

GCSE RELIGIOUS STUDIES
**A STUDY OF THE GOSPEL
OF MARK**



**Colourpoint
Educational**



Rewarding Learning

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND TO MARK'S GOSPEL | 5 |
| Facts about the Gospels | 6 |
| Palestine at the time of Jesus | 9 |
| Historical and Political Context | 11 |
| Religious and Social Background | 13 |
| | |
| CHAPTER 2 THE IDENTITY OF JESUS | 19 |
| Titles of Jesus | 19 |
| The Ministry of John the Baptist | 20 |
| Peter's Declaration about Jesus | 22 |
| The Transfiguration | 23 |
| Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem | 25 |
| The Calming of the Storm | 26 |
| The Request of James and John | 27 |
| Blind Bartimaeus | 28 |
| | |
| CHAPTER 3 JESUS THE MIRACLE WORKER | 29 |
| A Man with an Evil Spirit | 29 |
| Jesus Heals Many People | 30 |
| A Man with a Dreaded Skin Disease | 30 |
| A Paralysed Man | 32 |
| A Man with a Paralysed Hand | 32 |
| Jairus' Daughter and a Woman | 33 |
| Jesus Feeds Five Thousand People | 34 |
| The Syro-Phoenician Woman's Daughter | 35 |
| A Boy with an Evil Spirit | 36 |
| | |
| CHAPTER 4 THE KINGDOM OF GOD | 38 |
| The Coming of the Kingdom | 38 |
| Parables | 38 |
| The Parable of the Sower | 39 |
| The Lamp on a Stand | 41 |

The Parable of the Growing Seed 41
 The Parable of the Mustard Seed 41
 Jesus and the Children 42
 Entry into the Kingdom..... 42
 The Great Commandment..... 43

CHAPTER 5 THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS 45

The Plot Against Jesus 45
 Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus 45
 The Passover Meal and the Last Supper..... 46
 The Events at Gethsemane and Jesus’ Arrest 47
 Jesus Before the Council 49
 Jesus Before Pilate 50
 The Crucifixion and Death of Jesus 51
 The Burial of Jesus 53
 Jesus’ Resurrection 54

CHAPTER 6 THE ROLE AND NATURE OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP 57

Jesus Calls His Disciples 58
 Jesus’ Attitude to the Sabbath 59
 Jesus chooses the Twelve 59
 The Challenge of Witnessing..... 61
 The Mission of the Twelve 61
 The Cost of being a Disciple 63
 Jesus at the Temple 64
 Coping with Temptation 64
 The Question about Paying Taxes 65
 The Widow’s Offering..... 66
 The Pressure of Discipleship 66

INDEX..... 68



For your folder



In a Group



Further Thinking

BACKGROUND TO MARK'S GOSPEL

The word 'Gospel' means 'good news'. It comes from the Anglo-Saxon *god spel*, which can mean 'spell it out', 'speak out' or 'proclaim'. In the Bible the Gospels proclaim the good news about Jesus. There are four Gospels with four different writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.



Each records the events of Jesus' life, death and Resurrection. Three of the Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – are very similar in content and structure. These are called the 'Synoptic Gospels'. The word *synoptic* means 'shared view'. Many passages from these three Gospels can be placed side by side to show how similar they are. For example, the story of Jesus' baptism and temptations (Matthew 3:13–4:11, Mark 1:9–13, Luke 3:19–4:19). The fourth account of Jesus' life, John's Gospel, is very different in style and content to the other three.

After Jesus' death, Resurrection and Ascension, many stories circulated about him. His disciples and

close friends would have recalled incidents that other people would know nothing of. Each group of people would probably have remembered different events. At first these stories about Jesus were passed around by word of mouth. This is known as the '**Christian Oral Tradition**'.

Many of the early Christians believed that Jesus would return during their lifetime (the idea that Jesus will return is called the 'second coming' or *parousia*.) However, as time passed, those first Christians who had met Jesus began to die out. It was important that the stories about Jesus were preserved, so they were written down.

Besides the four Gospels included in the New Testament, there are a number of other documents that claim to give written accounts of Jesus' life. These other accounts have not been accepted by the Church and are considered unreliable. Often they are written far too long after the event to be trusted.

The Gospel writers are called 'evangelists', that is, those who spread the good news about Jesus. Each writer tells the story of Jesus' life and death in their own unique way.

It would be too simple to describe the Gospels as 'biographies' of Jesus. You won't find many details on what Jesus looked like or what he did when he was growing up. Instead, the Gospel writers focused on the things that were important to them.

