

The Gospel According to Mark, 1:1-2

The Beginning of the Gospel

1. "Beginning"

Because verse 1 begins the book and lacks a verb, many versions and commentators take it as a title. However, it is followed by the formulaic phrase, "as it is written," which is not generally used in Greek to begin a new sentence. ⁽¹⁾ In addition, the phrase always links the quotation following it with the content that precedes it. This also supplies the missing verb. Grammatically, therefore, verses 2-4 seem to link verse 1 ("the beginning of the gospel") to the ministry of John the Baptist. ⁽²⁾ The sense of this is given in good form by the J. B. Phillips paraphrase:

"The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God begins with the fulfilment of this prophecy of Isaiah—'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you'. 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'. For John came and began to baptise men in the desert..." (Mark 1:1-4, Phillips)

John was the forerunner, the one who would prepare the people of Israel spiritually for the arrival of the Christ (the anointed one, the king). The Christ would in turn establish the kingdom of God (Mk 1:15). This kingdom, heralded by the prophets (e.g., Dan 2), begins with John's call to repentance, as Isaiah and Malachi prophesied (Mk 1:2).

2. "Gospel"

The Greek word means "good news". This word is found in many places in the prophecies of Isaiah. Mark was strongly influenced by the book of Isaiah. ⁽³⁾ We shall see evidence of that as we go through Mark's gospel. Isa 40:1-11 contains both the word "good news" (v. 9, in the form of a "herald of good news") and the prophecy of John's ministry in v. 3. This is not a coincidence. The "good news" is also found in 52:7 ("him who brings good news"). In the larger context of Isa. 52-53, Isaiah proclaims a new Exodus from captivity in Assyria (52:3, 4, 12), an Exodus that will require the slaughter of a new Passover Lamb (Isa 53:7; cf. John 1:29 and 1 Cor. 5:7. Recall that Jesus was crucified during Passover week).

The gospel is the message "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures ... then at his coming those who belong to Christ [shall be raised]. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (1 Cor 15:3-4, 23-26) The gospel includes the establishment of the kingdom (cf. Mk 1:14-15).

3. "of Jesus"

Meaning, "concerning Jesus," including the testimony of Jesus about Himself. "Jesus" is a Greek form of "Joshua". Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the wilderness in the Exodus, and Joshua led them out of the wilderness and into the promised land of Canaan. The name means "the LORD will save". The Letter to the Hebrews points out that though the people under Joshua did not enter God's rest (4:8), we who believe in Jesus have entered that rest (4:3). How wonderful it is to have a great high priest "who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God" (4:14)! He is in heaven, and we are in Him! Let us "hold fast our confession".

4. "Christ"

A title, not a surname. The word in Greek is equivalent to the Hebrew word "Messiah". Both mean "anointed", referring to the practice of pouring oil on the head of a new king to set him apart (1 Sam 10:1; 16:12-13; 6:42). Oil could signify gladness (Ruth 3:3), dedication (Gen. 28:18), and health (Jas 5:14). All these blessings would attend the arrival of the Christ, the anointed King (Isa. 61:1-3; cf. Lk 4:16-21). The oil also signified the presence of the Holy Spirit with the king, endowing Him for service (1 Sam. 16:13). In the gospel accounts, the Son is "anointed" directly by the Father, not with oil but with the Holy Spirit.

5. "the Son of God"

Even in the old kingdom, the king of Israel was considered the son of God by adoption (1 Chron 28:6). But the King that John will be announcing is the virgin-born "Immanuel" ("God with Us", Isa 7:14) and "Mighty God" (9:6) of Isaiah's prophecies. The coming one will be God's Son by nature, not by adoption: "The word 'son' is without the article in the Greek text. Emphasis is therefore upon character or nature. Jesus Christ is the Son of God by nature ... He possesses co-eternally, the same essence as God the Father." ⁽⁴⁾

6. The Witness of Scripture

Mark points to the testimony of Scripture in "Isaiah the prophet". He quotes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint. If you compare the text of Mark with the sources in the Old Testament, you will find that the wording is slightly different in places. This is because most English translations of the OT are from the original Hebrew.

The testimony actually blends Mal. 3:1, Exo 23:20 and Isa 40:3 in a seemingly unusual way:

"Behold, I send my messenger" (Mal 3:1a)
"before your face," (Exo 23:20)
"and he will prepare your way," (Mal 3:1b)
"the voice of one crying in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord;
"make his paths straight, (Isa. 40:3)".

However, according to scholars familiar with the Jewish literary practices of the time, this blending was typical. ⁽⁵⁾

Two questions confront us: 1) Why does Mark blend these particular scriptures, and 2) Why does Mark attribute the entire testimony to Isaiah?

1) What does this blended testimony of Scripture mean?

a. Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1 both speak of a "messenger" (the same word can mean "messenger" or "angel") and both speak of "the way". In the larger context of Malachi, the way is prepared for the Lord to come to His temple and judge His people. In Exodus the angel or messenger is a "guard" on the way through the wilderness for the people of Israel. It is not that Exodus 23:20 is to be understood as prophetic, but that they understood that God acts in a consistent way, according to patterns. If God will deliver his people again from bondage, He will follow the pattern He established when He delivered His people from Egypt: by sending a messenger to help lead them in the wilderness.

b. The Isaiah 40:3 verse, considered in its wider context, also has a messenger, "a voice," preparing the way in the wilderness for the presence of God to pass through on His way to rule and shepherd His people Israel. It is a promise of the restoration of the kingdom in Zion (Jerusalem).

Put together, the quotations convey the thought that as God provided a messenger in the wilderness when He brought them out of Egypt, so He will give them another messenger to help them in the wilderness to prepare them for His visitation to judge His people and once again establish His kingdom rule. John is the messenger sent to the people in the wilderness, and Jesus is the visitation of God to judge and rule them.

2) Why is only Isaiah cited?

The KJV and NKJV read simply, "the prophets". Obviously if that is the original text, there is no problem. The majority of the Greek manuscripts read that way, others say "Isaiah the prophet". If the latter is the correct reading, Mark is simply following his conviction that Isaiah is the lead testimony to John the Baptist, and the other two quotations are supporting witnesses.

"The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it" (Lk 16:16).

Notes

1. **France, R. T.:** "The καὶ ὡς [as] which begins v. 2 indicates that v. 1 should not be regarded as syntactically free-standing, since does not normally introduce a new sentence, but links what follows with what precedes ... and this is regularly the case with καὶ ὡς γέγραπται [as it is written]." (The Gospel of Mark [New International Greek Testament Commentary], p. 50).
2. **Lane, Mark:** "Mark's intention is grasped by reading verses 1-4 as a single sentence: the good news *concerns* Jesus the Christ, but it *begins* with the wilderness prophet John" (The Gospel According to Mark [New International Commentary on the New Testament], p. 42).
3. **Dowd, Sharyn:** "[Mark's] story will unfold as an interpretation of the gospel according to Isaiah: the one God who reigns over all the nations has anointed a warrior-king to lead God's captive people, both Jews and Gentiles, out of bondage into freedom" (Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel, p. 9).
4. **Wuest, Kenneth.** "Mark in the Greek New Testament" from Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament for the English Reader, Volume One, p. 11-12.
5. **Keener, Craig S.:** "Jewish teachers often combined several texts or parts of texts, especially if they had a key word or words in common (here, "prepare the way"). Because they were so learned in the Scriptures, they did not have to say which texts they were quoting and often assumed the context without quoting it" (The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament, p.135).