God. In it Jesus gives great fulness of teaching about his divine sonship. Yet this great theme is by no means absent from Mark. In fact the divine sonship of Jesus is stated in the very first verse of that Gospel, and as early



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as verse 11 it is confirmed from the highest of all sources, by the voice of God himself. No doubt the reader is meant to keep these facts in mind as he proceeds further into the Gospel, and he will note the occurrence of the title in connection with some of the most important events in the life Mark presents. The significance of Jesus is the focus at the beginning of both Mark and John, Mark showing that he is the Son of God and what great power he has, John giving a great number of his names and titles. Both give many of the questions that people asked about him and in both the theme of conflict with the religious leaders is important.

No, we certainly cannot do without Mark.

Mark and the remainder of the New Testament

To explore adequately the thematic similarities between Mark's Gospel and the New Testament writings from Acts to Revelation would require a very large book, or even a series of volumes. I will however make a few suggestions and the interested reader can look out for others in his or her own reading.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us of the birth and growth of the Church of Christ, and in it we read brief accounts of five addresses by Peter. If Peter was for Mark the main source of information about Jesus, we would expect some points of contact between these sermons and this Gospel, and this is just what we find, for Peter's sermon in Acts 10:34-43, preached, let us note, to a Roman centurion and his friends, bears a striking resemblance, brief as the account of it is, to the general outline of the Gospel of Mark.

Mark shows how difficult it was for Peter to accept the fact that Jesus was going to die and subsequently to rise again. It is difficult to read Peter's first letter without noting what a great emphasis he places on the sufferings of Christ and the glory which followed. He had now come to see as central that which earlier he had not accepted at all.

Paul's interest in the cross and resurrection of Jesus and his commitment to these events as the centre of the good news,

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which comes out clearly and succinctly in a passage like 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, accords very well with the dominance this theme has in the Gospel of Mark from its centre-point in Chapter 8 onwards. Without doubt, Peter would have shared Paul's horror that the Galatian Christians were being encouraged to treat Christ's atoning work at the cross as needing to be supplemented by circumcision and to retreat into a kind of 'Christian' legalism. If Mark had read Paul's letter to the Philippians, with its unsurpassed statement of the humble condescension of Jesus and his ultimate exaltation in 2:5-11, he would undoubtedly have said, 'that is the Jesus I recognise and about whom I have written.'

Mark wrote for Romans and so did Paul. Mark's first verse establishes his purpose of setting forth the facts about Jesus as good news from God and immediately makes reference to Old Testament prophecy. Paul too opens his great epistle with a reference to the gospel of God, says that it concerns God's Son and that it was promised by God through his prophets. Mark presents the great facts about Jesus, focusing on his cross, and gives brief but clear teaching from the lips of Jesus as to the significance of that event. Paul's letter takes the facts about Jesus for granted and expounds their significance at greater length, again with special attention to the cross and the resurrection

The first readership of the Epistle to the Hebrews is uncertain, but it was almost certainly addressed to a group of Jewish Christians who had experienced some persecution. We might therefore expect it to have more in common with Matthew's Gospel than with any of the others. Yet it should be noted that many scholars consider this group to have been domiciled in Rome. It is not surprising therefore to find that the teaching of Psalm 110 is of great importance here, dominating what is said in chapter 7 and referred to in other places in the letter. We recall that Mark gives the comments of Jesus himself on this psalm at the virtual climax of his public ministry (Mark 12:35-37), only a few days before his death.





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Mark 13 records teaching given by Jesus to his disciples on the subject of the destruction of the temple, teaching which then moves on to embrace also his second advent. The Book of the Revelation brings the New Testament to a close and this too is concerned with what was yet to come. We would expect some links between the two, and we are not disappointed. Mark 13:14 refers to 'the abomination that causes desolation', along with an exhortation to the reader to understand. This is an allusion to Daniel 9:27; 11:31 and 12:11 and the Book of Daniel is an important part of the background to Revelation. In Mark 13:22, for instance, Jesus warns his disciples against false Christs and false prophets. The two sinister beasts which appear in Revelation 13 seem to be a false Christ and a false prophet, and this is confirmed at least for the prophet in Revelation 16:13,14. The warning of Jesus to be alert and to watch, because of the suddenness of his return (Mark 13:33-37), finds an echo in Revelation 16:15.

