

# MARK

---

the way of the  
Son of Man

Mark's is the shortest gospel, and Mark writes at a break-neck pace. In contrast to Matthew, he includes only two larger blocks of teaching material, in chapters 4 and 13, but neither of these is as long as Matthew's longer blocks, and they don't have the same structuring role in the gospel. Mark has no infancy narrative. John the Baptist simply bursts on the scene (like Elijah, 1 Kgs. 17:1), and then Jesus bursts on the scene right after him. Matthew's account of John's preaching takes up twelve verses in chapter 3, but Mark summarizes the same ministry in seven verses; Matthew takes five verses for the baptism scene, but Mark uses three; most strikingly, the temptation scene in Matthew 4 takes up eleven verses, and in Mark only two. Matthew's gospel moves in a leisurely fashion from a genealogy to the beginning of Jesus' ministry in four chapters; Mark has Jesus born, baptized, tempted, and calling disciples before he is half-way through the first chapter. It is no accident that one of Mark's favorite words is "immediately." If Matthew presents Jesus as a new Moses, as a Rabbi or Teacher, Mark presents Him as a man of action, always on the move, a new David, the Warrior.<sup>1</sup> Matthew is like a slow-moving, talky art film;

1. In several cases, Mark's account of an event is considerably longer than Matthew's. The story of the Gadarene demoniac is much longer in Mark (cf. Mt. 8:28–34 with Mk. 5:1–20).

Mark is an action movie. For Matthew, Jesus is what He teaches; for Mark, Jesus is what He *does*. This also makes a difference for their conception of discipleship. For Matthew, being a disciple means holding to all the words that Jesus speaks (Mt. 7:24–27); for Mark, discipleship involves following Jesus, doing what He *does*.

With its fast pace and its emphasis on action, Mark looks simple. It isn't. One of the things that makes Mark subtle and complicated is his use of irony. Irony depends on a difference between the meaning on the surface and the real meaning. If I say to a midget, "You are very tall," I'm using a (lame) form of irony. In literature, irony often depends on the readers or audience knowing something that characters don't know. When Oedipus sets out to find out who murdered his father, the audience already knows that the criminal is Oedipus himself, and part of our enjoyment of the play is watching Oedipus catch up with us. We know throughout *Othello* that Iago is a manipulative villain, but Othello doesn't know that, and neither does Desdemona, his accused wife.

Mark uses irony to make the Pharisees and scribes look bad. He doesn't put up flashing neon lights. He tells his stories so that the Pharisees condemn themselves without realizing it. Chapter 3 is a good example of this ironic technique. Jesus enters a synagogue on the Sabbath and heals a man with a withered hand. In Matthew's version (12:9–14), Jesus asks the assembled Jews if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath (the Old Testament answer is, of course, yes). In Matthew, Jesus asks the kind of question a rabbi might ask. Mark includes another part of Jesus' question: "Is it lawful to heal *or to kill?*" That sets up the ending of the story. The Pharisees oppose Jesus for doing good on the Sabbath, but immediately afterward they go out to make plans to kill Him (v. 6). They don't say a word to Jesus, but they answer

His question with their actions: For them, it *is* lawful to kill on the Sabbath.

Mark also makes abundant use of intercalation, or “sandwich stories.” He begins one story, interrupts it with a completely different story, and then returns to complete the original story. All three synoptic gospels tell the story of Jairus’ daughter as a sandwich story. First we hear of the sick girl, then the story is interrupted for Jesus to heal the woman with the hemorrhage, then He returns to the task of healing the sick (now dead) girl. Matthew 9:18–26 contains a fairly brief rendition of the story, but Mark has some additional details that help us see the purpose of this structure. Mark tells us, for instance, that the woman has had a hemorrhage for twelve years. This means that the woman has been in a state of uncleanness for more than a decade, cut off from the temple worship, and having some inconveniences in daily life. Uncleanness is ceremonial death, and this woman has been effectively dead for a long time (cf. Lev. 15). When we get to the end of the story, the number twelve is repeated with reference to the girl: She is twelve years old (Mk. 5:42). The woman and the girl are linked by the number, and thus they are interlaced in Mark’s telling. Mark implies that the woman’s uncleanness parallels the girl’s death. Uncleanness is a form of death, and Jesus has come to cleanse as much as to raise the dead. The emphasis on the number twelve here is not accidental, since it associates both the woman and the girl with Israel, God’s now unclean bride, God’s dead daughter. Jesus has come to raise up dead *Israel*. The sandwich story links the two women, and shows that Jesus’ ministry is both to the outcasts, and to the dead; and Mark shows us that the outcasts are dead, and the dead, outcasts.

