

# An Introduction to Jesus According to Mark and John

## Introduction

What do Cristiano Ronaldo, Vladimir Putin, Beyoncé, Narendra Modi, and Miley Cyrus have in common? They are all on *TIME* magazine's 2014 list of the 100 most influential people in the world. Whatever we may think of them, and many evoke mixed reactions, these are the people that are apparently shaping thought and events across the globe. But what about Jesus of Nazareth? While he too evokes mixed reactions—people love or hate him, follow or ignore him, worship or ridicule him—I contend that he should be on the cover of a special edition of *TIME* magazine as the most influential person in history. At first glance, this would surprise some who consider Jesus' three-year career a failure. Just over two thousand years ago, an obscure Jew named Jesus appeared on the Palestinian scene. He was about thirty years old, hailed from Nazareth and had no formal theological education. He began to announce the coming of God's rule on earth, urging his fellow Jews to repent, believe and enjoy the blessings of God's rule. Jesus announced that God had sent him on a salvific mission to Israel. Empowered by God's Spirit, he claimed he was the fulfilment of Israel's eschatological hopes, acting on God's authority and even to be on a par with him. The Jewish authorities were incensed and Jesus' confrontations with them eventually got him killed after a tumultuous three-year career.

This would have been the end of Jesus and his work, were it not for his followers who claimed that Jesus had risen from the dead on the third day. Over the few weeks, between his resurrection and ascension into heaven, Jesus commissioned the small number of men he had mentored during his brief career to be his witnesses in the world. Divinely empowered by God's Spirit, these apostles carried on Jesus' mission and the Jesus movement was born. Today there are over two billion devotees of Jesus, also called 'Christians', making Christianity the largest religion in the world. This is an unlikely success story when we consider Jesus' brief career, in which he appears more a failure than a winner. Jesus attracted large crowds but gained few followers; he confronted the religious authorities but got killed as a result; he trained twelve disciples to continue his work but one betrayed him and the others did not understand much about what he was doing or who he was. Later, a few of Jesus' followers wrote accounts of Jesus' life and ministry in the form of four Gospels as we have them today. If Jesus is the most influential person in human history, it would not go amiss to learn about him. Among the four Gospels, Mark's Gospel forms the basis for Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel, so I will focus on Mark and John's accounts of Jesus. These are their stories.

## The Gospel According to Mark

The author of this Gospel may be John Mark, an associate of Paul who later acted as Peter's interpreter in Rome. If this is the case, Mark's Gospel is based on Peter's eyewitness account of Jesus' life and ministry. Mark probably wrote his Gospel just before AD 70, in the aftermath of Nero's persecution in AD 64 (13:9-13) and the defilement of the Jerusalem temple by the

Zealots in AD 67-68 (13:14ff.), in order to encourage Christians in general to continue in their discipleship during or for a time of persecution. So, who, according to Mark, is this Jesus? What was his mission? And how will this story of Jesus be of any encouragement to Christians facing persecution?

Mark starts his account with the words, 'The beginning of the Gospel (i.e. good news) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1:1). The key question Mark is trying to address is, 'Who is Jesus?', and the opening verse indicates two key aspects of Jesus—he is the Christ and the Son of God. When we read Mark's narrative we learn that Peter confesses the first aspect of Jesus' identity (8:29) and the Roman centurion confesses the second aspect (15:39). In addition, Mark records that on two occasions God himself declares Jesus is his Son—at Jesus' baptism (1:11) and at the Mount of Transfiguration (9:7). Yet, titles mean different things to different people, so Mark finds it important to clarify for his readers what it means that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God. While Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ or Messiah in 8:29 is laudable in itself, it also creates an opportunity to reveal what kind of Christ Jesus is. Although Peter ascribes the right title to Jesus, he also misunderstands Jesus' identity. When Jesus explains that he must suffer, die and, after three days, rise again, Peter rebukes him, showing clearly that this was not the kind of Christ he had in mind. In turn, Jesus rebukes Peter and begins to explain that suffering and death are not just part of his programme but also await his disciples, who must follow him on 'the way of the cross' (8:31–9:1). This element is so crucial that Jesus reiterates on two more occasions that he must suffer and die (9:31; 10:33–34) and teaches at length on the nature of costly discipleship (8:22–10:52).

