

Reading the Gospels as Literature: Mark April 19, 2010

<All references to and quotes from this gospel refer to the Annotated Scholar's Version translation as found in *The Complete Gospels*, Robert J. Miller, editor (Polebridge Press, 1992).>

1. Mark, the writer
 - a. Mark's gospel is the shortest of the synoptics.
 - b. It goes at break-neck speed. His whole story may have transpired over a few months, no more than a year at most.
 - c. Mark doesn't worry about unnecessary details.
 - i. He doesn't name specific mountains, villages or locations.
 - ii. Sometimes he provides details that we may consider significant very late in the story, as in naming the women who were at the crucifixion (ch. 15) and at the empty tomb and only then noting that they were often with Jesus in the Galilee region and had supported him there.
 - iii. At times, he becomes redundant, or at least gives particular emphasis to a subordinate detail. At 1:32, "In the evening, at sundown . . ."
 - iv. He often uses parenthetical explanations to clarify events or practices.
 - (1) 3:9 Jesus asks the disciples to have a small boat for him to use when he teaches the crowd
 - (2) Mark explains at v. 10 that this was necessary because, having healed so many people, those who were sick kept pushing forward to try to touch him.
 - (3) 7:3-4 Mark explains the custom of hand-washing that Jesus' disciples seem to have ignored, to the consternation of the Pharisees.
 - d. Sometimes, Mark lets the story run away with him! See the Gerasene demoniac, 5:1-20, which is full of detail and is much longer than in Matthew and Luke.
 - e. Mark is only marginally interested in Jesus' psychological state/inner life. He attributes very little.
 - i. But when Jesus is baptized, Mark reports that he saw the skies torn open, the spirit descending, and heard a voice speak to him. No one else sees or hears these things.
 - ii. In ch. 2, v. 6, Mark says that some of the scholars were "silently wondering" why Jesus says the things he says, whether he's blaspheming, since only God can forgive sins.
 - iii. Jesus "sensed in his spirit that they were raising questions like this among themselves" and addresses them openly and directly.
 - iv. Jesus' family thinks that he is out of his mind, because of the press of the crowds that won't leave him alone (3:21).
 - v. One time, when he and the disciples cross the Galilee and come ashore, a huge crowd is waiting for him. Mark says, "he was moved by them, because they resembled sheep without a shepherd" (6:34).
 - vi. When the rich man comes and asks what he needs to do to have eternal life and says that he has kept the Law since he was a little child, "Jesus loved him at first sight" (10:21).

- f. Mark enjoys complex constructions, especially nesting one story inside another, to build tension, to take up some time or to act as an ironic parallel.
 - i. Jesus is on the way to heal Jairus' daughter when the bleeding woman touches his clothing and is healed (5:21-43)
 - ii. Jesus sends the twelve out to spread the news and to heal (6:7-13). While they're away, Mark tells the story of John the Baptizer's death (6:14-29)
 - iii. The story of Peter's denial is told as a side event during Jesus' trial by the high priest (14:53-72).
2. Who is Mark's audience?
 - a. From his explanations about various Jewish rituals and customs, it appears that Mark's audience is or includes many non-Jews.
 - b. Peter is more prominent in this gospel than any of the other disciples, though James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are often with him. It may be that Mark's community felt a special connection to Peter; it may have been founded by him or his disciples.
3. Who is Jesus?
 - a. Jesus appears out of nowhere, apparently in response to John the Baptizer's mission.
 - b. He is a carpenter (6:3)
 - c. He has a mother named Mary and brothers named James, Judas and Simon as well as unnamed sisters (6:3). His father doesn't appear to be alive since he's not part of the family group that wants to see him because they've heard he was going out of his mind (3:20-35).
 - d. Judging from chapter 3, there may be tension in Jesus' family about his mission. Even so, his mother was at the crucifixion and was one of the three who found the empty tomb.
 - e. There is no mention that Jesus had a wife or children of his own (though he must have been married at some point).
 - f. There's no statement about his age, but he must have been a mature adult or he would not have been given the kind of respect and attention he receives. If his wife had died and he had no children, that may have freed him to travel around, preaching.
 - g. He may have come from Nazareth, originally, but Capernaum is referred to as his home (9:33). The woman in the courtyard tells Peter she saw him "with that Nazarene, Jesus."
 - h. Most of his ministry seems to take place around the Galilee lake, though chapters 11-16 occur in Jerusalem.
 - i. Mark's entire story about Jesus takes place over a few months, perhaps a year. It's intense, fast-paced and brief.
 - j. He seems to be a spiritual person—someone who has had and continues to have a profound experience of God in his life and in the world around him.
 - i. He has a vision during his baptism. He sees the skies torn open and the spirit descending upon him as he hears a voice from heaven (1:10-12)
 - ii. He is immediately driven into the wilderness, Mark says, where he stays for 40 days and nights, is "tested by Satan" and "the heavenly messengers looked after him."
 - iii. He withdraws on his own to pray sometimes or he takes the disciples with him, away

