

# THE GOSPEL OF MARK

**Wilderness (1:3,12).** The Jews viewed the wilderness as the abode of evil spirits.

**Baptism (1:4).** During John's time, the Jews often administered baptism as a rite of purification for Gentiles who were converting to Judaism. John went one step further, preaching that Jews as well as Gentiles needed to be baptized, as a sign of their turning away from sin, in order to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

**Sabbath (1:21).** From the Hebrew word shabbat, meaning "seven." This was the seventh day of the Jewish week, which began at sundown Friday and ended at sundown Saturday. On this day, God's people were to cease from their labors (see Exodus 20:8) and pause to reflect on the things of God, especially the teaching of the Law at the local synagogue.

**Synagogue (1:21).** From a Greek word meaning "to come together." The synagogue was the center of both worship and education in the Jewish towns of Jesus' day. In Gentile cities, a synagogue could be started by as few as ten adult Jewish males.

**Teachers of the Law (1:22).** Other translations use "scribes." They were the scholars of the day, professionally trained in the interpretation and application of the Old Testament and the oral traditions handed down by generations of rabbis. They relied heavily on precedent (e.g., "Rabbi Hillel says such-and-such") for their authority.

**Blaspheming (2:7).** The Jews viewed blasphemy, the slander of God's name and reputation, as the greatest of sins. For a mere man to claim authority to forgive sins constituted such slander because only God had such authority. In Jewish teaching, even the Messiah could not forgive sins.

**Tax collectors (2:15).** Instead of sending their own people to collect taxes, the Romans hired locals to do it on a contract basis. Contractors agreed to pay Rome a certain quota; anything they collected above this quota was theirs to keep. Needless to say, this system provided each tax collector with a strong incentive to collect as much as he could from the local residents, and many did just that. In addition, the Jews viewed any countryman of theirs who chose this lucrative profession as a collaborator with the forces of Rome, which occupied Palestine, and therefore as a traitor. Tax collectors such as Levi were therefore regarded as social outcasts.

**Pharisees (2:16).** A Jewish religious party which believed that strict obedience to the Law of Moses was the key to spiritual renewal for Israel. While members were usually laymen, a few were trained scribes and thus had official status as religious leaders. Though few in number (generally estimated at 6,000, or roughly 1 percent of the Jewish population in Palestine during Jesus' day), they had a significant impact upon first-century Jewish society. The Pharisees were religious separatists and thus saw themselves as superior to the average Jewish citizen, yet they were generally respected- though not necessarily loved- by their countrymen. In their zeal to obey the Law of Moses, they formulated a lengthy catalog of interpretations that detailed precisely what was lawful and what was not and regarded these interpretations as just as authoritative as the Law of Moses itself.

**New wine (2:22).** Newly made wine was placed in fresh leather wineskins where it fermented, thus causing the wineskins to expand. If such "new wine" were placed in wineskins previously used and thus fully stretched out and brittle, the old skins would burst under the pressure of the fermenting new wine.

**Herodians (3:6).** Probably influential Jews who were friends and supporters of Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee as a puppet of the Roman government. Under normal circumstances, the Herodians were despised by the strictly orthodox, nationalistic Pharisees.

**Zealot (3:18).** The four major religious parties of Jesus' day were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. Like the Pharisees, the Zealots believed in strict obedience to the Mosaic Law and the rabbinic traditions. Unlike the Pharisees, however, the Zealots' "zeal for the law" extended to armed insurrection in order to overthrow the occupying forces of Rome and establish the "kingdom of God." Because Rome possessed such overwhelming military might, the Zealots avoided direct confrontation with the Roman forces in Palestine, instead relying on terrorist tactics such as political assassination.

Some Zealot leaders were messianic pretenders, such as the two insurrectionists, Theudas and Judas of Galilee, mentioned by the rabbi Gamaliel in Acts 5:36-37. The Zealots were also the key instigators of the Jewish revolt of AD 66, which ended with Roman armies destroying Jerusalem four years later.

The fact that Jesus chose Simon the Zealot along with Matthew the tax collector (the same person as Levi; see Mark 2:14 and Matthew 9:9), whom Simon and many other Jews would have regarded as a collaborator with Rome, no doubt made for some lively discussion among the Twelve!

**Secret (4:11).** The Greek word is *mysterion*, or "mystery." It signifies not some esoteric doctrine that only a few are able to understand but rather a truth heretofore concealed by God but now revealed by Him to His people through the Gospel.

