

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

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The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke have long been called the “synoptic” gospels due to the similarity of content. Clearly each Gospel relied on a similar collection and organization of stories, experiences and observations of Jesus. Modern Biblical scholars advanced the theory that those many small “stories” circulated independently within the early Christian community immediately following Jesus’ resurrection, and were only later assembled into the “synoptic” Gospels. Those who developed and embraced that theory of Gospel formation tended to reject the Gospel of John. Certainly the characters were the same in John’s Gospel and stories of the crucifixion and resurrection were very similar, but otherwise there were dramatic differences. The judgement that John’s was a bogus gospel held until archeologists in the modern period actually uncovered some of the physical sites mentioned only in John. The point served to illustrate the misplaced tenacity of the so called “more learned” Biblical scholars. But the fundamentalists were equally tenacious in some of their own assumptions about Scripture. Most pertinent to this essay was the assumption that the purpose of all of the Gospels was the story of Jesus’ life and ministry. The first problem with that assumption was Paul’s letter to the Romans:

“ . . . when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.” (Romans 2:16 Revised Standard Version)

Paul called his letter to the Romans, “his gospel,” but it had nothing to do with the story of Jesus’ life and ministry. It was Paul’s understanding of the “good news.” And gospel meant “good news.” The Gospel of Mark was likewise Mark’s version of the “good news,” and its principal intent was not the story of Jesus’ life and ministry. It was a recollection, for the benefit of the early Christian community, of Jesus’ teaching on discipleship.

A detailed outline of Mark’s Gospel confirmed Mark’s principal intent was discipleship.

1. Jesus was called into public ministry and his authority and identity was established through a public ministry characterized by numerous miraculous. Mark 1:1 thru 8:26.
 - a. The Father orchestrated the launch of Jesus' public ministry with a public baptism by John the Baptist which culminated in a declaration of Jesus' identity. (Mark 1:1 thru 1:13 RSV)
 - i. Mark quoted the prophet Isaiah to establish the significance of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry:
 - (1) *"As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"* (Mark 1:2 RSV)
 - ii. John the Baptist confirmed the importance of Jesus' public ministry:
 - (1) *"After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* (Mark 1:7-8 RSV)
 - iii. The Father confirmed the identity of Jesus when he came up out of the water after baptism:
 - (1) *"And when he 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, 'Thou art my beloved Son, with thee I am well pleased.'"* (Mark 1:10-11 RSV)
 - (a) Note that the word spoken to Jesus by the Father when Jesus rose from the baptismal water was interpreted a little differently in each of the synoptic gospels. That meant it was not clearly understood by others. Indeed it required a series of public miracles before Peter clearly understood Jesus' true identity and authority.
 - iv. Jesus was driven into the wilderness for forty days to be purged of any lingering delusions about the nature and consequence of his public ministry. (Mark 1:12-13 RSV)
 - b. Jesus returned from the wilderness to Galilee and launched a public ministry characterized by the selection of his disciples and a series of increasingly profound miracles. (Mark 1:16 thru 8:26 RSV)
 - i. *"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.’” (Mark 1:14-15 RSV)

- ii. *“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. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.’” (Mark 1:16-17 RSV)*
 - iii. *“That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together about the door. 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.” (Mark 1:32-34 RSV)*
 - iv. *“And as he passed on, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him.” (Mark 2:13-14 RSV)*
 - v. *“And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he [Jesus] was alone on the land. And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out; for they all saw him, and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; have no fear.’ And he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded. . . .” (Mark 6:47-51 RSV)*
 - vi. *“In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him, and said to them, ‘I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way.’ And his disciples answered him, ‘How can one feed these men and bread here in the desert?’ And he asked them, ‘How many loaves have you?’ They said, ‘Seven.’ And he commanded the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. And they had a few small fish; and having blessed them, he commanded that these also should be set before them. And they ate, and were satisfied; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. And there were about four thousand people.” (Mark 8:1-9 RSV)*
- c. The period of public ministry which included the call of the disciples and the series of increasingly profound miracles ended with the only miracle that apparently did not result in a complete healing on the first attempt.
- i. *“And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man, and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind*

man by the hand, and led him out of the village; and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, he asked him, 'Do you see anything?' And he looked up and said, 'I see men; but they look like trees, walking.' Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly. And he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even enter the village.'" (Mark 8:22-26 RSV)

