
THE UNIQUE MESSAGES OF THE FOUR GOSPELS

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DAY 1: MARK

INTRODUCTION

≧ Generally in the Church, whether it is Seminary, Institute, Sunday School, or Primary, we study and teach the four gospels as a **single entity**, meshing their stories together into a ‘life of Christ’ in order to present the fullest picture of Jesus’ mortal ministry. This **harmonizing approach** has been around nearly as long as have been the stories themselves.

The first attempts basically picked a single gospel they preferred and ignored the others. For example, **Marcion** in the **second century** only accepted **Luke’s** gospel because of his tie to Paul. A well-known first harmony was the *Diatessaron*, created by **Tatian**, another **second century** Church leader. He created a single combined version of the story of Jesus that was popular for many years. Unfortunately, he achieved his goal partly by eliminating passages that were contrary to his own thinking or were troublesome to him. That is true of any attempt to make one story out of four. While modern harmonies—which also includes movies and children’s videos about the life of Christ and our own Bible Dictionary—are perhaps more careful about retaining as much of the New Testament as possible, any editor’s combination of the various accounts will leave some things out and emphasize other things in order to achieve a single story.

A type of a harmony is a **parallel version**, where all accounts are placed side-by-side and similar stories can be compared and contrasted. This has the advantage of letting you see what each author said and not leaving anything out. One disadvantage, though, is that because events in the New Testament are not always presented in the same order or told in the same way, you lose the sense of the context of how each individual author portrayed a given event, since a parallel version requires selecting some order of events that does not match all four accounts. A great example of this is the parallel version references found in the **Bible Dictionary** of LDS Bibles, under the title “**Gospels, Harmony of**” (starting in 2013, in a separate **appendix** called “Harmony of the Gospels”), in addition to a brief explanation of the challenges of a harmony in the article “Gospels”.

In this class, I would like to take the approach of examining each of the four gospels on its own. We will present what we know of each **author** and how each **crafted** his **message** of Jesus to tell a specific story to a specific **audience**. We will examine the **literary methods** employed by each writer to present Jesus, and we will look at what each one says about Jesus’ life that is **unique**, compared to the other three authors. By doing this, I hope that we will gain a greater appreciation for the message that each one was trying to teach, and a greater respect for the individual effort that went into organizing and conveying that unique message.

THE SYNOPTICS AND JOHN

≥ As anyone knows who has read them, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are quite similar. They share many of the same stories and events of Jesus' life, and often use the exact same words and phrases. Because of these similarities, scholars have labeled these three books the "**Synoptics**," from a Greek word which means to 'see alike.' This is especially noticeable compared to John's record, which is very different from the other three.

Mark is the **least unique** of the four gospels. The substance of 606 of Mark's 661 verses appears in Matthew, and 380 of Mark's verses are found in Luke with minor changes. Many are the same verses but not all, so in the end, only 31 verses in Mark are not found in either Matt or Luke. In tabular format, we can see it like this:

Gospel	Exclusive	Common
Mark	7%	93%
Matt	42%	58%
Luke	59%	41%
John	92%	8%

That might make you think that today's class would be very short—after all, we could read all 31 verses in a few minutes and be done with it. But the numbers don't reflect the real story of what makes Mark unique. That's the message we will present today.

BACKGROUND TO MARK

≥ Mark is probably **John Mark**, missionary companion of Paul and Barnabus in Acts 12:25. Mark apparently came from a **wealthy family** in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12) and was **Barnabus' relative** (Colossians 4:10). Though he **left Paul** and Barnabus in the middle of a mission, generating some hard feelings from Paul (Acts 13:5, 13), he continued laboring with Barnabus and **went to Cyprus** (Acts 15:37-39). He and Paul clearly reconciled, because he was **Paul's companion** again for a time (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 1:24), and with Paul's close **friend**, Timothy (2 Timothy 4:11). He was also **with Peter in Rome** (1 Peter 5:13), and tradition is that he wrote his gospel in Rome when he was there. Two ancient writer discussed this.

