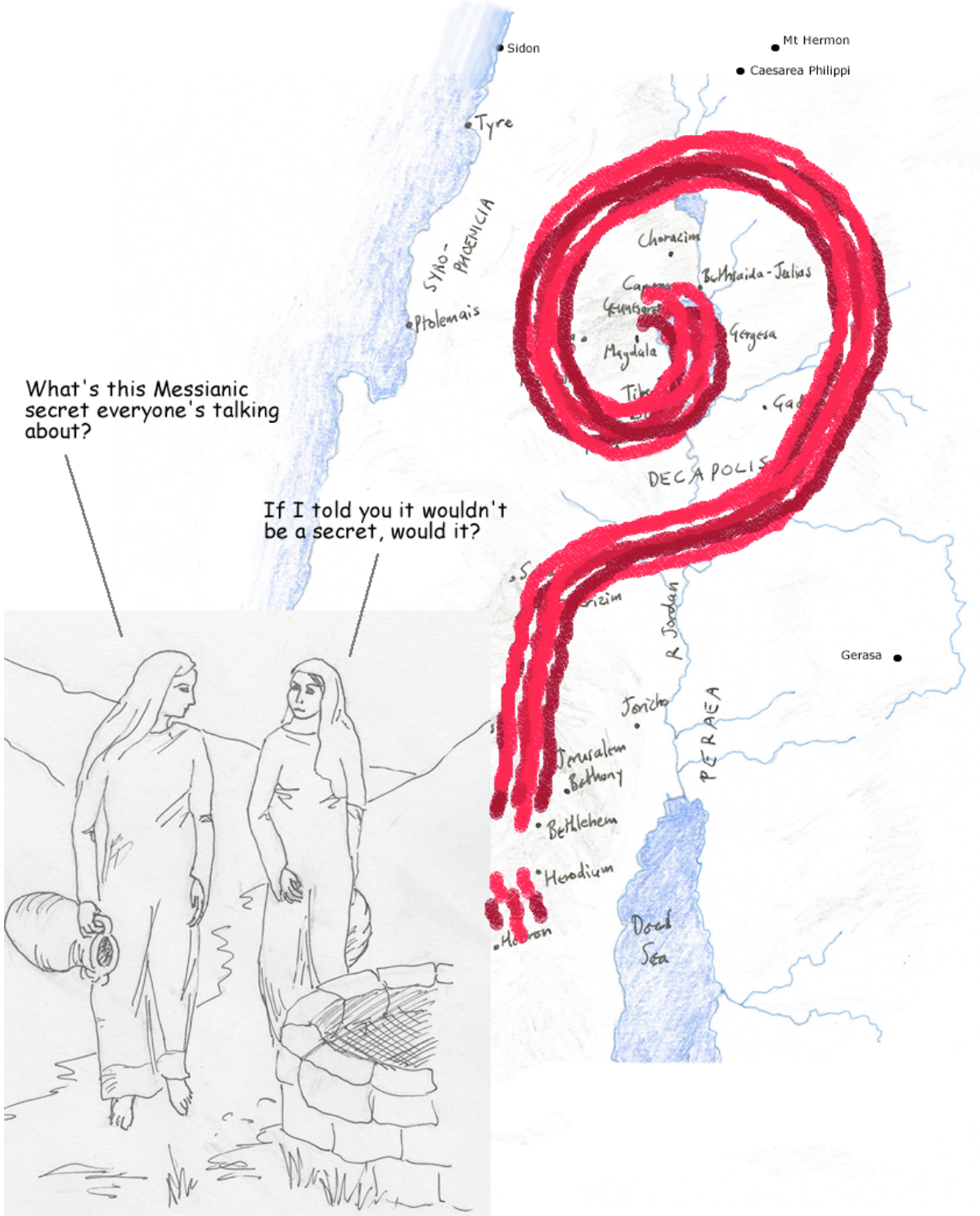


The Gospel of Mark



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Bible study at St Barts, Sydenham

September/October 2009

Introduction

We shall be covering the Gospel according to Mark in four sessions. The first session will be an overview of how the gospel may have come to be written, a brief summary of the narrative, and some examples of its distinctive style and content. This series concentrates on readings of the actual bible text, so this will be the only handout required throughout, and contains information which may help orient you to the text itself.