Jesus' divinity cannot be deduced from the titles 'Messiah' and 'Son of God' because in the Jewish understanding, the Messiah was to be a human agent chosen by God and anointed by God's Spirit to accomplish God's restorative purposes for his people; and the epithet 'Son of God' could refer to angels (e.g., Genesis 6:2; Job 38:7) or human beings (e.g., Psalm 2:7). Instead, it is in Jesus' claims that we perceive him being on a par with God himself. For example, Jesus' declaration to the paralytic that his sins are forgiven (2:5) is scandalous. The Jewish authorities see the implicit claim in Jesus' words because only God (in heaven) can forgive sins (2:7). Jesus' claim to have this authority on earth (2:10) is a claim to be on a par with God—to act on earth *as* God. Jesus also reveals a special, even intimate, relationship with God when he addresses God as 'Abba' in Gethsemane (14:36). Finally, Jesus' claim to a special place at the right hand of God's throne (14:62) is a claim to divinity, to be equal to God.

Regarding his programme or mission, Jesus not only announces the imminent coming of God's restorative reign but also that he was the conduit for its arrival (1:1, 14–15). Mark presents Jesus as God's authorized agent whose salvific activities include forgiveness of sins (2:10) and 'healing' sinners (2:17). From the outset, Jesus clashes with the Jewish religious leaders because his programme challenges their authority (e.g., 2:1–3:6a). Besides, while the Jewish leaders operate with a holiness paradigm of separation (others' uncleanness affects their holiness), Jesus' concept of holiness is subversive and involves engagement, in that his holiness affects people's uncleanness (e.g., 1:40–42; 5:25–29; 7:14–23). Most of the disputes between Jesus and the religious leaders concern the Torah and Mosaic tradition—and who has the legitimate authority to interpret it.

Jesus' so-called 'cleansing' of the temple (11:15–19) is a defining moment in his ministry. This event, 'sandwiched' in the middle of the fig tree incident (11:12–14, 20–24), is a prophetic action that points to the barrenness of the temple and foreshadows its destruction. Again, the Jewish leaders question Jesus' authority to do these things (11:27–28). Jesus' action in the temple and his critique of the Jewish religious leaders soon after, precipitate his arrest (12:12:1–12; 14:1). At his trial, the Jewish authorities are initially unsuccessful in building a case against Jesus, but later

sentence him to death based on his blasphemous claim (14:55-64). They then take Jesus to Pilate and pressurize him to ratify the death sentence (15:1-15). Jesus is then crucified by the Romans as a messianic insurrectionist (15:26). Mark, however, wants his readers to view Jesus' death differently. Jesus is the messianic Servant-King who gives his life as a ransom for many (10:45). Jesus' death is substitutionary (he dies 'in place of' many [10:45]) and atoning (he dies to restore people to God [cf. 14:22-24; 15:37-38]). And while it is unclear where Mark's Gospel ends, the narration of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead has been preserved (16:1-8). For Mark it is clear that Jesus is alive.

## The Gospel According to John

The author of this Gospel is the so-called 'Beloved Disciple'—an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry (21:24; cf. 19:35). The Beloved Disciple is probably John the son of Zebedee, who wrote his account of Jesus around AD 90 in order to evoke and strengthen belief in Jesus among his readers. For John, it is crucial to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, because such belief leads to life (20:31). John is as concerned as Mark that his readers understand who Jesus is, but chooses a radically different starting point. While Mark starts with the human Jesus, as it were, and challenges his readers to recognize there is more to him, John, from the opening line, introduces Jesus as the incarnate, divine, pre-existent Word (1:1-18). Like Mark, John presents Jesus as the Christ or Messiah but he is specifically a *Teacher*-Messiah—one who liberates people from the spiritual oppression of sin through his teaching (8:31-34; 15:3).

So, while John's readers learn straightaway who Jesus is, they will also discover, during the course of John's narrative, how people in his time struggled to understand where Jesus is from. 'The Jews', Jesus' opponents throughout his ministry, clearly think that Jesus simply has human origins (6:41-42; 7:27), whereas, in fact, Jesus' origins are in another world (1:1-2, 14; 3:13, 31; 6:33, 35; 8:23; 16:28). At other times, people seem to have no idea where Jesus is from (9:29; 19:9). The narrative does not clarify whether Jesus is a Judean or Galilean. On the one hand, Jesus hails from Nazareth (1:45; cf. 18:5, 7; 19:19) and the Jewish authorities think he is a Galilean (7:52). On the other hand, the Samaritan woman identifies him as a Judean (4:9); Jesus asserts that salvation is rooted in the Judean religion, which is now centered on him (4:22); and Jesus is crucified as 'king of the Judeans' (18:33, 39; 19:3, 19, 21).