≥ The first is **Irenaeus** (*Against Heresies*, 3.1.1), who said that Mark wrote **after Peter's death**, thus dating the gospel to about AD 64 in Rome (where by tradition, Peter was killed).

Second, **Eusebius**, in his book *Church History* (6.14.6-7), quoted an early Church leader, **Clement of Alexandria**, saying:

When, by the Spirit, Peter had publicly proclaimed the Gospel in Rome, his many hearers urged Mark, as one who had followed him for years and remembered what was said, to put it all in writing. This he did and gave copies to all who asked. When Peter learned of it, he neither objected nor promoted it.

Mark thus likely wrote some things while he was there with Peter, just before Peter was killed (AD 64-65), then perhaps finished his work shortly after Peter's demise. Eusebius also quotes **Papias**, an early Church leader from about AD 120-140, saying:

Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote down accurately, but not in order, all that [Peter] remembered of the things said and done by the Lord. For [Mark] had not heard the Lord or been one of his followers, but later, as I said, a follower of Peter. Peter used to teach as the occasion demanded, without giving systematic arrangement to the Lord's sayings (Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.39.15-16).

We don't know exactly when Mark wrote his gospel, but modern scholars tend to date all the gospels later than people did in the past. LDS scholars, such as **S. Kent Brown**, argue for an early date of Mark (about AD 64). For Latter-day Saints and others who believe in the ability of Jesus and prophets to predict the future, this especially makes sense. Scholars who **don't believe in prophecy** (and there are many today) feel compelled to date New Testament books well after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 simply because Jesus is recorded to have spoken of it. Their thinking is that he could not have given such accurate details before the event (or more accurately, that his disciples who wrote the gospels could not have recorded them so accurately before it happened), because that would mean that prophecy was real, so it must have been written after AD 70. Because we believe that Jesus could indeed and did predict the future, his disciples could have written it down well before the event with great precision. So if Matthew and Luke are written before AD 70, Mark, which was probably written first, must be written well before that date as well. Such an earlier dating of Mark also agrees with the ancient sources already mentioned about how and when Mark wrote it.

≥ Mark's **audience** is probably **Gentile**, because he gives and interprets **Aramaic** phrases (e.g., [5:41](#); [15:34](#)). He also **explains Jewish customs**, such as in [7:3-4](#). Mark teaches that Jesus was **misunderstood**, even by those closest to him, and that even though he died a humiliating death, he finally **triumphed** over all things. Mark emphasizes what Jesus **did** more than what he taught, though teachings are certainly recorded. It is a fast-paced book—indeed, the Greek word for “**immediately**” is used **40 times** in recounting Jesus' deeds. His followers have a sense of **wonder** about Jesus, even as they don't fully understand who he is. A third of his story is about the **Passion** of Jesus, meaning the events leading up to and including his suffering and crucifixion.

Most scholars believe that Mark's gospel was the **first written**. Thus in a sense, it was completely unique at the beginning—it may have been the only written account of the atonement of Christ available. But then both Matthew and Luke used Mark as their foundation, adding additional information and changing some of the things Mark wrote for their own purposes. We'll talk more about that in the next two days as we cover those two gospels.

OUTLINE OF MARK

≥ A good overall **outline** for the book of Mark is as follows:

1. Jesus appears, preaching God's kingdom (1:1 – 3:6).
2. Ministers in Galilee (3:7 – 6:6).
3. On the way to Jerusalem (6:7 – 8:21).
4. Heals blind eyes; teachings on discipleship (8:22 – 10:52).
5. In Jerusalem (11:1 – 14:31)
6. Passion narrative (14:32 – 16:8).
7. Markan postlude (16:9-20).

In Mark, Jesus **first appears** ready for **baptism** and the start of his mission—there is nothing about his birth or childhood. He is the **Christ, the Son of God** immediately—that is how Mark introduces the book (1:1), and that is confirmed at his **baptism** (in Mark, the Father’s voice is **spoken only to Jesus**, though the **JST** adds that **John also** heard the voice). He briefly ministers in **Galilee**, then moves toward **Jerusalem**, healing and teaching along the way. A large portion of the work is devoted to the **last week** of Jesus in Jerusalem, and especially the atonement, trial, and crucifixion.

