

CENTRAL THEMES OF MARK'S GOSPEL

I. Introduction

A. Significance of Mark

B. Authorship

C. Date

D. Place

Clement of Alexandria locates it in Rome during Peter's ministry (Eusebius His Eccl. 2.15; 6.14.6). One of the strongest arguments for Rome or Italy lies with numerous Latinisms. That is, Mark transliterates several Latin terms directly into Greek. For example, in Mark 12:42, the "widow's mite" (Greek coin) is a *quadrans* (Latin coin). That clarification would only make sense in a Latin speaking world and the East was Greek speaking.

Regarding the audience, Mark explains Aramaic expression and Jewish laws and customs. This suggests an audience that is unfamiliar with certain forms of Judaism.

E. Mark as Story

II. Mark's Narrative

A. Prologue (1:1-15)

B. Part One (1:16-8:26)

C. Part Two (8:27-16:8)

III. Mark's Theology

Mark wrote a story, not theology. In describing Mark's theology we must identify and then describe Mark's key themes and motifs regarding God, Jesus, and discipleship, and their opposition.

A. Kingdom of God

Mark summarizes Jesus' message at the outset of the Gospel in terms of the Kingdom of God (KG).

Mark 1:14-15. ¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (NRSV)

We would expect the "kingdom of God" (KG) to be prominent throughout Mark, but that phrase hardly stands out. Mark uses that phrase 15 times, whereas Matthew uses it about 50 times and Luke uses it 40 times.

Of Mark's usage of KG, three occur in parables (4:1-34), three in the sayings about children (10:14-15), and three in discussion about the rich (10:23-25). The phrase "KG" is not defined

1. Kingdom as Future

The KG is something that people will enter:

Mark 10:23. ²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (NRSV)

The KG refers to a future day:

Mark 14:25. ²⁵ Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." (NRSV)

The KG is something to wait for:

Parable of the Sower. **Mark 4:3-20.**

Parable of the Seed Growing Quietly. **Mark 4:26-29.** ²⁶ He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." (NRSV)

Parable of the Mustard Seed. Mark 4:30-32.³⁰ He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?"³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." (NRSV)

Mark 9:1.¹ And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." (NRSV)

Mark 15:43.⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. (NRSV)

The KG correlates with the coming Son of Man in judgment and the summons for the disciples to watch and wait.

Mark 8:38.³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. (NRSV)

Mark 13:24-27.²⁴ "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.²⁶ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. (NRSV)

Mark 13:33-37.³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.³⁵ Therefore, keep awake-- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." (NRSV)

2. Kingdom as Present

The KG must be received now. It is a personal experience of God's rule that qualifies one to enter in the future.

Receive the KG as a Child. Mark 10:14-15 ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." (NRSV)

People enter now. Mark 10:24-25. ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter [present tense] the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (NRSV)

To receive the KG now doesn't exhaust the meaning of the KG in the future, nor does anticipating the KG in the future preclude experiencing it now.

3. The Inauguration of God's Reign

Jesus' summary of the Gospel in 1:14-15 express both a present and future aspect of the KG. It has been inaugurated, but awaits consummation.

Mark 1:15. "The time is fulfilled [present], and the kingdom of God has come near [future]; repent, and believe in the good news." (NRSV)

The KG has come to pass; the "time is fulfilled" (*peplērōtai*; πεπλήρωται). Yet the verb "has come near" (*ēngiken*; ἤγγικεν) denotes nearness rather than actual presence.

So the KG is present and future. Each of the three seed parables (4:3-20, 26-29, 30-32) refers to both the present and future dimension of the KG.

This is the "mystery of the Kingdom" (Mk. 4:11). The redemptive rule of God has coming into human history like a vulnerable seed (4:3-9, 13-20) that grows without notice until harvest (4:26-29) whose beginning is small and whose end is grand (4:30-32).

