

New Testament History and Literature

Lecture 9: Mark — Background and Themes

Author: Dr. Dave Mathewson | Session 9

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson examines the Gospel of Mark within its first-century pastoral context, focusing on its encouragement for a suffering Christian community in Rome. He analyzes Mark's distinct structural division—balancing Jesus' triumphant public ministry with His suffering and passion—and explores central theological themes such as the New Exodus, the Suffering Servant, the Son of Man, and the Messianic Secret. Mathewson also addresses the negative portrayal of the disciples and the deliberate, abrupt ending at Mark 16:8, demonstrating how both highlight human weakness while pointing to the enduring promise of Jesus' presence.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Gospel of Mark

- A. Context within the Gospels course (moving quickly after Matthew)
- B. Class announcements: Upcoming Exam 1 and Extra Credit review session
- C. Opening prayer and reflection on bridging 1st and 21st century contexts
- D. Brief review of Matthew's distinct themes (Jesus as Teacher, Messiah/Son of David, New Moses, Climax of OT, Son of God)

II. Author and Historical Setting

A. Authorship

- 1. Gospel attributions originated in later church tradition
- 2. Testimony of Papias: Mark as interpreter and associate of Peter (also connected to Paul)

B. Audience and Purpose

- 1. Association with the city of Rome and house churches
- 2. Hostile environment under Emperor Nero and Christian struggles
- 3. Pastoral focus: Encouraging readers by showing that suffering is central to the Gospel and following Christ

III. Structure and Literary Organization

A. Introduction (1:1–13): Key characters and thematic orientation

B. Triumphant Ministry (1:14–8:30)

1. Focus on miracles, authority, deity, and forgiveness of sins
2. Historical imagery: Traditional association with the Lion

C. Suffering and Death (8:31–16:8)

1. Focus on Jesus' passion, death, and march toward Jerusalem
2. Significance of equal proportions (~50% devoted to passion): Victory achieved through suffering

IV. Key Theological Themes

A. Inauguration of the New Exodus

1. Rooted in Isaiah's prophecies of divine deliverance from exile
2. Jesus fulfilling expectations of new creation, restoration, and redemption

B. The Suffering Servant Motif

1. Key Verse: Mark 10:45 ("Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve...")
2. Allusion to Isaiah 53 suffering servant

C. Balance Between Deity and Humanity

1. Divine prerogative demonstrated (e.g., forgiving paralytic's sins in Mark 2:5)
2. Countering first-century "divine man" concepts by emphasizing human suffering

D. The "Son of Man" Title

1. Background in Daniel 7 (exalted, heavenly figure receiving an eternal kingdom)
2. Dual function in Mark: Expressing deity/glory and predicting suffering

E. The Messianic Secret (Secret Messiah)

1. Command to remain silent regarding Jesus' identity
2. Reasons: Preventing political misunderstandings of a military messiah and requiring the resurrection for full comprehension

F. Portrayal of the Disciples

1. Disciples depicted as obtuse, weak, failing, and lacking faith
2. Pastoral function: Encouraging struggling readers by showing Christ's grace to flawed followers

G. Emphasis on the "Gospel" (Good News)

1. Used 7 times in Mark (more frequently than other Gospels)
2. Dual resonance: Fulfillment of Isaiah's promises and subversive contrast to Roman imperial announcements

V. The Problem of the Ending (Mark 16:1–8 vs. 16:9–20)

A. Textual Evidence and Manuscripts

1. Canonical brackets and manuscript notes (oldest and best manuscripts end at 16:8)

2. Later additions (16:9–20 and shorter endings) inserted by scribes seeking traditional resolution

B. Literary and Pastoral Purpose of the Abrupt Ending (16:8)

1. Ends with fear and silence of the women at the empty tomb
2. Mirrors the readers' own fears, struggles, and perceived failures in Rome
3. Counterbalanced by angelic promise of Jesus going ahead to Galilee (16:6–7), emphasizing enduring divine presence and fulfillment