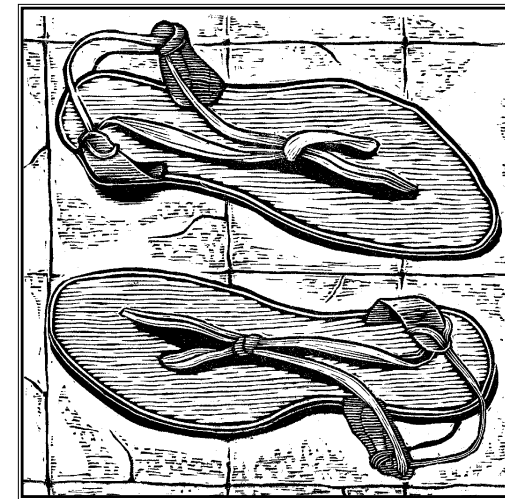


# MARK

## THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY



**DICK  
FRANCE**

**A BIBLE COMMENTARY FOR EVERY DAY**

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# **INTRODUCING THE PEOPLE’S BIBLE COMMENTARY SERIES**

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While it is important to deepen understanding of a given passage, this series always aims to engage both heart and mind in the study of the Bible. The scriptures point to our Lord himself and our task is to use them to build our relationship with him. When we read, let us do so prayerfully, slowly, reverently, expecting him to speak to our hearts.

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## **PBC MARK: 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 nineteenth 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*

## A DRAMA *in* THREE ACTS

After a prologue which sets the scene, Mark's story unfolds in three main sections, each of which has a distinct geographical setting:

1:1–13	Prologue (set in 'the wilderness')
1:14—8:21	Act 1: Galilee
8:22—10:52	Act 2: On the way to Jerusalem
11:1—16:8	Act 3: Jerusalem

The different geographical locations of the three acts serve to show the movement of the story towards its conclusion in Jerusalem, but there is much more to the three-act division than that. The story moves through three distinct phases, in terms both of the nature of Jesus' ministry and of the way people react to it, while the geographical movements serve to underline, and in a significant way even to symbolize, this movement of the plot towards its climax.

### Galilee and Jerusalem

Few modern readers of the New Testament realize that first-century Palestine was not a simple unity. Galilee, where most of Jesus' story takes place, was in almost every way separate from Judea (and its capital, Jerusalem). Between them stood the hostile territory of Samaria. Their histories had been separate for most of the 1,000 years since the days of a united Israel under David and Solomon, and they lived under different political systems (at the time of Jesus, Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor in Judea, Herod Antipas the Jewish 'king' in Galilee). Galilee was for most of its history more subject to foreign control, and had been dubbed by Isaiah 'Galilee of the Gentiles'. Its Jewish population were regarded by the Judean Jews as both racially suspect and religiously unorthodox. Galileans had their own dialect of Aramaic, and a Galilean Jew in Jerusalem would have been as obviously 'foreign' as an Irishman in London or a Texan in New York.

### The plot

Jesus was a Galilean, and it is in Galilee that Mark tells of the warm popular response to his ministry. It is this period of 'success' which

dominates Act 1, set in Galilee; Jesus is among his own people. Of course there are doubters and outright opponents even in this part of the story, but it is significant that Mark twice makes the point that these opponents are not local, but have come 'from Jerusalem' (3:22; 7:1).

Act 3 begins with Jesus' arrival, for the first time in Mark's narrative, in Jerusalem, where he is a stranger. Here, by contrast with Act 1, apart from the Galilean disciples who have come with Jesus to Jerusalem and escort him triumphantly into the city, the overall picture is one of darkness and increasing confrontation, leading up to the death of Jesus at the hands of the authorities of the capital. The darkness is relieved by the prediction of resurrection, but it is not in Jerusalem but in Galilee that the risen Lord will again meet his disciples (14:28; 16:7). Between these two sharply opposed scenes, Act 2 forms a bridge in two main ways (apart from the geographical movement from north to south). First, it is punctuated by Jesus' explicit predictions of the fate which awaits him in Jerusalem (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34), so that the shadow of the cross now falls darkly across the story, and Jesus' determined southward journey becomes a death-march. Secondly, the focus of his ministry now moves from public preaching and miracles to the private instruction of his disciples, preparing them for what lies ahead, and patiently re-educating them away from facile hopes of glory to the acceptance of the way of the cross, and the whole new scale of values which it entails.