- (1) That miracle was very important in the structure and intent of Mark's Gospel. First, it was the only miracle in which Jesus appeared to have some difficulty. Second, after the man was healed he was abruptly sent the man away and told him not to "even enter the village." Third, immediately after that miracle Jesus withdrew from public ministry and began the formation of the disciples' character. Fourth, a miraculous healing of a blind man occurred at the end of the disciples exclusive teaching and just before they entered Jerusalem (Mark 10:46-52 RSV). Clearly both miracles were meant to carry symbolic meaning, and served to frame a period of intense teaching. Jesus, in effect, declared that miracles alone did not constitute the full expression of his identity and authority, nor the principal purpose of his ministry. The awkward miracle was followed by the introduction of the 'Messianic secret,' "*And he sent him home, saying, 'Do not even enter the village.'*" 8:26 That admonition of secrecy was reiterated more clearly after Peter's recognition that Jesus was the Christ: "*And he charged him to tell no one about him.*" 8:30 Mark's intent was to establish the period of disciple formation that followed. That process had to be experienced in 1) its entirety, and 2) in the exact sequence set forth. Interaction with the public during that period of the disciples' character formation would have only served to confuse and derail that intense and structured teaching. Mark also intended to make clear to the Christian community that understanding the disciples' character formation was essential to understanding the principal objective of Jesus' ministry, and the process essential to achieving the future mission objectives of the Christian community.
2. With the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida Jesus ended his public ministry in Galilee. He and the disciples then embarked on the journey to Jerusalem. But Mark's narrow use of the miracle stories as a vehicle for establishing Jesus' authority and identity, the introduction of the 'Messianic secret,' and the abrupt withdrawal from public ministry, belied the common assumption that Mark merely recorded a factual description of events that transpired during that journey. The key to Mark's real purpose in 8:27 thru 10:52 was the precise repetition of the formula, ". . . the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." Mark 8:27 thru 10:52.

- a. Jesus began the intense formation of the disciples character by requesting confirmation that they fully understood his identity and authority.
 - i. *“But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, ‘You are the Christ.’”* (Mark 8:29-30)

- b. Peter’s recognition that Jesus was the Christ was followed by Jesus’ reiteration of the ‘Messianic secret,’ *“And he charged them to tell no one about him,”* (8:30) and then the declaration of the key formula:
 - i. *“And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”* (Mark 8:31 RSV)
 - (1) The principal event in the first stage of the disciples’ character formation was the transfiguration.
 - (a) *“And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves,; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus.”* (Mark 9:2-3 RSV).
 - (i) A disciple must first know the Lord as a transcendent being . . . as God . . . as totally other . . . as totally beyond human ability to add or detract. Mark not only declared that to be the first stage in the formation of the first twelve disciples, but declared that to be the model and expectation of the Christian community as it looked forward to the missionary objectives established by Jesus.
 - (b) After the transfiguration, Jesus, Peter, James and John returned to join the disciples who had remained behind. They found them embroiled in an altercation over their failure to cast out a “dumb spirit.” Jesus rectified the situation by casting out the dumb spirit. Later, in private, the disciples asked why they had failed, Jesus responded: *“This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”* (Mark 9:28-29 RSV) But the Greek word translated as “prayer,” was “pros-

euchomai.”^{1 2} Prayer in the common parlance was to “ask.” More specifically, to ask God . . . for something. Ask for healing, blessing, vision, courage, et al. Many of the words translated in the New Testament as pray or prayer did mean to ask, beg, or demand. But “pros-euchomai” did not derive from any root associated with any of the other words translated as prayer. Indeed, it was a word that did not exist until used in the New Testament. That meant Mark and the others who used that word in the New Testament invented it for their specific use. So we have no way of knowing its meaning except from the context in which it was used, and through our own experience in prayer. We do know it was used to describe the Father and the Son’s most intimate times together.

