

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session One

Before we begin to study Mark, we have to answer some questions:

1. Why were the Gospels written in the first place?
2. When were they written?
3. Who wrote them?
4. Why are there four Gospels, and not one, say, or seven?
5. How reliable are they?

1. Why were the Gospels written in the first place?

The question may seem obvious – we’ve always had the Gospels, and without them, we wouldn’t know much about Jesus. But written documents were not the first and most important way to hear about Jesus.

The first way you heard about Jesus was encountering Jesus himself – in Galilee, say, or Jericho, or Jerusalem. We know he spoke to crowds of thousands. Even so, you would get only a glimpse of Jesus, or a small portion of his whole story.

The second way was to hear about Jesus through someone else who had encountered him, or had followed him, or had been taught by him. Even during Jesus’ lifetime, he commissioned groups of people to spread the Good News – first the Twelve Apostles, then a larger group:

Luke 9:1-6 (also Matthew 10; Mark 3:16-19) When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: “Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” So they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.

The Twelve “insider” disciples, whom we call the Apostles (“The Sent Ones”), remain with Jesus throughout his ministry, and are therefore the most important

eyewitnesses, with the most complete story. Upon the death of Judas, the Apostles choose another to replace him; Peter outlines the qualifications (Acts 1:21-26):

*...it is necessary to choose one of the men **who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us**, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must **become a witness with us** of his resurrection."*

So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

The role of the Apostles was clear – **to spread the word about Jesus**. Teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah was the Apostles' task. In Acts, they are the source of Christian teaching (*Acts 2:42 - They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Acts 4:33 - With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all*). The apostles taught with **authority**, as those who were with Jesus from the beginning, and commissioned by him.

Paul, Peter, Jude and John – among other New Testament writers – recognised the importance of the eyewitness, Apostolic testimony:

Ephesians 2:19-21 - So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

2 Peter 3:2 - you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles.

Jude 17 - But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ

1 John 1:1-3 - We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it

and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

So the Apostles were the primary source of authoritative teaching regarding the words, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But there were two problems: the church was growing, and the Apostles were dying.

Christianity was spreading rapidly, numerically and geographically, and was becoming too large for the Apostles, the authoritative eye-witnesses of Jesus, to be able to share their testimony about Jesus first-hand to everyone who would hear. On top of that, the Apostles were dying, most often victims of violent persecution – James was beheaded, Peter crucified, Matthew run through with a spear. The voices of the Apostles, the testimony of the eyewitnesses, was being silenced.

This was a crisis, for in the ancient world, first-hand verbal testimony was considered far more valuable than written testimony. If you wanted the truth, you had to go to the source, or to a reliable second-hand verbal account of the source. In terms of the Christian faith, that was the job of the Apostles. Their job was to tell people what Jesus said and did. Nobody thought to write the sayings and teachings of Jesus down as he said them; that's not the way the ancient world worked or thought. You listened carefully to what your teacher or leader said, and then, having accurately committed it to memory, you repeated it to others.

So the Apostles travelled from town to town, city to city, country to country, and they shared the words and story of Jesus with all who would hear. The Apostles too had followers, and they too spread the story, although not with the same first-hand authority. But people could check up on these second-hand accounts by running them by the Apostles themselves.

Imagine this scenario: “Here’s what Apollos told us about Jesus. And if you don’t believe me, you can check it out with any of the Apostles you can find. I think Thomas is coming through next month.” **Eyewitness testimony of the life and words of Jesus was the foundation upon which the church was built. The church wasn’t built upon the Gospels; it was built upon the living, face-to-face verifiable testimony of the followers of Jesus.**

But then the Apostles started to die. People – in fact, the Apostles themselves – thought the return of Jesus would happen in their lifetime. They had no concept of the much longer timeline which God had in mind. They assumed that they would spread the message of Jesus personally, until – this year, next year – Jesus would return and bring the story to a close. But as the years passed, people realised that God might have a different time-frame in mind.

More disconcertingly, by the hand of antagonistic political or religious rulers the Apostles themselves began to be killed off. What if all the Apostles were to die before Jesus returned? How could the integrity of the Christian message be preserved? If I can't check with an Apostle to make sure what I've heard in a sermon is a true reflection of what Jesus said and did, how do I know someone isn't just making stuff up?

2. When were they written? And,

3. Who wrote them?

Reluctantly, and as much as 25 years and more after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Apostles and their followers finally started writing stuff down. Each emphasizes different aspects of Jesus' teaching, and are written with their own particular faith communities and issues in mind. Nevertheless, they transcended regional concerns, to ultimately be embraced by the wider church.

The Gospels, then, are eyewitness, authoritative accounts of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, written to preserve the teaching of the Apostles and their direct experience of him. That there are four and not just one Gospel enriches and broadens our understanding of the recorded events, as each reveals the characteristics of both audience and author. **There were numerous other Gospels in circulation, but only in much later years; these four were the only ones deemed accurate and authoritative by the eyewitnesses and their direct descendants.** Their very reliability is why the church preserved, copied, distributed, and based their understanding upon them.

In effect, in the absence of the Apostles themselves, the Gospels have Apostolic authority, and fulfill the role of the Apostles in the post-Apostolic age.