



PETER'S PREACHING

THE MESSAGE OF MARK'S GOSPEL

JEREMY DUFF

PETER'S PREACHING

THE MESSAGE OF MARK'S GOSPEL

JEREMY DUFF

Text copyright © Jeremy Duff 2015
The author asserts the moral right
to be identified as the author of this work

**Published by
The Bible Reading Fellowship**

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1865 319700
Email: enquiries@brf.org.uk
Website: www.brf.org.uk
BRF is a Registered Charity

ISBN 978 0 85746 350 0

First published 2015

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

All rights reserved

Cover images:

Front: Leonardo Correa Luna/Gettyimages

Back: troyka/Shutterstock

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

CONTENTS

1	Peter's preaching.....	6
2	The disciples.....	33
3	Following on the way.....	62
4	Miracles	94
5	Who is Jesus?	128
6	The law	159
7	Parables.....	196
8	God's reign.....	225
9	The death of Jesus	268
10	Mark's Gospel	292

CHAPTER 1

PETER'S PREACHING

'Who told you that?' is an important question. The office gossip and, even worse, the 'Twittersphere', are constantly producing crises, scandals and conspiracies, but most of them melt quickly away as soon as you ask, 'Who told you this?' Of course, this is nothing new: the courts have long since known not to accept evidence that starts, 'A friend of mine met this man in the pub who said...'

So what about Mark's Gospel? Who is this Mark? He doesn't introduce himself in the Gospel, and he certainly isn't one of the twelve disciples. Was he there when Jesus went around doing all those miracles, or is he the first-century equivalent of a 'friend of a friend who met a man in the pub'?

Fortunately, we have a revealing piece of evidence about the identity of Mark, the man responsible for Mark's Gospel. It's a shaft of light from the very earliest days of Christianity, which illuminates the origins of this Gospel and, as we shall see, of all the Gospels. Furthermore, there is intriguing evidence from the very way in which early Christians wrote—creating a system of abbreviations and adopting the latest technology (which could be described as the ancient world's equivalent of the ebook). When all this evidence is put together with the surprising way that the earliest church

used and honoured Mark's Gospel, there is a fascinating story to be unearthed.

Our starting point is a revealing snippet of information directly about Mark. It comes from a man called Papias, who was bishop of the city of Hierapolis, Turkey, in the early years of the second century AD. (Hierapolis is close to Colosse and is mentioned in Colossians 4:13. It's the modern-day town of Pamukkale, a popular tourist site because of its hot springs.) Scholars normally date Papias's life to about AD60–130. In comparison, Jesus was most probably crucified in AD30, and Mark's Gospel written AD60–65. So Papias was a young man around the time when Mark's Gospel began to circulate.

Sadly, Papias's own writings have not been preserved. Much from the ancient world is lost to us, long since having rotted away or been destroyed in one disaster or another. Other than in chance finds, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, authors from that era reach us only if, throughout the many centuries before printing was invented, monks dutifully copied and recopied their work as the originals wore out. That only happened if the writings were highly valued. Unfortunately, Papias seems to have fallen out of favour, condemned by a key authority—the first 'church historian', Eusebius (who finished his work in AD324)—probably because Papias wrote interpretations of the book of Revelation that linked 'the beast' with Rome. This use of symbolic language did not go down well in the Roman imperial church in Eusebius' time.

All is not lost, though, for, in his historical works, the same Eusebius twice quoted Papias's words. First, we can read Papias's description of how he was always seeking out information from Jesus' disciples and those who had personally learnt from them.

Whenever anyone who had been a follower of the elders came, I would investigate the elders' words—what Andrew or what Peter said, or what Philip or what Thomas or James or what John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples said, and the things which Aristion and John the elder, the disciples of the Lord, were saying.

PAPIAS' WORDS RECORDED IN EUSEBIUS, *HISTORY OF THE CHURCH*, 39.4

Papias wanted to know! This is hardly surprising: people in the ancient world were just as curious as we are today. Furthermore, this was still about a century before any real concept of the 'New Testament' emerged, so a man like Papias had no ready-made source of accepted, authoritative books to rely on. For comparison, we see a similar focus on seeking out accurate sources for what Jesus did and said in the opening four verses of Luke's Gospel: Luke searched out the eyewitnesses to Jesus, so that his readers could be assured that they were hearing the truth.

You'll notice that the word 'elder' occurs three times in this quotation. It's a difficult word to pin down. It really means an 'old respected man' but the word was also used for a Christian leader, and, when you read what Papias says, it is clear that he is using it to talk about Jesus' disciples—Andrew, Peter, James and John and others. Peter uses the same word to describe himself in 1 Peter 5:1–2, where he also exhorts the 'elders' of the churches to shepherd God's flock willingly and eagerly.

