

Introduction for The Gospel of Mark

"If you were to go to your local art gallery you may find some paintings or sketches that show the area where you live and that you know best, but from many years ago. You might see the local tourist spots, a lookout over rolling county-side or maybe street scenes in an urban area. In one of our Tasmanian galleries I saw the work of John Glover, a famous Tasmanian landscape artist, and the change from when he sat and drew and painted the scenes before him, to what is *now* seen from that same vantage point is quite amazing. Towns, roads, and railways have all sprung up where once he saw rolling grasslands and copses of tall gum trees.

(A section re Galilee)

If I'm going to visit and spend time somewhere that I have never been before, I usually like to try to find out a bit about it. These days we go on-line and are able to plan our visit in advance having seen photos or Youtube clips. We are going to spend a good deal of time in Galilee this term. Now maybe you *have* been to Israel and walked where Jesus walked, and sat on the shore of the lake and enjoyed the quietness. What a wonderful experience! I have been there only with the aid of photography, and also Christian tour guides who over the years have produced great films so that we can see the scenery that would have been so familiar to Jesus and his friends.

So, we have quite the opposite situation than with my experience with the John Glovers and the landscapes *he* painted.

So, what *was* Galilee and the lake area like two thousand plus years ago. What would *Jesus* have seen as he left Nazareth where he had grown up since he was a toddler, where everyone knew him as Mary's eldest, the carpenter's son – where his brothers and sisters still lived with their families – and where Mary still made *her* home. What would the Galilee of *his* time have been like, as he set out on the mission given to him by his Father, what would he have seen as he travelled around?

Well, we know what Galilee *was not!* Certainly not like a John Glover painting! It was no backwater where everyone lived a very quiet rural life or in sparsely populated communities. Nazareth may not have been the large town it is today, its modern size is mainly of course *because* of its biblical past.

Some film portrayals of the story of Jesus and even some Bible illustrations that we can have in our minds, could have us imagining a peaceful laid-back rural life for the entire population!

In reality, Galilee was a bustling well-populated area of Israel, with towns of 30,000 inhabitants as in, for example Sepphoris, about an hour's walk from Nazareth. Good Roman roads connected this large city to the coast and other areas of Galilee. There were also numerous quite large villages in between the major centres. When the gospel writers describe 'crowds' they really mean 'crowds' According to the historian Josephus, Galilee was heavily populated, with between two and three hundred thousand inhabitants. It was not a very large area either!

On three sides Galilee was surrounded by mainly Gentile communities and so had more contact with non-Jews than their southern brothers. They had in fact resisted the Roman takeover more strenuously than the Judeans had. However, Galilee was a real part of 'the promised land' from the Jews point of view, and efforts were made by the religious

authorities to teach and instruct these more liberal northern Jews in the way *they* wanted them to think and behave. That was the task of the leaders of the synagogue.

As you went to do the shopping at the market, especially in Lower Galilee, where most of the population lived, you would have heard Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic spoken, and you would have seen Syrians, Jews and Romans mixing fairly freely. It was a centre of political and commercial life. Now this was mainly because Galilee stood on trade routes which had seen armies, traders and diplomats passing through over the years.

The International highway was the most important of these trade routes, connecting Babylon and the East, to the western part of the Roman empire and passing through Galilee close to Capernaum in the North, going down across the region to the coastal plains, and then southwards to Egypt. Roman roads are a legacy of their occupation and changed for ever the accessibility of the major cities of their world.

Now, we would describe Galilee as a multicultural society but the contempt that strict Jews felt, and displayed for their Gentile neighbours would not be tolerated in our present-day societies.

There is only a little mention of cities in the Gospels. Probably because Jesus seems to have avoided preaching in them, especially in the later part of his ministry. But there is much archaeological evidence of several large towns in the area and some, as we have seen, are named. For example, Tiberias, about two thirds of the way down the western shore of the lake. Tiberias was being built as King Herod Antipas' capital of Galilee, as Jesus was growing up. The king's palace was built on the hill behind the city. A trip on Google earth around the lake will show you modern Tiberias as one of the largest towns in the area.