The next three sessions will be divided as follows:

- Chapter 1 up to Chapter 7:23 – the teaching in Galilee
- Chapter 7:24 to end of Chapter 11 – the journey away from Galilee towards Jerusalem
- Chapters 12 to 16 – the final act in Jerusalem

To provide an adequate introduction to this gospel, we need to consider its history and purpose, and the narrative actually contained in it.

History of the gospel

Mark's gospel is short and apparently simple so for many years, it was disregarded in comparison to the other gospels. Nearly all the verses in Mark also appear in Matthew and Luke, and hence it was thought not to be very interesting in its own right. One viewpoint was that Mark was a summary of one or both of the other gospels. Today, however, it is believed that Matthew and Luke used the gospel of Mark as one of their sources. Since the gospel of John is clearly of a later date, this makes Mark the earliest of the four gospels, which immediately increases its significance.

One tradition is that Mark is himself the young man or boy who escapes naked from the garden of Gethsemane (14:51-2), as this element of the story is only present in his gospel.

Another tradition related by the second century church father Papias has it that Mark took most of his material from Peter's memories. This could explain the fact that Mark is very forthright about Peter's shortcomings, almost as though Peter were narrating them and being honest at his own expense. However, the other gospels have even more about Peter's blundering. Mark's using an eye witness, on the other hand, could explain some of the vivid detail we see, such as the "green grass"

in the feeding of the five thousand (6:59), Jesus sleeping on the rowers' cushion in the boat during the storm (4:38), and holding children "in the crook of his arm" (9:36).

It is possible that Mark is not familiar with Galilee. This could be explained if he were living in Rome and taking down Peter's account of events. Alternatively, he could be living in a Latinised part of the empire, but outside Rome itself. This is evidenced by his use of Latinised Greek expressions like "centurion", or use of Roman currency terms. His account of the lowering of the paralysed man through the roof (2:4) says his friends "made an opening and dug through it" as though the roof were tiled. Amidst the rushing around in the first part, there are some discrepancies in location, e.g. 5:1 (the region of the Gerasenes) and 7:31 (Sidon is not on the way from Tyre to the Decapolis, but a major detour).

Mark also makes some mistakes about Jewish law. For example, in his talk on divorce in 10:11-12, he refers to women divorcing men. This was possible under Roman law but not Jewish law.

If Chapter 13 is a prediction of the fall of Jerusalem, rather than an account of it after the fact, the gospel could have been written in the late 60s. Otherwise a likely date is the early 70s. The stress on suffering in this gospel might be a response to Nero's persecutions, which would help to date the gospel earlier.

