

## INVITATION TO MARK

The book of Mark is one of four accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. Its author doesn't identify himself by name, and he doesn't say who he's writing to. But we can determine a lot about these things from the book itself. First, it's clear that this book is written for a Roman audience—that is, for people whose first language was Latin, who lived at a distance from the land of Israel, and who were not familiar with Jewish customs. The book is written in Greek, the common language of the time, but it uses many Latin terms. The author explains Jewish customs, and he translates quotations from Jesus that are in Aramaic. He also notes that Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross, was the father of Alexander and Rufus, expecting that his audience will know who these men are. A man named Rufus was a leader in the church at Rome. Another thing we can tell from the book is that its author either witnessed Jesus' ministry personally or heard about Jesus from an eyewitness. The book includes many details which an eyewitness would recall. At one point we're told that Peter remembered that Jesus had cursed the fig tree. Such a detail could only have been provided originally by Peter himself. The book therefore may well be the "memoirs" of Peter as Jesus' disciple. But why was it written? As we read through its pages, we're struck by the recurring emphasis on the need to be willing to suffer and even give one's life in order to remain faithful to Jesus. One clue we have to this purpose comes in the way that Peter's brash boasting of loyalty to Jesus and his subsequent denial are related unflinchingly, with only a hint of his later restoration. The portrayal seems intended to challenge believers not to deny Jesus in the same way Peter had. But it must have been offered at a time when Peter's standing in the Roman church was so high that not even this

portrayal would have diminished it. This time would have been right after Peter's death at the hands of the emperor Nero around AD 65. (In that case, Peter's memoirs would have been written down, as tradition suggests, by his younger friend and co-worker John Mark, who was with him in Rome at the end of his life—see p. 1806.) The kind of witness to Jesus by Roman believers that the hour called for is modeled by the Roman centurion at Jesus' death: Surely this man was the Son of God! The book appears to be written, therefore, to challenge and encourage believers in Rome to remain faithful to Jesus in the face of Nero's persecution. While it accomplishes this goal by telling the story of Jesus' life, it has a much faster-moving plot than other biographies of the day. It's much more like the dramas that were presented on the stage for Greek and Roman audiences. In these dramas, the tension would build until reaching a point of crisis and climax. After this the tension would be steadily diffused as conflicting parties put a plan into action to secure their threatened interests. The ultimate clash of these plans produced an "overturning" of the situation that had formerly prevailed, in favor of a new one. In Mark the tension centers around the identity of Jesus. If we think of the book as a drama, we may say that in its opening half, the tension is over the question: Who is this man? This tension builds over the course of three acts: : In the first act, Jesus teaches and heals the crowds that swarm to him (pp. 1771–1774). : In the second act, Jesus encounters more conflict and opposition (pp. 1774–1778). : In the third act, the disciples struggle more to understand who Jesus is (pp. 1778–1782). Each act begins with a reference to Jesus calling or commissioning his disciples, and each one ends with an episode that calls attention to the question of his identity. The episode at the end of the third act shows Jesus healing a blind man in two stages, so that he slowly comes to see. This reflects the experience of the disciples, who have

only gradually come to recognize who Jesus is. Then in the central episode of the whole story—between its two halves—Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah (p. 1782), the one bringing God’s reign to earth. Now the overt conflict begins. As the Messiah, Jesus has come to introduce a radical new way of life that will undercut existing power relationships. (Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.) This is threatening to those who are currently in power. As he and his disciples travel to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, Jesus warns them three times that he will be betrayed and executed, but adds that in the ultimate triumph of God’s plan, he will then rise from the dead. The second half of the drama depicts this outcome, and it too does so in three acts: : In the first act (which, significantly, also ends with the healing of a blind man), Jesus and his disciples travel to Jerusalem (pp. 1782–1787). : In the second act, Jesus teaches in the temple and clashes with the established leadership (pp. 1787–1791). : In the final act, this leadership executes its plan and has Jesus arrested and crucified, seemingly “overturning” all he has done. But then God “overturns” their deed and raises Jesus to life (pp. 1791–1796). Readers of the story are thus called to be faithful to Jesus, even if this means suffering the same fate he did. This is how God will continue to overturn the existing order and establish the way of life that Jesus taught. Implicit in this is the promise that God will “overturn” the death of believers just as he did that of Jesus. They too will be vindicated and raised to new life.