Travelling north up that western shore of the lake you would next come in Jesus' day to Magdala which was about half way up the lake and was a busy centre for the drying and export of fish, one of the main industries of the region.

Kinnereth lies between Magdala and *Capernaum*, where Jesus was based for most of his ministry, and where Andrew and Peter and James and John and their family fishing businesses were also based. Near Kinnereth was seven salt springs, which together with the hot mineral springs of Hammath, just south of Tiberias, attracted the sick from around a wide area. This, of course, in the days of limited medical knowledge.

Capernaum is on the north shore of the lake and is the most often mentioned of the towns. Another major centre is Korazin just to the north again.

The lake itself is over 200m (almost 700ft) *below* sea level, and the surrounding mountains and hills funnel winds that produce spectacular storms on its surface. Today of course the lake *is* a tranquil and quiet place for the most part, as visitors tell us. But in Jesus' day it was a busy fishing ground for hundreds of boats and as you continued round the top of the lake and crossed over the Jordan river where it feeds water into the lake, you would have come to Bethsaida. This was the home town to some of the disciples and was also a well-known fishing industry town.

The Jordan river rises on snow- capped Mount Hermon to the north of the lake, and together with other smaller rivers from the surrounding hills brings fresh water to supply the lake and in Jesus' day produced a plentiful supply of fish for the needs of the population. It was their major industry and their staple diet!

The steep hills surrounding the lake mean that there are just three, small but very fertile plains where agriculture flourished in the volcanic soils. They produced walnuts, palm trees, figs, olives and grapes, as well as crops of wheat and barley. The plain of Gennesaret between Magdala and Capernaum would have been well-known to Jesus as the route to Nazareth from the Lake.

Today if you go tripping with Mr Google, you will see those expanded agricultural areas around the lake, where modern farmers can irrigate more land than was possible before mechanical pumping was available.

Speaking of industry, as most of the hills and soils *were* the result of lava outflows, black basalt rock and especially the boulders were hand tooled into mill-stones, olive presses and household grinders.

So, the trade routes, the rich agricultural land and a thriving fishing industry all give us a picture of life there. This was the physical setting for Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

But what was the political and social situation there? Now you may have a map in your bible of Israel in the time of Jesus.

Galilee, where most of the action in Mark's account takes place, was divided from Judea in the south by Samaria (at least in Jewish eyes); Galilee— 'up north'— was not well thought of by its southern neighbours, and especially by the religious leaders who looked down on these Northerners from their lofty Jerusalem home!

So, who were these Galileans with their distinctive local accent? What made them so different from their Judean brothers?

We read in 2 Kings 17 that when the Assyrians had conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel, they deported the surviving Jewish population and re-populated it with pagan, Gentile foreigners. It became known as 'Galilee of the Gentiles'. When the Judean Jews returned from *their* exile in Babylon, many re-settled there, and eventually the majority were Jewish. But that was not achieved without considerable suffering, and coercion by a succession of kings.

Galilee in Jesus' day was a hotbed for revolutionary sentiment and activity, and the Galileans had a reputation for fearlessness and volatility. Their attitude was caused not only by their rejection of the authority of the Roman ruling class, and of course on religious grounds, but also on the grounds of their social and economic need.

Herod the Great and his son Herod Antipas ruled Galilee from 40 B.C. to AD 39. Under their governance, Galilee enjoyed prosperity. However, there was only small upper class and a slightly larger middle class, but the majority were still of a lower class and *most* were tenant farmers and day laborers. And this bred resentment!

