

WHAT IS A GOSPEL AFTER ALL?

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Historical Background

If we take the Gospel of Mark as the first gospel written, then Mark set the literary pattern to which all the other “gospels” would have to conform. Exactly what was this pattern? Not what we might assume. A little historical investigation into the matter might be helpful.

Mark opened his work with the words, “The beginning of the *gospel* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” When he used the word “gospel” in this way, he signified to his reader a new literary genre. He was not working from scratch, however. That is, the word “gospel” was not unknown in the first century. The idea of “good news” is the thought. The underlying Greek word *euangelion* meant reward for good news. The related word *euangelia* meant the good news itself. This word was used especially to make public announcements of momentous events. For example, we have an inscription about the Roman emperor, Augustus, that helps us understand this word:

- (1) Asia Minor—archaeologists uncovered an inscription at Priene dated about 9 B.C. that tells about the coming of the emperor Augustus to rule the world. It reads, “in that it gave us Augustus, whom it filled with power for the well-being of men when it sent him to us and our descendants as Saviour, who would put an end to war and would set everything in order.”
- (2) Further on in this inscription is the use of term for “good news.” The statement is, “The birthday of the god was for the world *the beginning of good news (euangelia)* that came forth because of him.”

New Literary Genre

However, Mark’s use is new. His idea about Jesus is similar to that expressed about Augustus in the above words. Jesus’s arrival on the scene of history, like Augustus, was the “beginning of good news.” Yet the word about Augustus was simply a short announcement, sort of a “flyer,” if you will, posted on the telephone pole. Mark wrote an entire document, not just a flyer. By doing that, he created a brand new genre of literature, and signified this new genre with his special use of the customary word *euangelia*. Much more than a flyer, Mark published an entire work that he called “gospel.” From looking at Mark’s “gospel” as a piece of literature, what can we determine about what is a “gospel”? The typical assumptions that a “gospel” as literature can be classified either as a “biography” or as a “history” raise many more questions than they answer.

More than biography

Mark made clear by his opening words that he was not writing a biography of Jesus. As a matter of fact, the sum total of the life of Jesus known the Gospel of Mark is just a year or two of his ministry. Out of thirty-three years of a life, Mark gives us only two—not much of a “biography”! Even more telling, five chapters out of a total of sixteen deal with just the last week of Jesus’ life. That is, almost a third of the content of this “gospel” is just one week of a life, and that week is the last week! The focus of this document Mark has called a “gospel” clearly is on Jesus’ death. So reading Mark is not so much reading a biography as it is reading an extended sermon, a sermon that labors to interpret the significance and meaning of Jesus’ death. A “gospel” is more than biography.

More than history

Mark also made clear by his opening words that he was not about writing a history in the vein of a Tacitus or a Suetonius or a Josephus. Mark has historical details about Jesus, but he did not intend to be a mere historian. The naked facts of history mean nothing without interpretation. Mark intended to interpret history. This interpretation would require more than a pedantic, historical “then...,” “then...,” “then.” While Mark has a broadly chronological order (one has to be born before he can die), Mark is not concerned strictly with chronology. He never names a specific month. He never records a specific year. Outside of the Transfiguration and the Passion, he never gives a chronological sequence that can connect more than two or three events even loosely. Even these events of the Transfiguration and Passion cannot be placed in a particular year! Further, we make a grave mistake to assume that just because Mark *narrates* events in a given sequence that those events happened *chronologically* in that sequence. A “gospel” is more than history.

The Preached Story of Jesus

Just what is Mark’s new piece of literature? Mark tells the story of Jesus. For decades that story had been told in oral form, creating an extensive body of oral tradition. However, eyewitnesses who knew the story well were now beginning to pass away. In the decade of the 60s in the first century, leaders who had been the bulwark of the church, such as James, Peter, and Paul, were being martyred. No longer could the story of Jesus be preserved by those who actually knew him. The preaching of Jesus needed preserving. *Mark’s new piece of literature represents the preaching of Jesus in written form.* Since that preaching involved the joy of salvation, that was “good news” to the world.

So Mark writes a “gospel” about Jesus that is more than biography, more than history. Mark’s “gospel” is a new literary genre created by Mark so that he could preach Jesus as “good news” to his world in a permanent written form.

Literary Description

As a new literary genre, the document which is identified as the “Gospel of Mark” can be described in specific *literary* terms. What are these literary aspects of Mark’s “gospel”? They can be described in three areas: (1) literary nature, (2) literary content, and (3) literary setting.

Literary Nature

Mark is not biography nor history in the modern terms of those words. The Gospel of Mark is not a newspaper giving simple reports about Jesus to satisfy biographical curiosity. The Gospel of Mark is a written form of the preached message of Jesus. As any sermon, a “gospel” will represent the particular theology and emphasis of the one preaching.

Literary Content

Mark has selected his material from a broader base of the oral traditions about Jesus. Particularly, Mark has selected that material which best supports the message preached. Mark is selective. He does not write down every oral tradition known. He selects material that makes his particular points. Mark also is not sequential. He does not intend to present the material as a detailed, blow-by-blow chronological account, like week 1, then week 2, then week 3, and so forth. Material in this type of literature called a “gospel” might be out of chronological order on purpose to make a thematic or theological point. So, a “gospel” ordered in this way takes on what shape? That is, what then are the formal literary characteristics of the content of a “gospel” as best we can tell from the pattern Mark gave us? A gospel’s content has four formal literary characteristics. These are:

1. *Proclamation*—the content includes an announcement from God of the final stage of salvation which was promised long ago now being fulfilled. God’s final work is proclaimed to the world.
2. *Unique*—the content makes clear that what is proclaimed is so new as to be unique. A new age has dawned, and no other proclamation, not even that of the Roman emperor Augustus, is the same nor as universal.
3. *Divine*—the content will emphasize that this history is totally God’s doing all the way around—God’s initiative, God’s revelation, God’s choosing of messengers, God’s sending “apostles” (“ones sent”).
4. *Subject*—the content will focus like a laser on Jesus. Especially, Jesus as salvation, as the eschatological figure inaugurating the New Age.

Literary Setting

While a “gospel” is focused on Jesus, we learn more about the evangelist’s life setting than that of Jesus. This reality is the simple result that the “gospel” is written for the evangelist’s community of believers. The needs and shape of the community will surface most prominently as the writing proceeds. As any good sermon will, Mark’s “gospel” is tuned to the needs of the church at Rome in the late sixties (the most probable setting of the Gospel of Mark according to scholars). Mark has a specific reading audience in mind as he writes. The primary setting-in-life of this Gospel is Mark’s church. The Gospel of Mark reveals as much or more about the setting-in-life of his church at Rome as about the setting-in-life about Jesus. This literary characteristic is another reason why writing a “biography” of Jesus from a “gospel” is a difficult to impossible proposition at best.