

# HOW WE GOT THE FIRST WRITTEN GOSPEL: A LESSON IN PEOPLE WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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Text: Mark 1:1-ff ; Acts 15:36-39; 1 Peter 5:13

**Introduction:** The time is the middle of the first century. A.D., probably somewhere around A.D. 50 to A.D. 70. My own interpretation would place the time around A.D. 65, give or take a few years. The life and ministry of Jesus has taken place, the early church has moved from being a sect of Judaism to becoming a religion making universal claims. The mission to the Gentiles led by the Apostle Paul has been enormously successful, while correspondingly resulting in some tension with the Jewish-Christian element of the church.

At the same time those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus during his earthly ministry are beginning to fade from the scene. Many simply have died off from natural causes. Some, beginning with Stephen very early on in the history of the church, have become martyrs for the faith. Persecution has increased, especially in terms of official Roman hostility toward the church, and if it hasn't already happened, Peter and Paul according to tradition would be executed under the Roman Emperor Nero. Jesus has not returned as the early church was expecting. And yet, the church has continued to expand and grow throughout the Roman Empire. So the question arises, "Since Jesus has not returned, and since we are rapidly losing those who were eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus, how are we going to teach those who have never seen Jesus but have heard the testimony of those eyewitnesses?" "How are we going to preserve the testimony of those who had actually seen and heard Jesus?"

Someone was needed to record a written testimony, a written record, to God's revelation in Jesus. Such a record would preserve the witness of those who saw and heard Jesus, and it could be used to teach the numerous new converts to the faith, no matter how many years, yeah, centuries, even possibly millennia if humanity continued that long.

So the question to be answered this morning is "Just who was qualified to write a "Gospel of Jesus Christ?" Who had the knowledge, the experience, and the understanding of the story, along with the awareness of the need for such a written work? Who had the connections with the early leaders of the church, which would lend credibility to his writing, which would give it the needed authority? The answer lies in the journey of John Mark. He was raised by a dedicated, influential Christian mother. He was taught and nurtured by some of the most influential personalities in the early church – his uncle, Barnabas, the Apostle Paul, and the Apostle Peter. And, he most certainly would have crossed paths with other apostles and disciples in the early church.

Furthermore, he was a part of the story. Evidence points to his presence during the last week of the life of Jesus, as it led up to His arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. He travelled with Barnabas and Paul at least for a part of the first missionary journey. He later travelled with his uncle again on a second journey, and in fact was a source of conflict between Barnabas and Paul as they contemplated a second journey. Somewhere along the way he united with Peter in doing mission work, and heard his many

stories about the life and teachings of Jesus. He served as the amanuensis or secretary of Peter, and surely developed the writing skills that prepared him to be the author of the first written Gospel.

So, as we seek to answer the question, "How did we get the First Written Gospel?" we can affirm that it was not an accident but the result of a journey of many influences upon John Mark. As we examine the contributions of those who influenced Mark, we should be reminded that we too have had numerous influences in our personal lives, and that all of the important things that we do are built upon the foundations of such influences. And, we should also be reminded that we too influence those people that we encounter in our lives, and that we can and do make a difference – for good or for bad – in who they become, whether they are family, friends, or even total strangers.

We also are fortunate to have a record of the very first testimony related the written Gospels. It comes from Eusebius of Caesarea, the Father of Church History, who wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* in the early A.D. 300s during the time of Emperor Constantine. Eusebius recorded the testimony of Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis in the early second century, A.D., who wrote that "Mark being the interpreter of Peter, whatsoever he recorded he wrote with great accuracy, but not, however, in the order in which it was spoken or done by our Lord, for he neither heard nor followed our Lord, but, as before said, was in company with Peter, who gave him such instruction as was necessary, but not to give a history of our Lord's discourses. Wherefore Mark has not erred in anything, by writing some things as he has recorded them; for he was carefully attentive to one thing, not to pass by anything that he heard, or to state anything falsely in these accounts. . . . Matthew composed his history in the Hebrew dialect, and every one translated it as he was able." The question then is how did Mark come to the place where he would write down the very first Gospel?

I. Influences in the life of Mark – We need to begin by looking at the influences upon the life of Mark.

A. His mother, we don't know her name nor do we know anything about his father – his mother was a Christian, a leader among the early disciples, and a sister of Barnabas. She probably was from Cyprus since her brother Barnabas is identified with the island as his home, and therefore she would have had a more cosmopolitan and a more inclusive outlook, and would have been much more comfortable with the presence of Gentiles in the early church. It seems that she instilled an inquiring attitude in Mark, and set an example as a dedicated and sharing Christian who opened her home to the early followers of Jesus. She showed courage as a woman in a world in which women were usually 5th and 6th class citizens (a good reason to be a follower of Jesus). From this perspective she must have been a good model in encouraging Mark to have confidence in terms of who he was and what he could do. She surely encouraged him to broaden his understanding, to encounter those who came from different backgrounds, and to travel to new and different places and observe different cultures. She must have supported and encouraged him to become educated, as evidenced in his skills as an amanuensis. Mark could read and write and someone had to encourage him and teach him.

B. Barnabas, his uncle – a native of the island of Cyprus, a member and leader of the church at Antioch, a compassionate and caring individual, probably well-to-do, saw the good and the potential in everyone he met: Gentiles at Antioch of Syria, who were welcomed into the church there where Barnabas was a leader, and quite possibly the most influential leader in the congregation; the poor in Jerusalem (sold a piece of property and gave the money to the apostles to help the needy); Saul of Tarsus, a persecutor of Christians in Jerusalem and Damascus; John Mark, like his uncles, seemed to be comfortable with anyone that he encountered. Barnabas was also willing to step aside as the main leader, if necessary, as

evidenced in the case of Paul on the first missionary journey. It seems that Mark was also very comfortable with others leading and with him following according to his own gifts and talents.

