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Outline of Mark, Part I:

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Outline of Mark, Part II:

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I. Introduction to Matthew and Mark

For this and the next lesson we now turn to an introduction to each of the four Gospels. In this lesson we will look at Mark, which is believed to have been written first, and then Matthew. We want to try to understand the Gospels as they were originally written, as different authors, evangelists, to specific Christian communities with distinct purposes in mind and distinct circumstances that elicited those purposes. We begin with the gospel of Mark.

II. Gospel of Mark

A. Presentation of Jesus

If we ask the question of distinctive themes or theology, the most natural place to begin is with the way each gospel writer presents Jesus. Obviously they have much in common, but the distinctives are telling as well. Mark is the gospel which some commentators have claimed has the best balance in his presentation between the divinity and the humanity of Christ. In fact, his gospel falls neatly into two halves, roughly the first eight chapters presenting an action-packed, dynamic narrative of Jesus' ministry—focusing particularly on His miracles, on His triumphs, and on His ability to amaze the crowds. Then abruptly after Peter's confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi, in 8:27 and following, Mark's narrative turns toward the cross. Many fewer miracles appear here—much more teaching for the disciples instead, and the teaching often is on the need to suffer. The glory of the first half of the gospel, as it were, is increasingly replaced by a focus on the cross. One famous turn-of-the-century commentator, Martin Kahler, spoke of the gospel of Mark as a passion narrative with an extended introduction, and this famous remark is not too far from the truth.

Mark 15:39b

*Surely this man was
the Son of God!*

THE CHRIST =

The Greek equivalent of
“Messiah”

B. Son of God

In the first half of Mark’s gospel, appear those indications most clearly of His divinity. The opening verse of Mark 1:1 speaks of Jesus, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus, who is the Christ, and who is the Son of God. While the term “Son of God” does not appear frequently in the gospel, it appears again at the close of the gospel in Mark 15:39 on the lips of the centurion seeing the way in which Jesus dies. The term “Son” by itself also appears at the strategically located incidence of Jesus’ baptism and his transfiguration. For Mark, “Son of God” is a title of majesty, pointing to Jesus’ divinity. The emphasis on the healings and miracles, that we have just mentioned characterize the opening half of Mark’s gospel, furthers this sense of one who comes with supernatural powers. But that divinity is also balanced by Jesus’ humanity.

C. Messiah

The second title that Mark 1:1 introduces us to, the “Christ,” is a significant title throughout Mark’s gospel, and Christ is the Greek equivalent of Messiah. And one of the striking features, particularly so in Mark more than in any other gospel, is the number of times when someone recognizes Jesus as the Christ only to have Jesus tell him, as it were, to keep it silent. This motif has come to be known as the “Messianic secret.” We see it following Peter’s confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi in perhaps the most dramatic fashion of all. Wherein in Matthew’s parallel in Matthew 16, Jesus praises Peter for several verses and gives him the keys to the kingdom; in Mark, all He does is silence him. Mark 9:9 gives us a clue as to the reason for this Messianic secret; it is only after Jesus’ resurrection that people will fully be able to understand Who He is. Prior to His resurrection, it will be too easy for people to misconstrue His ministry as one merely of a popular military or political leader or liberator.

D. Suffering Servant

The theme of “Suffering Servant” is a second one that fits into the focus on Jesus’ humanity in the gospel of Mark. Again, it is not the sheer frequency of the title but its strategic location. Mark 10:45 sums up, from Jesus’ mouth, His understanding of His coming death. “For the Son of

Mark 10:45

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.



Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life, a ransom for many”—a probable allusion to Isaiah 53 and the ministry of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah’s prophecy, the “ransom” alluding to the ministry of a substitutionary atonement as Jesus pays the penalty in His death that sinners deserve to pay for theirs.

E. Negative View of Disciples

In addition to distinctive views of Jesus, Mark is also well-known for having perhaps the most negative portrait of the disciples of any of the four Gospels. They too regularly misunderstand. Apparently Peter’s confession was inadequate (because of Jesus’ abrupt silencing of him) and that is made clear in the succeeding verses when Peter is not prepared for Jesus’ prediction that He must go to the cross. Jesus has to turn and rebuke Peter as one who is reflecting the viewpoint of Satan and not that of God. In Mark, Jesus’ disciples understand His parables less than they do anywhere else. And if we are right in our comments from our earlier lesson that the original copy of the gospel of Mark ended with 16:8, then Mark has deliberately ended his gospel without ever narrating an explicit resurrection appearance of Jesus. Rather the angel has told the women who were at the tomb that He was raised, that they should go tell His disciples, that they should meet Him in Galilee. But the original text of Mark most probably concluded with the words, “They did not say anything to anyone, for they were afraid.” Clearly, Mark’s community, Christians that they were, knew more of the story, but Mark chose to highlight the aspect of fear and misunderstanding on the part of the disciples.