So whenever someone who had learnt from one of Jesus' disciples (a 'follower of the elders') came to Hierapolis, Papias would ask them about what the disciples had said. This makes sense, for some of Jesus' disciples would certainly have lived until about AD60 or 70, and there would have

been people still around in AD100, who had heard them. By AD100, Papias himself would perhaps have been 30 or 40. Indeed, if he was born in AD60, he himself would have been just contemporary with Jesus' disciples, although he would have been only a child and perhaps none of them ever came to Hierapolis in person. (There was a tradition in the early church that Papias heard the apostle John, who is said to have been the last apostle to die. Maybe he did, but Papias' own words here don't make this claim: he states only that he listened to the people who had learnt from the disciples.)

So far, so good in this detective story. Papias got his information from good sources—but what did he say?

The elder also said this: after Mark became Peter's translator, he wrote down accurately, though not in order, everything he remembered that the Lord had said or done. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward he followed Peter, as I said. Now Peter used to shape his teaching according to what was needed, and was not making an ordered arrangement of the Lord's sayings. So Mark did nothing wrong when he wrote down the individual stories as he remembered them. For he did pay careful attention to one thing—to leave out nothing that he heard, nor to include anything false.

PAPIAS' WORDS RECORDED IN EUSEBIUS, *HISTORY OF THE CHURCH*, 39.15

So Papias is quoting 'the elder'—one of these foundational figures from the earliest days of Christianity, perhaps one of Jesus' disciples or perhaps one from the same generation. He is quoting someone who was there when Mark was writing—and what does he say?

Perhaps surprisingly to the cynical mind, he doesn't tell us that Mark was a super-accurate eyewitness to what Jesus

did and said; nor does he claim that Mark was inspired by some heavenly vision. His report is somewhat more modest. Mark himself, so Papias tells us, did not hear Jesus or follow him before his resurrection. However, he became a follower of Peter. Presumably that means he became a Christian in response to Peter's preaching, becoming one of his supporters and looking to him for leadership. Twice in this passage we read that Mark wrote down 'as/everything *he* remembered'. Technically we could argue about whether 'he' is Mark or Peter. However, since the passage also tells us that Mark wasn't an eyewitness but got his information from hearing Peter, it comes to the same thing: Mark wrote down Peter's account of what Jesus had said or done.

Papias also tells us that Mark was Peter's translator or interpreter. The Greek word used here can mean a translator in the straightforward sense, but it can also mean someone who helps by explaining someone else's words. Indeed, the word 'interpreter' in English can carry both meanings: for example, 'the foreign diplomat was accompanied by her interpreter' and 'the BBC is offering an interesting interpretation of the Prime Minister's speech'.

Why did Peter need a translator/interpreter? Well, because he was, as the book of Acts puts it, 'an uneducated, ordinary man' (Acts 4:13). More to the point, he was a Galilean fisherman, so his first language would have been Aramaic (the language of the region in Jesus' time). He may have been able to speak some Greek; people often do learn enough of the language of the ruling classes and of international trade to 'get by'. Peter spent his later years preaching to Greek speakers and even Latin speakers in Rome, and guiding the Greek-speaking church there. More generally, he was a central figure in the Jesus movement, which, during Peter's

lifetime, became mainly Greek-speaking. So maybe he learnt some more Greek, but it would be no surprise if he used translators or interpreters.

Perhaps you are wondering about the two letters Peter wrote in the New Testament. Were they written in Greek? Yes, they were, but look at the way 1 Peter ends:

*I have written these few words to you **through Silvanus**, whom I consider a faithful brother, to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Take your stand on it. The church in Babylon, chosen alongside you, sends greetings, as does Mark my son.*

1 PETER 5:12–13

Peter has written 1 Peter ‘through Silvanus’. He didn’t write the clear, attractive Greek that we find in the letter himself: he had a helper, a secretary—quite possibly a translator—called Silvanus, presumably because he couldn’t have managed it himself. We are used to this sort of writing in our own context. When we see the published autobiography of a famous footballer or pop star, we all know that they will probably have been helped by a ghostwriter. Someone more adept at writing will have listened to them and worked with them to produce a good-quality written product that communicates what the famous person wants to say.

Did you notice that final reference in 1 Peter 5:13 to Mark as ‘my son’? It is a tantalising glimpse into the circle of people around Peter. While we cannot be sure, this may well be the same ‘Mark’ that Papias tells us about. Peter certainly seems close to him, as he would be to the one who acted as his translator/interpreter when he preached. Interestingly, 2 Peter is written in a Greek style very different from the

style of 1 Peter. This may seem surprising, until we remember that both letters would have been written with the assistance of a secretary/translator/interpreter, and different helpers could well have produced different styles of language.

So the jigsaw fits together. Peter needed a translator/interpreter. He could probably order his breakfast in Greek, just as some of us can 'get by' in another language on holiday, and, by the time he was preaching and teaching in Rome, his Greek may have become much better. He probably wasn't reliant on Mark to translate his message word for word. Sometimes we just need someone to help put the complicated concepts into the other language, or to help interpret what we are saying for our foreign hearers. Even so, as Peter's translator/interpreter, Mark would have been intimately familiar with Peter's message, words and meaning.