Clearly, Jesus' ministry has to do with the inauguration of God's reign or redemptive rule. Thus the inauguration of the God's reign is manifest in the exorcisms (e.g., 1:21-27), the healings of the sick (e.g., 1:32-34), announcing the forgiveness of sins (2:1-12), fellowship with sinners (2:13-17), the calling of the Twelve (3:13-19), and his conflict with religious and political authorities (e.g., 3:6).

But Jesus' earthly ministry does not exhaust the meaning of the KG. The KG will come in the future accompanied with:

- power (9:1)
- the inevitability of a seed growing quietly (4:26-29)
- the stunning grandness of a mustard tree (4:30-32)
- judgment on evil (13:24-27)

B. Christology ¹

1. Messiah

The titles Messiah (1:1), Son of David (10:47-48; 12:35), and King of the Jews (15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32) may not be exactly synonymous, but they significantly overlap in meaning in Mark's Gospel.

a. Affirmed as Messiah

Mark presents Jesus as the Messiah. He is God's Anointed One. This is affirmed at several key points in the Gospel:

- The opening statement: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1).
- The voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (1:11; cf. 9:7). This announcement alluded to:
 - **Psa. 2:7.** The King of Israel is coronated with: "You are my son, this day have I begotten you" (Psa. 2:7).
 - **Isa. 42:1.** The Servant of Yahweh is identified: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isa. 42:1).

¹ Some of the following is from Frank J. Matera, *What are they saying about Mark?* Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1987) 18-37 .

- The Spirit coming on Jesus at his baptism: “the Spirit descending like a dove on him” (1:10) alludes to Isa. 61:1, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim the good news.”

Furthermore, Jesus demonstrates he is the Messiah by announcing the inauguration of the KG and then offers proof by showing the Reign of God by healing people and announcing forgiveness.

However, the clearest indication that Mark wants his readers to regard Jesus as the Messiah is when Jesus asks his disciples who they say he is. Peter responds, “You are the Messiah” (8:29).

b. Executed as Messiah (King of the Jews)

The royal imagery of Jesus is emphasized in Mark 15, where he is identified six times as King of the Jews (15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32).

During the trial by the Sanhedrin, the High Priest asks Jesus if he is the messiah (14:61) and Jesus answers affirmatively: “I am” (14:62). The same question is asked by Pilate, but in political terms: “Are you the king of the Jews?” (15:2). Jesus answers more cryptically: “You say so.” This leads to Jesus’ execution for the charge of claiming to be “King of the Jews” (15:16-20, 26). The chief priests and scribes taunted Jesus as “the Messiah, king of Israel (15:32).

Mark intends the reader to see the irony. The chief priests and Pilate think that Jesus is not the Messiah, King of Israel. However, the implied reader knows he is Messiah from the first statement of the Gospel. Put succinctly, the Jewish leaders mockery, “Messiah, king of Israel,” declares who Jesus is.

c. Suffering Messiah

For Mark, Jesus’ identity as the Messiah is only understood in light of Jesus’ suffering and eventual crucifixion.

1. Jesus as the Suffering Messiah is confirmed by Jesus’ three passion predictions (8:31; 9:30; 10:33-34). For example, when Peter identified Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus immediately qualified what that means by predicting his suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection (8:31). Peter’ negative reaction indicates that Jesus’ understanding is contrary to the expectation of what the Messiah will do. Moreover, after

2. Jesus as the Suffering Messiah is confirmed by the statement at the very end of the travel narrative that the Son of Man must give his life (10:45). This functions as a summary statement for Jesus' ministry.

3. Jesus as the suffering Messiah is confirmed by the trial, torture, and crucifixion narratives. It is telling that Jesus only explicit affirmation of his identity as Messiah comes at the trial scene before the Sanhedrin (14:61-62), which leads to his death his torture and crucifixion (15:16-39). Jesus is the Suffering Messiah.

