

Chapter three: According to Mark

Paul died about the time of the beginning of the Jewish uprising in CE 66. The main part of the conflict lasted four years and involved huge dislocation and loss of life. After a long and damaging siege, Jerusalem was overrun and its Temple destroyed.

The office of High Priest then ceased to exist. There was no longer a Great Sanhedrin to administer Jewish affairs. Local synagogues became the main focus for religious practice and belief. A succession of administrators (episcopoi) looked after Jews in Jerusalem, once more under Roman occupation. There were probably no longer the resources or the appetite among what remained of the Jewish establishment to police the activities of Paul's deviant communities in the diaspora.

These were able to grow and to change, rapidly gaining a distinct identity. By the late CE 70s, the communities had become known as 'Christianoi', followers or slaves of Christ. The character Jesus, while integral to Paul's efforts to establish his own importance, had not from the outset been the central, dividing issue. That had been, and still was, the question of observing Jewish Law. The Christianoi were not observers of all of the Law; they were not Jews.

But Jesus was now at the heart of ritual and belief in the new communities, fusing with and so supplanting a pagan dying-and-resurrecting godman. The new devotees would have wanted to know more about the character that had been imported by them, or for them, from the Nazarene Jews. It would seem from his letters that Paul himself did not have much in the way of information. The Christianoi needed a narrative for the life and death of Jesus.

This then was the set of circumstances in which an initial gospel story was formulated. It is traditionally attributed to a character appearing in Acts as companion to Barnabas and Saul, described as 'John whose other name was Mark'. As with the other gospels, there is however insufficient information reliably to identify a specific author.

It may be that someone within one of Paul's communities was responsible. It could equally have been the work of a competent, possibly even professional, storyteller, whose work was seized upon and adopted by the new Christians.

The author wrote his story in Greek, offering a smattering of Aramaic quotations, maybe to demonstrate that he had a grasp of his sources. He made or at least conveyed a number of mis-transliterations. So, for example, he identified one of the apostles as 'Simon the Cananean', that is someone from Cana in Galilee, while this same character is more realistically identified in Luke and Acts as 'Simon who was called the zealot ('cana' meaning zealot in Aramaic). He described another as James 'son of Alphaeus', which appears to have come from an Aramaic title, 'Klopas', with an alpha in Greek miscopied as a kappa. Similarly, Judas 'Iscariot' derives his nickname (or possibly accurate description) from sicarios, a name applied to zealot assassins (named after their curved sicae daggers) with, in this instance the initial transposition of an eta and sigma.

Mark also made mistakes in other matters including custom, law and local geography. For example, he had Jesus stating that a woman who divorces her husband and marries another

man would be committing adultery. Under Jewish Law, a woman did not have the right to divorce her husband.

He described Jesus as crossing to Judea from Capernaum, across the Jordan, when none of Judea was actually across the river. He had Jesus and the disciples going across Lake Galilee to the territory of the Gerasenes, when this was in fact considerably further away. He also had Jesus going through a tortuous and unlikely route from Tyre, via Sidon to Lake Galilee and on to the region of the Decapolis.

Mark's knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures was limited. At the very outset, he attributed to Isaiah a quote, the first part of which, 'Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way', is actually from Malachi. He had Jesus recapitulate the story of David taking the shew bread 'when Abiathar was High Priest', when in fact in the book of Samuel it was Ahimelech. Mark's summary of the ten commandments, attributed to Jesus, is insufficient and he adds in one, 'do not defraud' that is not actually there!

Mark referred to, but was unable to give a name to, the person who was High Priest at the time. While this might have been the outcome of an alteration by a later editor, the omission does alternatively suggest that he could not confidently place his story in an historical context.

The points which I have outlined are just some of the inaccuracies and deficiencies. This was not someone with first-hand knowledge of, or with roots in, the Aramaic-speaking Jewish community in Judea.

Mark does not claim to have been, and certainly was not, a first-hand witness to events. He is unreliable and lacking in knowledge of the people and the circumstances he is reporting. But he does nonetheless tell a good story. Astonishingly, what he actually tells is not what Christians now claim this to be.

Mark's Jewish Messiah gathered up his followers, brought them down from Galilee to Jerusalem, provoked the Jewish authorities and then assembled his force on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city. Then, inexplicably, it all fizzled out. The disciples, enjoined to stay awake and keep watch, were waiting ... for what? It may have been for more people or more weapons or quite possibly both.