SOME UNIQUE PASSAGES IN MARK

≧ As mentioned, Mark has a small number of unique verses when compared to the other three gospels. Here are nine of the unique items that Mark presents, some of which are interesting details to stories also told in the other works. Other unique items will be mentioned later in conjunction with various stories.

1. When Jesus was in the wilderness, he was with wild beasts (1:12-13).
2. The Parable of the Growing Seed (4:26-29).
3. Jesus’ words; Jairus’ daughter was 12 years old (5:41-42).
4. Jesus healed a deaf and dumb man by putting his fingers in the man’s ears and touching his tongue (7:32-36).
5. Jesus healed two blind men, one at Bethsaida healed in stages (8:22-26) and one named Bartimaeus, whose name we only learn from Mark (10:46) (Matt says two, Luke one, neither supply a name).
6. ≧ More details about the conversation and the healing of the paralytic boy (9:21-27).
7. Matthew talks about the hand or the eye offending, but Mark adds a similar comment about the foot (9:45-46).
8. When the rich man came to ask how to have eternal life, Jesus loved him (10:21).
9. The scribe who came to question Jesus was nearly converted (12:28, 32-34).

UNIQUE ORGANIZATION

≧ Though sometimes Mark’s gospel’s is noted for its **poor grammar** in Greek (Matthew and Luke often tell the same story, correcting Mark’s Greek), a careful study also reveals that it is a **complex and thoughtfully constructed work**. In fact, the way he wove together the stories of Jesus’ ministry is what makes Mark most unique among the synoptics. He uses **‘bracketing’** which puts related events at the beginning and ending of sections to group what is in between together as a theme. He also uses **‘intercalation’** which means inserting one story in the middle of another, letting the outer story help interpret the inner one. Let’s explore some of this artistry in composition.

INTERCALATION EXAMPLE: CLEANSING THE TEMPLE

≧ A good example of intercalation (putting one story inside of another) is the cleansing of the temple. In **Matthew**, while returning to Jerusalem, Jesus sees a **fig tree**, but discovering it has no fruit, **curses** it. The results are **immediately** presented—the tree withers in the same verse in which it was cursed. Matthew uses it as an illustration of what faith can do (Matthew 21:18-22).

Mark tells the same story but with an entirely different purpose: he uses it to interpret the event of the cleansing of the temple. First, Jesus **cursed the tree** in the hearing of his disciples (11:12-14). Next Jesus entered the **temple** and, seeing the moneychangers, **cast them out**, angering the Jewish leaders (11:15-17). After this statement of authority over the leadership, the group left the city. The next morning, they saw the **withered tree** (11:20). When Peter pointed out the tree, Jesus counseled them to have faith, as in Matthew (11:22-24).

In Mark, the story of the fig tree wraps around the temple cleansing, binding them together, and representing both the corruptness of the Jewish leadership and their system of worship. The **fig tree is cursed** because it has the outward appearance of being a fruitful tree, but it is not—it bears no fruit. Likewise, the **Jewish temple** has the outward appearance of adhering to the Law of Moses, but in reality, it bears no fruit either. The withering of the tree is a witness to the truth of Jesus' words about the corruptness of the temple. In the end, the two incidents combined give Jesus the opportunity to **teach about true worship**—faith, prayer, repentance, and forgiveness.

BRACKETING EXAMPLE: REJECTION AND MIGHTY WORDS AND DEEDS

≥ A good example of bracketing involves a longer section. It opens with **two scenes of rejection** that are actually **intercalated** but together serve as the opening bracket. First, Jesus' **friends** (or better translated—his **kinsmen**, his family) try to stop him because they believe he is insane (3:21). Mark then shows the **scribes** rejecting him because they believe he is **possessed** (3:22, 30). Finally, to tie it to the previous family rejection, his family comes to seek him, and he leaves them cooling outside, while he declares that his **family** are those **who follow him** (3:31-35). The end of the bracket is when the **people of Nazareth also reject him** (6:1-5). They are intrigued by his doings and sayings, but point out that Jesus' family is right there—he's just an ordinary guy. The two rejections and the two references to his family at both ends are the brackets.