Mark's view of Jesus as the Suffering Messiah is affirmed in the earliest confessional statement about Jesus: "Christ [the Messiah] died for our sins according to the scriptures." (1 Cor. 15:3)

2. Son of God

Jesus is also identified as the Son of God. Some say that "Son of God" is Mark's particular designation for Jesus, because it stands in the opening line, and it is heard at his baptism (1:11), transfiguration, and the centurion acclamation at the foot of the cross (15:39).

a. Baptism & Transfiguration

The voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism announces to Jesus, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (1:11) and at the transfiguration, the voice from heaven declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (9:7). Most scholars agree that Mark is alluding to one or more of the following Jewish texts:

When God addresses Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac:

Gen. 22:2. He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." (NRSV)

When God addresses his anointed, the King of Israel on the day the king is coronated:

Psalm 2:7. I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you. (NRSV)

When God addresses his chosen Servant (individual or nation):

Isa. 42:1. Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. (NRSV)

Through these intertextual echoes, Mark identifies Jesus having (i) a *special role* as the anointed king (Messiah) and (ii) a *special relationship* as God's only or unique son.

b. Parable of Wicked Tenants

Jesus sonship is implicit in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mk 12:1-12) and is a commentary foreshadowing the rejection of Jesus by the chief priests in Mark 14.

c. Demons

Jesus' role as the Son explains why the demons address him as "the Holy One of God" (1:23-27) and "Son of God" (3:11) and by the Gerasene demoniac as "Jesus, Son of the Most High God" (5:7). The demons knew who Jesus was and that is why Jesus forbade them to disclose it (1:34; 3:12).

d. Trial

When Jesus is before the Sanhedrin, the High Priest asks him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?" (14:61)—the two designations, Messiah and Son, explicitly come together here and echo the opening statement. The High Priest's question reflects the royal son motif of Psa. 2:7, which extends back to Nathan's promise to David that his son would know God as "father" and God would know him as "son" (2 Sam. 7:14). As we know, Jesus affirms to the High Priest that he is Messiah, Son of the Blessed (14:62).

e. Crucifixion

Finally, at the climax of the passion narrative, with Jesus' death and the Temple curtain having been torn open, a Roman centurion at the foot of the cross declares, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (15:39). In this way, the two designations, Jesus as Messiah (on the plaque above the cross) and Jesus the Son of God (from the centurion) come together.

3. Son of Man

The title, Son of Man, is the most significant title used in Mark, because only Jesus identified himself as the Son of Man (SM). It occurs twice in the first-half of the Gospel (Mk. 2:10, 28), but thirteen times in the second half (Mk. 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 13:26; 14:21 (twice), 41, 62).

a. “Son of Man” in Jewish Context

(i) *Ezekiel*. The Prophet Ezekiel is frequently addressed by God as “son of man” (Heb. *ben ’adam*) and told to prophesy (Ezek 2:1, 3, 6, 8; 3:1, 3, etc). The phrase SM occurs 93xs in Ezekiel.

In the first chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet has a vision. In the vision he sees God, who he describes as “the One that seemed in human [*’adam*] form” (Ezek. 1:26). God then addresses Ezekiel as a parent to a child. God calls Ezekiel, “O son of man [*ben ’adam*]” (Ezek 2:1). That is, the truly Human One calls Ezekiel a “son of the human one.”²

Walter Wink writes: “Humanity errs in believing that it is human.... We are only fragmentarily human, fleetingly human, brokenly human.... Ezekiel’s vision intimates that only God is, as it were, really Human, and since we are made in God’s image and likeness, we are capable of becoming more truly human ourselves.”³

The point is, in view of Ezekiel, SM language could be understood as “a child of humanity.” As such, it is a reference to being truly human, truly the image and likeness of God. SM language is a claim to be a realized human being.

(ii) *Daniel*. Daniel 7 presents a vision of four great beasts like various animals and a figure “like the son of man.” The “one like a son of man” (Aramaic *bar ’enash*) receives dominion and glory and kingship from the “Ancient of Days” (Dan. 7:13).

