

## Background information on the Gospel of **MARK**

**T**he four Gospel-writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—each give us a portrait of Jesus geared to a specific purpose and for a particular set of readers. This means that each Gospel has its own *theme*, and the writer selected his material in line with it.

Of the four Gospels, the first three have much material in common and deal with many of the events of Jesus' life from a similar point of view. For this reason they are known as the *synoptic Gospels*—'synoptic' meaning 'seeing together'. John's Gospel, by contrast, takes a quite different approach. In summary:

- *Matthew* wrote his Gospel with a *Jewish* readership in mind: he includes lots of Old Testament quotations, refers to 'the lost sheep of Israel' (15:24; 10:5-6), mentions Jewish customs without explaining them (e.g. 17:24-27), uses 'heaven' instead of 'God' throughout because of contemporary Jewish sensibilities, and stresses that Jesus was the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies (e.g. 5:17).
- *Mark* wrote his Gospel for the *Romans*: he uses the names of Roman coins (12:42), explains Greek words by their Latin equivalents (15:16), explains Jewish customs (7:3-4), translates Hebrew or Aramaic expressions (5:41; 7:34), and refers to Rufus (15:21) who, according to Romans 16:31, was a resident of Rome.
- *Luke* wrote his Gospel for the *Greeks*: he writes in a manner typical of the Graeco-Roman literary style, omits Hebrew and Aramaic expressions, explains Jewish customs (4:31; 22:1), says little about fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, and is at pains to show that Jesus was no threat to the ruling authorities of the day (23:4, 14, 22).
- *John* wrote his Gospel for *all Christians*: it has no addressee and is slanted towards no particular ethnic group. It is different in style from the synoptic Gospels: it contains no parables and only seven miracles, Jesus' speeches are more concerned with his person than with the ethics of the kingdom, the narrative focuses more on his personal conversations than on his public speeches, and John highlights Christ's deity as the Son of God and the importance of faith in him.

### **The author: John Mark**

John Mark lived in Jerusalem before going to Antioch to work with *Paul* and *Barnabas* (Acts 12:52). His opting out of their first missionary journey led to a rift between the two apostles (Acts 15:37-39). But about ten years later Mark was back with Paul in Rome (Colossians 4:10) and Paul described him as 'helpful to me in my ministry' (2 Timothy 4:11).

Mark was also close to *Peter*, who was also in Rome at that time and calls Mark 'my son' (1 Peter 5:13). There is some evidence that *Peter was in fact Mark's major source of material*: Papias (who wrote around 140 AD) states this categorically. Certainly the fast-moving and practical nature of this Gospel fits in with what we know of Peter's character.

So Mark was well qualified to write about Jesus: he had been a Christian from the earliest days of the church, was a close associate of Peter, and had been involved in the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome between AD 30 and 65 alongside the apostles.

### **The Gospel of action and reaction**

Mark seems to have written his Gospel with *evangelism* in mind. It is short (the shortest of the four) and simply-constructed, presenting Jesus as the *servant* of God (10:45) who came to do his Father's will. In line

with this is majors more on his *works* than on his words. In fact it records the most miracles of any of the Gospels. It is full of *action*, moving rapidly from one incident to the next—the Greek word *euthus*, meaning ‘immediately’, ‘at once’ or ‘straightaway’ occurs over forty times.<sup>1</sup>

Mark uses vivid language to describe *people’s reactions* to Jesus’ ministry. They are, for instance, ‘amazed’ (1:27), critical (2:7), afraid (4:41), puzzled (6:14), ‘astonished’ (7:37) and bitterly hostile (14:1). Mark also emphasises the *slowness of the Twelve to grasp just who Jesus was* (e.g. 8:15-21; 9:30-32).

Subject-wise, a simple breakdown of Mark’s Gospel would be as follows, based on Jesus’ movements:

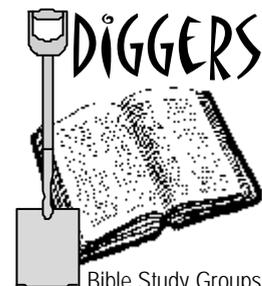
1:1-13	Introduction
1:14 – 3:6	Jesus’ early ministry in Galilee
3:7 – 6:13	Jesus’ later ministry in Galilee
6:14 – 8:30	Jesus’ withdrawal beyond Galilee
8:31 – 10:52	Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem
Chapters 11-13	Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem
Chapters 14-15	Jesus’ suffering and death
Chapter 16	Jesus’ resurrection

We, however, will look at the book in ten more evenly-balanced portions, as follows:

1.	1:1 – 2:28
2.	3:1 – 4:20
3.	4:21 – 5:43
4.	6:1 – 7:23
5.	7:24 – 8:38
6.	9:1 – 10:16
7.	10:17 – 11:33
8.	12:1 – 13:37
9.	14:1-72
10.	15:1 – 16:20

## How to make the most of this Diggers study

- The Bible version being used as a basis for the series is the *New International Version* (NIV). Try to bring a copy to the sessions as it is much easier if everybody has the same version as a starting point. But by all means use other versions alongside it for reference. You may, for example, have the *New Century Version* (NCV), the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), the *New Living Translation* (NLT) or *The Message*.
- Mark’s is the shortest of the four Gospels—only 16 chapters, so try to *read the whole book through* a few times during the series. This will give you a balanced view of the book.



<sup>1</sup> It is so common, in fact, that the NIV doesn’t always bother to translate the word. In the Greek, for example, verses 10 and 12 of Mark chapter 1 begin identically with the words ‘And immediately...’ In v12 the NIV renders it ‘At once...’ but omits it completely in v10.

- *Before* you come to each session *read the passage to be studied*—several times if possible.
- *Jot down* your thoughts and observations as you go along so that you can come to the group with something to contribute.
- This is a book about *Jesus*, whom we love, serve and model our lives upon. Keep asking yourself what new things you can learn about him, and how you can become more like him.