

## **Background to the Gospel of Mark**

### **The Titles of the Four Gospels**

Unlike modern authors, the writers of the four Gospels (The Gospels According To Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) didn't attach their names or autobiographical sketches to their 'books'. But while the first recipients of these Gospels undoubtedly knew who wrote them, their titles weren't added until about 125 AD, as they were distributed more widely.

### **Identifying Mark as the Author**

Papias, a prominent bishop of the early second century and a student of the Apostle John, is our most important source for identifying the author of the second gospel. According to Papias, the Apostle Peter chose Mark (also known as 'John' and 'John Mark') to write down his account of the life of Jesus. Papias writes, *"Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord... For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in [his arrangement of the Lord's oracles]."* (A New Eusebius. Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337, J. Stevenson.)

There are a number of good reasons to accept the testimony of Papias regarding Mark's authorship of our second Gospel:

1. Luke, the writer of our third Gospel, confirms that Mark's mother's home was a meeting place for the Apostle Peter and other early first century Christians (Acts 12:12 - 14).
2. In his first letter to the early church, Peter also attests to his close relationship with Mark, recording that Mark was with him at the time he wrote this letter and affectionately calling Mark, 'my son' (1 Peter 5:13).
3. Mark was also the cousin of Barnabas, another important early Church missionary and leader (Colossians 4:10). In fact Mark was an assistant to Barnabas and the Apostle Paul on their very first missionary journey (Paul is the author of 13 New Testament letters). A dispute arose between Paul and Barnabas after Mark deserted the two during this mission (Acts 13:13). On a subsequent mission Barnabas wanted to include Mark again, but Paul refused to travel with him. Therefore Barnabas took Mark and Paul went his separate way with another assistant (Acts 15:36-40). But toward the end of his life, Mark won a place back into the heart and mission of Paul (2 Timothy 4:11).
4. These details confirm Mark's close relationship with Peter, and also demonstrate that he had access to some other excellent sources to write an account of Jesus' life. Furthermore, it's unlikely that another 'ghost-writer' would have used a name as relatively insignificant as Mark's as a pseudonym for such an important literary work. So it stands to reason that Mark is really the author of our second Gospel.

Finally, it's worth pointing out that of the four Gospel writers, Mark is the only one who includes a cryptic comment about a certain young man who fled naked from the scene of Jesus' arrest (14:51-52). It is possible that this unnamed figure was Mark and that this is his secret signature on his gospel. This theory is strengthened by our knowledge of Mark's shameful desertion of Paul and Barnabas and his great love for riddles and mysteries in his writing.