FACTS ABOUT THE GOSPELS

No one is certain when the Gospels first emerged. You might assume that Matthew's Gospel is the earliest book in the New Testament, because it comes first. However, if you look at the **timeline** you will realise that Paul's letters, such as Romans and Corinthians, seem to be the earliest books. Most scholars argue that Mark's Gospel, the shortest one, was the first to appear (around AD64–65).

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| 63 BC | Romans take over Palestine |
| 4 BC 5 BC | Mary gives birth to Jesus |
| AD 25 | Jesus begins his public ministry of preaching and healing |
| AD 28 | Jesus is crucified by Pontius Pilate On the third day Jesus rises from the dead 40 days later Jesus ascends into heaven 10 days later the Holy Spirit is poured out on the believers |
| AD 45 | Paul takes the news about Jesus to Asia Minor and Southern Europe |
| AD 51 | Paul writes letters Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus and Rome |
| AD 63 AD 65 | Mark's Gospel was written |
| AD 70 AD 80 | Matthew's and Luke's Gospels were written |
| AD 90 AD 100 | John's Gospel was written |

These dates are estimated.

Who was Mark?

Mark, sometimes called 'John Mark' is mentioned a lot in the New Testament. Most scholars believe that he is the author of Mark's Gospel. We know that he lived in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12) and that he was probably a Greek-speaking Jew (a Hellenist). Mark was not one of the twelve apostles, although he seems to have been a good friend of the apostle Peter. Many scholars believe that Peter's preaching provided Mark with much of his material. Mark also set out with Paul on his First Missionary Journey (Acts 12:25).

THE PURPOSE OF MARK'S GOSPEL

The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, tell us about the life of Jesus. Each has a different emphasis which shows us what was important to the author and his readers. Each Gospel writer or evangelist had a 'target audience' in mind when writing his Gospel.

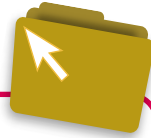
Some people believe that Mark was written at the time when Christians were suffering persecution under the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero, and that he was writing for the persecuted Christians. A third of the Gospel focuses on Jesus' suffering and death. Readers of the Gospel are advised to "*take up your cross and follow me*" (Mark 8:34-35), which suggests that they may have been under the threat of persecution.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MARK'S GOSPEL

• Style

The style of Mark's Gospel is simple, brief and blunt. Mark does not waste words but gets straight to the point. It is the shortest of the four Gospels.

There are very few references made to the Jewish scriptures and Jewish customs are explained, which suggests that Mark was writing for a Gentile (non-Jewish) audience. Mark also explains the meaning of any words that he quotes in Aramaic, the language used in Palestine at the time.

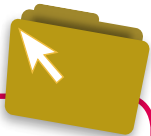
FOR YOUR FOLDER

Look up the following verses and pick out the Aramaic word used by Mark along with the English translation:

| Reference | Aramaic word/phrase | Translation |
|-----------|---------------------|-------------|
| 3:17 | | |
| 5:41 | | |
| 7:34 | | |
| 15:22 | | |
| 15:34 | | |

- **An eye-witness account**

Another characteristic of Mark's Gospel is that on a number of occasions it seems that an eye-witness must have been present at events. For example, there may be a particular emphasis on an exact detail. Many scholars believe that the eye-witness was the apostle Peter who was a close friend of Mark's.

FOR YOUR FOLDER

Look up the following verses and note the detail that Mark gives which suggests he is describing an eye-witness account:

| Reference | Detail |
|-----------|--------|
| 4:35 - 38 | |
| 6:39 | |
| 10:32 | |
| 10:50 | |

- **Failure**

Jesus' disciples left everything to follow him. However, throughout Mark's Gospel we are reminded of their failure to understand him. During the last week of Jesus' life Judas betrayed him; Peter denied him; the other disciples ran away and left him. None of the disciples are mentioned at the crucifixion or at his tomb and Mark does not record that Jesus met them after his Resurrection.

It is not only the failure of the disciples that is highlighted in Mark's Gospel. The religious leaders failed to accept that Jesus was the Messiah and plotted to kill him. The people of Nazareth rejected him. The Sanhedrin condemned Jesus to death and he was mocked by the ordinary people when he was dying on the cross.

- **Suffering**

All of the Gospels give an account of Jesus' last days but Mark's Gospel seems to particularly focus on the suffering and death of Jesus. Mark does not record the Resurrection of Jesus, although he does mention the empty tomb. Jesus is presented as the Messiah who must suffer and die before he rises again to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus also expected his followers to suffer (see Mark 8:34).

