

The GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

A LOOK AT THE SON OF GOD
Sunday Liturgical Year B

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NOW AFTER JOHN WAS ARRESTED, Jesus came into Galilee,
preaching the gospel of God, and saying,
“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand;
repent, and believe in the gospel.”
—the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:14–15



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK: WHAT TO EXPECT

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Most scholars are comfortable with the idea that the *Gospel According to Mark* was the first of the four *Gospels* to be written. It usually is dated from AD 65 to AD 70. The author is believed to have been a Gentile disciple of the apostle Peter, and there is academic speculation that he might be the John Mark described in the *Acts of the Apostles* 12:12. Some sources refer to him as Peter's "interpreter" who was writing to early Christians of Gentile background. All but 31 verses in the *Gospel According to Mark* show up in the *Gospels According to Matthew* and *Luke*. The *Gospel According to Mark* was not included in the Sunday lectionary until after the Second Vatican Council.

The Evangelist's main emphasis appears to be on documenting what Jesus actually did, as opposed to recording what Jesus taught as in the *Gospel According to Matthew*, establishing Jesus' place in the continuing story of salvation history as in the *Gospel According to Luke*, or explaining Jesus' impact on how humanity relates to God as in the *Gospel According to John*.

Which of the four *Gospels* would you recommend to someone who wishes to learn more about Christianity but is unfamiliar with Jesus? Which of the four *Gospels* do you find most appealing? What advice would you give someone about how best to approach reading the *Gospel According to Mark*?

Gos•pel the good news of Jesus Christ

The first four books of the New Testament, the **Gospels**, are the word of God. As such, they reveal important spiritual truths about Jesus' divinity, especially concerning his Passion, death, and Resurrection. All of the **Gospel** accounts are not identical, so these spiritual truths cannot be considered the same as factual descriptions or scientific observations.

WHAT IS THE 'MESSIANIC SECRET'?

In the *Gospel According to Mark*, Jesus repeatedly asks that his identity not be disclosed. Scholars continue to debate why the Evangelist Mark insisted on recording this detail.

The most controversial explanation—rejected by most scholars—is labeled the "Messianic Secret." It suggests that the passages in which Jesus asks that his identity remain secret are not historical but instead were inserted by the author to reduce tension in the early Church related to Jesus being the Messiah.

There are at least two credible explanations for Jesus' apparent reluctance to allow it to be known that he is the Messiah: 1) The timing was not right for such a revelation—similar to the idea of Jesus awaiting his "hour" in the *Gospel According to John*, and 2) Jesus did not want to encourage the prevailing idea that the Messiah would be a political king.

DISCREPANCIES SURROUNDING JESUS' BAPTISM

The four *Gospels* differ in their accounts of Jesus' baptism. The *Gospel According to Mark* 1:9 records this as a matter of fact; the *Gospel According to Matthew* 3:13–17 describes John the Baptist's reluctance to baptize Jesus; and the *Gospel According to Luke* 3:21–22 neglects to specify that the baptism was done by John. The *Gospel According to John* 1:29–34, believed to have been written last, fails to describe Jesus' baptism and instead focuses on John's recognition of Jesus as the Son of God. John never is called "the Baptist" in most translations of the *Fourth Gospel*. John attributes his witness to Jesus' identity on the fact that he viewed the Spirit descend as a dove and remain on Jesus.



JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD

The *Gospel According to John* generally is considered the primary *Gospel* promoting the idea of Jesus as the Son of God (based on that Evangelist's description in his prologue—the first 18 verses of the first chapter). The *Fourth Gospel* avoids any mention of Jesus' earthly lineage as the son of Joseph and Mary and focuses instead on Jesus' spiritual link to God as his Father. The *Gospel According to Mark* also ignores details of Jesus' birth in order to emphasize Jesus' connection to God.

