

## INTRODUCTION

### *It's a Story*

**T**hrough the centuries the Church, its ministers and scholars, have put Mark in fourth place among the four gospels—the least significant, the white ribbon. Mark gets credit for collecting and writing down the gospel narrative for the first time but little praise for artistry. Both Matthew and Luke use the narrative Mark constructs but edit, rearrange, and draw in additional traditions to convey their own insights into Jesus' identity, ministry, and message.

Matthew gets the blue ribbon for most attention to Church interests and longest sermon (the sayings that comprise the Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5-7). Luke gets a grand champion purple for literary elegance and theological insight, hanging Jesus' identity on Isaiah's promises of a Spirit-filled prophet who brings good news to the poor and like Israel in exile has to suffer. John's gospel takes the prize in a whole different category with its theology of Jesus as the preexistent Word and its own distinct composition around seven revealing signs.

Uniquely Mark's gospel preserves the way early communities told and shaped Jesus' story in their oral traditions. These early communities gathered around the eyewitness disciples to remember Jesus' teachings and actions and break bread as he asked. Jesus himself never wrote a word. He taught and preached orally. No one captured on their smart phone a video of Jesus teaching or healing. No hidden security camera preserved his activities. It is the men and women disciples who accompany Jesus in his ministry that remember and hand on his teachings and actions and proclaim them in the light of his resurrection.

The Acts of the Apostles, the sequel to Luke's gospel, tells us the tongues of Jesus' disciples caught fire on Pentecost, and they began proclaiming their Easter experience that God raised up Jesus, who was crucified. Early believers formed communities and house churches in which they broke bread as Jesus asked and became workshops of the word, gathering to hear about Jesus' words and deeds from those who accompanied him. Story hearers became storytellers.

## WHAT ABOUT ORAL TRADITION?

Oral storytelling gives events plot, character, and form just as written stories do. Mark's gospel richly exhibits oral artistry and theological insights. Oral traditions differ from the game of telephone, which results often in silly, indecipherable messages. Oral sayings and stories have bones, basic structures that aid memory and fix essential messages. For example, its inverse form makes the saying, "The Sabbath is made for humankind, not humankind for the

Sabbath,” easy to remember. The passion narrative fixes places and scenes indelibly in Christian memory—supper in the upper room, prayer in the garden, trial at the high priest’s house, mocking and scourging at the soldiers’ fortress, condemnation at Pilate’s quarters, crucifixion at Golgotha.

The gospel we receive not only conveys Jesus’ message but proclaims the first Christians’ faith that his resurrection affirms Jesus is the messiah and God’s Son. Their faith colors the whole story. The gospel contains three layers of history and insight. It narrates events and teachings from Jesus’ public ministry (A.D. 30). It hands on stories and sayings early Christian communities told and shaped orally during the four decades between Jesus’ death and resurrection and Mark writing the first gospel (A.D. 30-70). The evangelist Mark preserves the traditions by writing them down at a time when the eyewitnesses are dying out and the siege of Jerusalem has scattered the original community (A.D. 70).

In the written gospel an all-knowing or omniscient narrator takes the place of the oral preacher or storyteller. As the narrative engages us, we forget that anyone is telling the story; its plot and scenes unfold as if they were happening. But many eyewitnesses and early Christians have told and shaped the traditions we receive, and the gospel writer has arranged them purposely to reflect theologically on who Jesus is. Like the early believers we have well-developed storytelling and story-interpreting skills ourselves from hearing jokes, watching soap operas, or preferring the pattern of one murder series or comedy series over another. Once we realize that the early Christian witnesses give stories forms that stick in the memory and arrange

stories deliberately, we can use our skills to interpret their claims and insights.

The gospel refers back in history to events in Jesus' life, the world behind the text. In the gospel Jesus' teachings and actions take literary form and become story—the world of the text. The gospel also refers forward to its audiences—the world ahead of the text. Mark writes this gospel for us—for future hearers and readers. We are the ones meant to catch on to the whole story that Jesus' disciples in their pre-Easter character don't get. In written form the gospel travels through time and space, calling new generations to faith in “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1.1).

#### WHEN WAS THE FIRST GOSPEL WRITTEN?

Scholars date the writing of Mark's gospel about A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and ended temple-centered religious practice. In the decade before the destruction of the temple, officials martyred in Rome two of the early Christians' strongest preachers and leaders—Peter and Paul, silencing their voices. In the same years the disciples who knew Jesus firsthand were growing old. Anyone who was 30 in A.D. 30 during Jesus' ministry is 70 at the time of the writing of the first gospel. If Jairus's daughter, who was 12 when Jesus raised her from death, remains alive in A.D. 70, she is 52, and can tell the story of what happened to her. In A.D. 70 the era of eyewitnesses handing on their stories is ending. For the gospel to continue to call new generations to faith, it must be written down so the message can travel through time.