How Mark wrote

Papias tells us something more. If you look back to the second quotation ('The elder also said this...'), you will see that he seems to be trying to convey something slightly tricky about the way Mark and Peter handled the stories of Jesus. Papias says that Mark wrote down 'accurately, though not in order', that he had no intention of giving an 'ordered arrangement of the Lord's sayings'. He tells us that, in this respect, Mark was following in Peter's footsteps, for Peter 'used to shape his teaching according to what was needed'. Nevertheless, Papias tells us that Mark's account of Peter's preaching is trustworthy: he omitted nothing and included nothing false.

So Mark's Gospel contains the preaching of Peter, in a

written form. It is genuine preaching—stories about Jesus and accounts of his teaching, recounted by Peter for a particular audience on a particular day. Mark has put the material together into his Gospel, without any attempt to give the material a particular historical order. This stands to reason. For example, Mark will have heard and remembered Peter telling the parable of the sower, and he will have heard and remembered Peter speaking about the time when Jesus healed Jairus's daughter. However, it is extremely unlikely that Peter would have said, 'Jesus told this parable shortly before he met Jairus and healed his daughter, who you might remember I told you about last week.' Peter would have preached about different incidents and different pieces of Jesus' teaching, without indicating a precise chronology. Then Mark, we are told, wrote it all down without attempting to go back and piece together an accurate 'order' (although, of course, it would be obvious that the crucifixion came at the end).

If we are on the right lines here, we should find Mark's Gospel to be slightly disjointed, made up of separate stories rather loosely stitched together (except for the final days in Jerusalem leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection, when the story has an intrinsic flow). We might expect to find the material grouped by topic or theme, as Mark writes down, for example, all the parables he remembers Peter retelling. We might also expect a particular sort of honesty, as Peter would have remembered how bewildering it felt to have actually been one of Jesus' disciples: he knew he wasn't a saint from a stained-glass window. Also, of course, we might expect the sort of little details that Peter would have included in his preaching—since, after all, he had been there.

All of that is exactly what we find.

Look at chapters 2—4 in Mark's Gospel. They present a series of very loosely connected stories.

- 2:1–12: 'A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum...' (healing the paralysed man).
- 2:13–17: 'Once again Jesus went out beside the lake...' (calling Levi; eating with tax collectors).
- 2:18–22: 'Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting...' (new wineskins for new wine).
- 2:23–27: 'One sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields...' (Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath).
- 3:1–6: 'Another time he went into the synagogue...' (healing on the sabbath).
- 3:7–12: 'Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake...' (summary of healings).
- 3:13–19: 'Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him...' (calling the twelve disciples).
- 3:20–35: 'Then Jesus entered a house...' (Jesus' family and the claim that he is working for Satan).
- 4:1–20: 'Again Jesus began to teach by the lake...' (parable of the sower).
- 4:21–23: 'He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp..." (what is hidden should be disclosed).
- 4:24–25: "'Consider carefully what you hear," he continued...' (the measure you use will be measured to you).
- 4:26–29: 'He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like..." (parable of seed growing secretly).
- 4:30–34: 'Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like...?" (parable of the mustard seed).

None of these stories has a proper link to the story before. They begin with vague phrases such as 'Once again...' or

‘One sabbath...’ yet the stories themselves are anything but vague, capturing many details and the emotions involved. It is as if those remembering the stories have focused on their key points, not on how they fit into a timeline or specific locations. This is, in fact, how human memory works. We remember what is important. Most married people can remember what they wore on their wedding day—because it mattered—but not what they wore the day before. This means that, while we remember individual incidents well, we tend not to remember which order they came in. Just think back to a holiday a few years ago: you can probably remember a number of great days, or meals you had, but you would struggle to remember which day was which. The sequence doesn’t matter, so our brains don’t remember.

The different passages in Mark seem to be arranged thematically. For example, from Mark 1:21 there is a steadily building tension between Jesus and the religious authorities, which culminates in 3:6: ‘Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.’ Immediately we start to see this plot in action, when in verse 22 Jesus is accused of working for Satan, but then it all goes quiet: there are no further significant clashes with the authorities until chapter 12. Is this because, historically, Jesus clashed with the religious authorities repeatedly at the beginning of his ministry, then changed so that he got on well with them, and then changed again near the end so that the tension re-emerged? Possibly, but it is perhaps more likely that this bunching of passages on a particular theme comes from Mark. He gathered together at the beginning of his Gospel a number of stories that highlighted the tension between Jesus and the religious system of his day. This established the theme and allowed it to overshadow the rest of the story.

Similarly, Mark 4 is a collection of parables about the kingdom of God, joined by phrases like ‘he also said’, yet there are no parables in chapters 1—3 or 5—6. It can’t be that Jesus wasn’t teaching in those chapters because we are explicitly told that he was. At the same time, chapter 4 doesn’t read as if it is an account of what Jesus said on a particular day. The natural conclusion is that Mark has grouped Jesus’ parables about the kingdom together in one chapter.