In the middle are **four parables** and **four miraculous deeds**:

- 1) The sower (4:3-20)
- 2) The candlestick (4:21-25)
- 3) The growing seed (4:26-29)
- 4) The mustard seed (4:30-32)

These parables have a common theme—**God does miraculous things** and man has little impact on the outcome. The sower sows ordinary seeds but gets 100-fold return; the person that has little will get much more; the man casts seeds into the ground and does nothing else, but gets a great harvest; and the small mustard seed grows into a huge tree. These parables collectively illustrate the grace of God and his amazing gifts to us, where **our meager efforts are richly blessed**.

The **four deeds** then apply this concept to Jesus' actions:

- 1) Jesus stills a storm, showing power over nature (4:35-41)
- 2) He heals a demonic, showing power over spiritual matters and things beyond this world (5:1-20)
- 3) He heals the woman with the issue of blood, showing power over illness (5:25-34).
- 4) He raises Jairus' daughter from the dead, showing power over death (5:22-24, 35-43)

The brackets of the two rejection stories show how people rejected Jesus in spite of the many signs and miracles that he presented (**words and deeds**) to show God’s grace and his power to dispense that grace. It emphasizes Mark’s theme that people did not understand Jesus during his ministry—not until he was resurrected did they “get it.”

Note also that in the middle of the miracles is another **mini-intercalation**. Jesus is requested to come heal Jairus’ daughter and leaves to do that, but while en route is interrupted by the woman with an issue of blood. He heals her, but during the delay, they learn that the daughter has died. Jesus continues anyway and raises her from death. This story and order is not unique to Mark but does serve to escalate the situation to show Jesus’ full power to heal us today, just as he did these two women.

BRACKETING EXAMPLE: BLINDNESS

≥ A significant bracketing section begins and ends with Jesus **healing two blind men**, which was already mentioned as having unique Markan elements. The first is the blind man healed in stages, where he first sees “men as trees, walking,” then with a second administration is fully healed (8:22-26). The second is Bartimaeus (meaning, son of Timaeus), on the highway leading out of Jericho, who cries out for mercy and throws off his garment (perhaps his only possession) to go to Jesus, receives his sight, and immediately follows after Jesus (10:46-52). Between these accounts are three efforts by Jesus to teach his disciples who he is and what his true mission will be, but they do not understand. Thus the healings of the blind men illustrate how the **disciples were blind** to Jesus’ mission, foreshadowing both their ability to only **understand partially his mission** at first (like the man healed in stages) and only once fully enlightened to completely commit to him (like Bartimaeus).

Reference	Prophecy	Failure to understand	Discipleship	Jesus’ nature
8:31 - 9:8	8:31, he will suffer and be killed	8:32-33, Peter rebukes him for saying this	8:34-38, Take up the cross and follow him	9:1-8, transfiguration
9:30-41	9:31, men will kill him but he will rise the third day	9:32, they understood not	9:33-37, be the servant of all	9:38-41, men do miracles in his name
10:32-45	<u>10:32-34</u> , Jewish leaders will condemn and kill him, he will be scourged and spit upon, but he will rise the third day	10:35-40, James and John ask for privileges, but they don’t know what they ask	10:41-44, the greatest needs to be the minister and servant to all	<u>10:45</u> , Jesus gives his life as a ransom for others

With the brackets of blindness, Mark also shows deliberate organization through his use of the three passion predictions, or prophecies about Jesus’ suffering and death (8:31-9:8; 9:30-41; 10:33-45). Each one follows a similar pattern: 1) a **prophecy**; 2) a **failure** to understand; 3) a teaching about **discipleship**; and, 4) an indication of **Jesus’ exceptional nature**. The three prophecies are arranged climactically, starting with more general statements and ending with very specific

declarations ([10:32-34](#) for specific things on the crucifixion; [10:45](#) for how Jesus gives of himself for us). The reactions also change, from a stern rebuke of Jesus in the first one, to not understanding in the second, to stunned silence in the third.