- (i) *“And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he pros-euchomai.”* (Mark 1:35)
- (ii) *“And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pros-euchomai.”* (Mark 6:46)
- (iii) *“And they went to a place which was called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here, while I pros-euchomai.’”* (Mark 14:32 RSV)
- (iv) *The best clue as to how the disciples understood “pros-euchomai,” was Luke’s use of the word in Luke 3:21:*
 - 1) *“Now when all people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was pros-euchomai, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, ‘Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.’”*

¹ Modern Concordance to the New Testament, Edited by Michael Darton, Doubleday & Company, Inc, Garden City, New York, 1976, pages 24-26.

² Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume II, Edited by Gerhard Kittel, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1965, pages 775-808.

2) Jesus' baptism was an extremely important public affirmation of his identity and authority. With Luke's use of the word it can be said it was also a time of empowerment of Jesus by the Father and the Holy Spirit. Empowerment was necessary to prepare Jesus for forty days in the wilderness. It was also necessary as preparation for: 1) the selection of the disciples, 2) the feeding of the 5000, and 3) the crucifixion. Those were occasions when Jesus appeared to be especially intimate and transparent with the Father. And in each case he found the courage and wisdom to proceed. His instruction to the disciples that the only way they could cast out the "dumb spirit" was prosuchomai meant they also had to be empowered by the Father and the Holy Spirit. Even more important, the instruction was an invitation into a relationship with the Father, similar to his own.

c. The call of the disciples into an intimate relationship with Jesus and the Father triggered the second declaration of the formula.

i. *"The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise."* (Mark 9:31 RSV)

(1) The principal event in the second stage of the disciples development was the dispute over who was the most important.

(a) *"And they came to Capernaum and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you discussing on the way?' But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest."* (Mark 9:33-34 RSV)

(i) The conventional interpretation of the passage that focused on the disciples' apparent immaturity and vanity missed Mark's point completely. He declared that so called vanity to be the second stage of the disciples' formation, and therefore, an

essential stage in their development. They had just experienced the transcendence of Christ in the transfiguration. Transcendence meant totally other, totally beyond, totally God. The experience did not engender feelings of superiority. But to have experienced the transfiguration and then to be invited into a relationship like that shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit most certainly led to vanity. To be “chosen by God!” . . . can there be anything in the universe more likely to cause one to feel special? . . . set apart from other humans? No, there was not. Vanity was not only inevitable, it was an essential confirmation that the person had really been called by God. Jesus did not reject the disciples for their vanity, but rather continued to form their character. Modern Christians who are keen to denounce vanity in young people may be warring against those who are truly called, and also warring against God’s purposes.

- d. The need for Jesus to continue the formation of the disciples’ character beyond the stage of vanity triggered the third expression of the formula:
 - i. *“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise.”* (Mark 10:33-34 RSV).
 - (1) Jesus rejected any attempt on the part of the disciples to focus on heavenly reward.
 - (a) *“‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ And he said to them, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ And Jesus said . . . to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”* (Mark 10:35-40 RSV)
 - (2) Jesus accomplished his objective with the disciples by teaching them they are called to be suffering servants just as he was a suffering servant.
 - (a) *“. . . whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also*

came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:44-45)

- e. The period of discipleship formation was marked as completed with the healing of the blind beggar, Bartimaeus.
 - i. “. . . as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent; but he cried out all the more, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’ And Jesus stopped and said, ‘Call him.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; rise, he is calling you.’ And throwing off his mantle he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ And the blind man said to him, ‘Master, let me receive my sight.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Go your way; your faith has made you well.’ And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.” (Mark 10:46-52 RSV)
 - (1) During the Galilean ministry Mark used miracles as a mechanism for establishing Jesus’ identity and authority. Once Peter fully understood that identity and authority Jesus withdrew from public ministry and began the period of intense disciple formation. That period began with the awkward healing of the blind man at Bethsaida and the introduction of the Messianic secret, and ended with the healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus and the triumphant return to public ministry in Jerusalem. Mark thereby established that the process of discipleship formation described in his Gospel was essential to the early Christian community for their future success in responding to Jesus, and success in accomplishing the missionary objectives set down for them. It must also be noted that the call, and subsequent ministry of the Apostle Paul developed according to Mark’s model. Paul experienced the transcendence of Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-9 RSV), went through a period of believing he was the most important disciple (Galatians 1:11 thru 2:14 RSV), and then his mature period as a suffering servant during his three missionary journeys.
- 3. The third phase of the disciples’ formation began when they entered Jerusalem. (Mark 11:1 thru 12:44). Jesus signaled the nature and importance of that phase of formation with the parable of the “fig tree.”
 - a. *“On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from*