C. The Apostle Paul – Mark saw in Paul a ferociously committed individual, who fought for faith and freedom; an intellect and a theologian/philosopher; one who was willing to change and never look back; a champion to the Gentile mission; one who unlike his Uncle Barnabas gave you one chance and one chance only; one who was willing to face whatever obstacle, whatever challenge, in order to do what he truly believed was right; one who would stand up to Barnabas, to the leaders in the Jerusalem church, even to the great Apostle Peter when he (Paul) felt that the gospel was being compromised; he was willing to die for the cause of Christianity and he apparently did. Paul was a demanding individual, who made great demands upon himself. He was caring and compassionate, but also straightforward and insistent upon doing things his own way. He made enormous contributions to the early church, especially in terms of opening the door to Gentiles and in advancing the Christian faith throughout the Roman Empire. He was willing to die for his faith, and according to church tradition, did so.

D. The Apostle Peter – Mark was his secretary or amanuensis, according to Papias; Peter was bold and boisterous; his heart if not always his mind was in the right place; he was enthusiastic and also humble; he was a man of courage and conviction, spent time under arrest and in prison; he was a preacher more than a philosopher; he was a missionary as well, although we don't mention this as much as we do the work of Paul; also was willing to live for and die for the Gospel, and he apparently did.

E. The other Apostles – although we don't have any direct information, Mark certainly encountered the other apostles of Jesus in his life, especially during his early days in Jerusalem. His connections with them would certainly provide an important quality to his Gospel.

F. So the bottom line is that the influences in the life of Mark uniquely qualified him to write the first Gospel. He learned the stories and the teachings of Jesus from the very best leaders in the early church. He observed some of the finest models of Christian living that one could find. He worked with Christians of courage and conviction. And his journey enabled him to understand the universal nature of the Christian faith, while appreciating the Jewish foundation. He was certainly qualified for his unique contribution.

Furthermore, most scholars believe that the evidence points to the fact that when Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels, that both used Mark as the foundation and outline of their records and that they added material that was available to each one, respectively. So, when we read from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we continue to be influenced by Mark's contributions. One cannot underestimate the importance of the first and shortest Gospel in the Christian canon.

II. Personal Influences in my life: In examining the life and influences upon Mark, I found reason to look at those who have influenced me.

A. My mother, Hazel Watkins Yarbrough – insisted that I and my sister and brother get an education.

B. My father, Roy Slayden Yarbrough – he simply set an example much like that of Barnabas. He very seldom said anything negative about people (with one exception when he would speak of a man whom he thought had swindled my grandmother out of the family farm). But my dad was usually quiet

and calm, positive toward others. It is interesting that my Dad's sisters and brothers also looked to him for leadership, even though he was the youngest living son by my grandmother. My Dad, through the influence of my Mother, moved away from Tennessee to work in a factory in Illinois, where he could do a better job of providing for his family and where his children would get a better education. I can simply state that in this regard my parents' children benefitted more than my many cousins, and for that I am grateful.

C. Janis – she has influenced me in many ways. The most visible is getting me through graduate school by typing countless research papers, including the first draft of my doctoral dissertation, on our electric, portable, Smith Corona typewriter, which I assumed was the greatest and final technological advance in preparing written documents. Janis also has set a supreme example of sacrificial giving to others who need support or help.

D. Good friends: Delores Keller, her son Frank and Mike Merrick, Dan Cochran, and so many others. They are all different in so many ways, and that has been a plus in my journey.

E. Professors – I have been influenced by a number of college professors along the way: Dr. Kenneth Moore; Dr. H.K. Neely (who was also a colleague); Dr. Glenn Hilburn.

F. Colleagues: Warren McWilliams, Carolyn Patton, Carolyn Cole

G. What I am trying to say is that none of us get to be who we are on our own. We all need others and are shaped, usually by the good qualities, of others. Every one of us has a unique role in the scheme of things, and in a more defined level, in the role of the Christian community, and for most of us in this particular congregation.

## **CONCLUSION:**

This morning I want to conclude with a challenge that the story of Mark gives to each one of us to remember those who made a difference in our respective lives and what this tells us as believers. Who are those people who have made a difference in your life? Who is it that caused you to radically change, or to reshape your understanding of people, the world, and the church? To whom do you owe a debt of gratitude when it comes to evaluating your understanding, your place, and your contributions to your world and your faith?

And let me also remind you that who you are and who you may become will contribute to people of the next and following generations, whether your name continues on or not. Mark lived 2,000 years ago. But the influence of his Gospel, and the influence of those that touched his life, are evident in the pages of this book that we continue to study and appreciate even today. And, that influence is not about to diminish.

My life and your life will bear fruit in the lives of others. If we contribute to someone becoming a better person, and person who helps those around him or her, and that influence spreads to the next generation, then the cycle of our lives will come full circle. Who knows what unnamed person years from now will be a better person and make a greater contribution simply because you and I made a difference in someone's life, and that person made a difference, and that person made a difference, and so on and so on.

So, in conclusion, how the Gospel of Mark came to be written is a story that has a lot more to it than we normally realize. And that story reminds us of the importance of our own story, and the influences upon our lives, and the influence of our lives. We all are important, and let us be reminded of that on this day!