

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Three – Mark 1:1~13

Mark 1:1

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God

This opening line is a dangerous, revolutionary claim.

Dangerous to the established political order

Dangerous to the established religious order

That's why Jesus was killed, and that's why the Christians were persecuted.

The Priene Calendar Inscription Marking Augustus' 54th Birthday (9 BC)

“Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she **filled with virtue** that he might **benefit humankind**, sending him as **a saviour**, both for us and for our descendants, that he might **end war** and arrange all things... and since the birthday of **the god Augustus** was the **beginning of the good news** [εὐαγγέλιον] for the world that came by reason of him.”

Mark's opening line is a challenge to the entire world order. The Good News is not about a Roman triumph; it is about the establishment of a new Kingdom. It isn't about the birth of the Emperor, but about the coming of the Messiah. The Emperor is not the Son of God; there is a rival claim to divine favour and status. And that rival is Jesus. Augustus is not the beginning of the Good News – Jesus is!

Jesus was also a challenge to the existing religious order. 1st Century Judaism had been built on the expectation (not the arrival!) of a Messiah, a Messiah who would supernaturally restore Israel to prominence, politically and militarily. And Jews were committed monotheists: a claim of Sonship or equality with God was inconceivable.

An Outline of the Gospel

The entire Gospel of Mark is summed up in the sermon given by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, retold by Luke in *Acts 2:22-24*:

“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him

to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”

Mark 1:2-3

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”—
“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”*

The story begins with a voice offstage, reading from Scripture. This passage is the only place in Mark where the narrator tells us that Scripture is being fulfilled (the others are spoken only by Jesus). Mark is telling us that Jesus is not an “out of the blue” event, but is tied into the history and expectation of the Jewish people. He is the fulfillment of the long promise of God – that the Lord will come.

All the Gospels tie Jesus into the Old Testament. Without the history of God’s interactions with the Jewish people, Jesus is out of context. Attempts to divide him from Jewish history result in the Gnostic Jesus, an ethereal presence uttering secret teachings (as in the gnostic Gospel of Thomas).

Mark 1:4-8

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Unlike the other Gospels, Mark minimises the importance of John the Baptist. Luke even gives extensive details regarding his parentage and birth, but for Mark, John serves little function other than to set the stage for Jesus. John also serves as the link between the Old Testament era and the new; in this quick detail about his clothing, he resembles the Old Testament prophet Elijah:

2 Kings 1:8

“He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist.” The king said, “That was Elijah the Tishbite.”

Mark 1:6

John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

1 Kings 17:6

The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

John's main role is to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus; in fact, several of his disciples (not all) will become disciples of Jesus. He also makes it clear that Jesus is ushering in a new age: that of the Holy Spirit.

Followers of John persisted into the age of the early church.

Acts 19:1-5 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?"

"John's baptism," they replied.

Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Recent archaeological discoveries reveal that followers of John the Baptist continued his practice:

Tradition says John was born in the village of Ein Kerem, which today is part of modern Jerusalem. Just 2.5 miles (4 kilometers) away, on the land of Kibbutz Tzuba, a communal farm, the cave lies hidden in a limestone hill — 24 yards (meters) long, 4 yards deep and 4 yards wide. Unquestionably used as a Baptism site, it seems to have persisted in use to well after New Testament times.

But Mark quickly moves away from John the Baptist: he wants to focus firmly on Jesus and his words, and especially his deeds; also, Peter wasn't part of the Baptist movement. His brother Andrew was, according to the Gospel of John:

John 1:35-42 The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?” “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon. Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter).

What happens at the Baptism of Jesus?

Mark 1:9-11

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Jesus is introduced as coming from Nazareth in Galilee – in the north of Israel, quite a distance from the Baptism area, which is in the south, close to Jericho and the Dead Sea, in a place today called Qasr al Yahud.

The ripping of the heavens. The opening of the heavens first occurs in the calling of Ezekiel in exile: *“The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God” (Ezek. 1:1)*. It is usually a sign that God is about to speak or act and that one will get a quick peek at God’s plan.

