

Galilee

The Social Setting of the Gospel of Mark

by Merrill Kitchen

Probably little more than thirty years after the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the Gospel of Mark was written to proclaim afresh that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus was Good News to all humanity. Directed to a specific faith community in an unknown geographical location it is the first Gospel ever to have been written, and although it is ascribed to a person named Mark, no one really knows the name of the author. Before this Gospel was written, the scattered followers of Jesus throughout the Mediterranean region, while recognising the authority of the Torah and Prophets, primarily treasured an oral history – a myriad of sayings and stories about Jesus. Of course, some of the more distant communities from Jerusalem had occasional letters from apostles such as James and Paul, but when reflecting on the deposit of faith left to them by Jesus, these earliest worshippers depended upon their highly developed collective memories. Then calamity struck! The destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE changed everything, inaugurating a new beginning for Christians and yet another exile for Jews.

It seems that the followers of Jesus had begun meeting in and around the temple area soon after the first Easter. In fact, Paul's letters suggest that this Jerusalem gathering was considered by Christians as the 'mother church', being the abode of most of the twelve apostles and the place from which all authoritative Christian teaching was given.¹ The temple had always been holy to them and traditionally was expected to be the geographic site where the anticipated Messianic Jesus would return to judge the whole world. Certainly it was a place where Christianity and Judaism intersected at every level. In this intersection, it was difficult to know whether the Jerusalem church members could be described primarily as Jews, Christians, a sect of Jewish Christians or a sect of Christian Jews.

A Setting of Conflict Rather than Peace

Whatever their social reality, the Jewish revolts against Rome that began in Judea in 66 CE profoundly affected everyone. Gradually at first, and then in a final rush for refuge, both Christians and Jews fled Jerusalem and settled in adjacent territories, often reuniting with family members who had left Judea a generation earlier. New and larger faith communities began to form in the cities of the adjacent regions and, in spite of a long held belief that it was written to Roman Christians, Mark's Gospel almost certainly emerged from one of these fledgling refugee churches in the immediate region of Palestine or Syria.

The large number of conflict stories suggests significant confrontation with antagonistic religious forces, both Jewish and Christian, as the new arrivals interacted with earlier settlers and questions of propriety and process were confronted. Some of the new arrivals 'advocated a faith so Jewish in nature that it was indistinguishable in Mark's eyes from the position of the scribes and Pharisees'.² Some looked to the stability of ritual and Torah as ethical frameworks providing a sense of cohesion in their otherwise fragmented existence. Some valued circumcision as a sign of belonging, observed the Sabbath and Jewish festivals, ate only prescribed foods and separated themselves from Gentiles. Perhaps they even began to edit the faith stories they had received so that they remembered Jesus predominantly as an observant Rabbi.

There were others who probably felt disillusioned. In the midst of conflict, God had not vindicated their faithfulness, so perhaps they had been wrong about Jesus. They may have even changed allegiance and begun to associate with the followers of John the Baptist, or even joined up with one of the Jewish zealot groups. The historian Josephus describes vividly the terror of those remaining in Jerusalem at the time leading up to its destruction. They experienced severe hunger and deprivation, suffering violently when captured by the army and witnessed wholesale slaughter as thousands of dissidents were crucified. Surely God had abandoned them and was no longer to be found in Jerusalem.

A Setting in Galilee Rather than Jerusalem

Like refugees in every century, these first century believers had few choices. They needed food, water, shelter and a safe environment in order to survive. The most accessible place to Jerusalem, capable of providing subsistence living for relatively large numbers of people, was the region of the Galilee, and many fled to this verdant northern region with its craggy mountains and deep valleys. The area around the harp-shaped freshwater lake, known locally as Kinneret, was fed by the fast running Jordan River whose waters arose from the melting snow of Mount Hermon, and cascaded down the valley into the natural reservoir they called a Sea. In this temperate climate people could help themselves to water freely, catch abundant fish, glean productive fields and make shelters under the many palm trees that lined the shore. Plenty of temporary work would have been available, so that dislocated people were employed as day labourers for the many small industries flourishing in the region. They could harvest crops, salt fish, help construct roads under army supervision or even collect taxes for the Romans. There was plenty of work for stonemasons and construction workers in the many Greco-Roman cities being erected throughout the region at the time. While Jerusalem remained a place of threat and destruction, Galilee offered hope and possibilities for the future. It was a region where Jew and Gentile were always neighbours, and, as Mark points out at the beginning of the Gospel, out of Galilee came Jesus of Nazareth.