Daniel 7:13-14, 18. ¹³ As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. ¹⁴ To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. ... ¹⁸ But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever-- forever and ever." (NRSV)

² Walter Wink, *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 27.

³ Walter Wink, *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 26.

According to I. Howard Marshall, the phrase *like the son of man* “should undoubtedly be translated ‘like a man’ (so NEB). The Aramaic phrase is used to designate a particular member of a species, and (as in Hebrew) ‘man’ and ‘son of man’ can be used interchangeably to refer to an individual. The force of *like* is that the figure is not a man but is like a man, just as the beasts are ‘like’ different animals.”⁴

In Marshall’s interpretation, just as the beasts represent four kingdoms, so the manlike figure represent “the saints of the Most High” or the faithful people of Israel mentioned in v. 18.

In this way, the “*Son of Man* is not so much a title as it is a role. It represents the faithful remnant of the elect people of God. Jesus represents that faithful remnant, elected by God to suffer even to death (Mark 14:34; cf. Rv. 12:11) and be vindicated through resurrection and glorification (cf. Dan. 7:21-22).”⁵

(iii) Aramaic form of self-reference. The Aramaic, *bar ’enash*, literally, “a son of man,” can be used to refer to a “human being”. The Semitic idiom, “son of” means a member of a class. So “a son of the quiver” is an arrow (Lam. 3:13). When a speaker wanted to be modest, he would refer to himself a “son of man” or “human being.” In this way, the speaker “shows solidarity with other human beings and is subject to the same humanity.”⁶ For example, Mark 2:10 can be understood as Jesus claiming that, as a human, he can forgive.

Scholars, like Linders and Casey, take this approach and deny that Jesus thought of himself as the SM in the sense of Daniel 7. Marshall disagrees with Linders and Casey and says, “There is more to be said for Vermes’s understanding of the sayings, according to which Jesus used the idiom to speak of himself with modesty or to avoid a direct reference to his own death.”⁷

Dunn (Christology in the Making) argues that in some sayings Jesus used the phrase as a self-designation and at other times was making a conscious allusion to Daniel 7.

(iv) 1 Enoch. The Book of 1 Enoch, which can be dated between 50 and 100 C.E.,⁸ presents a figure called, “the Son of Man.” The phrase SM occurs sixteen times in the Similitudes (1 En. 37-71) with three different Ethopic expressions.⁹

⁴ I Howard Marshall, “Son of Man,” in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 778.

⁵ Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark, Believers Church bible Commentary* (Scottsdale: Herald, 2001): 429.

⁶ David Flusser, *Jesus* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1997):128.

⁷ I. Howard Marshall, “Son of Man” (1992) 780.

⁸ Walter Wink, *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 55.

⁹ Wink, *The Human Being* (2002) 56.

In 1 Enoch, the SM has an exalted position. He is a pre-existent heavenly being who judges all human and angelic beings. He will remove kings, the wealthy, and the oppressors from their positions of power (46:3-8). All the earth will fall and worship him (48:5). He is the preexistent, Chosen One, revealer of God (48:6-7). He is the Messiah (48:10). The Righteous One (38:2). The Elect One (frequently). He will sit on the throne of the Lord of the Spirits.

For example: **1 Enoch 46:1-3**. ¹ There I saw one who had a head of days, and his head was like white wool. And with him was another, whose face was **like the appearance of a man** [echoing Dan. 7:13-14]; and his face was full of graciousness like one of the holy angels. ² And I asked the angel of peace, who went with me and showed all the hidden things, about **that son of man**—who he was and whence he was (and) why he went with the Head of Days. ³ And he answered me and said to me, "This is **the son of man** who has righteousness, and righteousness dwells with him. And all the treasures of what is hidden he will reveal; for the Lord of Spirits has chosen him, and his lots has prevailed through truth in the presence of the Lord of Spirits forever. (trans. Nickelsburg & VanderKam).¹⁰

(v) *The Testament of Abraham*. In the T. Abraham, which is dated to the 1st or 2nd century CE, "the Son of Man" is literally the son of Adam (*ben Adam*), namely, Abel, who was murdered by Cain. God appointed Abel to be the eschatological judge, because God wanted every human being to be judged by a human being.¹¹

T. Abraham 13:3. "For God said, 'I do not judge you, but every man is judged by man.'"

b. "Son of Man" in Markan Context

In Mark's Gospel, "the Son of Man" is connected with four themes.