Why so? This leads us to a consideration of the distinctive circumstances of the people to whom Mark was writing his gospel. The negative portrait of the disciples and the emphasis on the way to the cross has suggested to many that Mark was writing to a group of Christians who themselves felt very inadequate, perhaps in light of the growing persecution of early Christianity. And a frequent suggestion has placed the composition and sending of Mark’s gospel to the decade of the 60s A.D., thirty-some years after the death of Jesus, as the persecution instigated by Nero was increasing in intensity. Mark 13, in which Jesus describes the coming destruction of the temple in very cryptic language as the

Irenaeus:

Mark was Peter's associate; wrote more thematically than chronologically

Clement:

Mark was Peter's associate; wrote for believers at Rome

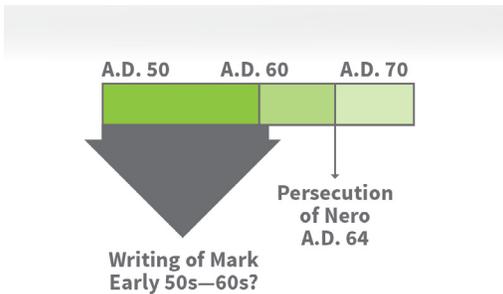
abomination of desolation or the desolating sacrilege has led many to think that this is being written before the fulfillment of that prophecy in A.D. 70, after which point the description could have been much more explicit.

F. Date and Setting of Mark

What little external evidence we have from the ancient church fits these suppositions in the writings of Irenaeus and Clement. We read the following from Irenaeus: "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not indeed in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter who used to give teaching as necessity demanded, but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in writing down single points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them." From this we learn the belief that Mark was Peter's associate, writing down the gospel events as he had learned them primarily from Peter, and apparently was concerned at times to write more thematically than strictly chronologically in sequence.

From Clement we read: "When Peter had preached the Word publicly to Rome and announced the gospel by the Spirit, those present, of whom there were many, besought Mark, since for a long time he had followed him and remembered what had been said, to record his words. Mark did this and communicated the gospel to those who made request of him. When Peter knew it he neither actively prevented nor encouraged the undertaking." Clearly some interesting differences, but still linking Mark with Peter and this time placing the readership of Mark's gospel in Rome, which fits the location of the first community to receive significant persecution by a Roman emperor.

There is, however, a different factor, significant for the dating and location of Mark's composition and sending of his gospel, and that is the nearly unanimous conviction of scholars that the gospel of Luke used Mark and therefore Mark must be earlier than Luke. We will see, when we come in our next lesson to introducing the gospel of Luke, that



Authorship of the gospel of Mark:

John Mark, associate of Peter and companion to Paul and Barnabas

there are at least plausible reasons for dating Luke and his second volume, Acts, to the very beginning of the decade of the 60s and no later than 62, the year with which the events that Acts ends were recorded.

If this is true then Mark must be placed just a little bit earlier than the persecution of Nero, which did not break out until 64. Perhaps Mark was written in 60 or 61 or even the early 50s, in which case we cannot be as sure about the context of persecution in Rome. It may have been the more localized, sporadic hostility that believers face throughout the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles. In any event, it seems likely that Mark is writing a very transparent, a very truthful, and a very sober account of the failures, as well as the successes, of the original disciples, not least Peter himself, in order to encourage people who perhaps felt that they were not doing too well in their Christian faith—that just as God was able to use these very fallible first followers of Christ, so he could use them too.

G. Authorship of Mark

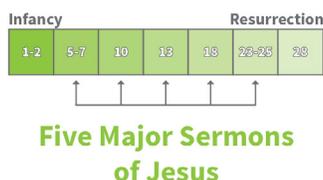
If we take these early traditions of the church seriously, we also then come to the conclusion that the author, Mark, was none other than the John Mark that we learn about in the book of Acts as a sometime companion of the apostle Paul and Barnabas, and one who was in Rome in the early 60s—at least if that is where we date the epistle of 1 Peter which has a closing reference to Mark in it. Nevertheless, the gospel strictly speaking is anonymous, and the titles “the gospel according to so and so,” would probably not have been added until at the very earliest the late first and early second century. There are many modern scholars who are somewhat more skeptical of the ancient attributions of authorship, but we see no reason to rule out the strong possibility that this Mark is indeed the author of the gospel—not least because he is a rather obscure character to have been chosen, if in fact he was not the author.