you again.’ And his disciples heard it.” (Mark 11:12-14 RSV).

b. *“As they passed by . . . [the next] . . . morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, ‘Master,’ look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered.’” (Mark 11:20-21 RSV).*

i. Jesus used the symbol of the withered fruit tree to affirm the power and dependability of the disciples’ new intimate relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit necessary for them to bear fruit.

(1) *“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” (Mark 11:24-26 RSV).*

c. The disciples were taught that they must bear fruit or they will wither. And they were assured the power and the support necessary for success would be theirs as long as they stayed in intimate relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and as long as they continued to forgive the sins of others. Jesus then began to model for them the kind of ministry to which they had been called.

i. Jesus immediately asserted his authority over the existing religious establishment by chasing everyone out of the temple.

(1) *“And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple. And he taught, and said to them, ‘Is it not written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations?” But you have made it a den of robbers.” 11:15ff*

ii. Jesus refused to explain or defend his authority to the chief priests and scribes.

(1) *“By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” Jesus said to them, ‘I will ask you a question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?’ Answer me.’ And they argued with one another, ‘If we say ‘From Heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘From men?’ - they were afraid of the people, for all held that John was a real prophet. So they answered Jesus, ‘Wd do not know.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these*

things.” 11:27ff.

- iii. Jesus told the chief priests and scribes that God the Father intended to destroy the established religious institutions and its leaders if they failed to do his will.
 - (1) “A man planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a pit for the wine press, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed; and so with many others, some they beat and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son; finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ And they took him and killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others.” 12:1ff.
- iv. Jesus declared the true and most important command of the Father was, “. . . *you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.*” And the second was, “. . . *you must love your neighbor as yourself.*” 12:28ff In other words, relationship with God, and relationship with other humans, transcended both Institution and Law.
- v. Jesus declared his authority above any authority claimed by Israel, including any such claim that derived from history and/or tradition.
 - (1) “*How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declared, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I put thy enemies under thy feet.’ David himself calls him Lord; so how is he his son?’*” 12:35ff
- vi. That institutional authority as expressed in sacral tradition, no matter how revered in social custom, meant nothing to God.
 - (1) “*Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.*” 12:38ff

- vii. That the grace of giving was not acknowledged based on the amount of the giving, but only on the heart and attitude of the giver.
 - (1) “And he sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which made a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.’”
12:41ff
 - d. Jesus taught that the call of discipleship was a call to confront the apostasy that imbued religious institution and social custom, and thereby maintain the integrity of the Father’s plan of salvation. Mark’s objective in his Gospel was a declaration that discipleship, properly formed, was essential to the forward movement of the Christian community.
4. The disciples understood the nature and requirements of their call, and then are briefed by Jesus on the objectives of their mission after his death and resurrection. Mark 13:1 thru 13:37
- a. Jesus first reaffirmed that the authority of the established religious institutions in Israel would be completely destroyed.
 - i. “And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.’” 13:1ff
 - (1) The temple, as a physical structure, was indeed completely destroyed by the Roman army in 70 AD as part of a systematic destruction of Israel following the Jewish rebellion of 66 AD. A Council of Jewish scholars formalized the “Old Testament Canon,” at Jamnia in 90 AD. That formalization of scripture was a act of closure and a tacit acknowledgment that Israel’s role as the Father’s principal instrument in revelation history had ended.
 - b. Mark followed Jesus’ affirmation that Israel’s authority as the Father’s people on earth had ended, with a horrific description of future events most often interpreted by Christian Fundamentalists as a description of the “end of the world.” The “more scholarly” students of the Bible, however, held it to be a description of the Roman suppression of the Jewish revolt of 66 AD, which had already happened by the time Mark wrote his Gospel. Both solutions are wanting. If a literal description of the end of the world was embraced than Jesus was clearly wrong when