Jesus' mission is to complete the work that the Father has assigned to him (4:34; 17:4), which is to save the world that is enveloped in darkness and does not know God (1:5; 3:16; 7:28; 8:47). Jesus' does this by revealing God the Father so that people may come to know him and consequently become of God through a spiritual birth that brings them into God's family (1:12-13; 3:3-5). Jesus' mission of revealing God is, in fact, a life-giving mission in that he is not only the bearer of divine life (1:4; 5:26; 14:6) but also its distributor (4:14; 5:21; 6:33; 10:10), especially through his revelatory teaching (6:63, 68). The culmination of Jesus' saving revelation of the Father is on the cross where he gives his life for the life of the world (cf. 3:14-16; 6:51; 12:32-33; 19:30).

While Jesus encounters some opposition from the start, the main part of his ministry is characterized by increasing hostility from 'the Jews' (John 5-12). Except for 6:1-7:9 and 10:40-11:6, all events in John 5-12 take place in or near Jerusalem, the religious-political headquarters of 'the Jews'. Not surprisingly, this group is also a noticeable presence at Jesus' trial and crucifixion in John 18-19. Although his opponents make repeated attempts to catch and kill him, Jesus manages to evade them (e.g., 5:18; 7:1, 19, 30, 44; 8:20, 37, 40, 59; 10:31-33, 39; 11:8; 12:36). It is only when he knows that his 'hour', that is, the divinely appointed time to finish the Father's work on the cross, has arrived, that Jesus allows himself to be arrested (13:1; 18:1-6). While the Markan account presents Jesus as largely unresponsive during his trial, the Johannine

account presents him as a skillful orator, challenging both his Jewish and Roman interrogators. Jesus is sentenced to be crucified not because he loses the argument in the trial proceedings—in fact, Pilate seems convinced he is innocent—but because Pilate overplays his hand and is manipulated by ‘the Jews’ (19:12-16).

John’s account of the crucifixion marks the climax of the story and highlights various theological issues. First, the cross acquires universal significance when the charges against Jesus are written in the major languages of the then-known world (19:19-20), in keeping with the cosmic outlook of the Gospel. Second, instead of the picture of shame and defeat, John sees new symbolism in the cross. The cross becomes Jesus’ throne where he is exalted as king, and the place of victory—Jesus’ triumphant cry, ‘It is finished’ (19:30), comes from knowing he has successfully completed the Father’s assignment. Third, the cross marks the pinnacle of the Father’s love for the world in the giving of his Son (3:16) and of the Son’s giving his life for the life of the world (3:14-15; 6:51). However, just as in Mark’s story, Jesus’ death is not the end.

John 20, describing Jesus’ resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene, the ten disciples and Thomas, marks the resolution of the story. While the settings and their responses differ, the common element is that Jesus provides each person with a first-hand encounter in order to evoke or seal their faith. Jesus’ insight into where people stand in relation to him drives his personalized approach to them. So, in her ‘earthly’ quest for Jesus’ body, the grieving Mary has to learn that Jesus will be present hereafter through the Spirit (cf. 14:15-23). With the insufflation and giving of the Spirit, Jesus symbolically re-creates his fearful disciples and seals their relationship with him, after which he commissions them (20:19-23). Thomas demands to see and touch Jesus for himself, but must learn to rely on trustworthy testimony rather than concrete, physical evidence. Similarly, John’s readers have to learn to rely on the trustworthy eyewitness testimony in the form of his Gospel.

## Conclusion

We have seen that there are differences in Mark and John’s presentation of Jesus, but these are far outweighed by the similarities. Both Mark and John relate the story of Jesus because they want their readers to put their trust in him and become his followers. Both accounts of Jesus are uniquely timeless: in any generation and culture, readers of these stories are confronted with this Jesus—and must respond. Will they believe in Jesus as the one who can save them and restore them to God? Will they entrust themselves to him in life-long costly discipleship? These are perhaps the most crucial questions people have to face and answer in their lifetime.



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Apologetics, Gospels

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