But Mark does not use the word “open” as some translations have it. Instead, he describes that the heavens are **torn (schizo)**, as one might imagine a bolt of lightning tearing its fabric. It is a significant difference. What is opened may be closed; what is ripped cannot easily return to its former state. When Jesus comes out of the water, Mark tells us, all heaven breaks loose.

What else is torn in the New Testament? Mark *15:38 - The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom*. With the arrival of Jesus, the heavens are ripped open, and with his death, the division between God and humanity is torn open.

It is also significant that Joshua (Josh. 3:7- 17; 4:14-17), Elijah (2 Kings 2:8), and Elisha (2:14) each parted the Jordan river as symbol of their power. Jesus, however, does not stand by the Jordan and part it; instead, something far greater is parted – heaven itself. The barriers are torn down and torn open, and God is now in our midst and on the loose. The hope of Isaiah, ***“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!” (Isaiah 64:1)*** has come to pass.

The Spirit “descending like a dove”

Genesis 1:2-3 - Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light!”

The same Spirit that once hovered over the primeval waters in the beginning of time (Gen. 1:2) now descends on Jesus. The hovering of God’s Spirit on Jesus like a dove was a sign that this new creation had begun. This time, however, the Spirit hovers over a human being, not over a formless void, which suggests that God intends to transform humanity.

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Mark’s language recalls Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. Psalm 2 is an enthronement psalm, which celebrates the enthronement of the king to rule over God’s people. “My son” is a title for the Davidic kings of Israel. It is not only a declaration of the relationship between Jesus and God (as Father and Son) but a declaration of Kingship and Messiah.

Psalm 2:6-7 - “I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.” I will proclaim the Lord’s decree: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have become your father.”

Isaiah 42:1 - “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.

2 Samuel 7:12-16 – “I will be his father, he shall be my son”

Mark 1:12-14

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

The “wilderness” is a desert wilderness of mountains, crags and rocks, traditionally in the Judean hills.

Forty days recalls not only the Noah and the Ark story, but also (and more importantly) the forty days Moses spent on Mt. Sinai with God (also referred to as wilderness) when Moses received the Ten Commandments.

Mark does not detail the temptations, as the other Gospels do; surprisingly, not even the fact that Jesus was proven victorious – we will have to wait and see how that works out in Jesus’ interactions with satanic forces.

“He was with the wild animals” may not only be a reference to the remote and dangerous conditions to which Jesus was subject, but may well be a point of identification with the early Christians, particularly during the brutal Nero persecutions, particularly after the fire of Rome, where Christians had been subject to attack by wild dogs, lions, and other beasts in the arena. Jesus was subject to such attack – we should be prepared to suffer the same.

Roman historian Tacitus (circa 100 AD) reports:

Nero... substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost exquisite cruelty, a class loathed for their abominations, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, from whom the name is derived, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate.

Every sort of derision was added to their deaths: they were wrapped in the skins of wild beasts and dismembered by dogs, others were nailed to crosses; others when daylight failed, were set afire to serve as lamps by night.

To strengthen Christians in their faith, Mark showed the similarity between what Jesus faced and what they were facing. They could hear of how their Lord had been driven into the desert to do battle with Satan (1:12). Mark is the only Gospel to record that Jesus was with the wild beasts in the desert (1:13). As Christians were misrepresented as atheists and haters of humankind, so Jesus was falsely accused of being in league with the devil (3:21, 30). As they were framed by trumped-up charges, so Jesus was framed by false witnesses (14:56- 59). As they were betrayed by intimates, so Jesus was betrayed by an intimate friend, one of the Twelve (14:43 – 46).

Everything to which the early Christians were subject, Jesus himself also suffered, and yet proved victorious. In experiencing the same difficulties as Jesus, early Christians could feel as though they were honourably walking in his footsteps, and would also receive the “crown of victory.”

Next Week – Mark Chapter 1:14-45