**Mustard seed (4:31).** "The smallest seed" known to the Galilean farmers in Jesus' audience, the seed from the mustard plant grows into a bush as high as ten feet—definitely large for a "garden plant"!

**Tombs (5:3).** People in first-century Palestine were often buried in natural caves or in tombs cut out of the limestone rock. These provided good shelter for anyone desiring to live there. It was a natural place for a possessed man to dwell because of the popular belief that tombs were the favorite haunts of demons.

**Synagogue leaders (5:22).** Jarius was not a priest or scribe but a layman whose responsibilities were administrative, including such things as looking after the building and supervising worship.

**King Herod (6:14).** Herod Antipas, whose father, Herod the Great, tried to kill the infant Jesus (see Matthew 2:16). When his father died, Antipas became tetrarch ("ruler of one-fourth") of Galilee and Perea.

**Herodias (6:17).** The daughter of Aristobulos, son of Herod the Great and half-brother of Antipas. Herodias was thus the niece of Antipas. Marriage to one's niece was permitted by the Law of Moses, but marriage to the wife of one's living brother was not (see Leviticus 18:16). Herodias had divorced Philip to marry Antipas. The family of Herod was part Jewish and was, politically speaking, the royal house of Israel. John therefore saw them as subject to Mosaic Law.

**Defiled (7:2).** The Greek word is one used to designate not something dirty or unhygienic but rather something "common," such as "common people" (as opposed to the Pharisees) or the "common" Greek language used in everyday conversation (as opposed to highly polished literary Greek). It was also used to designate ceremonial uncleanness.

**Tradition of the elders (7:3,5).** The mass of oral tradition formulated by the rabbis in order to apply the Law of Moses to specific situations. About AD 200 it was written down as the Mishnah, but in Jesus' day it was still in oral form. This tradition was passed on from generation to generation and was considered by the scribes and Pharisees to be as binding as the Law of Moses itself.

**Corban (7:11).** One such "tradition of the elders" whereby a man could declare a portion of his wealth to be "devoted to God." The person who designated his money as Corban did not have to give it to God during his lifetime, a fact that led to the abuse of which Jesus speaks. The origins of both this Aramaic word and the custom to which it refers are uncertain.

**Dogs (7:27).** Jesus used the word meaning "little dogs" or "puppies." Such diminutives were often used as terms of affection in Jesus' day. Thus, He was probably referring not to the bands of dogs roaming the streets but to pets who ate leftovers after the family had eaten.

**Yeast (8:15).** Yeast, or leaven, was used in baking bread. In rabbinical writings, yeast is usually, though not always, a symbol for evil.

**Ransom for many (10:45).** The Greek word translated “ransom” often referred to the price paid to liberate a slave, while the word rendered “for” was used as a term of exchange in the marketplace- including the slave market.

**Son of David (10:47).** The Jews of Jesus day believed that the Messiah would come from David’s kingly line. Many held that this Messiah would be, like David, a warrior-king who would overthrow the occupying forces of Rome and liberate the nation of Israel.

Colt...which no one has ever ridden (11:2). The colt was that of a donkey (see Matthew 21:2; John 12:15). Animals that had never been ridden were regarded as especially suitable for sacred purposes (compare 1 Samuel 6:7).

**Hosanna! (11:9).** The Hebrew word literally means “Save now!” It is an acclamation from Psalm 118:25, which was supposed to be the psalm sung when the Messiah arrived. Likewise, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” quotes Psalm 118:26.

**Temple (11:11).** Includes the area immediately surrounding the temple, as well as the temple building itself. The Jews regarded the Jerusalem temple and the Law of Moses as the most important religious institutions of their day. The temple symbolized the glory of God in their midst.

Fig tree (11:13). In the Old Testament, the fig tree was sometimes used to represent Israel (see Hosea 9:10; Nahum 3:12).

**Money changers (11:15).** The Roman money the pilgrims brought to Jerusalem had to be changed into the local currency with which the annual temple tax was paid. The money changers were not above making a profit on such transactions. Both the sale of animals for sacrifice and the money-changing activities were authorized by the high priest, and the chief priestly families probably owned a sizable piece of the action.

**Pharisees and Herodians (12:13).** The Herodians had no objections to paying taxes (actually a political tribute) to Rome, while the Pharisees disliked the Roman tax but did not actively oppose it. The Pharisees’ more activist counterparts, the Zealots, refused to pay the tax, seeing in such payment an admission that Rome had the right to rule Palestine.