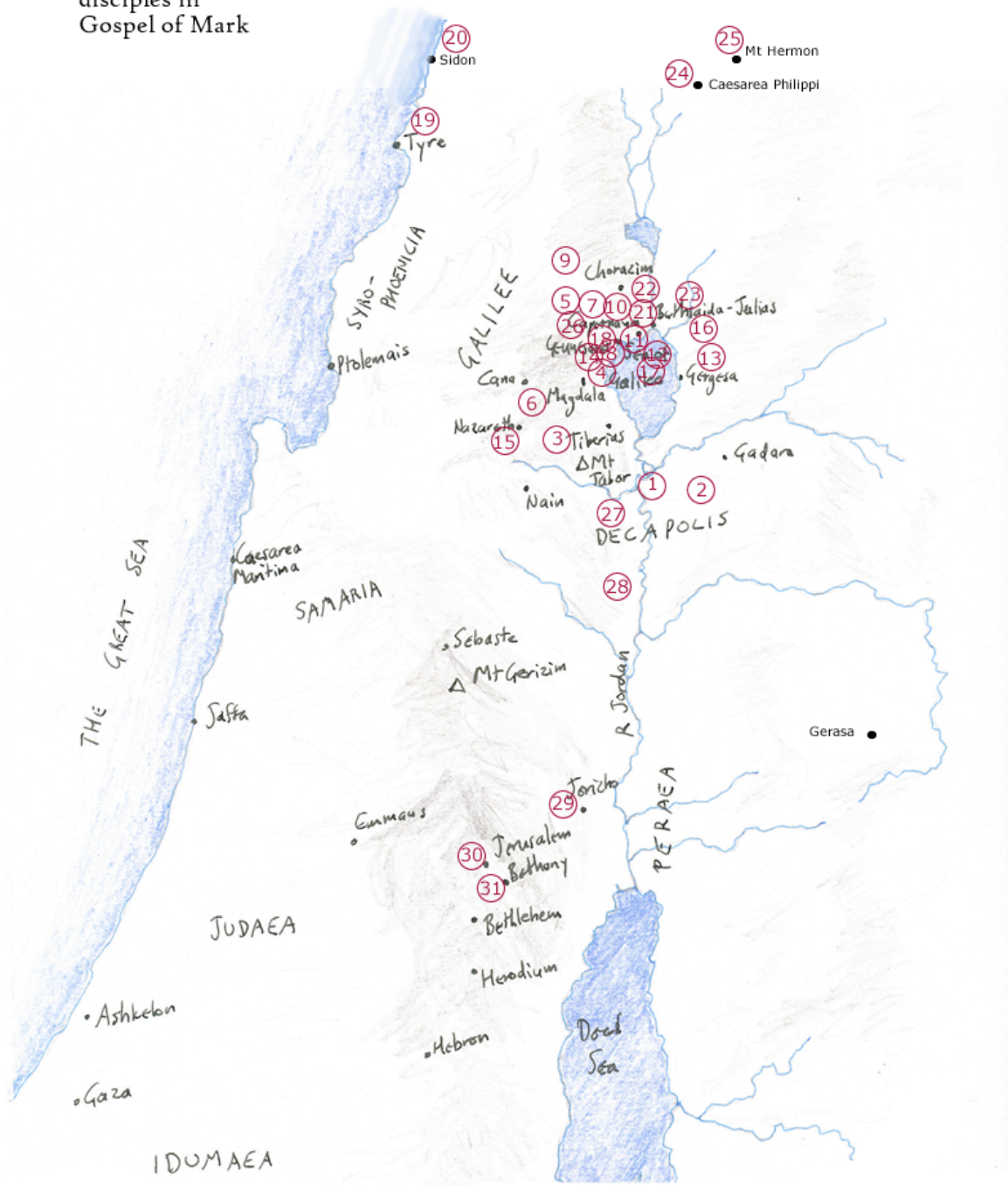
Geography of the gospel

The gospel splits into three distinct phases, in both its narrative of what Jesus and his disciples did, and the places they travelled. There is an initial phase in Galilee, then a journey through the Gentile territories followed by the beginning of travel southwards, and a final march to Jerusalem for the final phase of the gospel, the Passion. You can see in detail all the location changes in this table and on the map.