he said, *“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.”* 13:30 The world did not end before that generation passed away. But the so called “scholarly” interpretation was no less inadequate. The events in Jerusalem from 66 to 73 AD did not meet the criterion of, *“. . . nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines . . .”* 13:8

i. *“Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs.”* 13:5-8

ii. *“But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything away; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle. And alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not shortened the days, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. And then if any one says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed; I have told you all things beforehand. But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”* 13:14-25.

(1) It appeared unlikely that the two sections above, which described difficult future developments, were derived from observations of Rome’s suppression of Israel, because the language was far too general. If Mark intended to use that event to make a point in his Gospel, it would have been more compelling if referred to specifically and in detail. Furthermore, Mark inserted several contrary statements that are often ignored, but point to a different interpretation.

iii. Mark followed the first statement of difficult times to come with, *“. . . this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs.”* 13:8

(1) That was a positive statement, and meant the description of difficulties immediately preceding marked the

beginning of something very good.

- iv. And than said, *“But take heed to yourselves . . .”* 13:9
- (1) That statement immediately followed the statement about the “birth-pangs.” “Heed” could have been used to tell the disciples, and the Christian community to be concerned about themselves because they would be betrayed and persecuted. But that use of “heed” appeared unlikely because Jesus had previously taught the disciples they must be suffering servants, servants of all, and fearless in challenging the religious establishment. It was far more likely “to take heed,” was intended to mean “look to yourself,” for understanding of the events and social processes unfolding before you. That interpretation was confirmed several sentences later when Jesus said, “. . . *do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.*” 13:11 In other words, the disciples and the Christian community were intimately involved in the process that included the difficulties, they could best understand the nature and direction of those difficulties by looking to themselves, and those difficulties were the “beginning of the birth pangs.”
- v. Mark again followed the second description of horrific events with:
- (1) *“And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.”*
13:26-28
- (a) *“And then they will see the Son of man coming . . .”* was usually considered a declaration of Jesus’ return at the end of the world, and was always cast as a removal of the faithful from the earth to set the stage for a final judgement of the human race. Such a final judgement was deemed necessary due to the failure of ministry. But Jesus’ reference to the fig tree, “. . . *learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves . . .”* tied the return of the Son of man to the parable of the fig tree (11:12 & 11:20). Since that parable was used to teach the disciples they must bear fruit or wither, the description of a fig tree about to bear fruit meant the return of the Son of man was the consequence of effective ministry

- c. The description of a pattern that repeated many times. The so called “teaching on the end times,” began with Jesus’ declaration that the temple would be completely destroyed. Whether or not the temple had actually been destroyed by the Romans when Mark wrote his gospel was quite immaterial. The real intent of the passage was to establish that divine authority had passed from Israel to Jesus. Jesus’ response to the disciples’ question about when the literal events would occur led to a generalization of the theme of failure of existing false claims of divine authority followed by emergence of true expressions of divine authority. Elements of the general pattern are:
- i. *“Many will come in my name saying I am he . . .”* There will be many attempts to satisfy people’s need for God. Do not be led astray by such attempts.
 - ii. *“And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place . . .”* Two claims to absolute truth cannot coexist. They will war against each other until one prevails. Such struggles were the *“beginning of the birth-pangs.”*
 - iii. *“But take heed to yourselves . . .”* Look within yourselves and to all I have done and said to you to understand the process and how to effectively minister.
 - iv. *“, , , and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them.”* You must challenge the false claims of absolute truth in the very presence of the *“governors and kings”* who carry the authority of those false claims.
 - v. *“For in those days there will be such tribulation . . .”* Failure of false claims of divine truth, and failure of the social order constructed around those false claims, will cause chaos in the short term within the culture falsely constructed. Nothing is more difficult to survive than chaos.
 - vi. *“And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”* The risen Christ will construct a new, more divine order from the chaos.
 - vii. *“From the fig tree learn its lesson . . .”* The new construction of the Son of man, and the opportunity for that new construction, was the fruit of successful discipleship.
- d. The pattern developed by Mark was easily applied the Israel of his time.
- i. Israel claimed exclusive divine authority.
 - ii. The rebellion of 66 AD was initiated within Israel and was brutally crushed by Rome.

