

A Map for Mark

Andrew Malone summarises some of the material used for introductory New Testament classes at Ridley Melbourne...

I love looking at maps. They represent the world in a visual way, and I can see how to get from A to B. Better still, I can pick out some important landmarks and intersections which I should pass during my travels. So, while I'm travelling, I often don't have to look at the map again; I can just mentally tick off landmarks as they sail by. Conversely, if it's been awhile since anything seemed familiar, I know that I'm likely to have come off course and should muster up the humility to check the map again.

Most books of the Bible can be mapped out in a helpful way. Mark's Gospel is one which is particularly suited to visual representation. There are many other things we might say about the way Mark presents his story of Jesus. But the purpose of this particular introduction is to give you a map—a simplified, bird's-eye view of where Mark is taking us. That way, we can take confidence in the familiar landmarks as they pass...and perhaps recognise if we've somehow strayed from the direction he intends us to go.

Mark's Destination

Mark's gospel opens with a statement about what Mark thinks he's writing. The opening verse effectively functions as a title for the whole story: **'The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.'** (I'm following the usual wording found in most Bibles, even though the TNIV chooses to omit the phrase 'Son of God'; see its footnote.)

Christian readers read 'Son of God' as a theological label. We're so used to reading and thinking about, and worshipping and praying to our triune God: Father, Son and Spirit. But Mark probably has a political understanding in mind. 'Son of God' was a title used of the Jewish kings in the Old Testament. It was also the kind of title used by the Roman emperors who were particularly famous during the New Testament period. Indeed, scholars usually think that Mark was writing to a church in or near Rome, and probably close to the reign of the infamous Emperor Nero. So it's especially provocative to give *Jesus* the kind of title which the Roman ruler would have been proclaiming for himself.

That's also what Mark means by 'good news' or 'gospel'. The two translations are interchanged in 1:1 (compare NIV and TNIV), and we often learn in Sunday School that one means the other. What we often haven't learned is that the phrase hasn't always been a religious one. We have evidence that the Roman emperors would send out heralds to proclaim the 'good news' about the birth or enthronement of a new emperor; the crowds should rejoice at the 'gospel' of a new ruler who would bring peace and prosperity to his people.

So Mark's 'good news' about this particular 'Son of God' boldly claims an alternative emperor. As we read through Mark, we should keep one eye on the claims of kingship which Mark is making for Jesus. As we might expect, the way that Jesus rules comes as a great surprise to his disciples. Similarly, what this new king expects of his followers is also a little different.

