

2 Mark 1:1-8 John the Baptist prepares the way

Discussion: After raising any thoughts, questions or comments from the previous session, what do you think of the scripture that says “*All Scripture is God-breathed*” (NIV) or “*inspired by God*” (KJV) in 2 Tim 3:16a. Does this mean God always intended us to have four gospels?

Our previous **comparison** between the opening verses of Mark's Gospel with the parallel verses of Matthew and Luke found Mark's version appears to fully relate the events. However, Matthew and Luke have additional words or phrases (e.g., *brood of vipers*, Jesus baptising with the Holy Spirit *and fire*, plus the extra phrase *his winnowing fork in his hand*). The most common view by scholars is that Mark was the first gospel written; this may indicate that Matthew and Luke borrowed from one another, or that they used a (now lost) source known as “Q”, or perhaps even drew from other oral histories.

Figure 3 shows the most likely date for Mark relative to other New Testament (NT) writings, although some scholars argue for earlier dates.¹¹ Peter died about AD 64 (at the hands of Nero) with Mark's Gospel probably written in the years soon after. There is also a consensus by theologians that Mark is recording the words and actions of the apostle Peter.

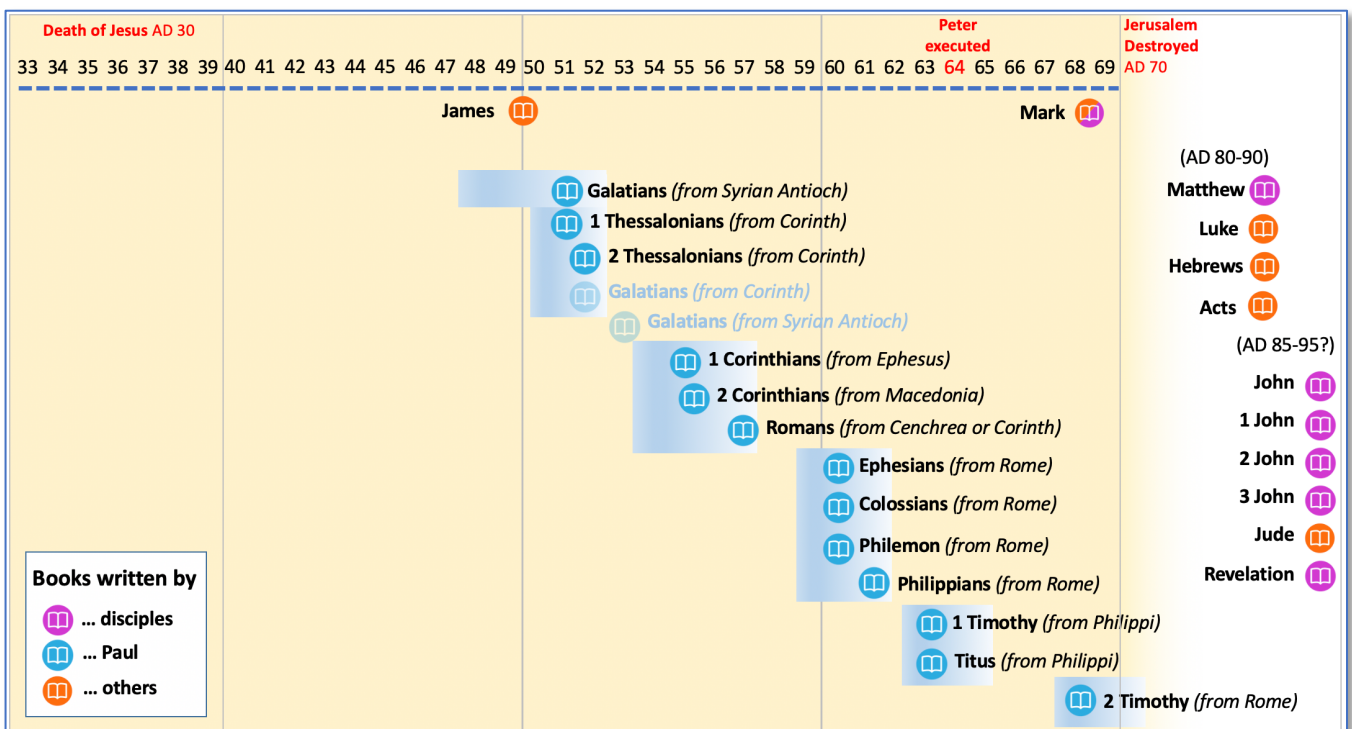


Figure 3: Probable timeline for the writing of NT scriptures

Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

The apostle Peter regarded Mark like a son, which we see in the letter he wrote “...sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark” (1 Peter 5:13).¹² Mark was not a mere secretary to Peter, but a close companion as well.