- from the crowds, to pray (1:33; 3:13; 4:10; 6:31; 6:46; 7:17; 7:24; 9:1-8; 14:32, 39).
- iv. Some think he is controlled by an unclean spirit (3:22, 30) because they obey him.
 - k. He deliberately calls disciples to follow him and he is shown a number of times as gathering the disciples and the crowd together so that he can say something to them all.
 - l. Jesus seems to be short-tempered and easily irritated by the disciples.
 - i. He frequently rebukes them for not understanding what he's doing or what he's said.
 - ii. He is indignant when a leper approaches him (1:40-45) and, after healing him, he still speaks very curtly to him, telling him to go and see the priest, but not to tell anyone what happened.
 - iii. In the synagogue, the people are waiting to see whether Jesus would heal a man with a crippled hand on the sabbath. Jesus becomes exasperated at their obstinacy when they won't answer his question about whether it is permitted to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to destroy it on the sabbath (3:1-6).
 - iv. When the disciples ask questions about eating without washing hands, Jesus asks them, "Are you as dim-witted as the rest?" . . ." (7:18)
 - v. After Jesus fed first 5,000 people and later, 4,000 with leftovers each time, when the disciples don't have any bread he warns them to avoid the "leaven of the Pharisees" but they still don't understand. He asks them whether they're dense. They have eyes and ears, but don't remember what has happened and don't understand what it means (8:13-21).
 - vi. When a man comes with his son, who has an unclean spirit, and says that the disciples weren't able to drive it out, Jesus says, "You distrustful lot, how long must I associate with you? How long must I put up with you?" Later, he tells them that "the only thing that can drive this kind out is prayer" (9:17-19).
4. Who else is in the story?
- a. John the Baptizer is the first person described in the gospel. Mark portrays him as Elijah, the herald. John, Herod, Herod's wife and her daughter are also described in the story of John's beheading.
 - b. Disciples, principally Peter (his brother Andrew was also called at the beginning, but seems not to have prominence later), James and John the sons of Zebedee.
 - c. Crowds of people gather to see Jesus, to hear him, to touch him.
 - i. They bring their sick and possessed to be healed.
 - ii. There are so many of them, nearly all the time, that Jesus can't eat a meal in peace.
 - iii. They don't keep secrets.
 - iv. But when he goes to Jerusalem, he's alone in the temple the first time he goes there.
 - v. They pay attention when he's debating with the religious leaders in the temple (ch. 12). Mark says that "a huge crowd would listen to him with delight" (12:37).
 - vi. The crowd is fickle.. They're happy when they're getting something—entertainment, healing, exorcism. But they're not loyal. They tell Pilate to crucify Jesus. There's no explanation for their change of heart.
 - d. There are women in the story.
 - i. Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law