All this must have given King Herod Antipas some very real headaches and sleepless nights. He was granted *his* power by the Roman authorities and he lived in fear of losing this control. He also desperately wanted to be the Tetrarch or ruler of Judea with its capital city of Jerusalem as *his* headquarters. At the moment that position was held by a despised Roman, the procurator Pilate. Herod also had control of the area of Perea down on the eastern side of the lower reaches of the Jordan river below the lake, and had a headquarters there as well as at Tiberias. He lived in style, and enjoyed the title of 'King'. He had a lot to lose. His half-brother Philip was Tetrarch of the Gentile area to the north east on the opposite side of the upper Jordan river where it flowed *down* into the Lake. Both were sons

of Herod the Great whose plans to destroy Jesus as an infant in Bethlehem failed, but resulted in that terrible massacre of the under two-year-olds who lived there.

So, the appearance of Jesus on Herod Antipas' watch in Galilee, with the increasing following that Jesus commanded and with those large crowds we spoke of earlier, all this added to Herod's insecurity. Soon after Mark has introduced Jesus to us in his account, we discover that Herod had already dealt with John the Baptist down south, and now look what's happening in the even more unpredictable and volatile climate of Galilee. He would have been very watchful and listening to his supporter's reports of the activities of Jesus and his band of disciples with great interest. And again, very early in Mark's account we hear of most unlikely alliances between the Herodians, who supported at least outwardly the Roman occupation, and the Pharisees who deeply resented their nation's conquerors. Both groups were plotting to kill Jesus, and Herod would have been very well informed by *his* supporters.

(A Section re Jerusalem)

As we seem to have access to a time machine today, let's take advantage of it, and take a side trip down to Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel. We'll set the controls again for the time when Jesus began his public ministry.

Now *modern* Jerusalem is a divided city with a very mixed population, but back then it was the hub of the Jewish religion for the known world. Herod the Great, Herod and Philips' father, had totally restored the temple and expanded its surrounding terraces and built vast colonnades around those terraces, so that it was one of the wonders of the world and definitely on the tourist map! The temple building itself was not enlarged, as strict rules governed its size and shape, but it was beautified and was indeed a wonder to behold! The final work on the surroundings was still underway in Jesus' day. A very long-term project!

The Jewish religious authorities were centred in Jerusalem, as were often the Roman occupiers, with Pilate, probably *not* enjoying his deployment to this outpost of the Roman Empire. It was a hostile, dry and dusty corner of the Mediterranean. How he, and his wife, would have longed to be in fertile and lush Italy. They may have considered it as being banished rather than being posted!

Jerusalem was a bustling city and at Passover time had its population increased by, possibly over twenty thousand, as pilgrims from all over the known world flocked to spend those special days in the City of David.

This is where Jesus will, as the prophet Isaiah predicted 'set his face' to go, at the Passover of God's appointment, to become the Lamb of God, who would take away the sin of the world.

Isaiah's prophecies feature in Mark's gospel all the way through. It's a side trip back in time on the journey he takes us on, that is well worth the effort, as we see, and wonder at words spoken hundreds of years before, being fulfilled in detail in the life and teaching and death of Jesus. Jesus leads us on yet another exodus, not this time as the Israelites of old were led out of slavery in Egypt, or as Isaiah prophesied that they would come back to Jerusalem after 70 years of exile in Babylon.

This exodus is Jesus leading us into the presence of his Father to have eternal life as we live now, and when we complete our time on earth, with him for ever.

Jerusalem features in so much of Scripture and Jesus did visit it more than once and was deeply saddened by its rejection of him, as it's true king.

(Who, what, when and where)

As we look at the New Testament, we discover that there are four accounts of Jesus of Nazareth, his life and teaching, and maybe you have wondered why.

One church father, Justin Martyr in the second century described the gospels as ‘memoires of the apostles’ They record facts *about* Jesus and give us the teaching *of* Jesus and certainly bear witness *to* him.

We need to note that none of the four gospels were written *by* Jesus. All four contain collections of his sayings, and they are woven into the story of his life and ministry. We have to remember that it was God who chose to give us all we know about his Son’s earthly ministry in *this* particular way, four accounts, not just one, or in some other way.