(i) *The authority of Jesus*. For example, the SM claims to have authority to forgive sins (2:10) and to govern the Sabbath (2:28). The question is what type of authority is Jesus claiming. Is Jesus claiming, like the SM in Daniel or 1 Enoch, he has divine authority? Or is Jesus claiming, like other humans (a son of humanity), he has authority to invoke God's forgiveness?

(ii) *The suffering of Jesus*. The bulk of Jesus' references to the SM have to do with his suffering and death. Three occurs specifically with his passion predictions (Mk 8:31;

¹⁰ The translation is from the Ethiopic. 1 Enoch was originally written in Aramaic, but now exists in full in Ethiopic. George W.E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch, A New Translation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 13, 57-58.

¹¹ *T. Abraham* refers to three judgments, one by a human, one by the twelve tribes, and the last by God (*T. Ab. 13:3-8*).

9:31; 10:33). The mission of Jesus is to serve others and give his life as a ransom for many (10:45). So, like Mark's use of the "Son of God," the title "Son of Man" is closely connected to the shadow of the cross.

(iii) The future coming of Jesus. There are three references to the future coming of the SM "in clouds with great power and glory" to gather his people and to reject those who have rejected him. The coming of the SM is associated with him being "seated at the right hand of God" (Mk. 8:38; 13:26; 14:62), which alludes to Dan. 7:13-14 and the one "like a son of man" comes with the clouds of heaven, appears before the Ancient of Days, and is given authority over the earth.

(iv) The vindication and resurrection of Jesus. There are three references where Jesus predicts his vindication and resurrection (Mk. 8:38; 13:26; 14:62).

C. Messianic Secret

William Wrede wrote a book called, *The Messianic Secret (Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien)* in 1901. The thrust of Wrede's book was that Jesus never claimed to be the messiah during his lifetime. However, after his death, his disciples identified him as the messiah. To explain how Jesus could be the messiah, while no one knew it during his lifetime, is explained by the "messianic secret" first promulgated by Mark.

1. Silencing the Demons

The use of a name was a common attempt to control someone, especially regarding incantations and magic. Silencing the demon was typical move by exorcists to overcome that attempt in the exorcism.

But for Mark, the command to be silence was part of the secrecy motif, not part of the exorcism itself. The demons recognized their subjugation to Jesus from the outset (1:24; 3:10; 5:6; 9:20) and yet Jesus silences them regarding his identity (1:25, 34; 3:12). Hence, the demons recognition of Jesus functions more to correctly identify Jesus as "Son of God," the knowledge of which characters in the story are unaware. demonic recognition of Jesus "pulls back the veil" so the reader can see what is known beyond mere earthly life.

2. Silencing the Disciples

Jesus also gives a silence command to his disciples (8:30; 9:9). They are not to make public that he is the Messiah in contrast to the public's view that he is a prophet (8:29).

In 9:9, Jesus prohibits Peter, James, and John from making known what they had just seen (Elijah and Moses) and what they had just heard (God's voice). They were to keep this secret "until after the Son of man had risen from the dead. Jesus' identity as Son of God or Messiah was not to be revealed until after the cross.

There are also texts in which Jesus promotes an atmosphere of secrecy. He offers private instruction about parables (4:10, 34), ritual purity (7:17), the transfiguration (9:9), exorcisms (9:28), his passion predictions (9:31), and last things (13:3). Several times, Jesus hides to escape the crowds (1:35; 6:31; 7:24; 9:30)

In other words, Mark's messianic secret corresponds to his portrait of Jesus as Messiah, Son of God whose true significance could only be grasped in the light of the cross. In this way, Mark accents Jesus' death as part of the significance of Jesus' identity as Messiah, Son of God.