Mark uses sandwich stories when Matthew and Luke do not. In Mark 6:14–29, we read about John the Baptist’s martyrdom. In Matthew 14:3–12, the story is told as a

digression after Matthew mentions that Herod believes that Jesus is John raised from the dead. In Matthew, it is not a sandwich story at all. In Luke 9, it is technically a sandwich story, but it's very short, only three verses, and many of the details that Mark gives are not there. In Mark 6, it's a long story sandwiched in the midst of the account of Jesus sending out the Twelve to preach repentance, cast out demons, and heal the sick. In 6:30, after the account of John's death, the disciples return and they go out by themselves for a rest. Placing the story of John's death in the middle of a story of mission teaches us something about the disciples' work. When Jesus sends you on a mission, you might end up like John. This also foreshadows Jesus' death, who is sent to proclaim the kingdom and will suffer like John. Also, Mark tells the story in a way that captures the contrast between Jesus and Herod as "king of the Jews." Jesus as the true king, worried about sheep without a shepherd. Herod is a false shepherd who devours the prophets, while Jesus is the true shepherd-king who feeds His people.

### **Son of God**

The phrase "son of God" marks a frame or *inclusio* around the entire gospel, and provides another large example of Mark's use of irony. Mark 1:1 tells us that Jesus is God's son. In the course of the gospel, demons recognize Him as the "son of God" (3:11; 5:7; cf. 1:34), but as soon as they say it, Jesus silences them. The disciples don't confess that Jesus is Son of God, not even Peter, who says only that Jesus is the "Christ" (8:29). As readers, we know from the first verse that Jesus is the "Son of God"; we see that the demons know who Jesus is. As we read along, we hope that one of the disciples will catch on. Finally, just as Jesus *dies*, and because of the

way He dies, the person confessing Jesus as the Son is not a disciple, but a Roman centurion (15:33–39).

Though no other human being confesses Jesus as the “son of God,” God the Father uses this title in a few places. The first is at the beginning of the gospel in the baptism scene. Jesus is baptized and called the “beloved Son.” In the same passage, Mark tells us that the heavens are “opened.” The Greek word here is *schizo*, and the use of this word to describe the opening of the heavens at the baptism is unique to Mark. It is used regularly in the Old Testament to describe the Lord’s coming by rending the heavens (Is. 64:1; Ps. 18:9). At the baptism, the Father shows that He has torn open the sky to come to deliver His people. Jesus’ arrival is the sign that the heavens have been opened. Later, Mark uses the same verb for the rending of the temple veil (15:38), just before the centurion confesses Jesus. Heavens rent, and the Father identifies His Son; the temple curtain is divided, and a Gentile echoes the Father’s words.

The Father speaks again in the middle of the book at the Mount of Transfiguration (Mk. 9:1). Jesus’ baptism and His transfiguration are closely linked. In both events, there is a voice from heaven; in both places, the Father says, “This is My beloved Son.” In both there is a reference to “Elijah.” In chapter 1, John is dressed like an Elijah (2 Kgs. 1), and in chapter 9, Elijah himself appears and shortly after Jesus tells His disciples that John is “Elijah” (9:12–13). After the Transfiguration, Jesus goes down from the mountain, and immediately encounters a boy possessed with an unclean spirit, just as Jesus encounters the devil right after His baptism. In Mark, these two events are at the beginning of the two phases of Jesus’ ministry. Each of these passages discusses the connection of Jesus with John (1:6; 8:28). When we put the parallels between the baptism and the transfiguration

together with Mark's use of the phrase "son of God," we get this sketch of the book as a whole:

1:1–8:21	8:22–16:7 (or 20)
A. "Son of God," 1:1	"Christ," 8:29
Baptism	Transfiguration
<i>schizo</i>	
John	"Elijah"
Beloved Son	Beloved Son
Encounter with demon	Encounter with demon
Befuddlement of disciples	Centurion confesses the "son of God"
	<i>schizo</i>

The book divides almost exactly in half. Each half begins with the Father telling us what we've known since verse 1: Jesus is God's Son.