In the Gospel of Mark, Galilee is a place of life and affirmation while Jerusalem is a place of death.³ Having waited expectantly in Jerusalem and been disappointed when their hopes were dashed, a new vision unfolds as the story of Jesus is revisited and the grace of God is revealed in a new place and at a new time. Eyes are opened, ears begin to hear again, voices are raised in praise and hope is restored. No longer was the sacred mountain in Jerusalem the confined residence of God. Rather the story reminded them that their God could not be contained. Healing and wholeness was experienced in unexpected, even profane places, as close to the underworld as they could imagine. Their cosmic world

dictated that deep water was the most threatening of spaces: under seas dwelt scary creatures that disturbed waters and trapped unwary sailors. But around the shore of the Sea of Galilee they saw tranquillity as well as turbulence, and they remembered that when Jesus was present the storms were calmed. They even recalled that the Gentile world across the other side of the sea had been embraced by healing love and included into the kingdom of God.

These refugee followers discovered that they had camped on 'good soil' that was bearing fruit; they were like 'wild birds' unexpectedly finding nests in the large welcoming 'branches of trees' that could never grow in Jerusalem. They discovered that grassy mountains, houses and boats could be holy places and that synagogues and temples were not the only spaces in which God could be found. They discovered that separation from the natural kinship group did not mean loss of identity, but that a new kind of family emerged, and they followed Jesus as brothers and sisters together. They discovered that being labelled 'unclean' by the religious few did not separate them from God but rather gathered them together and empowered them in an unexpected way.

A Setting of Community Rather than Hierarchy

The traditional leaders of the earliest Christian communities had let the refugee community down. Those continuing to hold on to the authority of Peter, James and John experienced disappointment and disillusion as eschatological hopes dissipated in the reality of exile. Hearing Mark's story of Jesus meant discovering again that even though the disciples had been recruited in Galilee, they had never truly understood what it meant to follow Jesus.⁴ They had been seduced by the ideas of buildings and statues, fame and glory, and in the end each one of the Twelve left him.⁵ Galilee became the only place where a future could be found for Mark's community of faith and instead of looking to the elders of the community, they are reminded that it is the young who have the answers.⁶ While looking only to Jewish men for leadership, they had been missing out on the powerful testimony of women, Gentiles and lepers.⁷

Hierarchical communities are centred around palaces, temples and genealogies with restricted entry criteria and rigid rules of engagement. Egalitarian communities, on the other hand, meet openly with few restrictions in market places and households. Mark's Gospel emphasises over and over again that Jesus' power is released in egalitarian settings but repressed by political, religious and traditional family systems. Mark's community of faith is one that eats together around tables without fear of rejection.⁸ They include Jews and Gentiles, children and grandparents and they share their possessions with each other.⁹ They are not in hiding from secular authorities – they pay their taxes, but they stand prophetically against all that corrupts and denies the kingdom of God in their midst.¹⁰ In the end, they are a community that honours the crucified One and recognises that God is intimately present with them in the midst of their suffering.

Conclusion

Mark's Gospel has long been noted for its geographical references.¹¹ But as our indigenous Australian brothers and sisters tell us, geography is more than mere cartography. Every rock and tree locates and contextualises the stories of people in particular kinds of groups and alliances. As the mountains, valleys, streams and lakes of Palestine were encountered day by day, their stories were remembered over and over again. Moreover, the reality of its people's existence was affirmed and their consciousness of Jesus' continuing presence acknowledged. The destruction of Jerusalem was not the end of their story, rather it is a marker along the way. In the midst of crisis the focus was no longer on a specific holy place, but on a journey of faith that may include different geographical settings and differing social contexts but will always be in the company of the suffering Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth.¹² *reo*

Endnotes

- Galatians 1:13–24.
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