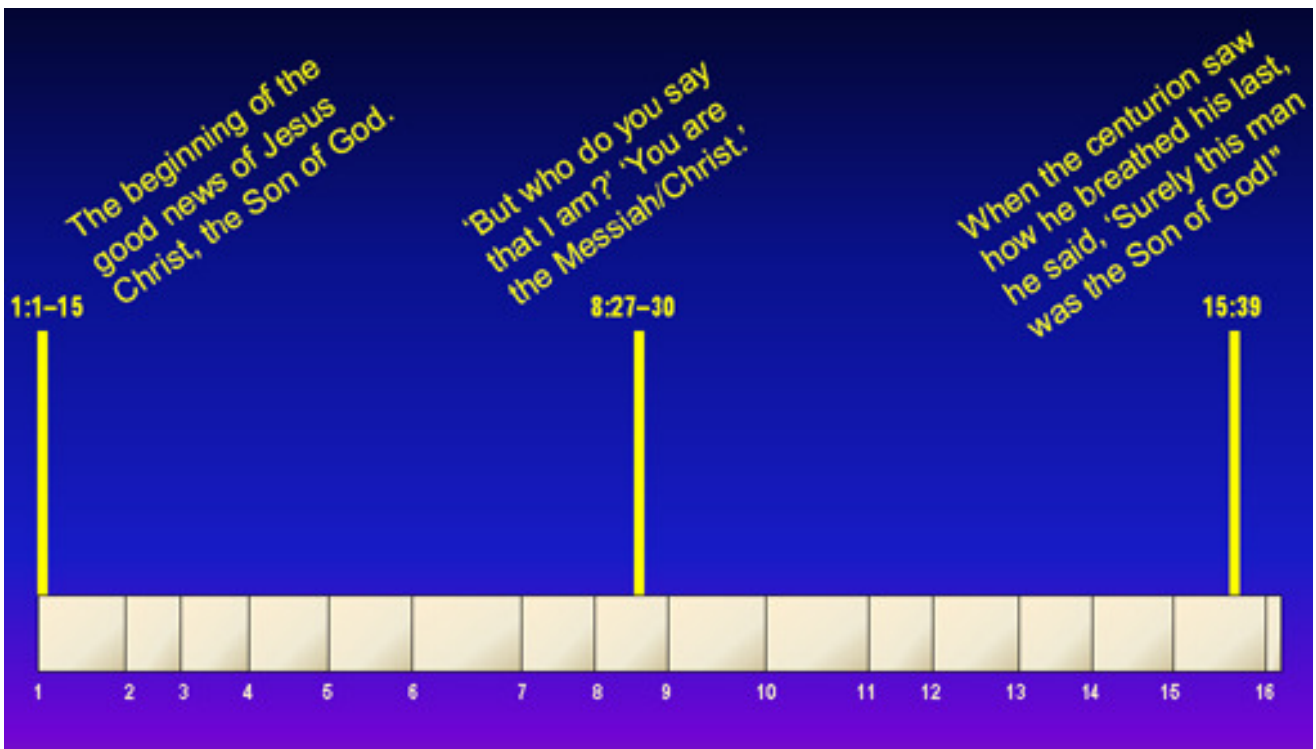
How will we, as readers of Mark's 'Gospel' respond to this 'good news' about the enthronement of a new ruler, and his tacit offer of world peace?



Mark's Map

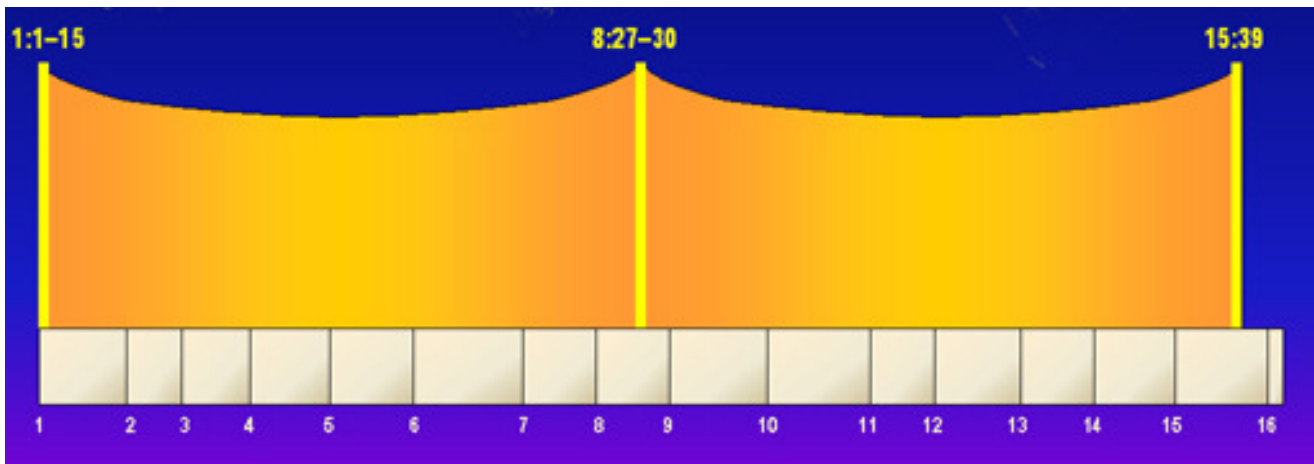
It seems to me that Mark uses such labels to show his readers where they're up to in the story. His title summary (1:1) introduces Jesus the 'Messiah/Christ' (also interchangeable terms), the 'Son of God'. So, too, at the key turning point in the middle of the book; Jesus asks the disciples what people make of him and Peter rightly responds, 'You are the Messiah' (8:27–30). And, when Jesus is finally 'enthroned' upon the cross, his identity is publicly (if also sarcastically) recorded as 'The King of the Jews' (15:26). Even a pagan centurion—one sworn to serve the Roman emperor—recognises that Jesus' death qualifies him as the ruling 'Son of God' (15:39); recall our Good Friday sermon this year.