Scholars sometimes use the phrase ‘pearls on a string’ to describe Mark’s Gospel. It’s a good description. The individual stories and pieces of teaching are like pearls, carefully preserved from Jesus and polished in the telling (or, we might say, as Peter preached them over the years), but their arrangement is a different matter. It is probably too flippant to say that they have just been ‘strung together’: as we will see throughout the book, and particularly in chapter 10, the sequence does seem to reveal a plan. Nevertheless, the order of the stories or teaching (how the pearls are arranged) is a separate matter from their content (the pearls themselves). We might say that in Mark we find pearls of Peter’s preaching, arranged in an order by Mark, his translator/interpreter.

Mark’s Gospel is also sprinkled with details that are not found in Matthew and Luke when they tell the same stories. For example, Mark alone tells us that the grass on which the 5000 sat for their meal was ‘green’ (6:39). Only he records the Aramaic words that Jesus said to Jairus’s daughter: ‘*Talitha koum*’ (5:41). It’s only from Mark that we hear how Jesus, healing someone who was deaf, ‘put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spat and touched the man’s tongue. He looked up to heaven and, with a deep sigh, said to him, “*Ephphatha!*”’ (7:33–34).

Mark also pulls no punches in the way he describes the Twelve. Only he describes the disciples as having 'hardened hearts' (6:52; 8:17), the same description used in the Old Testament of Pharaoh when he refused to let the Hebrews leave Egypt (for example, in Exodus 11:10) and, by Mark himself, of Jesus' enemies who were plotting to kill him (Mark 3:5-6). Similarly, Mark admits that James and John asked Jesus if they could have the places of honour for themselves, while Matthew saves their reputations by saying that it was their mother who did the asking (compare Mark 10:35-37; Matthew 20:20-21.) Even Jesus is presented as speaking more bluntly by Mark, whose account of Jesus' encounter with the brave and clever Syro-Phoenician woman (7:25-30) makes Jesus appear rude and inconsistent. (Jesus heals the daughter only because her mother makes a clever reply.) When Matthew tells the story (15:21-28), this aspect is very much toned down.

So we do find exactly the sort of snippets of detail and honesty that we would expect if Mark's account was fundamentally Peter's story. Although Mark's Gospel is shorter overall than Matthew's and Luke's, time and time again, when Mark, Matthew and Luke record the same incident, Mark's version is longer because it is full of detail. At the same time, the way Jesus and the disciples are portrayed fits well with the view that Peter himself was 'telling it how it was', rather than being a suitably presentable version of events written by someone for whom Peter is a great 'saint'.

Thus, we find that the words of Mark's Gospel themselves confirm the early evidence of Papias. The Gospel does appear to be Peter's preaching, written down 'not in order' by his translator/interpreter Mark.

Wider confirmation

All good TV detectives want to build up a number of pieces of evidence that point to the identity of the murderer. Not only was the blood found on his clothes, but he was seen leaving the area and was known to be jealous of the victim! We can do the same here. At the heart of our understanding is the evidence from Papias, which matches well with what we find in Mark's Gospel, but there are other supporting factors.

First, scholars have long recognised that Matthew and Luke appear to have used Mark's Gospel in some fashion (they call this 'Marcan priority'). There is a significant overlap in the wording: 50 per cent of the words of Mark occur in Luke and a massive 90 per cent of Mark's words appear in Matthew. You really can see Matthew as 'Mark with additions' or even 'the revised expanded version of Mark'. Seen from a different angle, Matthew and Luke are noticeably close to each other when Mark tells the same story too. It's as if, when Mark has the story, they both use him as a base.

You could suggest that these similarities are present just because people remembered the stories and Jesus' teaching well—so naturally they would remember the same words. However, that will not quite do, for two reasons. Firstly, of course, Jesus taught in Aramaic, but the similarity of wording is in Greek: the writers agree on the same *translation* of Jesus' words. More importantly, Matthew and Luke present the material in the same order as Mark does. As we saw earlier, Mark's order seems to be artificial—pearls on a string. The stories' content was remembered well because it mattered, but the comparative chronology (which parable was taught before which other) was not remembered because it was unimportant. Matthew and Luke put the stories and teaching

in basically the same order as in Mark, but that order—the way in which the pearls were strung together—was Mark’s creation. Hence, if Matthew and Luke also use it, that strongly points to their having based the material on Mark itself.

This fits with what Luke says in the opening of his Gospel.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the events which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word from the beginning have handed them down to us. Therefore it seemed good to me to investigate everything carefully from the beginning and to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus.

LUKE 1:1–3

Luke seems to be implying that he knows of other written accounts of Jesus’ life which were based on eyewitness testimony handed down, but that, in comparison, his work will be ‘orderly’. Although we can’t be certain what Luke was referring to, it certainly fits our emerging understanding of Mark—material known to Luke, not written by an eyewitness but drawing on the testimony of an eyewitness (Peter), and seen as being ‘not in order’.