3. Broken Silences

What about times when the silence was broken? In the healing of the leper (1:40-45) and the deaf mute (7:31-37), Jesus' command is broken. In the ancient world, healers often wanted to keep their healing arts or formulas secret. Ironically, Jesus' silence commands tend to evoke just the opposite. They tend to function as part of Mark's narrative as literary devices to set the stage for the next event.

4. Correcting a false Christology

Many scholars believe that Mark's Cross-Christology is correcting a false Christology threatening his community. Some people in Mark's community may have denied or downplayed Jesus' crucifixion or have overemphasized the resurrection glory of Jesus. Perhaps Jesus was viewed as a *theios anēr* (divine man) infused with the power of the Spirit, emphasizing Jesus' powerful ministry and neglecting his humiliating death.

Ironically, the secrecy motif is Mark's invention. It highlights Jesus' true nature or identity. Jesus' identity as the "Son of God" or the "Christ" can be recognized only after his crucifixion and death. His identity cannot be understood apart from the cross.

The overall thrust of Mark's Gospel shows that no one can understand who Jesus is until he is revealed as the suffering Son of Man (8:31; 9:30; 10:33-34) or the crucified Son of God (15:39).

D. Discipleship in Mark

1. Disciple (*mathētēs* (μαθητής)) = apprentice

The word “disciple” is a translation of the Greek *mathētēs* (μαθητής). It can be translated “learner, pupil, disciple, or apprentice.” Mark’s Gospel places emphasis on discipleship, which is evident from the structure of his narrative.

- The story of Jesus opens with a calling of Peter, Andrew, James and John (1:16-20)
- Each section of Mark begins with a story about the disciples (1:16-20; 3:13-19; 6:7-13)
- The disciples are Jesus’ primary audience on “the way”(8:27-10:52)
- The disciples accompany Jesus to the Temple as his constant companions (11:1-13:37)
- The disciples are given special instruction not given to outsiders (4:10-12; 7:17-23)

2. Who are the Disciples in Mark?

Most of the references to the disciples are to a narrow circle of followers who were “with him” and called to share in Jesus’ ministry. They are given special privileges.

Example: **Mk 14:33**. He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. (NRSV)

They are the witnesses to Jesus’ ministry, such as his public and private healings (5:21-43), Jesus’ transfiguration (9:2-8), and Jesus last Passover Meal (14:12-25).

They are given special teaching, such as his teaching on food laws (7:17-23), marriage laws (10:2-12), the coming tribulations (13:3-37), and the New Covenant Meal (14:22-25).

They are specially commissioned to carry out Jesus’ mission (6:6b-13).

3. The Failure of the Disciples

Mark also portrays the disciples in a less than positive light. They fail to understand Jesus repeatedly. They fail to understand:

- The parables (Mk 4:13, 34; 7:18)
- Jesus’ calming of the storm (Mk 4:35-41)

- Jesus' walking on the sea (Mk 6:45-52)
- Jesus' feeding of the masses (Mk 8:4; cf. 6:30-44)
- Jesus as the "one loaf" (Mk 8:11-21)
- Jesus' identity (Mk 8:31-33; cf. 8:27-10:52)

Most importantly, the failure of the disciples is depicted by their behavior at Jesus' arrest and trial—they run.

4. The Leaven of the Pharisees and Herod

One pericope, "Boat and Bread," portrays the disciples' precarious relationship with Jesus, the warning against the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod (8:14-21)

Mark 8:14-21. ¹⁴ Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵ And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out-- beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." ¹⁶ They said to one another, "It is because we have no bread." ¹⁷ And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸ Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹ When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" They said to him, "Twelve." ²⁰ "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" And they said to him, "Seven." ²¹ Then he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (NRSV)

This warning comes toward the end of the first half of the Gospel and follows Jesus' two feeding miracles (6:34-44; 8:1-9), Herod's question about Jesus (6:14-17), and the Pharisees' request for a sign (8:11-13).

