

Mark's Occasion and Purpose

(Dan Wallace)

As we have suggested before, all the gospels had more than one reason for their production. Further, one of the strange features of this gospel is that its purpose is especially enigmatic. Guthrie lists the following options that scholars have seen: catechetical, liturgical, apologetic, conflict with the Twelve, Christological, ecclesiastical, pastoral, and editorial. His conclusion is that "Mark had several purposes in writing his gospel." Though certainly true, Guthrie curiously omits the *occasion* for its production.

The occasion, if not found in the Neronian persecutions, must also be multivalenced. One of the factors hardly ever taken into account however is the fact that Mark is writing to *Gentiles*, though he got his material from Peter, the apostle to the *Jews*. Further, what is neglected is the fact that Mark had a strong connection with Paul—and that at one point was out of sorts with Paul.

Bringing these data to bear on the issue, we would like to propose the following *tentative hypothesis*: *Mark wrote his gospel as a prelude to Paul's intended visit to Rome*. The evidence, though quite speculative in places, is as follows.

1. The church at Rome was established before the Jerusalem Council met in c. 50 CE. Seutonius' statement that Claudius banned Jews from Rome in 49 because they rioted in reaction to "Chrestus" probably refers to the Jews' reactions to Christians in that city.
2. The church was probably established shortly after Pentecost, since proselytes and Jews came from Rome (Acts 2:10). The church would have been quite immature since these converts had very little information about Jesus on which to base their lives. Still, it could have been founded by them.
3. Even though Peter and Paul ended up in Rome in the early-mid 60s, we have no record of either of them getting there in the 50s. It is very doubtful that any apostle founded the church (cf. Rom. 15:20).
4. The combined evidence from Acts and the epistles suggests that although Mark was not in Paul's good graces in c. 50 CE (at the time of the Council meeting of Acts 15), he was so in 60-62 (when Paul dispatched him to the Colossians/Philemon from Rome). Thus, sometime in the 50s Mark certainly proved himself worthy of Paul's confidence once again. The fact that he is in Rome when Paul commends him may be no accident.
5. In Acts 19:21 Paul expresses his intention to visit Rome for strategic missionary work. Though it is impossible to date this precisely, it must have occurred in the early 50s. Further, this may not have been the first time Paul expressed such an intention, even though it is the first mention by Luke. Surely Paul's planned itinerary would be known to interested Christians in Jerusalem and Antioch.



6. One of the reasons why Paul wanted to get to Rome would have been the lack of apostolic guidance in that church. If the church was begun by proselytes returning from Pentecost in 33 CE, it would have had only hit-or-miss instruction about the faith for some time.
7. There is some evidence that even though Paul did not found the church at Rome, it *already* had a distinctive Pauline flavor to it.
8. Putting all this together, we see that there is a good bit of circumstantial evidence which suggests that someone from Paul's circles had penetrated Rome with the gospel before he wrote Romans. Further, there is independent evidence that Mark wrote his gospel in the mid-50s. When considering the *raison d'être* for the production of this gospel, it is easy to see why Mark would be so highly motivated to get back into Paul's good graces and precede Paul to Rome. All the data fit the supposition that Mark went to Rome in the early to mid-50s, with Peter's sermons and Paul's mission in the back of his mind. He then composed the gospel for the Roman Christians. In this light, it is no wonder that Mark's gospel looks so Pauline in respect to the OT Law—even though he got it from Peter in large measure.