**Sadducees (12:18).** One of the four major Jewish sects of New Testament times, the other three being the Pharisees, Zealots, and Essenes. The Sadducees represented the property-owning urban class and were mainly centered in Jerusalem. They were numerically small but of great political influence due to their wealth, though not particularly popular with the people. When Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70, they disappeared from history.

The Sadducees denied the doctrine of the resurrection of the body because they held only the five books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy) to be sacred Scripture, and they did not find any clear teaching of such a resurrection in those five books.

Abomination that causes desolation (13:14). This phrase is taken from the book of Daniel, where it occurs four times (see 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Daniel 11:31 clearly refers to the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem by Antiochus Epiphanes (168 BC), the Syrian despot who erected an altar to Zeus over the altar of burnt offering, sacrificed a swine on it, and made the practice of Judaism a capital offense. The other three references are not so easy to interpret, though two (see 9:27; 12:11) appear to refer to the end times. New Testament scholars are divided as to whether Mark 13:14 refers to events preceding the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, or to events preceding the end of the age just prior to Christ’s return. Perhaps it is best to see Jesus as using this phrase in an ambiguous way, thus making a double fulfillment: the armies of Rome (AD 70) and the Antichrist (the end of the age).

**Blood of the Covenant (14:24).** The Old Covenant was made possible by the blood of the Passover Lamb, which freed the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. Forgiveness of sins under the Old Covenant also required blood sacrifice (see Leviticus 16 for a description of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement). As another New Testament writer put it, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22) and therefore no possibility of a covenant between God and humankind.

**Abba (14:36).** An Aramaic intimate form for father (“Daddy”). The Jews did not use this word to address God, thinking it too familiar and therefore disrespectful. Jesus not only used it Himself but encouraged His disciples to do so (see Romans 8:15).

**Sanhedrin (14:55).** The high court of Judaism, composed of the chief priests and other prominent religious leaders of Jerusalem. If all the members were present, there would have been seventy of them. (See also Acts 4:5-22; 23:1-10).

This nighttime gathering of the Sanhedrin was highly unusual and perhaps illegal. At the same time, we must keep in mind that certain “loopholes” may have existed in Sanhedrin procedures that would permit this sort of speedy nocturnal trial under extreme circumstances. As Jesus Himself noted, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were famous for creating exceptions to established rules in order to justify their deeds (see Mark 7:9-13). So most, if not all, of the procedures at the trial of Jesus may have been legal, if not usual.

Be that as it may, Mark’s account portrays the trial of Jesus as sort of “kangaroo court,” with a parade of prearranged false witnesses and no real opportunity for a defense on Jesus’ part. Whether or not strictly legal, it was certainly not fair.

Pilate (15:1). Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea from AD 26 to 36. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, he did not hesitate to quell local insurrections with brutal dispatch. Jesus Himself called attention to Pilate’s repression on at least one occasion (see Luke 13:1-5). On the other hand, Pilate was no mere despot but acted according to Roman civil law when investigating cases brought before him. In the final analysis, he owed his position to the pleasure of the Roman emperor and was for this reason more motivated to placate the local populace than to administer exact justice.

The Jews brought Jesus to Pilate because under the Roman occupation they could not legally put someone to death (see John 18:31), except in cases where the sanctity of the temple had been violated (see, for example, Acts 7:59; 21:27-32).

**King of the Jews (15:2).** When Jesus acknowledged the title “Son of David” (see 10:47-48) and rode into Jerusalem in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 (see Mark 11:1-11), He was in fact proclaiming Himself “King of the Jews.” The Jews brought this charge not for religious reasons, however, but for political reasons, hoping Pilate would condemn Jesus as one who desired to usurp the authority of the Roman emperor.

**Anoint Jesus’ body (16:1).** The women were unable to anoint Jesus’ body on the day of His death because He was buried shortly before sundown on Friday, the beginning of the Sabbath, and they still had to buy and prepare the spices (see Luke 23:56). They sought to anoint Jesus not for the purpose of preserving His body (the Jews did not practice embalming) but most likely to reduce the stench of decomposition. (In Palestine’s hot climate, bodies decomposed quickly; see, for example, John 11:39). The women’s act, while largely impractical, was a gesture of love (compare Mark 14:3-9).