1. Baptism in the Jordan	1:9 – 11
2. The wilderness	1:12 – 13
3. Preaching in Galilee	1:14 – 15
4. Calling the disciples on the seashore	1:16 – 20
5. Teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, healing Peter's mother in law	1:21 – 22
6. Preaching over Galilee	1:35 – 39
7. Back to Capernaum, healing the man lowered through the roof	2: 1 – 6
8. Calling Levi at the lakeside in Capernaum	2: 13 – 17
9. Going up the mountain	3:13 – 19
10. Capernaum	Ch 3
11. The lakeside	4:1 ff
12. Crossing the lake	4:35
13. The Gerasene demoniac	5:1
14. Return to the Galilee shore	5:21
15. To "his own native place", Nazareth	6:1
16. Praying in a lonely place, feeding 5000	6:35
17. Crossing to Bethsaida, walking on water	6:45
18. Mooring at Gennesaret	6:53
19. Tyre and Sidon, the Syro-Phoenician woman	7:24
20. To Sidon "en route" (this is in fact a huge detour) to the Sea of Galilee	7:31
21. To the Sea of Galilee, healing a deaf man	7:31
22. To Dalmanutha (not sure where this is) after feeding 4000	8:1 – 10
23. To Bethsaida by boat, healing a blind man	8:22
24. To the villages of Caesarea Philippi – "Who do you say that I am?"	8:27
25. The Transfiguration, probably Mount Hermon rather than Mount Tabor	9:2
26. Starting the southward journey, to Capernaum: teaching on ambition, children, stumbling blocks, resurrection	9:32
27. Leaves Capernaum, to the hills of Judaea, across the Jordan: teaching on divorce	10:1
28. Continues on road, meeting the rich man	10:17
29. Jericho	10:46
30. Close to Jerusalem, the triumphal entry	11:1
31. In Jerusalem by day, spending nights in Bethany	11:11

Clearly, that is a lot of movement! The early part of the gospel has many, many journeys, but no timeline; in fact, we get a sense of Jesus and his followers dashing about due to all the verses beginning, "And immediately..."

Journey of Jesus and
disciples in
Gospel of Mark



The structure of the gospel

Mark's choices of which events to narrate, and the meaning and importance he apparently attaches to them, are interesting. There is a threefold structure in terms of the themes covered, as well as the locations.

In the first part, chapters 1 to 7:24, Jesus remains within Galilee but travels around rapidly.

In the second part, 7:24 to 9:50, Jesus and the disciples move around in the north, from Tyre and Sidon to the Decapolis, Caesarea Philippi and the surrounding towns, and then back to Galilee.

In the final part, from 10:1 onwards, they turn southwards and journey via Peraea to Jericho and then Jerusalem.

The gospel could also be seen as two halves, where the first section, Chs 1 to 8, seeks to raise the question, "Who is this man?" and the second half, from Ch 8 onwards, to answer it. In any scheme, however, the Transfiguration is a pivotal point. With this breakdown of the text, we could see 1:14 to 3:6 showing the call of the first disciples, and the first confrontations with the Jewish leadership. From 3:7 to 6:5 we have growing opposition, but also miracles being performed. 6:6 to 8:30 show more hostility to Jesus and his message, but also Peter's confession that he has understood Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus leaves Galilee, not now followed everywhere by great crowds, but journeying with his small group of core followers. 8:31 announces the importance of suffering, making it plain that this is not the triumphant military Messiah-ship that people have been expecting. The journey to Jerusalem follows, with the incidents in the temple and then the Passion narrative.

Mark's attitude to the disciples is significant. He portrays their slow learning process as they accompany Jesus, but also the immediacy with which they leave their old lives behind to follow him.

Conflict is an important theme from the very beginning, when we see the temptation in the wilderness, and demons recognising who Jesus is as he heals sick people. Mark sees the world as part of a cosmic war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. The first words Jesus says are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand." (1:15)

The "Messianic Secret" is very important and distinctive to Mark's account. Mark narrates fewer miracles than the other Synoptic gospels, and the point of these miracles is always to show that Jesus is the Messiah. However, the beneficiaries and bystanders are forbidden to rush off proclaiming this, and are told to return to their homes quietly. Most of the Jews at the time were expecting the Messiah to be a military leader who would help them defeat the Romans and get their country back, a king in the style of King David. Jesus needed time to explain that his mission was different, and was probably trying to avoid an uprising or a clampdown by the authorities before he could get his true message out to the disciples and followers. Jesus orders silence about his status in 5:43, 7:24, 9:30, and 8:29. He is occasionally referred to as Son of Man, a less unambiguously Messianic title, e.g. 2:10 and 1:34.