The material in the first three is often very alike, and they are called the ‘synoptic’ or ‘common view’ gospels. Mark’s was written first and then Matthew and Luke used much of his material when later on when they were writing theirs. John’s was written much later again.

God planned it this way, although we are not absolutely certain *why* he did. But one reason could well be that different Christian communities had particular needs that required an account to assist *them* to grow as believers. They also needed a record of Jesus as a tool to enable them to reach out to enquiring, or newly-believing folk, in their different cultural or physical settings.

For example, Matthew wrote, mainly for Jewish folk and majors on the fulfilment of all the Old Testament prophecies about Messiah. Luke wanted to give his friend Theophilus, an accurate account of Jesus, and did much careful research and followed it up with a further accurate account of the early church and its spread in the Acts of the apostles, which by the way, could accurately be called the ‘Acts of the Holy Spirit. John’s account is very different to Mathew and Luke’s and, as we said, he wrote it much later often giving the *teaching* of Jesus prominence. For example, I have found John’s accounts of Jesus debating with the religious leaders particularly striking.

Jesus would have spoken Aramaic, and later many communities, as the church spread, would have *only* been Greek speaking. Many of these would not have lived in a Jewish, rural, agricultural setting, but in places like Rome, Ephesus or Antioch. These were urban, pagan cities and presented a very different environment.

(A section regarding Mark in Rome)

We’ve been to Galilee and taken a side trip to Jerusalem, so now we need to jump in our time machine and go forward some years and fly over to Rome in around AD 64–65 and catch up with what is happening there.

There’s a growing strong fellowship of believers, meeting in house churches. They have received in years gone by a very wonderful letter from the apostle Paul, and an involuntary visit from him, not that long ago, as he was brought to Rome as a prisoner and finally released to resume his missionary work. Peter too has spent time in Rome with them and his companion Mark, a younger man, has become a part of their fellowship and would seem to have settled there for a while at least.

The Emperor Nero had not been *too* bothered by 'these Christians', although there had been increasing hostility from the Roman population as the believers naturally resisted joining in their pagan rituals, and the behaviour that accompanied them. Nero had been busy making life difficult for the aristocracy of his day, not a very wise attitude to take or a diplomatic thing to do, and when the devastating fires in Rome broke out on the 19th July in AD 64 and burned for six days before being brought under control, blame began to be pointed in *Nero's* direction, and *he* then decided to pin the whole thing on 'those Christians'. They became his scapegoats. Bitter persecution followed.

Perhaps it was because of *this* situation that Mark was prompted by the Holy Spirit to begin the task of writing the first of the accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus. We don't know for certain if he met and listened to Jesus, but we do know he was mentored and much loved by Peter who had spent three years as a close friend of the Master.

It is *just* possible that Mark *may* have begun to write his account *before* the terrible persecution that Nero brought down on the heads of the believers, and it may have even been circulating before the fires. But what's more important than that, is the *message* that Mark wanted to *bring* to the believers.

It was a big undertaking to write such a manuscript, but he had plenty of material both in written form, and many oral accounts of the sayings and wonderful actions of the Lord Jesus. And of course, all the notes he may have taken as he listened to, and travelled with Peter as *he* went out with good news of the gospel after Jesus returned to Heaven and the Holy Spirit came just as Jesus had promised, empowering all the disciples for the great missionary task he had given to them.

Mark wanted to give the believers an evangelistic tool to place in the hands of new believers or enquirers, who needed to know exactly who Jesus was – what he had come to do – and what their response to him should be. He also wanted to give the harassed and soon to be persecuted, and some to be martyred believers, the tools to encourage *them* to stand firm, and know that as Jesus had suffered persecution and died for them on the cross, so their future may well hold similar suffering – as the master – so the servants.

These were the motivators that Mark had as, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit he sorted through those written sayings of Jesus of which there were many circulating. He recalled what he had heard from Peter. He may have been an eye-witness to some of the events he was about to record. Then, each event or teaching was carefully recorded in particular places in his manuscript, so that the fast - moving and often very abbreviated version of the gospel as we know it today, leads us on an exciting and very well-planned journey.