III. Gospel of Matthew

A. Jesus the Teacher

If we turn from the gospel of Mark to the gospel of Matthew,

Structure of Matthew



we see a distinctive portrait yet again of the life and ministry of Jesus. We again begin with his theology and then with distinctive views of Jesus. One of the things that strike us about Matthew, unlike Mark, is the extent of Jesus’ teachings that we read about. Jesus, in Matthew, preaches five lengthy sermons that comprise almost a chapter, or at times more than a chapter, in length: the famous Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7; His missionary discourse to the disciples in chapter 10; a chapter of parables in 13; a sermon on humility and forgiveness in chapter 18; and, after the extended woes to the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23, to more full chapters of what has been known as His eschatological or Olivet discourse, His teaching about the end times on the Mount of Olives. Interestingly, the Hebrew Scriptures also began with five major blocks of teachings, the five books of Moses. Was Matthew trying to portray Jesus as a teacher like, but also greater than, Moses? The fact that He twice goes up into the mountains to teach is reminiscent of Moses’ receiving the Law on Mount Sinai as well. But Jesus is not just a teacher, or perhaps even a lawgiver for Matthew. He is the “Son of David,” a very Jewish royal title, very distinctive to the gospel of Matthew.

B. Jesus the King

Matthew highlights elements of Jesus’ kingship and royalty, particularly in his opening chapters, in ways that the other gospels do not. The term “Son of God” that we ran across in Mark actually occurs more frequently in Matthew, and the element of the wonder associated with Jesus’ ministry, and particularly His miracles, seems to be heightened as well. Then, lastly, one may speak of the title “Lord.” Although it is not particularly distinctive to Matthew, being found in all of the four Gospels frequently, it is Matthew’s most characteristic title, as one who is worthy of worship, this Jesus of Nazareth.

In addition to distinctive views about Jesus, there is an extremely detailed and distinctive focus on the Jewish people in the gospel of Matthew.

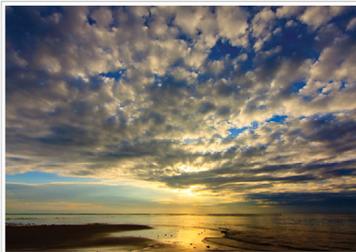
C. The Jewish Jesus

Here there is at first glance a certain tension, seemingly



Matthew 10:5

Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.



“ . . . first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

contradictory information. On the one hand, there are statements and events in the gospel of Matthew that portray Jesus as more uniquely Jewish than in any of the other gospels. Only in Matthew do we read in two chapters about Jesus’ birth that repeatedly He fulfills words of the prophets about what the Messiah would be like. Only in Matthew do we read in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:17-20, about Jesus’ relationship to the Law when He says, “Think not that I came to abolish the Law; I did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, I came to fulfill them.” There are seemingly scandalous passages: in Matthew 10:5-6, when Jesus tells His disciples to go nowhere among the Samaritans or the Gentiles but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; and Jesus Himself, in speaking to the Canaanite woman in 15:24, says He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

D. The Universal Jesus

What is more, only Matthew’s gospel uses the expression “kingdom of heaven” rather than the more common and well-known “kingdom of God,” probably because Jews were reticent to pronounce the very holy name of God and substituted this euphemistic expression. Yet despite those and many other Jewish features of the gospel of Matthew, there are also very universalist features, features that stand out more prominently in Matthew than elsewhere, about Jesus as “the one for all nations.” It is only Matthew who, in the parable of the wicked tenants in Matthew 21:43, speaks through Jesus of the kingdom being taken away from the people of Israel and given to a nation who would produce the fruits pertaining to the kingdom. It is only Matthew who has the famous story of the judgment of the sheep and the goats, the judgment of all nations, in chapter 25, or who ends his gospel with the Great Commission, to go into all the world, making disciples of all nations—Matthew 28:18-20.

Probably the best resolution of this tension between the two stages of Matthew’s gospel is to recognize what Paul would later put very succinctly in the epistle to the Romans: that he was sent first of all to the people of Israel, that the gospel is good news first to the Jew but then also to the Gentile. Jesus, during His lifetime, while foreshadowing and occasionally anticipating a bit of Gentile mission, for the most part reserves His ministry for the people of Israel, knowing that as



God's chosen people they should have first chance to respond to this new stage in His revelation. But He also knows that His religion, that His understanding of the way His ministry fulfills Judaism, will no longer leave room for distinctively chosen people but rather bring the message, through His apostles to every corner of the globe.