FORESHADOWING

Foreshadowing is a characteristic of Jesus in Mark, sometimes being outright prophecy and sometimes more subtle. One good example is the **woman who anoints him** ([14:3-9](#)) which he says is done for his **burying** ([14:8](#)). Later when he dies, the disciples don't have time to properly anoint his body as would usually be the case, so he is put in the tomb without that ([15:46](#); in [16:1](#) they finally come to **anoint his body**), fulfilling his prediction. These two events are the **brackets** around his suffering, trial, and crucifixion.

During his last few days, he predicts many other things that all come true, including:

- The arrangements for the Passover meal ([14:12-16](#)).
- That his betrayer was one of the Twelve ([14:18-20](#), [42](#)).
- The desertion of the disciples ([14:27](#), [14:50](#)).
- Peter's denial ([14:30](#), [14:66-72](#)).

This steady march of fulfilled prophecies leads to the great one that has yet to be fulfilled: that the Son of Man will come **in power in the clouds of heaven** ([14:62](#)). By showing how these predictions all came true, Mark assures us as disciples that the final great one will also come to pass. This is why Mark's gospel can, in a sense, leave us hanging, as it were (following the ending of the early manuscripts at [16:8](#))—we have sufficient evidence as to how this story ends and can believe in how it will yet end later.

MIGHTY DEEDS

Mark devotes more space to Jesus' mighty acts proportionately than the other gospels. Yet he doesn't do it just for sake of telling about them but puts them in a context that speaks to the authority and power of Jesus, especially as a teacher.

For example, in the **exorcism** ([1:22-27](#)), Jesus is first declared to be different than the scribes, teaching with authority ([1:22](#)). To explain what he means, Mark then shows Jesus as one who **doesn't follow the normal 'rules'** about exorcism. In those days, exorcists were expected to get power over the demon first by learning his name, then convincing him that he is either a greater being or speaks in the name of a greater being than the demon. In the story, the demon tries to follow the rules, declaring that he knows Jesus' name and thus should have power over him ([1:24](#)). But Jesus simply commands, **'Come out'** and he is **obeyed**. By Jewish custom, Jesus should have had no power over the demon—he never asked his name—and the demon should have had all power over Jesus, but he had none. Thus the exorcism demonstrates that he is a teacher “that had authority, and not as the scribes” ([1:22](#)). Likewise, Mark wants us to know that **we can share in the Jesus' power through his words**, even though he is not with us to perform his mighty acts.

THE MESSIANIC SECRET

Many scholars see in Mark a tendency for Jesus to request secrecy about his identity before the resurrection. They have given this tendency the name ‘**The Messianic Secret**,’ and see it reflected in the following references: 1:25, 34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:17-21, 26; 9:32.

The problem is, in other cases, Jesus did very public things **without asking** for people to remain quiet (2:11-12; 3:1-5; 5:19). He also **taught openly** about his mission (4:10-20, 34) and **didn’t always silence demons** (5:7-10). A careful look at each of these passages shows that Jesus’ **motivation was specific to each event**—don’t talk about the transfiguration until later; don’t attract huge crowds that would inhibit his ability to minister; etc. So the Messianic Secret isn’t a secret as much as it is a precaution to help him progress in his ministry.

JESUS’ PASSION IN MARK

As mentioned in the beginning, Mark devotes a lot of his account to the final week of Jesus, and especially the story of the atonement, trial, suffering, and death of Jesus—sometimes referred to as the ‘**passion**’ of Jesus, from the Greek *pathos*, meaning ‘**something that befalls someone**.’ This account is very similar to those of Matthew and Luke and generally known. Here I would like to point out unique Markan contributions to our understanding of this event.

Though the KJV Mark doesn’t speak of Judas’ motivation for his betrayal, the JST adds that that Judas “**turned away** from him [Jesus], and **was offended** because of his words” (**JST 14:28**). This change by the Prophet is unique to Mark.