Why did Matthew and Luke follow Mark so closely? In fact, they each follow him in slightly different ways. Matthew uses Mark as a structure within which he inserts large sections of his distinctive teaching. Luke generally fills out Mark’s story, section by section, with extra individual stories. Nevertheless, they both use Mark very faithfully, despite the fact that they clearly have many other sources for Jesus’ material. This rather suggests that they knew that Mark was from a top authority—a reliable, important witness. That authority can hardly be Mark himself—he wasn’t an apostle or even

an eyewitness—but the idea would make sense if Mark was known to have been Peter’s translator/interpreter, writing down Peter’s preaching.

Moving on from here, it might also seem surprising that Mark’s Gospel survived at all. Matthew, Luke and John are clearly fuller accounts. Indeed, if almost all of Mark is in Matthew, why keep Mark—particularly as it misses out so much important material, such as Jesus’ birth, the Lord’s Prayer and the resurrection appearances? (Mark 16:9–20, which is printed in brackets in Bibles, is not actually part of the original Gospel: this is discussed in Chapter 2.) Interestingly, Mark’s Gospel is rarely quoted in the early church. When the first Christians wanted to point to what Jesus had done or said, they referred to one of the other three more comprehensive Gospels. Nevertheless, Mark was kept, and was faithfully copied and recopied. Why? Perhaps because it was known to be the voice of Jesus’ most important disciple, Peter.

The preservation of the name, ‘the Gospel according to Mark’, is also intriguing. In the second century AD, there was a great conflict within the growing Christian movement, with different groupings claiming to be faithfully preserving Jesus’ teaching. In those conflicts, the apostles were the recognised authorities. Hence, we find that different groups put down their teaching in ‘Gospels’—in the name of Thomas or Peter, for example—and people forged letters in the name of Paul. In this battle, ‘Mark’ would have been a nonentity. Why would anyone take notice of a text that didn’t (claim to) come from an apostle? Yet the material from this ‘B list celebrity’ name was kept. Why? Well, it would certainly make sense if it was known that the Mark in question was Peter’s translator/interpreter, meaning that the Gospel ‘really’ came

from Peter. (The same was true of Luke's Gospel: Luke was identified as Paul's travelling companion, so Luke's Gospel was seen as being 'really' Paul's.)

Thus we find that Mark's Gospel was given real importance by the other Gospel writers and was faithfully preserved, despite its having been effectively replaced by Matthew. Furthermore, it was preserved and defended under the 'unimportant' name of Mark. All of this makes sense if Papias is right and Mark's Gospel is Peter's preaching.

Mark: the ebook of his day?

What do you think the original of Mark's Gospel or other books of the Bible actually looked like? What were they made of? Most of us, if we stop and think, bring to mind some distant memory of pictures of Greeks, Egyptians or Romans reading from scrolls. We have books made of paper, but they had scrolls made of papyrus.

It's certainly true that, up to the time of Jesus, all literature from the lands around the Mediterranean was written on scrolls made either of papyrus or of animal skin (vellum). Shopping lists, prayers and notes might be written on scraps of pottery, but, for anything longer, scrolls were used. A scroll—sheets of papyrus or vellum stuck together to make a long roll—was the only way of holding together enough pages. This continued to be the case for a few centuries after Jesus for all types of literature, with one massive exception: Christians did not, on the whole, write on scrolls. They were the 'early adopters' of the latest technology of their day—the book, or codex.

A basic book (called a quire) is like a child's exercise

book—sheets of paper folded over and stitched through the middle (today we might use a staple). This means that there are pages to turn, while a scroll is wound and unwound. If a quire has too many pages, it becomes unwieldy: imagine if the book in your hand now was made up of 100 sheets of A4 paper folded in the middle and fixed with a large staple. Instead, the quires are kept fairly small—maybe 16 pages—and multiple quires are glued or stitched together. If you look down the spine of this book, you will see exactly that—small groups of folded sheets glued to each other.

Books (codices) were just beginning to be used in the first century AD. They are first mentioned by a Roman writer, Martial, and by Paul (in 2 Timothy 4:13). The Romans already had ‘note-books’ made from stringing together several wax tablets. They were used for all sorts of note-taking by generals, merchants and so on, and examples have been found perfectly preserved in Herculaneum (the Roman city engulfed by lava from the volcano Vesuvius). At some point in the first century AD, it seems that these ‘note-books’ evolved into the book.

It seems obvious to us that the book is a better technology than the scroll: it is more portable and robust, both sides of the paper can be written on, it can be laid flat for reading, and you can easily flick back and forward. For example, if you wanted to look at something on page 101 in this book, you could do it easily, but it’s a very different matter to roll forward to the right place in a scroll to check something and then roll back again. However, humans are often conservative and it takes a long time for new technologies to catch on.

A helpful comparison is with the ebook today. There are many practical reasons why it is a better format for reading the written word, but you are more likely to be reading this

book on paper. Why? Well, a key factor is that many people want a book to ‘feel’ like a book—the look, the touch, even the smell is important to them. We know where we are with a physical book. Times are changing—the new technology is expanding and may soon become dominant—but the change is happening slowly because it’s not simply about practicality.