- **The Messianic Secret**

This is one of the most prominent themes of the Gospel. Mark presents Jesus as a secretive and mysterious figure. He teaches his disciples in secret and he orders those he has healed not to tell anyone. He commands demons to be quiet when they begin to announce his identity, and his disciples fail to understand who he really is.

Mark may have used the idea of the Messianic Secret to explain how the Messiah must suffer and die. This was not what the vast majority of Jesus' followers expected. In Mark, Jesus' disciples witness his miracles and listen to his teaching and identify him as the Messiah, but they did not expect him to be put to death at a young age.

FOR YOUR FOLDER



1. Do you think that Mark's Gospel was written at a time of persecution of Christians?
2. What evidence is there that Mark's Gospel contains eye-witness accounts?
3. Describe two characteristics of Mark's Gospel.

FURTHER THINKING



Did you know that each of the Gospel writers has his own symbol? Mark's symbol is a lion. This may be because his Gospel begins with John the Baptist crying out in the desert, like a roaring lion. Matthew's symbol is a man, Luke's is a calf and John's is an eagle. Find out how these other symbols came about.



The Structure of Mark's Gospel

Mark's Gospel is 16 chapters long. It can be divided in the following way which helps the reader to understand what was important to Mark:

| REFERENCE | CONTENT |
|------------|--|
| 1:1-8 | John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus |
| 1:9-11 | God identifies Jesus as the Messiah at Jesus' baptism and at the Transfiguration |
| 1:12-13 | The Temptation of Jesus before the beginning of his ministry |
| 9:1-8 | God identifies Jesus as the Messiah at the Transfiguration |
| 1:14-13:37 | The teaching and deeds of Jesus |
| 14:1-16:20 | The suffering, death, burial and Resurrection of Jesus |

Before we look at the important events in the life of Jesus it will be useful to find out as much as possible about the place and time in which he lived. Background information that helps us to understand those events includes the geographical, political, social and religious background of Palestine at the time of Jesus.

PALESTINE AT THE TIME OF JESUS

Geographical Context

Jesus lived in a place called Palestine. Today this land is occupied by the countries of Israel and Palestine. It is an extremely important place for Jews, Christians and Muslims, for whom it has deep, sacred significance.



TIP

As you work your way through this book and come across the names of different places it is a good idea to look back to this map to see exactly where the places were.

Key Places in Palestine for a study of the life and ministry of Jesus

The River Jordan

The Jordan River runs from the uplands of Galilee into the Sea of Galilee, then through the Rift Valley

and into the Dead Sea. It splits Palestine down the middle.



The Sea of Galilee

The northern area around **Galilee** is where Jesus spent much of his life. The Sea of Galilee is really a large lake 13 miles long and 7 miles across.



Galilee, Samaria and Judea

Find the **River Jordan** on the map. If you look to the left of it you will see three main regions – **Galilee** at the top, **Samaria** in the middle and **Judea** underneath. It is mainly within these regions that the ministry of Jesus took place, although he does travel beyond them. You may also recognise the place names of some of the towns, where important events happened in the life of Jesus, such as the town of Bethlehem and the city of Jerusalem.

The Wilderness of Judea

To the east of the uplands of Judea lies the Wilderness of Judea, a desolate area where John the Baptist lived and where Jesus was tempted.



A scale model of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem was the capital city of Palestine. At the time of Jesus it had a population of about 50,000 people. It was a busy place, with narrow, overcrowded streets and it was part of the main corridor running between Asia and Africa. It had many visitors and the streets were full of traders and travellers, many of whom were Jews who went to visit Jerusalem to carry out their religious duties at festival times.

FURTHER THINKING



Have you ever visited Jerusalem? Do you know what it is like today? Find out 5 facts about the city of Jerusalem.

FOR YOUR FOLDER



Various events in Jesus' life took place in and around Galilee. Referring to the map on page 9, look up the following references and complete the table, writing a sentence on each of them:

| Mark reference | Place | Event in Jesus' life |
|----------------|-------|----------------------|
| Mark 1:5 | _____ | _____ |
| Mark 8:27 | _____ | _____ |
| Mark 4:1 | _____ | _____ |
| Mark 7:24 | _____ | _____ |
| Mark 14:32 | _____ | _____ |
| Mark 15:22 | _____ | _____ |
| Mark 15:42 | _____ | _____ |