The JST version of the first sacrament ordinance in Mark also heightens the sense of commitment and emotion. Jesus tells them that “as oft as ye do this ordinance, you will remember me in this hour that I was with you...even the **last time in my ministry**” (14:24). The disciples’ reaction to this pronouncement was one of profound **grief**, and they **wept** over him (14:25).

In Gethsemane while praying, it is Mark that has Jesus use the intimate Aramaic term for his Father, **Abba**, as he declared that all things are possible to God and hopes to have the cup taken away (14:36).

Mark has Jesus predict **three betrayals**: **Judas’** (14:18-21), the **disciples** as a group (14:27), and **Peter’s** (14:29-31). Matthew and Luke give the same predictions, but in Mark it is portrayed with more tragedy and a sense of abandonment. In Gethsemane, just as Jesus is taking upon him the sins of the world, the **disciples are “sore amazed” and “heavy,”** and begin “to **complain** in their hearts,” questioning if Jesus really is the Messiah (**JST 14:33, appendix**). When Jesus is arrested, the disciples **all flee** to save themselves, including one unnamed young man who had to leave his expensive linen garment behind to avoid capture (14:46-52). (Some think this character is Mark himself, perhaps come ahead of Judas and his small army to warn Jesus after they first came to the upper room.) Thus **Jesus finds himself completely alone** as he is taken to judgment (14:50).

During the trial, it is only from Mark that we learn that the **false witnesses** brought by the Jewish leaders in their hastily arranged trial **could not agree** with each other (14:56, 59).

Mark also uniquely has the **rooster crow twice** (14:68, 72), which matches Jesus prediction in Mark that Peter would deny him three times before the rooster crowed twice (14:30).

As Jesus is led out to Golgotha for the crucifixion, all the Synoptics mention that Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry the cross-beam of Jesus' cross for him. Mark alone tells us more about Simon—that his sons are named "**Alexander and Rufus**," implying an intimate knowledge of this family and that the sons are still there and well-known among Mark's audience (15:21).

Mark is the only one to mention the time of Jesus' crucifixion—"the third hour" (15:25), which would be roughly 9:00 am on our clock today.

Matthew and Luke both mention **women at the cross**, but Mark provides greater detail, alerting us that these women were his **disciples in Galilee**, that they **ministered** unto him (supported him financially), and **had come to Jerusalem** with him (15:41).

This harks back to another unique Mark insight about the **last supper**—that the **Twelve were not the only ones** in the room. Indeed, by Jewish tradition, all of their families should have been there, and it is likely that other families were there, too. We get this from Jesus' words that one of the people eating with him would betray him. Several asked if it was them, so he clarified that "It is one of the twelve" (14:20). If only the Twelve were eating with him, that pronouncement would make no sense and provide no clarification. It is only if there is a larger crowd in the room that the statement has any value.

After Jesus is dead, **Joseph of Arimathaea** went to Pilate to ask for his body. This request was bold but perhaps not entirely unprecedented, even though most who were crucified were also buried in mass graves to add to the indignity of it all. This event is recorded in all four accounts. However, in Mark's account alone, **Pilate is surprised** to hear that Jesus is already dead. He calls for the **centurion** assigned to the crucifixion, who reports that Jesus was indeed **already dead** (15:44). This is very unusual for a crucifixion, where the goal was to make death slow and painful.

Finally, when the women come on Sunday morning to take care of the overdue anointing of his body, Mark uniquely records that they conversed on the way about **who would roll the stone away** for them (16:3), something they apparently forgot in all the emotion of the weekend until that moment. It's a simple detail, but adds reality to the account.

CONCLUSION

Mark's gospel is a well-crafted composition that endeavors from the first verse to show that **Jesus is the Christ**, the Son of God. He shows how **those around him struggled with that concept** even though Jesus taught it by word and deed. He shows Jesus' **power and authority**, and goes into great detail about this **final week** in mortality. In the end, Mark gives us hope that **we can endure** our own trials and challenges, and with **faith** in Christ that is merited by the **proofs** Mark has provided, can anticipate joining with him in his **great triumph** when he finally reigns on the earth in fulfillment of his messianic mission.

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