In the same way, although it may seem obvious to us that a book is better than a scroll, the majority of Greek and Roman literature continued to be written in scrolls for another few centuries. The exception to the rule was any kind of Christian literature. Why did the Christians adopt this new technology so enthusiastically?

It is possible to argue that it was just because the codex was more robust than the scroll for people who travelled around a lot, and the early Christian leaders were always on the move. Alternatively, because Christianity was counter-cultural, perhaps the Christians were pleased to distinguish themselves from the rest of the world by using books, not scrolls. These reasons might explain why some Christians abandoned the old ways of writing and adopted the new technology, but why did almost all of them do it? Theodore Skeat, the Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum from 1961 to 1972, in his influential book *The Origins of the Codex*, was sure that there had to be a further reason. However convenient the codex was, the Christians would have adopted the new technology so uniformly only if a very early, respected and influential text led the way. So how was the trend for the codex started among Christians?

It was not just the use of the codex rather than the scroll that marked Christians out as different. They also used a system of abbreviations for some words—particularly God, Lord, Jesus and Christ—known to scholars as *nomina sacra*

(‘sacred names’). For example, rather than writing ‘Jesus’, which in Greek is IHSOUS, they wrote IHS; rather than Christ (Greek XPISTOS) they wrote XPS (in both cases with a line over the letters). If you are familiar with Christian art, you might recognise the IHS and XP symbols, since they are often used (in XP, the P, which is actually the Greek letter ‘ρ’, is normally placed on top of the X). Similarly ‘God’ and ‘son’ are shortened.

These abbreviations, again, seem to be a uniquely Christian phenomenon. They are not found in Jewish texts and have no parallel in Greek literature, but they are found almost without exception in every Christian biblical text. Why? Again, scholars have their different views (might it be a sign of respect?) but few escape from the conclusion that, at some point, a hugely influential text invented the abbreviations and set a trend.

So we have two curious hard facts about early Christian literature: it was written in books, not on scrolls, and it used a system of abbreviations. Both of these features suggest that there was an original piece of early Christian literature that set a trend for what ‘Christian writing’ should physically be like, which was then copied widely.

What was this trendsetting piece of early Christian writing? We don’t know for certain, but there is another early Christian ‘trend’ worth contemplating—the idea of a ‘Gospel’. We are used to the idea of a ‘Gospel’, but, if you ponder for a moment, you will realise that it is a tricky concept.

The word ‘gospel’ (in Greek, *euangelion*) means ‘good news’—in other words, a piece of news which is good. It is not a particularly common word, but we find it being used to refer to announcements of a military victory, success in a court case or the arrival of an emperor. We see the word

used thus in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, in 2 Samuel 18:19: 'Now Ahimaaz son of Zadok said, "Let me run and take the *good news* to the king that the Lord has delivered him from the hand of his enemies.'" In the New Testament, we see it in Mark 1:15: 'The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the *good news*!' At times, perhaps it is starting to acquire the sense of 'the particular good news about Jesus': for example, 1 Thessalonians 3:2 says, 'We sent Timothy, our brother and God's colleague in the *good news* of the Messiah.' But in none of these references does 'the gospel' mean a physical book. In fact, nowhere in the New Testament itself is the word 'gospel' used to mean a book, except perhaps in the first verse of Mark's Gospel: 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.'

How is it, then, that we have four books called 'Gospels' (and, indeed, further Gospel books that were written in the second century and later)? It's not just a matter of the unusual use of the word 'gospel' to refer to a book. The Gospels are a particular sort of book: they are a sort of 'biography with a point'. They combine stories of what Jesus did with blocks of his teaching, stretching from the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee through to his resurrection (though some have a 'prologue' dealing with his birth). Again, we might think that is obvious, but in the New Testament itself the 'gospel' is a message to be proclaimed, not a life story. So how did all four writers decide that the way of writing the 'gospel' was not to be a theological presentation of the message but an account of Jesus' life?

Finally, we can also note that the titles of the Gospels are distinctive: 'The Gospel according to...'. This use of 'according to' is very unusual when indicating a book's

author. An author is usually identified by the word 'of': we have the plays *of* Shakespeare, the letters *of* Paul and so on. We might expect to read 'the Gospel *of* Mark', but instead we have 'the Gospel *according to* Mark'. Presumably the point is that the message is the gospel *of* God: God is the author of the good news. So the use of 'according to' is a mark of humility (effectively, it is 'God's good news, written down by Mark') and a reminder that the 'gospel' is really the message, not the book. At the same time, the source—in this case, Mark—is important (see Luke 1:1–4 for an emphasis on the importance of sources; also John 19:35; 21:24; Hebrews 2:3; 1 John 1:1–3; 1 Corinthians 15:3–8). This may all be very logical, but it would still be rather surprising if all four Gospel writers had the same idea of how to title their work, independently of each other. (It is possible, of course, that the titles were applied slightly later than the Gospels themselves were written, so I wouldn't want to place too much weight on this point on its own.)