In the passion narrative which follows, Jesus was arrested, tried, convicted and crucified by the Romans, taken from the cross and then placed on the eve of the Sabbath (Friday evening) in a closed family tomb. When, a day and a half later, on Sunday morning, women went to the tomb to dress the body, they found the tomb opened and empty, with a messenger posted to tell them that Jesus was going ahead of them, to Galilee. The women then fled in astonishment and terror.

There Mark's narrative ends. From a prediction accorded to Jesus earlier in the text, reinforced by what the young man is given to say at the tomb, the story should have gone on to describe the journey to Galilee and what then happened there. It is twice stated that Jesus was going on, ahead of the disciples, to Galilee. This, together with the abrupt ending, strongly indicates that the narrative has been cut.

In some versions of Mark, there are a further twelve further verses which are inconsistent in style, language and content and also lacking continuity with the preceding text. It is thought that these verses were added much later, in an effort to make up for what had been lost. The verses also have material that seems to derive from the later gospels, John and Luke.

What is interesting is that Mark, up to that point, has provided an account with a number of elements suggesting that Jesus could have survived his ordeal. Those executed by crucifixion were sometimes left fixed to a cross for days, to die gradually from the effects of exposure, thirst, hunger and their wounds. However, in this instance there was a need to get the victim down before the start of the Sabbath, it would appear in order to accord with Jewish custom or sensibilities.

It seems from the text that on the Friday, the eve of the sabbath, there was a degree of delay and possible procrastination, which meant that Jesus was not the cross for more than a few hours. Death would in such circumstances would have been facilitated by breaking the victim's legs. However, this action is not recorded in Mark or in the other synoptic gospels. In the gospel of John, it is stated that the Roman soldiers refrained from wielding the heavy, crurifragium club because Jesus appeared already to be dead.

In Mark, Jesus is given vinegar (sour wine) on a sponge, following which he cried out and appeared to breathe his last. In the gospel of Peter, it is not just vinegar but vinegar and rosh (the juice of the opium poppy) which is administered. That would certainly, in sufficient quantity, have helped simulate the appearance of death.

This is, it should be remembered, a story. So, it is not a question of what actually happened but what, in an underlying tale, was said to have happened. There are many elements in the narrative conveying the possibility of a coordinated rescue attempt.

At the time, Jerusalem was crowded with tens of thousands of Jews visiting to celebrate Passover. The Romans were stretched. The execution, it appears, took place in a private garden where there was a family tomb in which the body would be placed. There may well have been people milling about, perhaps pressing the execution squad to desist from disrespectfully breaking the legs of someone already dead.

Once Jesus was removed to the tomb, efforts could have been made within it, in privacy, to revive and treat him. Indeed, assuming that this was the intent, preparations would have been made to have people and the wherewithal within the cave to achieve this.

If suffering and heroically surviving an ordeal, resurrection in this sense, was intended in an earlier Mark, one more original than the version we now have, then this could be why the gospel's ending was cut. It was all too naturalistic and non-miraculous, for a developing Christian theology.

In the more original scenario envisaged by Mark, Jesus may have spent a few days recovering in hiding before embarking on a journey to Galilee. This would, either on foot or on the back of a donkey, have taken several days. Once there, Jesus would have met with some of his supporters (or backers) and discussed what to do next. Remaining in public, and risking recapture, would not have been sensible. Some form of exile, internal or exile, might well have appeared the best option.

This is how an original story in Mark might have continued. Is there incidentally anything about this that seems at all familiar?

The ending of Mark that was there was not, I suggest, what an emerging community of Christians wanted. They had, fifty years on (around CE 80 when Mark was written), already taken on Jesus as a dying-and-resurrecting godman. The gospel had now to be modified to tell this.

This was achieved by some drastic editing, which I suggest included cutting the gospel's ending. But the twelve replacement verses, which were then added to Mark, were seen even from a very early stage as unsatisfactory and unconvincing. The attempted resolutions which followed in other gospels brought together what may have been patchy recollections. There was no clear source, it would seem, to make up for what had been lost in Mark.

What finally happened had become an open question. Jesus vanished, melted away or was beamed up into the heavens.