Like the Evangelist John, the Evangelist Mark gets right to the point in the very beginning of the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:1 with a clear state-

ment about Jesus' lineage: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

In case his readers miss this, the Evangelist Mark has the centurion repeat the point in the *Gospel According to Mark* 15:39: "And when the centurion, who stood facing him, [Jesus on the cross] saw that he thus breathed his last, he [the centurion] said, "Truly this man was the Son of God."

Significantly, two other accounts in the *Gospel According to Mark* (1:11 and 9:7) insist that God himself reinforces that Jesus is his beloved Son by making that claim from heaven at Jesus' baptism and again at Jesus' Transfiguration.



A LINK TO MOSES & ELIJAH

Throughout the *Gospel According to Mark*, Jesus' actions invite comparison with two of the greatest prophets in the history of the descendants of Jacob—Moses and Elijah. Jesus' miracles include sea crossings, exorcisms and healings, and feeding large crowds in the wilderness.

Moses is considered the founder of the nation of Israel, and Elijah is credited with being responsible for a major renewal of the covenant God made with his people. That Jesus' behavior is similar to theirs points to what appears one of Jesus' ultimate goals in the *Gospel According to Mark*—to renew and restore the spiritual fortune of the descendants of Jacob.

This spiritual fortune can be understood to be an inheritance in the kingdom of God. Christians interpret this as an inheritance in eternal life.

THE RENEWAL OF ISRAEL

In the *Gospel According to Mark*, the miraculous power of the kingdom of God is seen as evidence of the renewal of the nation and people of Israel—without participation of the scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem. Jesus' actions confront the priestly establishment. The *Gospel According to Mark* seems more concerned with God's kingdom as a new development in the history of the descendants of Jacob and less with the beginning of a new religion—although at the time of Jesus' Incarnation, religion was inseparable from society and politics.

im•me•di•ate•ly at once; instantly

The Evangelist Mark's use of superlatives ("all the country of Judea," "all the people of Jerusalem" in the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:5), and his breathless writing style advances his *Gospel* at a fast pace, resulting in a sense of urgency intensified by his focus on things happening **immediately**, a word he uses 35 times throughout his *Gospel* (nine of those times in the first chapter in the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:10, 12, 18, 20–21, 23, 29–30, and 42). The Greek word translated as **immediately**, εὐθύς (*euthus*), literally means "straight" or "level" and expresses a sense of quickness in much the same way as the English word "straightaway." The idea is that straight equals fast travel, and things are happening speedily.

THE HOLY LAND IN JESUS' TIME

Descendants of Jacob once ruled two kingdoms in a strip of land about 150 miles long and 60 miles wide located roughly between the Mediterranean Sea on the west and the Jordan River and Dead Sea on the east. Galilee, Samaria, Perea, and parts of the Decapolis made up the former northern kingdom of Israel, which fell to Assyria in 722–721 BC. Judea is the Roman name of the former southern kingdom of Judah, whose people were exiled to Babylon beginning in 597 BC. The Persian king Cyrus the Great allowed their return in 538 BC. By Jesus' time, the entire region had become a Roman province called Palestine, a term that originally described only the coastline once known as Philistia.



GEOGRAPHY IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

The *Gospel According to Mark* can be divided into four geographic sections. The Evangelist Mark begins his story abruptly with 13 verses outlining Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, the voice from heaven identifying Jesus as God's Son, and Jesus' almost immediate temptation in the wilderness. The *Gospel According to Mark* 1:14—8:21 focuses on Jesus' ministry in and around Galilee, and the *Gospel According to Mark* 8:22—10:52 looks at Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. The final six chapters describe Jesus' Passion, death, and Resurrection, which occur in the history-rich Judean city of Jerusalem.

FAITHFUL WOMEN

Women play an important role as models of faithfulness in the *Gospel According to Mark*. They frequently are presented in contrast to Jesus' faithless disciples, who persistently misunderstand, betray, deny, and desert Jesus.

syn•op•tic with the same eye

The Greek word *syn* means "with," and the word *optic* means "eye"; **synoptic** means "with the same eye." Because the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke generally take the same perspective to telling the story of Jesus, their *Gospels* are referred to as **synoptic Gospels**. Most scholars think that the *Gospel According to Mark* was written first and served as source material for the work of the Evangelists Matthew and Luke.