I reckon this looks fabulous as a visual. It shows me exactly where Mark is going. First, we can map out Mark's sixteen chapters, and the three points (start, middle, end) already flagged:



These are not just passages which I've picked at random. I think that Mark shows people in the *story* who are busily asking of Jesus, 'Who is this man?'. Such questions do occur throughout the story, but the answers are particularly clustered near the start (e.g. 1:1, 11, 14–15) and the middle (8:29; 9:7) and end (14:61–62; 15:39). So I think that Mark is hoping that his *readers* themselves will start asking this same question—and that we will notice the answers that he keeps repeating at the key points of the book. This is the story of God's new ruler. He's not called 'king' or 'prince' or 'emperor' as modern fairy tales might use; Mark uses the theological language of 'Son of God' or 'Messiah/Christ'. We need to tune our ears to such language, so that we hear this repeated language concerning 'God's king'.

I was drawing the picture in class one day, and decided that the three markers in the picture looked a bit naked. Like a good Sunday School teacher, I decided to fill in the picture and join up these markers, to show that the story extends between each of these key points. I was lazy, so the joins looked a bit like some curtains hanging between three tent poles. But the accidental sketch caught our collective breath, as we noticed the ensuing representation (next page):



This is, of course, a simplification of the overall story. And yet—just as Mark himself flags at the start and middle and end of his story—it *is* the introduction to God’s new king. Jesus’ crown is far less shiny than the kinds of gold tiaras we romantically envisage (cf. 15:16–20). Much of Jesus’ teaching concerns the fact that he will be a *suffering* ruler (especially chapters 8–10)... and his followers really can’t comprehend this. Nonetheless, Mark presents us with a choice: a new king whom we might choose to follow, in contrast with the option of earthly rulers and worldly models of power.

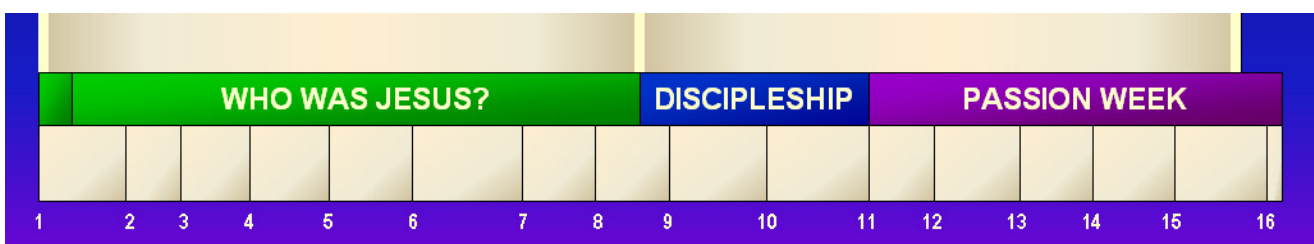
Thus one commentary is spot-on when it tries to find a title for Mark’s story: *The Servant King*.

Finer Details

For some people, they absorb a whole journey with a single glance. So, for you, it may well be enough just to notice that Mark falls into two halves, and that both halves teach us something about the new and surprising kingship of Jesus.

