

Themes in Mark

Vocabulary words

- **Jesus:** Greek translation of Hebrew Joshua
- **Christ:** Greek translation of Hebrew “messiah,” meaning anointed (a term for kings, especially the Davidic line).
- **Kerygma:** Oral teachings, thought to have dominated the early church
- **Parousia:** Second coming by Jesus, not present in John.
- **Eschaton.** End-time.
- **Paraclete:** John’s word for Holy Spirit. It means “Advocate” and is the opposite of Satan or “Adversary.”
- **Son of Man:** In Ezekiel, refers to the earthly Son of Man (“human being.”) In Daniel, refers to the “Eschatological Son of Man”—a celestial being associated with end-time. Mark also describes the “suffering” Son of Man whom he equates with Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, a sort of kinsman-redeemer and scapegoat (Mark 8:31, 9:12, 9:31, 10:33, 10:45, 14:41)
- **Son of God:** A typical designation for royalty, including Roman Emperors. In Mark, only demons and centurions seem to recognize Jesus’ divinity.
- **Gospel:** “Good news” –term evoked “good news of Caesar” who brought peace to the world.
- **Apocalypse:** a revelation of unseen realities and a disclosure of events designed to climax in God’s final intervention in human affairs.
- **Transfiguration:** As James, Peter, and John watch, Jesus is transformed into a being of light, accompanied by Elijah and Moses. (Mark 9:2-13); A heavenly voice identified Jesus as God’s son.
- **Passion:** Jesus’ suffering and death.
- **Essenes:** An ascetic, withdrawn community at Qumran which secreted away the Dead Sea Scrolls. Held several “proto-Gnostic” beliefs, very close to John’s theology. John the Baptist was probably an Essene; many think he was Jesus’ teacher (see description of John in [Mark 1:6](#))
- **Zealots:** linked to abominations and persecution of Christians; this party’s opposition to the Roman occupation led to rebellion and subsequent destruction of the temple in 70 CE. The thieves crucified next to Jesus are probably zealots.
- **Aramaic:** Jesus’s spoken language. Aramaic words used in gospels include Hosanna; Immanuel, "God with us"--the Hebrew title given to the child in the prophecy of Isaiah (7:14) and applied by Matthew (1:23) to Jesus; *Eloi*; and four titles for Jesus: Rabbi, or teacher; Amen, or prophet; *Messias*, or Christ; and *Mar*, or Lord.

Unique language in Mark

- The phrase "and immediately" occurs nearly forty times in Mark; while in Luke, which is much longer, it is used only seven times, and in John only four times. Mark frequently links sentences with Greek: *καί* (*and*); Matthew and Luke replace most of these with subordinate clauses.
- The word [Greek](#): *νομός* *law* ([\[8\]](#)) is never used, while it appears 8 times in Matthew, 9 times in Luke, 15 times in John, 19 times in Acts, many times in Romans.
- [Latin](#) loanwords are often used: [speculator](#), [sextarius](#), [centurion](#), [legion](#), [quadrans](#), [praetorium](#), [caesar](#), [census](#), [flagello](#), [modius](#), [denarius](#).^[96] Mark has only a few direct Old Testament quotations: [1:2-3](#), [4:12](#), [7:6-7](#), [11:9-10](#), [12:29-31](#), [13:24-26](#), [14:27](#). Mark makes frequent use of the [narrative present](#); Luke changes about 150 of these verbs to past tense.^[97]

Conflicts with various figures

- **Sadducees:** ultra-conservative Jewish sect composed of wealthy landowners. Recognized only the Torah, not the prophets and the writings, denied existence of both resurrection and afterlife. They cooperated with the Roman occupation, making them unpopular among the poor.
- **Sanhedrin:** Supreme Jewish high council, led by the High Priest. Condemned Jesus on charges of blasphemy.
- **Pharisees:** Rigorous observers of the Torah, or law, who tended to be separatists. They nevertheless accepted the ideas of resurrection and afterlife. Anticipated Jesus’ teachings. Paul was a Pharisee before his conversion. The Pharisees were instrumental in preserving Judaism after the destruction of the temple.
- **Apostles:** Mark repeatedly shows Jesus’ apostles as not comprehending him, missing the point of his parables, being skeptical of his miracles, and not understanding his divinity. They do not understand political scheming of Pharisees and Herodians, nor do they grasp the allegorical nature of parables and miracles, which all have a symbolic correspondence. Their argument about who gets to sit at Jesus’ right hand is highly ironic (Mark 10:38)
- **Family:** Npyj home community of Nazareth and family thinks he is crazy and tries to discourage him from prophesying.
- **Roman Empire:** story of “man of tombs” with Legion (enter into the pigs and drown): Mark 5:2-13