There are fewer parables than the other Synoptics, and those that are included tend to relate to the kingdom of heaven, rather than a wider range of subjects. Jesus is repeatedly referred to as a teacher, but few of his teachings are included. The main theme, again, is Messiah-ship.

Jesus is acknowledged to be the Messiah by God (1:11 and 9:7), evil beings (1:24, 3:11, 5:7) and ordinary people (15:39). His divine status is made known in 15:39, 14:62, 13:32. He is capable of forgiving sin (2:10), a divine prerogative. He performs miracles, e.g. 1:31 and 4:41, and exorcisms, e.g. 1:27 and 3:23. Mark's opening makes plain Jesus's Messianic titles and the rest of the gospel explains them, making it clear that Christology is a key issue Mark wishes to cover.

The rejection of Jesus by others grows over time: from the public in 5:40 and 6:2, the leaders in 2:1 to 3:6, and the disciples in 4:13.

Mark makes it plain that God's plan includes suffering both for Jesus and the disciples, in 10:45, 14:24, 9:12, 14:21,49. He relates Jesus' teaching about the Way (the path of discipleship) in 8:31,34; 9:31, 35; 10:15,24,29,33,39; 13:1 – 13. The middle section could be summed up not only as containing evidence that Jesus is the Messiah but evidence about suffering, the Way of the Cross and the nature of discipleship. It is just possible that this is a response to a growing theory that Jesus was wholly divine and did not suffer, which is a view that Mark is keen to scotch as quickly as possible. Mark's theme of the disciples' failures to understand is possibly an exaggeration of historical events to make a point, as this would connect with the failures of the Jewish people as rebuked by Isaiah hundreds of years before.

Mark's passion narrative is vivid, but ends with the famous ending, an oddly curtailed resurrection story. This has been the subject of much speculation over the years. On arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus speaks of the coming destruction of the temple and the downfall of Jerusalem. The story of the anointing in Ch14 is a kingly anointing, but immediately followed by suffering: again Mark is making it quite clear what kind of king Jesus is. Jesus finally answers a question about whether he is the Messiah: "I am." (14:62). All Mark's themes: suffering, misunderstanding, Messiah-ship, discipleship and glory, come together in this final story. There are parallels with the way the story started - the contrast between the tearing of the veil and the centurion's statement and the story of Jesus' baptism - and with the OT in Psalm 22.

We end with an empty tomb, but no resurrection, just frightened women running away. There are many theories about this ranging from Mark having been interrupted, possibly arrested, to a deliberate attempt to turn the question back to the reader: "What would you do next? How are you going to respond to this good news?"

The style of the gospel

Mark's Greek is quite rough and ready in expression, with some grammatical errors and many awkward phrasings. Like the other gospel writers, he is clearly not a native speaker. The structure of the gospel is much more sophisticated than its language. Mark makes use of typical Hebrew stylistic devices like inclusio: i.e. sandwiching an important point (the filling) between pairs of similar items (the pieces of bread). He also likes making points in lists of threes: some examples: three boat scenes, three predictions of the passion around the time of the transfiguration.

The readings for the first week

Rather than focussing so much on the story, here we are concerned to demonstrate something of Mark's style and themes.

1. A scene showing the immediacy of the narrative. The phrase "and immediately" is used 10 times in the first chapter alone, and is common throughout the first half. Ch1:16-31. This also shows Jesus' response to the demons saying they know who he is.
2. A scene of the Transfiguration – Ch 9:1 – 13.
3. An extract showing the sandwich structure of the fig tree incident around the temple visit in Ch11:1 - 33. We could see the fig tree as representing the people of God, who should be in the temple, but aren't.
4. A scene from the Passion – Jesus before the Sanhedrin, Peter's denials, then Jesus before Pilate. Ch 14:53 – Ch 15: 15.