How do we piece together this jigsaw? First, let's look at the developments in the idea of a gospel—the progression from 'gospel' meaning the 'good news' to 'Gospel' as the title for a book; the idea that the way to tell the gospel message was by presenting a life story of Jesus; and the use of the phrase 'according to' to indicate the human author or source. There is a fairly obvious reason for all this, if we remember that almost all scholars believe that Mark's Gospel was used by the authors of Matthew and Luke (and was probably known by the author of John). If Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source for some of the words and the order of their Gospels, it seems perfectly reasonable to conclude that they also got the very idea of a 'Gospel book' from Mark's Gospel, together with the sense that a Gospel book should contain

Jesus' life story, and probably that the book should be called 'The Gospel according to...'. This is indeed reasonable but, again, it's striking that this Gospel text had such a wide influence if it was just the work of the relatively unimportant man Mark.

Once we have established that Mark set the trend, copied by Matthew, Luke and John, for the 'Gospel' as a book telling the life story of Jesus according to 'X', then we can look back with new eyes at the two strange 'hard facts' about early Christian writing—the use of the codex and the *nomina sacra* (abbreviated 'sacred names'). They also needed a 'trend starter' to get them going—some hugely influential text, which established the idea that Christian writings 'should' be in a codex, using *nomina sacra*. The obvious conclusion is that this text was also Mark's Gospel—but we can't be sure. Sadly, if doing history is like making a jigsaw, doing ancient history is like making a jigsaw without the picture on the box, and with some pieces missing. However, it's the best explanation available.

So Mark can be seen as the ebook of its day, breaking new ground and creating a distinctive sense of what Christian writing was like, and was copied by all who came afterwards.

Back to Papias

The question still remains, though, as to why people would have followed Mark in this way. Why, in an early Christian world dominated by the apostles, Jesus' brothers and eyewitnesses, would people allow the pattern for Gospels and, indeed, for all Christian literature, to be set by the nonentity Mark?

It all makes sense if we believe what Papias said. If Mark was Peter's translator/interpreter, then Mark's Gospel would have had Peter's authority behind it. Mark's Gospel would have been backed by the authority of the most central, respected figure in the early Christian movement. That would explain why Mark's Gospel played such a trendsetting role.

There are two final pieces of supporting evidence. First, let's go back to the physical processes of writing. According to Papias, Mark's Gospel began as the written record of Peter's preaching. To take dictation or notes from a speaker, secretaries at the time often used the ancient equivalent of a notebook—the strung-together bundle of wax tablets that was the predecessor of the codex. So Mark would initially have taken down Peter's preaching on strung-together wax tablets. He then would have taken it just a step further, writing everything up on the nearest equivalent format, which was papyrus sheets sewn together—the new codex. He may even have felt that the codex set the right tone: it was appropriate for transcribed oral speech or dictation, not properly written literature. We might also find the origins of *nomina sacra* here: it may have been a form of shorthand. Shorthand was used by secretaries in Jesus' day when taking down dictation, so perhaps Mark developed it.

Second, our findings gain further support from a slightly later Christian writer, Justin Martyr, writing about AD155–160. Fifteen times Justin refers to the 'memoirs of the apostles', which might be literally translated as 'what the apostles *remembered*'. Papias used exactly the same word when he said, 'After Mark became Peter's translator, he wrote down accurately, though not in order, everything he *remembered* that the Lord had said or done.' In addition, Justin uses the

word ‘gospel’ to refer to a book just three times, preferring the clearer title ‘memoirs of the apostles’. Once, however, he uses the two descriptions in the same sentence, making it clear that they both refer to the same thing (‘For the apostles, in the memoirs they produced, which are called Gospels, handed on to us what Jesus commended them’: *First Apology*, 66.3).

Justin does not generally mention a particular ‘memoir’ by name—with one exception:

It is said that Jesus changed the name of one of the apostles to Peter. This is written in his own memoir, and also that he changed the names of two other brothers, the sons of Zebedee, to Boanerges, which means sons of thunder.

JUSTIN MARTYR, *DIALOGUE WITH TRYPHO*, 106

It is only in Mark’s Gospel (3:17) that we are told that Jesus renamed the sons of Zebedee ‘Boanerges’. So Justin refers to ‘Peter’s memoir’, followed by a reference to something only recorded in Mark’s Gospel. This is all the more revealing because Justin is not trying to defend the authority of the Gospels; it merely slips out in passing that he thinks of Mark’s Gospel as Peter’s memoir.

Peter’s preaching

Papias tells us clearly that he heard personally, from people who were there at the time, that Mark’s Gospel was Peter’s preaching, written down by Peter’s translator/interpreter, Mark. It was written down accurately, though not in chronological order and with no attempt to make an ‘ordered arrangement’ of the Lord’s sayings.