First, the disciples failed to understand Jesus' identity or his ability to provide "bread" (8:17-18) and Jesus warns them about the leaven of the Pharisees (8:15).

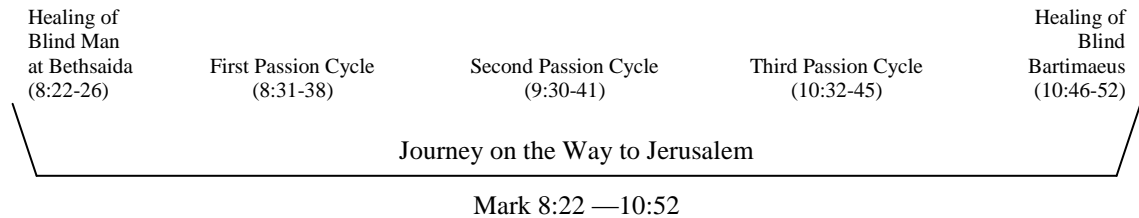
Second, Jesus asks if they do not "perceive and understand" or "if their hearts are hardened" (8:17; cf. 6:52). Hardness of heart is attributed to the Pharisees (3:5) and also to the arch enemy of the People of God, the Pharaoh in Egypt (Exod. 7:3, 13; 14, 22; etc.)

Third, in Mk. 8:18, Jesus cites the words of Jeremiah 5:21: "Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see, who have ears, but do not hear." This echoes Jesus complaint about "those outside" (4:12; cf. Isa 6:9). The disciples lack faith and are very close to being like Herod and the Pharisees.

Fourth, Jesus ask specifically about the amount of leftovers from the feeding of the five and six thousand (8:19-20) before asking again, “Do you not yet understand?” (8:21)

5. The Cost of Discipleship

The clearest teaching about discipleship or being an apprentice of Jesus comes in the center section of the Gospel (8:27-10:52). Mark has framed the whole center section with two stories, each of which describes Jesus opening the eyes of a blind man.



a. “Kingdom of God” alludes to “Entering the Promised Land”

This section talks about "entering the Kingdom of God" (10:23-25).

Mk 9:1 And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that **the kingdom of God has come with power.**"

Mk 9:47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to **enter the kingdom of God** with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell.

See also Mk 10:14; 15, 23-24, 25

Mark draws on the **OT way-conquest motif** of entering the promised land.¹²

Exod 23:20. I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you **on the way** and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

Deut 1:8 See, I have set the land before you; **go in and take possession of the land** that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them. (Also see Deut 4:1; 6:18; 16:20).

Isa 40:3-5. 40:3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness **prepare the way of the LORD**, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 40:4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 40:5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Mal 1:3. See, I am sending my messenger to **prepare the way** before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight--indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. (NRSV)

¹²So Willard M. Swartley, *Mark: The Way of All Nations* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1979) 156.

b. Echoes of Moses and the Exodus

Mark is using the imagery and language from Exodus.

- \ Both Moses and Jesus descend from a mountain to unbelief (Ex 32:19; Mk 9:19);
- \ Both Moses and Jesus take three people up on the mountain (Ex 24:1; Mk 9:2);
- \ Both have a voice speaking from a cloud on the 7th day (Ex 34:29-35; Mk 9:2);
- \ Both discuss building tents or a tabernacle (Ex 25:9; Mk 9:5).
- \ Both cross over the Jordan River and come to Jericho (Josh 4:19; Mk 10:46).