- ii. A bleeding woman touches him and is healed.
 - iii. The Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter was possessed
 - iv. Jesus' mother tries to see him in ch. 3.
 - v. Jesus' mother, Mary of Magdala and a woman called Salome are at the crucifixion and at the empty tomb. Mark only tells us that they had followed Jesus and “assisted him” when he was in Galilee in chapter 15!
 - vi. Mark doesn't say anything about them until the crucifixion!
 - e. Specific men are named.
 - i. Jairus, whose daughter Jesus healed
 - ii. Bartimaeus, whom Jesus cured of blindness
 - iii. Simon of Cyrene, who carries Jesus' cross.
 - iv. Joseph of Arimathea isn't named or identified until 15:43, after Jesus has died. He asks for Jesus' body and arranges for his burial.
 - f. There are children mentioned, but except for Jairus' daughter, there are no specific relationships stated. Like the women, the children are in the background. They may be disciples' children or the children of members of the crowds at various times.
 - g. There are religious leaders, Pharisees and “scholars” but they are not singled out. The high priest isn't even named in ch. 14 in the trial at night.
 - h. Pilate appears to be used by the Jewish religious leaders. He doesn't seem to act on his own authority.
5. What does Jesus do?
- a. John the Baptizer preached that the apocalypse was near, that God was coming and that the people must repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. His activity is a direct challenge to the authority of Herod Antipas and the Roman occupiers. John also disputed the validity of Herod's marriage to Herodias, who was not only his brother's former wife, but also Herod's niece. (Herod had divorced his first wife and Herodias had divorced her husband, Herod's brother, to marry Herod Antipas.)
 - b. Jesus is portrayed as coming out of nowhere to accept John's baptism in the Jordan River whereupon he immediately goes off into the wilderness for an extended retreat.
 - c. Mark says that Jesus begins his ministry after John was imprisoned.
 - d. He preaches: “The time is up. God's imperial rule is closing in. Change your ways and put your trust in the good news!” (1:15)
 - e. Jesus calls disciples.
 - i. Peter
 - ii. Peter's brother Andrew
 - iii. James and John, the sons of Zebedee
 - iv. The men make immediate, impulsive decisions to follow him, indicating that Jesus is charismatically powerful, not one to be turned down.
 - f. With his four followers, Jesus goes to Capernaum, to the synagogue, where he begins to teach.
 - i. The people are amazed because he teaches as one with authority, different from the scholars who referred to others.

- ii. A man who had an unclean spirit confronts Jesus and is exorcised.
 - iii. The bystanders remark that Jesus brings a new kind of teaching, with authority, and that even unclean spirits obey him.
 - g. Jesus and his followers leave the synagogue and go to Peter's home where Jesus cures his mother-in-law of a fever.
 - h. Word spreads rapidly and crowds begin to clamour for his attention. He spends his time healing sick people and casting out demons.
 - i. These events, from chapter 1, roughly summarize Jesus' activity.
 - j. He travels around the Galilee, ventures in the Decapolis and eventually goes to Jerusalem, teaching and healing all the while.
 - k. Controversy follows him everywhere and his opponents become increasingly pointed and hostile, culminating in the temple in Jerusalem.
 - l. By contrast, the crowds love him.
6. Why is Mark writing this story?
- a. The purpose of a gospel is to evangelize—to tell the story of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection so that others may hear and believe.
 - b. In Mark's gospel, Jesus never claims to be the Messiah.
 - c. Various others—principally demons, but also Peter and the centurion at his death—declare that he is the son of God.
 - i. Jesus always silences demons.
 - ii. He tells many of those whom he heals not to tell anyone what has happened.
 - d. Jesus asks his disciples who the people say he is. They tell him, “John the Baptist,” “Elijah” or “one of the prophets.” He asks them, “Who do you say I am?” and Peter replies, “You are the Anointed!” (8:27-30)
 - i. Jesus warns them not to tell anyone about him.
 - ii. He doesn't confirm or deny what Peter has said.
 - e. The “messianic secret” has fascinated scholars and others for centuries.
 - i. Some people like intricate, complex arguments. Conspiracy theories and intrigue are fascinating.
 - ii. I think it's a fairly simple device, though. Knowing the secret differentiates Mark's hearers from the disciples who didn't understand what was going on and who eventually abandoned Jesus
 - iii. The gospel is meant to be heard over and over again. Those who hear it for the first time may not understand what it's about right away. But they will understand the next time they hear it.
 - (1) Outsiders become insiders
 - (2) Insiders, “in the know,” are well on the way to conversion, to joining the Way

Most projects go through six stages:

1. Enthusiasm
2. Disillusionment
3. Panic
4. Search for the guilty
5. Punishment of the innocent
6. Praise and reward for the non-participants.

How well does Mark's gospel follow this pattern? Where would you make the divisions?

Next week: Read all of Matthew

1. Notice where Matthew is similar to or different from Mark.
2. Matthew knows Mark's gospel. What does he want his hearers to know that Mark doesn't tell them?
3. Where is Matthew similar to Mark?
4. Where is his gospel different? How do you account for the differences?
5. Who is Jesus for Matthew?