What we find in the Gospel itself confirms Papias' words. The Gospel is slightly disjointed, made up of separate stories loosely strung together. The material is grouped by topic or theme, not presented in a strict historical order. It is strikingly honest about the disciples' failings, as only one of the disciples themselves could be, and it contains lots of the sort of details that Peter would have included in his preaching, which later writers edit out.

Papias' statement finds wider confirmation in the way Matthew and Luke bow to Mark's authority, using Mark's words and order as a basis for their Gospels. It makes sense of the fact that the early church kept Mark, despite its being replaced by Matthew and 'improved' by Luke, and that they kept defending it under the unimportant name of 'Mark'.

As we have seen, Papias' statement also makes sense of some of the mysterious 'hard facts' of early Christian writings—the adoption of the codex and *nomina sacra*. Although we can't prove that Mark's Gospel started the trend, this is the best explanation available, particularly as it also looks likely that Mark's Gospel was key in the move to the use of the word 'gospel' to describe a book containing Jesus' life story. Why did people follow the lead of Mark's Gospel in this way? Because it was known to be Peter's preaching, or Peter's memoirs.

What difference does this make? Most importantly, it means that as we read Mark's Gospel, we are hearing Peter's voice. Mark is not just 'a book, drawing on some unknown sources, written by someone unknown, which somehow at some point the church decided should be in the Bible'. If we go back to the question with which this chapter started—'Who told you that?'—we have an answer. It was Peter, one of Jesus' first disciples, who emerged as the leader of the disciples and the

central figure in the early church. He was there, all the way through; he heard it all.

This is important for me—to hear the voice, through his translator/interpreter, of Peter himself. I can sit on the bus and read on my phone the message of Jesus' closest disciple, telling me what he saw and heard as he travelled with Jesus. Perhaps, as you ponder this, it may mean that you approach Mark's Gospel with new interest and enthusiasm.

I think it also matters in the wider world. You and I might be happy to accept Mark's Gospel as important because it is 'in the Bible'; for others, this doesn't mean much. But when you explain that it is the written-down testimony of an eyewitness, people are intrigued.

The conclusion that Mark's Gospel is Peter's preaching also explains this book. Obviously it's where the title comes from! But it also explains the content. I have taken at face value Papias' words that Mark didn't intend to write a connected account and didn't write 'in order', and have taken the liberty of approaching the Gospel in a thematic way, rather than chapter by chapter, verse by verse.

We are used to a verse-by-verse approach to studying the Bible, and I certainly don't want to decry it. Nevertheless, freshness helps us see with new eyes, and there are key themes running through 'Peter's preaching' that we miss when we read it in order. If the order is not from Jesus and is not from Peter, we are free to look at it in a different way. Thus, the chapters of this book will focus on different key themes in Mark's Gospel, such as the disciples, who Jesus is and miracles. Each chapter will quote *in full* the parts of Mark's Gospel that are particularly relevant to that theme.

To add further freshness, I have translated the Greek of Mark's Gospel myself, being honest to the sometimes

rough style of the original—the voice of Peter, the Galilean fisherman. You will soon notice Mark’s somewhat unusual habit of sometimes using a present tense within a story being told generally in past tenses. For example, in Mark 3:13–14, ‘He goes [present] up into the hills and calls [present] those he wanted [past], and they went [past] out to him...’. Scholars often talk of this as a ‘historic present’ tense but have not developed a clear understanding of why Mark uses it in some cases and not in others. Therefore, I have decided to stick literally to Mark’s Greek and let you experience the distinctive style.

In the final chapter, we will go back to look at the order in which Mark chose to record events. It might not be from Peter or Jesus, but presumably Mark’s order was not just random. For now, though, I invite you to accompany me as we hear and ponder Peter’s preaching.

As the earliest of the Gospels, Mark is arguably the foundational text of Christianity, summarising the core of Jesus' teaching. Vivid, immediate and provocative, it is in essence the preaching of Peter, Jesus' closest disciple, calling men and women to a more radical discipleship.

Peter's Preaching brings to life the content and meaning of Mark's Gospel for contemporary readers, combining the in-depth analysis of a commentary with the accessibility of Bible reading notes. Each chapter explores a key theme from Mark, covering every verse in the Gospel while also showing how the text links together as a whole. It is a valuable tool for those preaching and teaching the Bible, as well as those embarking on theological study and any wishing to deepen their grasp of this Gospel.

The Revd Dr Jeremy Duff has taught New Testament at Oxford University and a number of theological colleges and courses, and is a vicar in an urban parish in the Diocese of Liverpool. For ten years he was one of the commissioning editors for BRF's *Guidelines* Bible reading notes and his book *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (2005) is Cambridge University Press's bestselling religion title. He is also the co-author, with the Revd Dr Joanna Collicutt McGrath, of *Meeting Jesus: human responses to a yearning God* (SPCK, 2006).



978-0-85746-350-0
UK £



Visit www.brfonline.org.uk for email updates, resources
and information about BRF's wider ministry

Front cover image: Leonardo Correa Luna/Gettyim- Design: Heather Knight
ages Back cover image: troyka/Shutterstock