

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY
— A Bible commentary for every day —



Mark

Dick France

BRF CENTENARY CLASSICS



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PREFACE TO THE 2010 EDITION _____

The first issue had no space for a preface, so all the general things I wanted to say about my approach to Mark had to go into the first two readings. Since then I have published a much bigger commentary on Mark (719 pages, on the Greek text!) and an even bigger one on Matthew. But further study has not changed my overall approach to the gospel in any significant way, and I hope readers will still be willing to tackle those first two readings seriously before launching into the text proper. Mark left us a *book*, not a collection of individual readings, and it is only when we appreciate his work as a whole that we have the necessary framework into which the individual parts can be fitted with real understanding.

It is always a pleasure to hear from readers who have found benefit from one's writing. I have been especially pleased that several have told me that they have taken up my suggestion of reading or listening to the whole of Mark's gospel in a single session (either alone or in a group) before tackling the individual readings, and that this has given them a new, and sometimes significantly different, appreciation of Mark's message. I am happy to repeat that recommendation for a new generation of readers.

Enjoy Mark!

Dick France

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INTRODUCTION ---

Many members of the first-century churches could not read, and many more could not afford to possess a scroll of their own. So we should think of our New Testament books as intended to be read aloud, when the members of the church were gathered together.

Mark's gospel, the shortest of the four, may well have been intended to be read out in a single session. It takes about an hour and a half to read aloud, and the experience of listening to it (and still more of reading it) in this way is thrilling, as those who have attended Alec McCowan's hugely popular one-man recitations of the gospel will know.

Mark the storyteller

It is when you read Mark's gospel in a single session that you see most clearly what a well-written story it is. Threads of continuity come to light, and there is a skilful build-up (and sometimes release) of tension, comparable to that achieved by some of the best dramatists.

The author must have been a popular communicator. His style is more expansive and vivid than that of the other gospel writers, and he seems to relish a lively scene. His gospel is shorter than the others not because he writes concisely (where he runs parallel with the other gospels, especially Matthew, he is often much more long-winded), but because he has limited his material. While he says much about Jesus' power as a teacher, he offers less of his actual teaching than the other gospels. He writes rather of eager crowds and impressive miracles, of dramatic confrontation with opponents both human and demonic. He allows us to feel the disconcerting impact of Jesus on his often bewildered disciples, and to share with them the experience of having their world turned upside-down by the revolutionary values of the kingdom of God. He presents in all its starkness the paradox of a rejected and executed Messiah, of a Son of God who meets with incomprehension and hostility from the people of God.

It is all intensely moving, as the story forges ahead with breathless urgency towards the inevitable showdown in Jerusalem, where on a small local stage a drama of cosmic proportions is played out.

The trouble is that for most Christian readers it is now all so familiar that it is almost impossible for us to feel the disconcerting and yet exhilarating impact which the story must have had on those who first heard it. Let me urge you, therefore, if you possibly can, to arrange at best to

hear Mark's story told in a single session, or, failing that, to set aside an hour and a half and read it through yourself (in a modern version) as if it were a novel, trying to put yourself in the position of those who first heard the story and for whom it was all so powerfully new. When you have done that, you will be in a better position to see the significance of the individual sections as we work through them in this book.

Mark and Peter

Very early Christian tradition tells us that the gospel was written by John Mark of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), who was later a colleague both of Paul (Acts 12:25; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11) and of Peter (1 Peter 5:13), and that it was when he was Peter's assistant that Mark decided to record the stories about Jesus which Peter was in the habit of telling in his later days in Rome. The early writers are divided as to whether he did this while Peter was still alive (and with his blessing) or after Peter's death in, probably, AD64 or 65. It seems a plausible tradition, and in Mark's action-packed gospel it may well be that we hear at least an echo of the enthusiastic way in which Peter would have told the stories of the man who had changed his own life and outlook so irrevocably.