JESUS CHRIST: THE SON OF GOD

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Unlike the *Gospel According to Matthew* and the *Gospel According to Luke*, both of which begin with Advent narratives associated with Jesus' birth, the *Gospel According to Mark* wastes no time in introducing Jesus as an adult and focusing on the beginning of his ministry. All four of the *Gospels*, however, arrive quickly at an account of Jesus' relative John, although the four accounts regarding Jesus' baptism differ widely. John is so well known for this event that he frequently is referred to as John the Baptist. Only the *Gospel According to John* (written by a different John) avoids suggesting that baptism was John's primary role. What might be implied by the different accounts? How do they suggest that the *Gospel According to Mark* might have been written first?

Consider what might be the most important revelation about Jesus that is recorded in the first chapter in the *Gospel According to Mark*. What point seems to interest all four Evangelists enough to include a reference to the prophecy in the *Book of Isaiah* 40:3? Of what value is this to Christians?

MARK 1:1–45

1¹ The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who shall prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight—”

⁴ John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather belt around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; ¹¹ and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

¹² The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

¹⁶ And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I

will make you become fishers of men.”¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.¹⁹ And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets.²⁰ And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.

²¹ And they went into Caperna-um; and immediately on the sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught.²² And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.²³ And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit;²⁴ and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.²⁷ And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”²⁸ And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

²⁹ And immediately he left the synagogue, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.³⁰ Now Simon’s mother-in-law lay sick with a fever, and immediately they told him of her.³¹ And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she served them.

³² That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.³³ And the whole city was gathered together about the door.³⁴ And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

³⁵ And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed.³⁶ And Simon and those who were with him followed him,³⁷ and they found him and said to him, “Every one is searching for you.”³⁸ And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out.”³⁹ And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

⁴⁰ And a leper came to him begging him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.”⁴¹ Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I will; be clean.”⁴² And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.⁴³ And he sternly charged him, and sent him away at once,⁴⁴ and said to him, “See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people.”⁴⁵ But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.



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WHO HEARS THE VOICE FROM HEAVEN?

The *Gospel According to Mark* 1:10–11 records: “And when he [Jesus] came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” While the synoptic *Gospels* seem to agree that Jesus is the one who saw the Spirit descend like a dove, in the *Gospel According to John* 1:29, it is Jesus’ relative John who witnesses the bird.

The *Gospel According to John* also records that it is John who makes the statement that Jesus is God’s Son. The synoptics all seem to suggest that it is Jesus who sees the dove descend from heaven and also hears the voice of God.

One more interesting difference in these accounts—only the *Gospel According to John* describes Jesus’ relative witnessing the Spirit as a bird that then remains on Jesus as a sign of divine favor. The wording in the three synoptic *Gospels* is much less precise.

1 Read the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:1–5. Compare the way in which prophecy from the *Book of Isaiah* 40:3 is used in the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:2–3 with how it is used in the *Gospel According to John* 1:19–23. What might be the most significant difference? What unusual thing is Jesus’ relative John doing in the wilderness? Who is traveling to the wilderness to see John, and what do they do when they get there? Consider how John’s baptism of repentance compares with the Christian sacrament of Baptism.

2 Read the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:6–13. What does John’s attire suggest about his role in Scripture? If necessary, refer to the *Second Book of the Kings* 1:8. Where does Jesus come from in order to be baptized? The original Greek fails to specify the type of bird that descends from heaven. What might make a dove a fitting image of the Holy Spirit in regard to baptism? If necessary, refer to the book of *Genesis* 6:11–8:22. Why might Mark have neglected to mention that the dove remained on Jesus, a detail that is included in paragraph 701 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*?