- iii. The Christian community survived that period quite successfully.
 - iv. Chaos reigned in Israel for an extended period.
 - v. It occurred before the first generation of Christians had passed away.
 - vi. Christianity blossomed into the period of the “Apostolic Fathers,” which was an immensely creative period of cultural expansion.
- e. The pattern was just as easily applied to the fall of the Roman Empire and the emergence of Western Civilization. It can be applied to innumerable positive developments in Western Civilization and the World. And it can certainly be applied to the “end times.”
5. Mark’s version of the crucifixion and resurrection was almost exactly the same as the other Gospels (Mark 14:1 thru 16:20). The close similarity in all of those accounts meant it was the most recent experience for all of the early Christians, and most certainly the events that caused them to grasp the true significance of Jesus’ life.
- a. Nevertheless, some minor differences should be noted. Matthew and Mark reported that Jesus told the disciples before the crucifixion that he would meet them in Galilee after the resurrection.
 - i. *“But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.”*
Matthew 26:32 & Mark 14:28
 - ii. No such statement was made in either Luke or John.
 - b. After the resurrection, Mark reported that *“a young man in a white robe,”* instructed them:
 - i. *“. . . he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.”* Mark 16:7
 - c. Matthew reported:
 - i. *“. . . he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.”* Matthew 28:7
 - d. Luke reported that Jesus met the disciples in Jerusalem. Luke 24:36ff
 - e. John reported that Jesus met the disciples in Jerusalem after the resurrection John 20:19ff and then later, after the ascension, he met them again by the Sea of Tiberias. John 21:1ff.
 - f. The effect of Matthew and Mark reporting that Jesus met the disciples in Galilee, while Luke and John reported that Jesus met the disciples in Jerusalem was to establish two sources of authority . . . those in Galilee and those in Jerusalem. The authority thereby identified with the group

in Galilee, validated Mark's teaching on discipleship.

6. Mark ended his Gospel with the unique: *"And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it."* 16:20
 - a. That final sentence served to validate the positive consequence for the early Christian community of our Lord's teaching on discipleship as presented in Mark's Gospel.

The Importance of Mark's Gospel

Mark structured his Gospel to set forth for the Christian community the manner and methods used by the Lord Jesus to form the disciples into effective and productive servants assigned the task of challenging the "false gods" of the secular order, and assisting in the construction of the Kingdom of God. By marking the beginning of that intense period of disciple formation with the introduction of the "Messianic secret," and withdrawing from public ministry, Mark declared the experience of formation must occur in the sequence he set forth, and must be experienced in total.

The process must begin with an experience of the transcendence of God.

Only then can the significance of the invitation into a intimate and empowering relationship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be properly understood.

Understanding the true significance of that "call," will inevitably generate vanity which is an essential confirmation of the experience of the transcendence of God, and a confirmation of the "call."

The disciple will be ineffective during the vain period, and will only become effective when vanity gives way to the acceptance of the role of servant, and acceptance of the difficult mission objectives set forth by the Lord Jesus for his disciples and for the Christian Community.

Mark wrote his Gospel for the benefit of the Christian community so that the process of disciple formation could continue as the community moved forward in history, and so the community could identify those who were so called, and understand the stages of their development. The most destructive force in Christendom is the propensity of the community to war against our Lord's purpose by rejecting those he has called before they have completed the process of disciple formation. Mark's Gospel was vitality important to the early Christian community, confirmed the call and development of the Apostle Paul, and is essential for Christendom to move forward in the very difficult modern period.