The Gospel begins with John the Baptist

The Book of Acts records an occasion when Peter started to preach which occurred at the house of Cornelius. We note that Peter started his teaching by referring to John the Baptist:

34a Then Peter began to speak.... **37** “You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— **38a** how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power...” (Acts 10:34, 37-38).

Consequently, if Mark was reporting the words of Peter, it is unsurprising that his Gospel should start in the same manner. It began with the appearance of John the Baptist who set the scene for Jesus to commence his ministry and initiated it by baptising him.

Discussion: John was only a few months older than Jesus. How do we know this?
A clue can be found in Luke 1:26, 39-44.

In the previous session we aimed to compare Mark 1:1-8 with the equivalent passages from Matthew and Luke. Let's reread this passage but this time focus on the message.

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, **2** as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”— **3** “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8** I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Key Points

Mark 1:1-3 The opening verses convey a lot of information to those listening:

- This good news *begins* with the arrival of John the Baptist, as prophesied in verse 2.
- *Christ* is a title, meaning Messiah or 'anointed one', as prophesied about in the Old Testament (OT).¹³
- *Son of God* refers to Jesus' unique and unparalleled relationship with God, implying to the 1st century hearer of pre-existence and deity.¹⁴
- Gospel simply means *good news*; it's not a style of writing.¹⁵

Verses 2 and 3 quote OT prophesies from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 respectively.

Malachi 3:1a

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me."

Isaiah 40:3

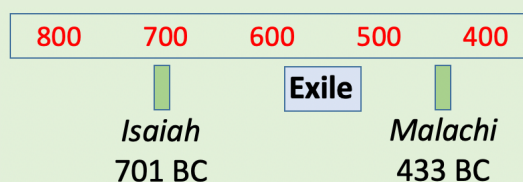
A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

"Make straight paths" (KJV) is taken from the Septuagint, which is the OT scriptures translated from Hebrew into Greek in about 250 BC. This was to meet the needs of Greek-speaking Jews who had dispersed throughout the Roman Empire (the *Diaspora*).

Going Deeper: The prophets Isaiah and Malachi

More than 100 years beforehand, Isaiah had warned the Jews that their sin would result in their captivity at the hands of Babylon. In 586 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar conquered them, destroyed the Jerusalem Temple and transported the population to Babylon, where they stayed for the next 70 years as prophesied by Jeremiah (25:11-12; 29:10). This period is referred to as the *Exile*.

Isaiah had prophesied 150 years earlier the name of Cyrus, the king who would eventually allow their return to Jerusalem (Is. 45:1-3). After their return, the Jerusalem Temple was rebuilt, but the prophet Malachi later warns the Jewish nation that they have once again fallen into sin.



Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

Mark 1:4-5

- The wilderness is an empty and uninhabited place. It features throughout the history of Israel as a place through which God takes his people on a journey of Exodus to deliver them (i.e., to the Promised Land, or into Babylonian captivity).¹⁶
- The idea of John crying out from the wilderness would therefore have resonated strongly with the people, who went out there to be baptised by him. The wilderness imagery links the prophesy of Isaiah to John the Baptist.¹⁷
- There is a Near-Eastern custom of a herald being sent out in advance to prepare the highway for a visiting Monarch and to announce their impending arrival.
- Baptism with water appears to be unique to John, but his call to repentance before God would have been understood by all those coming to him.¹⁸ It was not sacramental in nature, nor was it specifically for the purpose of *forgiveness*. God's people were being cleansed, made pure. They become part of John's expression of his ministry to "make straight the paths", in readiness for the arrival of Jesus.¹⁹

Mark 1:6-8

- John's clothing and food points to the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8).²⁰
- John emphasises the one "who is coming" is stronger than himself, and his 1st century hearers would have understood this to be the Christ, the Messiah.²¹
- Notice how Malachi continues after the verse Mark quoted:

But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire...(Mal. 3:2).

Here, Malachi describes how the Lord will refine and purify *with fire* when he comes, a method used with gold or silver. Is this what Matthew and Luke had in mind when they added "but Jesus will baptise you with the Holy Spirit *and fire*" to verse 8? Did they feel that Mark had omitted this?

John the Baptist is pivotal in the transition from Old Testament to the New. He is the last of the old-style prophets, as confirmed by Jesus in Luke's Gospel:

16 "The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached..." (Luke 16:16).

Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

Going Deeper: Forgiveness for sins

The Jews obtained forgiveness by making a sacrifice at the Temple. Each year, on the Day of Atonement, priests would perform a ceremony to symbolically place the sins of the people on the head of a *scapegoat*, which was then cast out into the wilderness. Baptism for the forgiveness of sins was a new idea, and yet the people came to be cleansed.²²

Discussion: How do we understand the forgiveness offered to us by Jesus? What is the role of repentance? How extensive is that forgiveness? What do we have to do or to contribute, if anything, to be forgiven?