3 In the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:10, who sees the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove? Who hears the voice from heaven? Consider whose voice this might be. Why might Jesus be driven into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan immediately after being baptized? Refer to the *Gospel According to Matthew* 4:1–11 to learn more about Jesus’ temptations.

MIRACLES & SIGNS

The first chapter in the *Gospel According to Mark* describes Jesus healing a leper. At that time, leprosy—a chronic infectious disease affecting the skin, nerves, eyes, and nasal lining—represented ultimate uncleanness and was strongly associated with sin. All three synoptic *Gospels* include miracles, but the *Gospel According to John* instead refers to as “signs,” which by definition point to something else. The miracles in the *Gospel According to Mark* are similar, however; they strengthen the faith of those who witness Jesus’ remedial actions.

king•dom of God unlimited reign of God surpassing spacial limits

The Greek word for **kingdom**, βασιλεία (*basileia*), derives from the word for “king” and stresses royal reign more than geography. The term **kingdom of God**, used multiple times in the *Gospel According to Mark* as well as in the other two synoptic *Gospels*, emphasizes that God is more important than the territory over which he reigns. The *Gospel According to Matthew* also refers to God’s reign as the “kingdom of heaven” as well as the **kingdom of God**. The Greek word οὐρανός (*ouranos*) translated as “heaven” literally means “the skies.” The earth has boundaries, but the sky has no apparent limits. Both terms—**kingdom of God** and “kingdom of heaven”—emphasize the all-encompassing rule of God.

4 Read the *Gospel According to Mark 1:14–20*. With what event does the Evangelist Mark link the beginning of Jesus’ ministry? Consider what Jesus hopes to accomplish. Where does Jesus enlist his first four disciples, and what promise does he make to them? How does the way Jesus enlists his disciples in the first chapter of the *Gospel According to John* differ? Consider whether either approach would be enough for you to leave everything behind. Think about what you are willing to give up to follow Jesus.

5 Read the *Gospel According to Mark 1:21–26*. What in this passage suggests Jesus was a practicing Jew? At the time of Jesus, practitioners of Judaism viewed cleanliness as essential to holiness. Consider whether it is likely that Jesus agrees. What might be the present-day equivalent of an unclean spirit? Reflect on how the demons described in the *Gospel According to Mark* are able to recognize Jesus as the Holy One of God. What might explain why Jesus insists that his divine identity remain a secret?

6 Read the *Gospel According to Mark 1:27–31*. Consider why the Evangelist focuses on Jesus’ authority as a teacher and a healer. What in particular about Jesus’ power amazes people at the synagogue in Capernaum? What is the immediate result of Jesus’ healing act? Where do Jesus and his disciples go when they leave the synagogue, and what happens when they reach their destination?

7 Read the *Gospel According to Mark 1:32–34*. Whom do the people bring to Jesus? What might be the practical result of this happening in the evening? What limitation does Jesus place on the demons? Consider why Jesus might be insistent that these demons accept his condition. Why might the demons agree to what he asks?

GOD IS THE REAL AUTHORITY FIGURE

In all of the *Gospels*, authority is a major concern. Instead of being thrilled that Jesus is able to heal people and forgive sins, the religious authorities feel threatened because they do not understand how Jesus possesses this power.

In the *Gospel According to Mark 1:22*, ordinary people in Capernaum are amazed at the authority of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus’ instruction is compared with that of the scribes, emphasizing that even the best-intentioned scribes have been relying on interpretation of the Law of Moses. Jesus is able to explain and teach aspects of the law from a different point of view—that of God, the lawgiver.

Jesus then heals a man possessed by an unclean spirit, further drawing attention to how his authority is vastly superior to that of any of the scribes.