He introduced his readers to Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God and took them on that journey of discovery, with the disciples. What *was* the kingdom that Jesus spoke of? Where *did* his power come from to preach, to heal, to cast out demons and even command the storms to still and the dead to rise to life again? The crowds were amazed, as were the disciples whom he chose, and called to be with him on his journey. Even *they* were slow to recognise their longed-for Messiah, and the religious authorities were – unbeknown to the disciples – beginning to plot his death very early in the story. The disciples would probably not have believed *that* as a possibility!

But Mark led his readers to a wonderful pivotal *point* in Chapter 8 where Peter speaks up for the disciples, answering Jesus' question as to who did *they* say he was. Peter declares that they believe Jesus *is* the Messiah. But unbelief, fear and misunderstanding of what Jesus has come to do, continues to be a problem for these 12 men. Their idea of greatness did not fit with Jesus' mission from his Father, and so Mark takes them to a pivotal *verse* in Chapter 10 verse 45 where Jesus explains to them that his kingship is that of a servant -

king.... and he has come to *give his life* as a ransom for many– and the prophecy of Isaiah of a *Suffering* Servant becomes a little clearer to his close friends. But they simply cannot seem to take in what Jesus tells them at least three times will happen to him *after* he goes up to Jerusalem at Passover, and *after he* dies there at the hands of the Romans.

So busy are they, grappling with this seemingly-impossible idea that Messiah could ‘die’ that they keep missing Jesus’ clear statement that he would rise again on the third day!

But would we have done any better than these dear friends of the Master?

As you study Mark’s gospel this term you will travel all over Galilee with Jesus and his disciples. You will get into the boats and cross, and re-cross the lake in fair weather and foul! You will go up north and find yourself mainly in Gentile areas, and you will listen to Jesus teaching the crowds, and sometimes just the disciples. You may hold your breath as the disciples would have done, as Jesus takes on the hostility and growing hate of the religious authorities.

You will join with the apprehensive disciples on that last fateful journey up the winding road to Jerusalem at Passover.

And, as Jesus *becomes* that ransom for many– for you and I – as he dies on the cross, you will look back at the road you have travelled, and marvel at the love, and the patience, and the grace that Jesus showed to all he met. Now, on the cross he pays the price for sin, and takes the punishment that should have been ours, dying in our place.

But that is not the end that Mark has for *us*, or for his readers in Rome all those years ago.

We, like them will read those wonderful life-giving words... ‘He is risen!’ And he was! and the unbelief of the disciples fled away as they joyfully met with him over the best 40-day Bible Study on earth, that there ever will be! No doubts now.

Mark’s task was done. The believers were encouraged by what was probably more like a booklet now, rather than a scroll. They faithfully copied and distributed it locally and then further afield. It was preserved and handed on, and Matthew and Luke, as we have said were able to draw on it for their later gospels. And as you look at the copy of the *entire Scriptures* you may have in your hand right now, do give thanks for all those who in later years copied, translated, and fought to have it printed and distributed, sometimes at the cost of their lives, as servants following in *their* Master’s footsteps. It is a precious jewel that we are privileged to possess.

Enjoy your voyage of discovery this term as you learn more about Jesus, as Mark leads us from a baptismal scene in the Jordan river in Judea, all over the promised land. Finally, we will find ourselves on the Mount of Olives, and we stand with the disciples as our risen Lord Jesus ascends into heaven, and know – from his own words – that one day we will join him in the air when he returns and gathers up the Christian family, past, present and future. He will then be seen coming, this time, in his Father’s glory and every knee *will* bow and every tongue *will* confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Have a wonderful journey, and meet Jesus, as *I* have done on *my* journey through Mark’s challenging gospel. Meet Messiah, Son of God, and respond to him, accepting his offers of grace and love, as he came to give his life a ransom for many, for you.

I have responded to him with gratitude and joy, and I pray that you will too.