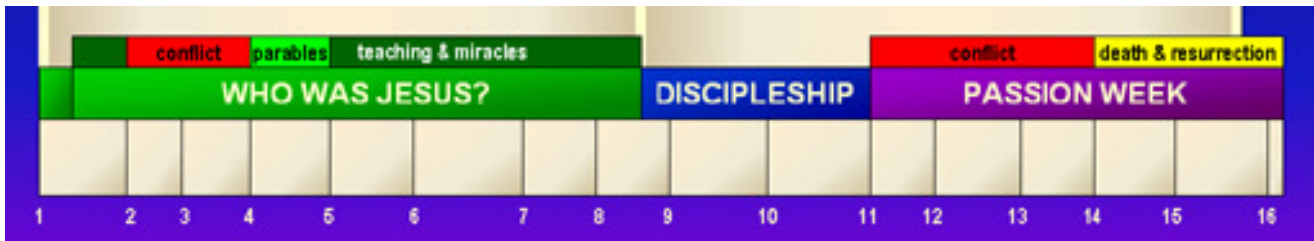
Others of us like to trace out the route in more detail. We like to check out the major intersections we’ll be passing through, and sometimes even count the number of side streets we pass. We can do the same with Mark (although I’ll refrain from zooming in for too much detail!).

Mark’s Gospel does, indeed, fall into two halves. The first half introduces Jesus, particularly as various people ask, ‘*Who* is this man?’. It’s only when we reach the central turning point (at 8:27–30) that the disciples finally get the right label for Jesus. Even then, they don’t fully know what this entails, so the second half of the book is all about *how* Jesus will rule: what kind of king will he prove to be? So there’s a block of chapters (8–10) as Jesus teaches them about his servant leadership, and then another block (11–16) as the story of Easter shows that Jesus’ ‘victory’ and ‘enthronement’ are somewhat different to the usual models of earthly leadership:



Even within each of these major blocks, Mark typically organises his stories so that there are collections of related material.

This can be a bit of a shock to those of us who simply assume that the Gospels recount a purely objective, chronological biography of Jesus' life. The stories *are*, largely, in order. But Mark (and Matthew and Luke and John) is a clever narrator, who sometimes rearranges material to make a point. It's just like our own story-telling, where we sometimes skip forward and back in a story so as to show the connections. Thus we see that Mark has various smaller blocks of material:



Mark's introduction to Jesus (chs. 1–8) is largely made up of Jesus' teaching and the many miracles he does to show that God confirmed this teaching. But Mark also shows us some other issues that arise. Jesus' arrival upsets some of the Jewish religious leaders, so Mark includes a block of five stories showing this conflict and how Jesus responds to them (2:1–3:6). Similarly, some of Jesus' teaching is done through parables; Mark only preserves a few of these, and collects nearly all of them into a single block (ch. 4).

Then there's the intentional block (chs. 8–10) about Jesus' atypical servant leadership, and the rigours of what it means to follow such a servant king.

The final chapters again fall into various smaller blocks. Three chapters (11–13) once again show that Jesus' ministry is wildly at odds with the existing form of Judaism; God is bringing about the fulfilment of his plans, and is replacing the Jerusalem temple and its self-serving leadership. No surprise that these chapters are marked by a series of confrontations between Jesus and the various Jewish leaders. This then leads to his death and resurrection, narrated in the final chapters (14–16).

It seems to me that these blocks of material are intentionally arranged by Mark, and that we can spot a number of repeated themes throughout. Mark recognises that Jesus' identity is not always embraced by everyone. So he repeatedly shows evidence that Jesus *is* God's appointed king. Mark also recognises that it's not easy to follow such a servant king, so he preserves much of Jesus' teaching on the topic, as well as showing that Jesus himself was confronted by the various traditions of his day and by the confusion and failure of frail human disciples.

So, too, for us as modern readers. Who do we think Jesus is? And what will it mean if we accept his invitation to take up our own crosses, to die to our old lives, and to follow in his ways?

Further Reading

There are many good commentaries on Mark. Perhaps the best single volume—which includes discussion of what Mark means alongside some suggestions for contemporary application—is David Garland, *Mark* (NIVAC; Zondervan, 1996). You can find others, both lighter and heavier.