JOHN THE BAPTIST & HIS LINK TO ISAIAH

All four *Gospel* writers draw a connection between Jesus’ relative John and the prophet Isaiah, and this happens very early in their writing. They each cite the same passage in the Old Testament *Book of Isaiah 40:3*—“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”

Interestingly, the New Testament uses different punctuation for this passage, locating the voice in the wilderness instead of in the way that is being prepared for the Lord. All three synoptic writers agree about this, and they all credit Isaiah’s prophecy. The *Gospel According to John 1:23* also plac-

es the voice in the wilderness and attributes the prophecy to Isaiah, but in the *Fourth Gospel*, John suggests that he himself is the prophesied voice.

Deutero- (Second) Isaiah was the prophet who announced that the Babylonian Exile was ending. The Persian Cyrus the Great allowed descendants of Jacob to return to their homeland in 538 BC. Their way back went directly through the desert. As Jesus’ herald, John is announcing a different way, a different Promised Land, and a different preparation for the Lord. At the same time, John is claiming that Isaiah’s original prophecy, like all biblical prophecy, had more than one type of fulfillment.



JESUS BEGINS HIS MINISTRY AFTER JOHN'S ARREST

In the synoptic *Gospels*, Jesus only is described going to Jerusalem at the end of his ministry, but the *Fourth Gospel* shows Jesus moving back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem throughout his ministry. The rest of the time, Jesus concentrates on areas outside of Judea. The *Gospel According to Matthew* 4:12–13 records that Jesus left Nazareth to live in Capernaum after learning of the arrest of John the Baptist. It is significant that the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:14–15 records that Jesus then begins his own ministry by preaching a message very similar to John's: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." The *Gospel According to Mark* 1:28 notes that Jesus' fame spread "everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee," pointing to the universal nature of Jesus' message of salvation for all of humanity—not just descendants of Jacob.

8 Read the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:35–39. Who is seeking Jesus the next day, and why? Where had Jesus gone early in the morning, and for what purpose? What information does this passage indicate about Jesus' reasons for becoming human? Consider how this translates into relevant knowledge for today's Christian. According to paragraphs 457 through 460 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, what are the four reasons for the Incarnation?

9 Read the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:40–42. This passage describes Jesus healing a leper, and it continues to play on the idea that sin was thought to be associated with a lack of cleanliness. What does the leper say to Jesus, and what is Jesus' response?

10 Read the *Gospel According to Mark* 1:43–45. What does Jesus instruct the healed man to do, and what does he caution him not to do? Consider why Jesus involves the priesthood after healing the leper. Think about what this passage discloses about how the man reacted to having his leprosy healed. Reflect on whether it is realistic of Jesus to ask that the man not talk about his healing.

JESUS PRACTICES PRIVATE PRAYER

One of the best things Christians can learn from reading the *Gospels* and studying Church teaching is how to pray. The *Gospel According to Mark* 1:35 records: "And in the morning, a great while before day, he [Jesus] rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed."

Although the Evangelist fails to mention what Jesus talked about with God the Father, Mark does share two important things that Christians can do to improve their own prayer efforts. First, Jesus has set aside some specific time for God. To do this, he had to get up "a great while before day." Second, Jesus went to a "lonely place" in order to pray.

Holiness requires that we set aside time and space for God. If we are serious about our relationship with Jesus and his Father, we will make an effort to find the time and a place for prayer, and we will persevere in our efforts.

Where have you experienced the most powerful prayer? Consider why. What can you do to reproduce that effect the next time you pray?

scribe a person who writes

The word **scribe** comes from the Latin word *scribere*, which means "to write." **Scribes** by definition are writers; the word "authority" suggests that power is associated with authorship. Because **scribes** wrote laws, they eventually became lawyers. For the descendants of Jacob in the Old Testament, all law was based on the Law of Moses and was religious in nature. The *Book of Ezra* 7:1–26 describes how the **scribes'** proficiency in the law allowed them to gain influence over the exiles returning to Jerusalem from Babylon. By the time of Jesus, the **scribes'** religious power rivaled that of the priests.