The value of Mark

In the early centuries of the church's life, Mark's gospel was undervalued. It was felt to be inferior especially to that of Matthew, which had so much more detailed teaching of Jesus and went into greater theological depths. Since they believed that Matthew's gospel was written first, Mark was too easily dismissed as his 'lackey and abridger' (Augustine). It was only with the growth in the 19th century of the belief that Mark was the earliest gospel that this shorter book came into its own. Nowadays most scholars value Mark as the earliest surviving record of the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Mark's Greek is lively but not very polished, in the style of the popular storyteller, rather than the sophisticated prose of a professional writer. Where a stylist would recommend subordinate clauses, Mark often strings sentences together with a simple 'and', so that the story rattles quite jerkily along. He is particularly fond of moving the action on with 'immediately' (eleven times in chapter 1 alone, though English versions tend to ration them). It is not easy to get bored as you listen to Mark!

Dick France

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Mark 14:1–2, 10–11

The priests and Judas Iscariot**The plot against Jesus**

We have had plenty of indications of how the religious authorities are reacting to Jesus. Even as far back as 3:6 they were plotting his death. Now he is in Jerusalem, within their grasp, and the time has come. But the same Passover festival which has brought Jesus to Jerusalem has also brought thousands of other pilgrims to the temple, and many of them already know Jesus and are his enthusiastic supporters – as the pilgrim crowds have demonstrated when they escorted him into the city with shouts of Hosanna. To make an open move against Jesus would be likely to provoke a riot.

During the day, Jesus spent his time in the temple, very publicly. The only answer, then, is to try to arrest him at night, when there are no crowds of supporters around. But how do you find one among 100,000 Passover visitors? The city was far too small for the crowds who came at festival time, and the visitors spread out to the surrounding villages or camped on the hillsides around the city. They must find inside information of where Jesus and his disciples are staying.

The informer

And that is where Judas comes in. His betrayal of Jesus consists first in his willingness to tell the authorities where the disciple group may be found at night, and indeed, as we shall see, to lead them there in person and identify Jesus so that they can arrest him. This is the service they most need from him, and it is for this that he is to be well paid. We shall see also, however, that when Jesus is brought to trial the high priest will be well informed about the sort of things Jesus has been saying about himself and his mission. Since most of the relevant sayings have been uttered in private to the disciples, it seems likely it is Judas who has fed the authorities with appropriate evidence which they can use against Jesus when the time comes.

Why did he do it?

It has always seemed incredible that a man who has devoted a year or more of his life to following Jesus could suddenly turn against him in this way. Few have been able to believe that a cash payment would alone be enough to motivate such a radical decision. Beyond that we are in the area of conjecture.

One interesting fact is that Judas' name, Iscariot, may indicate that he came from a town, Keriot, in southern Judea. If so, that would probably mean that he was the only non-Galilean among the twelve. So he may have come to feel out of place in this Galilean movement, and the more so when the group has come down to Judea and the Galilean crowds have welcomed 'their' prophet into the capital. So perhaps there is an element of racial prejudice in Judas' decision.

But it is likely that there is a more fundamental reason than that. As they have journeyed towards Jerusalem, Jesus has again and again made it plain to his disciples that he has no intention, as many had hoped, of leading a movement to restore Israel's national independence; his mission is not to lead his people to victory but to be rejected and die. Peter's remonstrance against such an idea (8:32) would have been echoed by the other disciples, and they have followed him reluctantly and with bewilderment.

If Judas originally joined the movement for motives of high-minded patriotism, he will have watched with dismay as Jesus has stubbornly rejected any such mission. And now in Jerusalem Jesus has made matters worse by actually attacking the temple itself, the very symbol of national pride, and daring to predict its destruction. Judas' desertion would then have been the result of disillusionment: this is not the sort of movement he had thought he was joining. His approach to the priests would then be partly an attempt to save his own skin while there is still time; but it might also arise from a genuine conviction that Jesus has embarked on a dangerous and unpatriotic course and must be stopped before he does any more harm.

For meditation

If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.



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Mark's gospel is the shortest of the four first-century books which share the story of Jesus of Nazareth, and the most vividly told. Mark shows the disconcerting influence of Jesus on his often bewildered disciples, and how their world was turned upside down by the revolutionary values of the kingdom of God. He writes of eager crowds and impressive miracles, of dramatic confrontation with opponents both human and demonic, building towards the final showdown in Jerusalem, where the cosmic drama of death and resurrection is played out.

The late **Revd Dick France** was an Anglican clergyman and a New Testament scholar and writer. He taught at London School of Theology before becoming principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

