

GOOD REASONS TO BELIEVE PETER IS THE SOURCE OF MARK'S GOSPEL

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The authorship of Mark's Gospel is of great importance to those of us making a case for the reliability of the New Testament. Mark isn't mentioned as an eyewitness in any of the Gospel accounts. How did Mark get his information about Jesus? Why should we consider his information to be reliable? There are several good reasons to believe Peter is the trustworthy source of information for Mark, beginning with the historical attributions of the early Church Fathers who affirm the relationship Mark and Peter had in the 1st Century. Beyond this, however, there are additional evidences within Mark's text supporting the claim Peter (Mark's mentor in Rome) is the source for Mark's information. I've described the evidential case in much more detail in *Cold-Case Christianity*, but this brief summary may be helpful:

The Writing Style Is Consistent With Mark's Background

The traditional view recognizes Mark as a Palestinian Jew who wrote his Gospel using Peter as his source. Most scholars believe the Gospel of Mark demonstrates a writing style and literary syntax exposing the author's first language as something other than Greek. In fact, the writing style seems to indicate the author's first language was probably a Semitic language such as Aramaic. This would be consistent with the idea Mark, a Palestinian Jew (who most likely spoke Aramaic) was the author of the Gospel. In addition to this, the Gospel of Mark includes a number of vivid and tangential details unnecessary to the narrative, but consistent with observations of an eyewitness to the events. This would indicate the author had access to an eyewitness such as Peter.

The Outline of the Gospel Is Consistent With Peter's Outline

Papias maintained the Gospel of Mark was simply a collection of Peter's discourses (or his preaching) as this information was received and recalled by Mark. If we examine the typical preaching style of Peter in the Book of Acts (1:21-22 and Acts 10:37-41 for example) we see Peter always limited his preaching to the public life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Mark's Gospel omits the private birth narrative and other details of Jesus' life described in the opening chapters of Luke and Matthew. Mark begins with the preaching of John the Baptist and ends with the resurrection and ascension, paralleling the public preaching of Peter as we see it summarized in the Book of Acts.

The Omissions of the Gospel Are Consistent With Peter's Influence

There are many details in the Gospel of Mark consistent with Peter's special input and influence,

including omissions related to events involving Peter. How can Mark be a memoir of Peter if, in fact, the book contains so many omissions of events involving Peter specifically? It's important to evaluate the entire catalogue of omissions pertaining to Peter to understand the answer here. The vast majority of these omissions involve incidents in which Peter did or said something rash or embarrassing. It's not surprising these details were omitted by the author who wanted to protect Peter's standing in the Christian community. Mark was quite discreet in his retelling of the narrative (other Gospel writers who were present at the time do, however, provide details of Peter's 'indiscretions' in their own accounts). Here are some examples of Petrine Omissions grounded in an effort to minimize embarrassment to Peter (see Cold-Case Christianity for a more detailed explanation of the events summarized here):

Peter's shame at the "Miraculous Catch"

(Mark 1:16-120 compared to Luke 5:1-11)

Peter's foolish statement at the crowded healing

(Mark 5:21-34 compared to Luke 8:42-48)

Peter's lack of understanding related to the parable

(Mark 7:14-19 compared to Matthew 15:10-18 and Acts 10:9-16)

Peter's lack of faith on the lake

(Mark 6:45 compared to Matthew 14:22-33)

Peter's rash statement to Jesus

(Mark 8:31-33 compared to Matthew 16:21-23)

Peter's statement related to money

(Mark 10:23-31 compared to Matthew 19:23-30)

Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial

(Mark 14:27-31 compared to Luke 22:31-34 and John 13:34-38)

Peter's behavior at the foot-washing

(Mark 14:22-26 compared to John 13:2-9)

Peter's denial and Jesus' direct stare

(Mark 14:66-72 compared to Luke 22:54-62)

There are a number of places in the Gospel of Mark where details related specifically to the words and actions of Peter have been omitted in what appears to be an effort to protect Peter from embarrassment. This doesn't mean Peter failed to talk about these things. He may very well have included them in his sermons and teachings. But Mark, his scribe and close friend, simply chose to omit these details related to Peter, either at Peter's request or on his own initiative.

The Inclusions of the Gospel Are Consistent With Peter's Influence

In addition to the omissions we have cited, there are a number of details included in Mark's Gospel demonstrating Peter's involvement and connection to Mark. As we describe a few of them, notice these inclusions are relatively minor and don't seem to add much to the narrative. Their incidental nature is an indicator the author lacked a motive other than to simply include Peter's perspective in the account. Peter's involvement appears to have been faithfully recorded by his scribe and assistant, Mark:

Peter's search for Jesus

(Mark 1:35-37)

Peter's house in Capernaum

(Mark 2:1-5 and 1:21, 29-31 compared to Matthew 4:13-16)

Peter's identification of the fig tree

(Mark 11:20-21 compared to Matthew 21:18-19)

Peter's identification of the disciples

(Mark 13:1-4 and Matthew 24:1-3)

Respecting the limits and brief nature of blog posts, I've restricted my description of these internal details (compared to how I've described them in the book), but the verse locations should help you discover them for yourself. There is a reasonable, cumulative, circumstantial case pointing to Peter as the source of information for Mark's Gospel. Remember, circumstantial evidence can be every bit as determinative as direct evidence in a court of law. The strength of such a case is based on the depth, quantity and quality of the individual pieces:

A. Biblical Passages Confirm a Relationship Between Mark and Peter

B. External Sources From History Tell Us Mark Wrote Peter's Memoir

C. Internal Indicators Reveal Peter's Direct Influence on Mark's Gospel

There is sufficient cumulative, circumstantial evidence to conclude Mark did, in fact, form his Gospel from the teaching and preaching of the Apostle Peter. If this is the case, Mark's Gospel was written within the lifetime of Mark (and likely within the lifetime of Peter). If the Gospel of Mark was written this early, it would have undergone the scrutiny of those who were actually present and could have exposed Mark as a liar:

2 Peter 1:16

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty

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