Authorship, Organization, and Context

- Acc to Papias, 130-140 CE, “Mark” did not know Jesus but based account on reminiscences by Peter. Attribution of gospel authorship to Apostles was 2nd century embellishment. Probably written 66-73, outside homeland, right after the First Jewish Revolt of 66: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/jews.html#first>.
- North/South polarity: first half recruiting peasants in Galilee, 2nd half confronting power structure in Jerusalem. Powerful “Son of God” in North; helpless and suffering “Son of God” in South.
 - **1:1-1:13** prelude to public ministry
 - **1:14-8:26** Galilean ministry
 - **8:27-10:52** Journey to Jerusalem
 - **11:1-15:47** Jerusalem Ministry
 - **16:1-8** Postlude: the empty tomb
- **Audience:** Greek-speaking audience does not seem to be familiar with Jewish customs or Aramaic language. Writer speaks of major Jewish figures but explains Jewish dietary laws from the point of view of an outsider: “For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands. . . and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles” (7:3-4)

Important Themes

- **Imminent apocalypse;** followers of Jesus should expect to suffer as he did. Signs Mark 13. Keep awake! Repetition of “Immediately” 39 times.
- **Reinterpretation of Torah:**
 - “The Sabbath was made for man.” Mark 2:28.
 - Conflict with Pharisees about hand-washing followed by Jesus’ joke about defilement: “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” Mark 7:15
 - New covenant “for many” replaces old; signified by Eucharist (communion), not circumcision. Sadducees accused Jesus of cannibalism; drinking of “blood” was blasphemous acc. to Torah. Other blasphemies including healing on Sabbath, forgiving sins (Mark 2:7) and claiming to be son of God.
 - Divorce as unlawful: Torah laws made because of Jews’ hardness of heart. (Mark 10:2-9) .
 - Multiple marriages Mark 12:13-27.
 - All commandments reduced to two Mark 12:29 (later one—John). Contrast to Matthew 5:18 to Jewish Christian audience: “Not one letter...will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”
- **Messianic Secret: recognized only by unclean,** demons, enemies, gentiles, Samaritans, outsiders, poor, and women (Mark 1:24), all of whom are warned to be silent. Some think this is added later to harmonize with John.
- **clueless / hostile "friends and family"**
- **elevation of the poor** and those who suffer: “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” Mark 2:17
- **critique of conservative,** literate establishment
- **imminent parousia** signaling new order
- **in medias res** beginning links John to Isaiah 40:3 and other conflated prophecies (misquoted)
- **Emphasis on suffering and imminent martyrdom.** Dark ending emphasizes empty tomb, Jesus’ continued absence. Open-ended.
- **Universality of church, sort of:** Gentile woman from Syro-phoenicia says the dogs can eat up after the children Mark 7:26-30). Precedes 2nd loaves fishes story, which illustrates feeding of Gentiles.
- **Renewal of Israel,** repetition of number 12, miracles with 12 in them (loaves and fishes 1)
- **Expansion of mission to Gentiles (dogs),** repetition of number 7 (nations) (loaves and fishes 2)
- **Parallels with Hebrew Bible;** repeated parallels to Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah
 - Apostles “hearts were hardened” 6:52 parallels Exodus 7:1-14
 - Apocalyptic predictions actually lifted from Daniel (13:14 compare with Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11)

John the Baptist

- Present in all 4 gospels, though John alone denies John’s “primacy,” insisting on the paradox that Jesus, though following after, existed before. John is an Essene. Ritual bathing in Jordan, not traditional Mikveh.
- John’s arrest foreshadows Jesus’: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.”
- Killed by Herod Antipas as a gift to daughter Herodias; clear links to story of Salome and Elijah.

Parables and Messianic Secret

- Parables were rabbinical techniques. Luke: end of prodigal son parable in which father is Yahweh, Elder son is Israel, and younger son is Gentiles)
- Purpose of parables is to disguise the truth Mark 4:12; purpose of secrets (lamp, bushel) 4:21
- Parable of the Sower Mark 4:3; explained 4:13
- Kingdom of God: mustard seed 4:26-34
- Vineyard 12:1-12—frightens “scribes” or Sadducees. Slaves are prophets; God is collecting rent.

Sandwiching of Symbolically related events:

- Blind man story frames blind apostles: 8:22 – 10:52.
- Fig tree: 11:12 – 11:25

Death scene: Chapter 15:16-end. Emphasis on pathos, not triumph.