Mark's gospel is the product of crisis. The other three gospel writers may convey fuller accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, but Mark's gospel brings us closest to the generation that faced the end of the eyewitness era and temple-centered Judaism and lived faithfully into the future without knowing Jesus' message would last and transform the world. Some scholars connect the gospel writer Mark with John Mark, who accompanied Paul (Acts 12.12,25; 13.5,13). Tradition identifies Peter as his source and Christians in Rome as the community for whom he writes after the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul in the A.D. 60s. Other scholars place Mark and his audience in Israel in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. In either case the gospel responds to a crisis; its audience fears the future. The gospel calls this audience and us beyond fear for their lives to faith in Jesus.

#### BECOMING ACTIVE READERS

As a whole literary work, the gospel requires active readers to find the insights early Christians oral traditions stash in the narrative for us readers of the future. As the first written gospel, Mark preserves not just individual stories but whole sequences of oral storytelling. These sequences are not just bites of tradition but sandwiches and whole meals on a skewer; they are story strands already arranged into patterns that proclaim Jesus' message and believers' insights. Repeatedly Mark creates literary sandwiches by placing one story within another. For example, Jesus sends his disciples out to preach and heal; later they return. In

between, while the disciples are out on their first mission, Mark's gospel tells the story of the beheading of John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner. John's martyrdom foreshadows the ultimate cost of Jesus' mission for him and his disciples. Like meat in a sandwich the middle story gives the surrounding story deeper meaning.

Similarly, shortly before the last supper and passion, a woman anoints Jesus on the head with costly oil the way Israel anointed its kings. Her story must be told whenever Jesus' story is told, the narrative insists. Her action is the meat of another sandwich. Immediately before the anointing is a scene in which officials decide to stop Jesus; immediately after the anointing is the scene in which Judas goes to betray Jesus. In the middle the anointing prophetically affirms Jesus' messianic identity as his passion is about to begin.

Mark's gospel not only uses literary sandwiches, its plot in chapters four to eleven includes three story cycles from oral tradition. Double stories alert us to these cycles—two sea crossings, two feeding miracles, and two healings of blind men. These twice-told stories indicate oral parentheses, one story marking the beginning of a sequence and the repetition marking its end. Oral tradition has arranged these cycles deliberately for effect just as a chef might arrange food chunks on a skewer in a pattern; for example, two pineapple chunks, then two watermelon chunks to create contrast; or, pineapple, onion, zucchini, lamb, zucchini, onion, pineapple to create symmetry.

Distinctively Mark's gospel is famous for one special motif: the messianic secret. Hearers and readers tap into this major theological motif when they wonder why Jesus cautions the leper he heals in chapter one not to tell anyone

what happened. Is Jesus using reverse psychology? Does he fear sudden fame? Why keep Jesus' messianic identity secret when verse one lets the cat out of the bag right off with its proclamation, "Here begins the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God?" Like every narrative worth the telling, Mark's gospel pulls us to read on and find out what happens next and in the end. Many notice that Jesus gives the same warning to keep what he does secret to others he heals. A theme recurs for a reason. If we explore all the places this theme occurs, what will we find? What is the secret? Who keeps it? Who tells? How does the secret function as part of the whole? These questions stretch across the gospel narrative. In this distinguishing characteristic, scholars questing to recover the historical Jesus first recognized Mark's gospel is not a history but a literary composition deliberately and artfully constructed to engage its readers and invite us to faith in Jesus. Taking a look at the whole story will enrich and deepen readers' insights into its parts.

## TOOLS FOR STUDYING THE WHOLE STORY

The way oral tradition and the gospel writer have constructed the gospel narrative expresses the theology and insights of the earliest Christians. These witnesses have sent their claims about who Jesus is to us in narrative form. To discover that the gospel is more than a story telling how things happened, readers must notice the way scenes fit together for deliberate theological effect. Here are the literary tools the approach in this book uses. Readers can use these tools or simply appreciate the approach at work in the chapters.

**1 Read the section of the gospel each chapter addresses. Divide it into scenes; even give them titles.**

Record the number of verses in the scenes. A new scene begins with a change of location, topic, character, time, action. For example, in Mark 1.9-11, John the Baptist baptizes Jesus in the Jordan. In Mark 1.12-13, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness—a change of character, the Holy Spirit; a change of location, the wilderness.

Analyze what you observe. Are scenes short, long, uniform in size? What does size point to as important? For example, what is the effect of many short scenes or a long scene?

**2 What does the beginning and end of the whole gospel or the beginning and end of story strands emphasize?** These are the two best places in a narrative to make the main point.

**3 Look for how the oral storytellers and gospel writer arrange the story scenes.** Look for contrast, symmetry, parallels, juxtaposition (back to back), repetitions, steps.

**4 Notice repeated imagery** (motifs), such as the messianic secret or references to the Son of Man imagery from Daniel 7.14.

This book will aid individuals or groups who want to study Mark's gospel as a whole and explore how the narrative expresses theology. For small Christian communities and RCIA groups that use the Sunday gospels for reflection, this book will put Sunday gospel passages in

their full context and take readers beyond the story into its theology.

An easy way to use the book is:

- Read and reflect on the section of the gospel cited at the beginning of each chapter.
- Read the chapter in *Mark's Gospel, the Whole Story*.
- Reflect on and discuss the questions at the end of the chapter, which aim to prompt insights and/or help you to articulate your own insights and share them.