

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL

Note: There are many excellent commentaries on Mark's Gospel. Simple and useful ones are the Tyndale and New International commentaries. My commentary (NCPI) would be enough for a simple study of the Gospel. A new NCPI Commentary written by Ian Pennicook will soon be printed. Students should find the introductory material in my commentary enough for the present studies.

THE NATURE OF A GOSPEL

We have 4 Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Many readers of these think they are primarily accounts of the life and ministry of our Lord. Whilst containing something of these elements they are really 'the good news' of Jesus Christ. Mark's Gospel opens with 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. Jesus Christ as Son of God is good news, and all he does is likewise good news. Writing biographies of people was not a fashion in the first century. Readers of this Gospel were expected to realise it was good news. Moslems quickly put down the gospel after reading 'Son of God'. That is not good news for them but bad news. Notice also 1:14, 'Jesus came . . . preaching the gospel of God.' We can say 'the good news of God'!

The first 3 Gospels are called 'synoptic Gospels' because put together they form a full synopsis of Jesus' life and ministry. The 3 have much in common, whereas John's Gospel is of a different order. John 20:30—31 tell why the Gospel was written—that belief in Christ might result, and with that belief eternal life. The synoptic Gospels also are written that Jesus may be seen to be the Son of God and as such, Saviour and Lord.

THE SHAPE OF SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

Some scholars see Mark's Gospel as the most primitive of the 3 because of its simplicity. Other scholars think the opposite. They say the simplest must be the later, because everything is clear. Some scholars think that Mark's Gospel is the basic material drawn upon by Matthew and Luke. They also speak of another source which they call 'Q'.

We need to realize that since the Gospels were not written to be biographies, they were designed for a certain purpose. Source Criticism is that department of study which seeks to trace the sources from which the Gospel were composed. Another form of study is Form Criticism. It asks the questions, 'Why do certain stories and accounts come in kinds of clusters, e.g. Luke 8:4—21? They believe that the life, works and sayings of Jesus were materials the evangelists used to illustrate and enforce their gospel-teaching. This would explain why the Gospels do not all follow a strict chronological pattern.

THE AUTHOR OF MARK'S GOSPEL

Generally speaking the Gospels may be taken to be written by those whose names attach to them, but the names were not present in the earliest manuscripts. Internal evidence often confirms this kind of authorship, and external evidence generally accords with this assumption. We will look at Mark himself as the possible author, but some external evidence is available, not that it is conclusive. It is as follows,

The earliest evidence is that recorded in the 4th. century by Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical history, written by Papias of Hierapolis about the mid-second century. It is, 'Mark, since he was the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately but not in order, the things said or done by the Lord as much as he remembered. For he had neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterwards as I have said (heard and followed) Peter, who fitted his discourse to the needs (of his hearers) but not as if making a narrative of the Lord's sayings; consequently, Mark writing some things just as he remembered, erred in nothing; for he was careful of one thing—not to omit anything of the things he had heard or to falsify anything in them'.

If the Mark of Acts and the Epistles is the author, then we read of him in Acts 12:12,25, 13:8, 13 and 15:37, 39. Mary was his mother and her home was a centre for believers. She, seemingly, was a woman of substance. Colossians 4:10 identifies Mark as the nephew (or cousin) of Barnabas. This explains him being taken on the first missionary journey with Barnabas and Saul, and then the argument over him in Acts 15. Paul's refusal to take him on the second missionary journey was because Mark had returned to Jerusalem early in the first missionary journey. Paul's attitude to Mark changed as we see in Colossians 4:10, Philemon 24 and II Timothy 4:11. He is also seen as an acceptable companion of Peter (I Pet. 5:13). If this Mark was the author of the Gospel, then he certainly would have obtained good materials from Peter, in addition to the fact that he was a young person at the time of the events of the crucifixion and resurrection, and his home was frequented by the early apostolic band, from whom he could have gained much Gospel material. Some understand him to be the young man who fled naked when the temple soldiers came to apprehend Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. The fact that this little incident is recorded only in Mark's Gospel could be a pointer to the young man as later becoming the author.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MARK

- (i) The Gospel is simple to the point of bluntness, showing remarkable economy in description.
- (ii) The Gospel moves rapidly. The term 'immediately' (AV 'straightway') is used 37 times in Mark, as against 14 times in Matthew and 12 in Luke. There is little time for reflection. Everything is action, and action is typical of 'the God Who acts', i.e. 'the living God'.

- (iii) The Gospel gives a number of details, e.g. 2:3; 4:37; 6:39; 7:33; 8:23f; 14:54. It is also strongly descriptive.
- (iv) Many of the stories and sayings are linked by keywords or similarity of subject, rather than constituting a mere chronological sequence.
- (v) The account does not lack candour, being quite critical of the disciples where such is valid. Likewise criticisms of Jesus are recorded, including his inability to do works at Nazareth (4:13; 6:52; 8:17, 21; 3:2; 1:27; 10:24, 32; 6:5—6).
- (vi) The Gospel records the range of emotions involved, such as love, compassion, severity, anger, and so on (1:41, 43; 3:5; 8:12, 23; 10:14, 15, 21).
- (vii) Whilst it said by some scholars that Mark was not a Jew and was not conversant with Palestine, this seems not to be the case, for his Gospel is of great value to Jewish groups, explaining as he does Jewish customs and places, and this is also helpful to Gentile readers.
- (viii) Three aspects or offices of Jesus are shown in the this Gospel, namely, Son of God, Son of Man, and Redeemer, i.e. the Suffering Servant. Mark 1:1,11; 3:11; 5:7 and 15:39 point to these, but it his actions which point to Jesus' Sonship of the Father such as the miracles, exorcisms, and teaching. His being Son of Man is just more than his being human as can be seen by 2:10, 28; 8:31; 9:9, 12, 31, 33; 10:33; 14:41 62. 10:45 shows him to be Redeemer and Suffering Servant. All of these are most important concepts.

THE MARKAN ENDINGS

The ending of chapter 16—and the Gospel—is in doubt. Naturally the Gospel seems to end at 16:8, but then the Gospel would seem incomplete. The verses 9—20 give a fuller description of Mary Magdalene than was given in 16:1, and seems a bit repetitious. Stylistic differences are also present, but whoever added the ending has done it quite well. It was certainly the mind of the early church, and so is quite valuable.

One other ending which is ancient is,

But they reported briefly to Peter and those with him all that they had been told. And after this Jesus himself sent out by means of them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

CONCLUSION TO INTRODUCTION

We can look forward with keen anticipation to reading and studying this living document. It is certain a rich means by which we can see freshly the person and work of Jesus, and know it is 'the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. It is wonderful to be able to participate in what happened in his day, and gather in the harvest of it now. John Mark himself is a great example to us of a young man who did not start well, but learned, developed and matured in character, and was able to give us this great Gospel.