The two halves of the book are linked in various ways. Jesus' Galilean ministry starts in 1:14, but after 8:27, Jesus begins to head toward Jerusalem. After the "prologue" culminates with the call of four disciples in 1:16–20, Jesus begins His ministry with a confrontation with demons in a synagogue, and does a series of healings that provoke the Herodians to plan to kill him (3:6). Similarly, in the second section, we see Jesus enter the temple and denounce it (11:15ff.), and this provokes a plot against his life (12:12). The first half of the book climaxes with Jesus' predictions about His death; the book climaxes with His death.

The *inclusio* also suggests that there might be a chiasm in the book as a whole:

- A. Baptism: splitting heavens and "You are My Son"
- B. Jesus tested in wilderness, 1:12–13
- C. Sower parable, 4:1–9
- D. Stilling of storm, 6:45–52
- E. Peter's confession, 8:27–30
- F. Prediction concerning passion, 8:31–33

- E'. Transfiguration, 9:2–10
- D'. Exorcism of possessed boy, 9:14–29
- C'. Vineyard Parable, 12:1–11 (key words are parable and fruit)
- B'. Jesus tested in temple, 12:13–17 (Jesus sees this as a “test”: same as the word for “tempt” in chapter 1)
- A'. Death: splitting veil and “This is the Son”

The “B” sections connect the wilderness with the corrupted temple, and also connect the tempting scribes, Pharisees, and priests to Satan. The parables in the “C” sections provide a “bread” and “wine” pair. Stilling the chaos of the storm (D) is connected with stilling the chaos of demonic possession (D'), and the confession of Peter that Jesus is the Christ (E) is confirmed by the transfiguration (E'). At the center of the whole book is Jesus' first prediction of His death.

In both of the structure outlines we have suggested, the passage in 8:31–33 stands at or near the center, where Jesus predicts His own suffering and death as a way of explaining what it means to be the “Christ.” What is Mark telling us?

### Review Questions

1. How is Mark's gospel different from Matthew's?
2. What is irony? How does Mark 3 illustrate Mark's use of this device?
3. What is a sandwich story? Why does Mark use sandwich stories?
4. How are the beginning and end of Mark's gospel similar?
5. How is Jesus' baptism like His transfiguration?
6. What is at the center of the chiasm of Mark's gospel?

### Thought Questions

1. Mark 3:20–35 is a kind of sandwich story. Explain.

2. In some manuscripts of Mark, the book ends at 16:8. Is that a good place to end the book? Why or why not?

3. Compare Matthew 16:16 with Mark 8:29. What's different? Why?

### God's Messenger

Mark begins his gospel with a quotation from Isaiah 40: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Mk. 1:2–3). This comes from the opening verses of a section where Isaiah prophesies about the coming redemption of Israel from Babylonian exile.<sup>2</sup> It is the only direct quotation that Mark gives (though Jesus quotes the Old Testament a lot). Return from exile the big theme of Isaiah 40–66, and Mark is saying that Jesus is the one who comes to fulfill that hope. The gospel is the good news of deliverance from exile. In this passage, Isaiah promises not only return from exile, but also promises the coming of the Divine Warrior. As He did in Egypt, Yahweh will again arm Himself and fight for His people to bring them from bondage (Is. 40:10; see also 42:13–15). In 49:24ff., Isaiah talks about taking the prey of the mighty man. By starting with this quotation, Mark is putting Jesus in the place of the “Divine Warrior” and the mighty man. In short, “Just as Yahweh had promised to deliver Israel from the strong man Babylon (Is. 49:24–25), to lead his blind people along a path that they did not know (Is. 42:16), and to return them finally through the suffering of his servant to Jerusalem (Is. 52–54),” so Mark tells us that Jesus comes to deliver “Israel from the strong man Beelzebul . . . , leading

2. Joel Marcus' study of Mark's use of Scripture (*The Way of the Lord* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992]) provides a helpful discussion of this passage. See also Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).