### Reading Mark

All this adds up to a deliberate and quite sophisticated shaping of the story which we do well to notice if we are to hear the story of Jesus as Mark (and Peter) told it. To see Jesus in this human dimension of a divided society is to be made even more aware of how he challenges and overturns all human expectations. The kingdom of God does not operate according to the rules of the kingdoms of this world. It is a kingdom in which the last are first and the first last, where greatness is in humble service and where death is the way to life.

Was there ever another drama like this one?

### PRAYER

*Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things  
out of your law (Psalm 119:18).*

## SETTING *the* SCENE

‘The wilderness’, mentioned four times in verses 1–13 and never again in Mark’s Gospel, is a pointer to the different focus in these introductory paragraphs. They are set not among human society in Galilee or Judea, but in the uninhabited land around the Jordan. Before the story proper begins, Mark as it were takes us aside into a lonely place to brief us on what it will all be about.

### A glimpse behind the scenes

What he offers in his prologue (1:1–13) is a glimpse behind the scenes, to help us to grasp the deeper significance of the human stories which will follow. First a sonorous quotation from the prophetic hopes of the Old Testament leads us via the larger-than-life figure of John the Baptist in the wilderness to ponder the identity of the even greater one whose coming he announced. And there in the wilderness we see heaven opened, and hear the voice of God himself endorsing the mission of his Son. In the wilderness too we see Jesus in the company of Satan and angels. The supernatural dimension to these opening scenes is further reinforced by noticing that Mark, who elsewhere seldom mentions the Spirit of God, here includes three references to him.

All this provides us, the readers, with a privileged access to the real significance of what is to follow, supplying a dimension which we might otherwise easily lose sight of in the hurly-burly of Jesus’ public ministry in Galilee, and still more later in Jerusalem.

### Good news

When Mark wrote his book, ‘gospel’ was not the name of a kind of writing, but meant simply ‘good news’. That is how Mark labels the story he is about to tell: this is worth hearing! The opening verse sums it up by reminding us of who Jesus is. First he is the Messiah—and it is worth remembering whenever we read of ‘Christ’ in the New Testament that it is not just a name but the special title, which surely no Jew could hear without excitement, of the promised deliverer of God’s people. And secondly he is the ‘Son of God’, a term which Mark will record at several key points in his story, and which

immediately alerts us to expect something more than the biography of an ordinary man.

### A voice in the wilderness

So we begin with some words from the Old Testament to alert us to the importance of the story to follow. They are words which take us to the heart of the hope which had grown throughout the Old Testament period that one day God would act decisively to fulfil his purpose for his people.

The quotation from ‘Isaiah’ in verses 2–3 is in fact a combination of related prophetic texts about ‘preparing the way’. Malachi 3:1 speaks of a messenger who will prepare the people for the Lord’s coming as judge, while in Isaiah 40:3 a voice in the wilderness proclaims that God is about to come and deliver his people from their long exile. The messenger and the ‘voice’ are heralds, forerunners of the great day of God’s decisive action. It is all about to begin, here in the wilderness.

But the person of whom these prophecies speak is not yet Jesus. Jesus will not appear until verse 9. The forerunner of God is another and slightly earlier prophet, John. Before Jesus even appears on the scene, the drama has begun, and scripture is being fulfilled as a new voice is heard in the wilderness, calling the people of God to repentance, so that they will be ready for the Lord’s coming.

We shall meet this extraordinary prophetic figure in the next study.

### PRAYER

*Thank you that this book is ‘good news’. Help us to appreciate how important it is, to be excited about it, and to be as eager as Mark was to pass it on to others.*