E. Other Distinct Features

Still other distinctive features of Matthew's theology include a focus on discipleship. Matthew is the only gospel ever to use the word "church," as he anticipates some of Jesus' organizational mandates for the fledgling community of His followers. He has greater levels of conflict with the Jewish authorities in Matthew's gospel than in Mark, some would say than in any of the other gospels, although John too portrays Jesus as having some very harsh words with the authorities. In fact, Matthew and John have been, at times, accused of being anti-Semitic, in an age understandably and appropriately sensitive to such issues. These claims must be taken seriously, but there is probably nothing stronger, even in the woes to the scribes and Pharisees of Matthew 23, than is found in much of the Jewish prophetic literature of the Old Testament. Jesus was a Jew thoroughly immersed in the rituals and beliefs of Judaism, but also believing that God had called Him prophetically to critique several ways in which particularly the leadership of His generation of Judaism had strayed from God's will.

F. Date, Setting, and Authorship of Matthew

The question then comes again: What setting would lead to this distinctive collection of themes and views about Jesus? And the obvious answer is that Matthew is writing to a very Jewish Christian community. Beyond that, there is little agreement. It has been debated whether this is before or after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. It has been debated whether this was in the Syrian city of Antioch, one place where Jewish Christianity, we know, was preserved in strong numbers even into the second century. It has been debated as well whether or not this took place before or after a so-called ban on Christians from the synagogue in the mid to late 80s—at the time a prayer was introduced into the Jewish liturgy of calling down a curse from God on all heretics,



including apparently the Nazarenes, probably a name for the sect of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps what can be agreed upon is that some of the vitriolic, some of the passion, that emerges in the gospel of Matthew is because of this tension with the non-Christian Jewish community.

Wherever or whenever Matthew was written, his gospel was written to a Christian community still embroiled in serious tension with non-Christian Jews in their community. In fact, one scholar has coined the phrase “the synagogue across the street” based upon archaeological data from various Middle Eastern cities in which synagogue and church were quite literally located very close to each other in the center of a particular community. If, indeed, Matthew is writing primarily to Jewish Christians who are freshly converted, who have freshly broken from the synagogue and all of their family and friends and attachments that implied, one can understand, on the one hand, Matthew’s passion for wanting to win as many Jews to Christ as possible, to encourage and build up in the faith those who have already come to believe in him, and also the remnants of strong emotions, if not at times some hostility.

If we again turn to the testimony of the early church, we find the unanimous conviction that the author of this gospel was none other than the converted tax collector, one of the twelve apostles, the man whom the Gospels alternately call Matthew or Levi. Interestingly, however, Matthew is written in very good Greek, a better Greek style even than Mark’s gospel; and it does not seem to most scholars to be the type of writing that someone who is writing with Greek as a second language would have penned.

If one turns to the oldest known testimony about the origins of the gospel of Matthew, we come to the testimony of the Christian writer Papias from the early second century, quoted by later church historian Eusebius. Papias wrote, “Matthew composed his gospel in the Hebrew language, and everyone translated as they were able.” Unfortunately, even the translation of Papias’ words is disputed. Let me read that saying again with some different translations: “Matthew compiled his sayings in the Aramaic language, or dialect, or style, and everyone interpreted as they were able.” We are not even entirely sure what the oldest testimony claims for Matthew, but there is an unbroken early testimony that he

Matthew composed his gospel in the Hebrew language and everyone translated as they were able.

Testimony of Papias

wrote something down, whether the sayings of Jesus or a full-fledged gospel, in either a Hebrew or Aramaic style or dialect.

That leaves open the possibility that our Matthew, our Greek Matthew, is the translation, even perhaps by someone other than Matthew himself or perhaps by the apostles, a translation and/or an expansion, a second edition if you like, of what Matthew originally wrote in Hebrew or Aramaic. It is not even impossible that what scholars call “Q” that we alluded to in our last lesson might have been this sayings document in Hebrew that Papias speaks of, which Matthew then later supplemented and added to, partly in dependence on Mark, in creating the form of the gospel that we now know. At any rate, Matthew clearly imbibes a Jewish milieu. As one understands his structure, one must pay careful attention to the teachings of Jesus that dominate his narrative. Notice how he intersperses blocks of teaching and narrative, often on a similar topic, in ways that have an apologetic thrust to convince the outsider, a catechetical thrust to teach the insider, and a pastoral thrust to encourage all those who read that Jesus is worthy of their worship.