Mark could be presenting Jesus as a new Moses leading the children of God into the promise of the Kingdom, just as Moses & Joshua.

c. *On the way* (*en tē hodō*; ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ)

(i) Seven occurrences

Mark has also structured his whole center section of his Gospel around the “on the way motif”. Mark uses the term “way” (*hodos*) seven times in this section:

8:27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and **on the way** [*hodō*] he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" (NRSV)

9:33 And they came to Caper'na-um; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing **on the way** [*hodō*]?" 9:34 But they were silent; for **on the way** [*hodō*] they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. (RSV)

10:1 He left ... and went ...

10:17 As he was setting out **on a journey** [*hodon*], a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (NRSV)

10:32 They were **on the road** [*hodō*], going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him. (NRSV)

10:46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting **by the roadside** [*hodon*]. (NRSV)

10:52 Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him **on the way** [*hodō*]. (NRSV)

Whereas Mark uses *hodos* seven times in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, Matthew only has two parallel uses (20:17b and 20:30) and Luke only has one (18:35). Essential, the "on the way" language is absent in both Matthew and Luke. Mark use *hodos* 16 times altogether; seven on the journey (Mk 8:27-10:52), two in

introductory OT quotations (Mk 1:2-3), and seven elsewhere (Mk 2:23; 4:4, 15; 6:8; 8:3; 12:14).

(ii) Prophecy

The whole Gospel of Mark is introduced with the Way-motif. Mark by citing three prophecies.

He begins with God's pledge to Israel in Exod 23:20: "Behold, I send an angel before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place which I have prepared."

Mark 1:2-3

1:2 See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you	Exod 23:20
1:2 who will prepare your way	Mal 3:1
1:3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:	Isa 40:3
"Prepare <i>the way</i> of the Lord, make his paths straight."	

Mark links three texts:¹³

- The **Exodus text** underscores Yahweh's covenant and promise to provide the way for the Israel to receive the Abrahamic Promise of Land.
- The **Malachi text** is associated with the Lord's coming to purify the Temple
- The **Isaiah text** was understood by many Jews to refer to the eschatological hope of the Lord's coming to set up his kingdom. The Essenes (Qumran and DDS) understood themselves as True Israel and as a purified community waiting *in the desert or wilderness (midbar)* (1QS 8:12b-16; 9:18c-21). For them, the term "way" (Heb *derek*; Gk *hodos*), denotes the study and faithfulness to the Torah, which occurs 33 times in the *Manual of Discipline*. Their purpose for living *in the wilderness* was *to study the way of the Torah*. This is how they prepared for the coming Messiah.

¹³ See Swartley, *Israel's Scripture Traditions and the Synoptic Gospels* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) 107.

(iii) Suffering & Discipleship

Notice that Mk 10:32 links the "on the way" motif with Jerusalem! Jesus and those who follow him are on the way to suffering and crucifixion.

Three Cycles	Passion Predication	Misunderstanding	Teaching on Discipleship
Mark 8	8:31	8:32-33	8:34-37
Mark 9	9:31	9:32	9:33-38
Mark 10	10:33-34	10:35-37	10:38-45

IV. Mark's Ending

V. Mark's Purpose

Taken on its own terms, the leading characters—Jesus and the disciples—and the nature of the conflict motif provide the best clues for understanding the author's design in writing this Gospel.

Jesus comes to inaugurate the KG. It is present and future and it is "good news" or Gospel. This "gospel" according to Mark corresponds to Isaiah's promised good news of God's rule and salvation (Is 52:7) as promised by Jesus (1:14), but there is a question how God's sovereign rule could be both present and future.

How is it that Jesus could be crucified rather than crowned in Jerusalem? That question was no less intense in Mark's day than ours. Mark uses the disciples (and their confusion) to illustrate the confusion and perplexity of Jesus' followers.

The answer seems to be that God's reign is being manifest among us in healings, exorcism, forgiveness, and many other "secret" events, like seeds growing secretly, known to angelic and demonic forces, but hidden from the eyes of ordinary mortals. What is more is that God's power, for the time being, is wrought in and through suffering—God is present in suffering—but in the future, in power and glory and justice.