

St. Mark: Steadfast and Strong from Youth



St. Mark was one of the seventy apostles appointed by our Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 10:10). He is distinguished as one of the four Evangelists. St. Mark authored the oldest canonical Gospel used by both St. Matthew and St. Luke, and probably also by St. John. Many believe the Gospel of Mark to be dated shortly before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The Evangelist, St. Mark, is the founder of the Coptic Orthodox Church. This apostle visited Alexandria, Egypt in the year 61 AD to preach the Holy Gospel in obedience to the Holy Spirit. St. Mark was the first missionary to Egypt and succeeded in founding the See of Alexandria. He is regarded as the first pope of an unbroken chain of 118 patriarchs.

Therefore the Coptic Orthodox Church can claim the blessing of apostolicity from its inception. An apostle who was specifically chosen by our Lord Jesus Christ founded the Coptic Orthodox Church. This is historically recorded within "Ecclesiastical History" written by Eusebius. Much has been written about the propagation of the Orthodox Faith due to the missionary work of the Evangelist, St. Mark.

I would like to examine the childhood and spiritual development of the saint in whose mother's home, the Passover was partaken of. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself chose this home and instituted the Holy Eucharist in its Upper Room. What type of home did St. Mark grow up in for the same home to have been the meeting place for the Apostles following the Crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ, to have an Upper Room in which the Holy Spirit descended upon those gathered at Pentecost, and is today recognized as the first Christian Church?

St. Mark was of Jewish descent of the tribe of Levi. He was born "John Mark" and lived in Pentapolis on the Northern African coast, west of Egypt. His family lived in Cyrenica. During St. Mark's early childhood, nomadic tribes referred to as barbarians, attacked the region in which he was living. With this attack, St. Mark's parents suffered the loss of most of their possessions.

Following this, his family migrated to Jerusalem. John Mark was provided with a very good education and was fluent in both Greek and Latin in addition to Hebrew. It is believed that St. Mark's cousin was Barnabas, and his father's cousin was St. Peter.

Insight into John Mark's personality can be obtained through this very well known story involving his travels in the mountains near Jordan:

"Once a lion and a lioness appeared to John Mark and his father, Arostalis, while traveling in Jordan. The father begged his son to escape while he distracted the wild beasts and awaited his fate. The father was filled with fear. He had not yet become a Christian.

John Mark assured his father that the Lord Jesus Christ would save both of them, and he began to pray. John Mark stood firm to meet the lions. He made the sign of the cross over himself and then over the attacking lions. Suddenly the two animals became quiet and slowly moved to sit at his feet. As a result of that miracle, the father immediately believed in the Lord Jesus Christ."

Due to his steadfast and strong faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, St. Mark calmed two wild beasts while a youth. Due to his steadfast and strong love for the Lord, his example led to his father's belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Due to his steadfast and strong belief in the power of the cross, he overcame fear. St. Mark as a youth demonstrated great steadfastness and strength. His young heart overflowed with love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

It could be that while growing up in Jerusalem his faith was made even stronger being where the Lord Jesus Christ lived and taught, and that through contact with Him his steadfastness and strength allowed St. Mark to share in His ministry and participate in His way of life. His steadfastness was evident even until adulthood as St. Mark was always associated with the Lord. St. Mark's presence at a number of events with the Lord Jesus Christ can be found in the Holy Scriptures.

St. Mark was present at the wedding of Cana in Galilee. He was the man who was carrying the jar when the two disciples went to prepare a place for the celebration of the Passover (Mark 14:13-14, Luke 22:11). St. Mark was also the man who fled naked before the Crucifixion (Mark 14:51-52). Due to these passages, the Coptic Church calls St. Mark, the "Theorimos" meaning the "Beholder of the Lord."

The chosen apostle's steadfastness and strength were to become more evident through his evangelism efforts. St. Mark started preaching the Holy Gospel with St. Peter in Jerusalem and Judea. He accompanied St. Paul and St. Barnabas on their first journey to Antioch, Cyprus, and Asia Minor. He went to Cyprus with St. Barnabas (Acts 15:36-41).

St. Mark following St. Barnabas's death in Cyprus went with St. Paul and preached in Colossi, Rome, and some think Venice. It is said that his real labor took place in Africa. After he left Rome he went to Pentapolis, and then to Egypt. St. Mark left Alexandria for Berce, then Rome where he met St. Peter and St. Paul. He remained there until their martyrdom.

St. Mark then returned to Alexandria where he found the Christians had multiplied in number and had built a church in Buacalis. As soon as he returned, the growing number of Christians entreated him to write down for them the teachings of the "New Way." In

response to their request and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel according to St. Mark was written.

The apostle's zeal increased as his missionary work flourished. St. Mark's steadfastness and strength from childhood had developed with maturity into one that was uncompromising and soon to become heroic. His zealousness angered the pagan nobles of the city and they decided he must be stopped at the feast of Serapis. In 68 AD the nobles incited the crowds against St. Mark during this feast. They seized St. Mark at Church and tied a rope around him. He was inhumanely dragged from street to street and then thrown into prison badly beaten and near death.

While in prison the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him and said, "Be strong, O my Evangelist, for tomorrow you shall receive the Crown of Martyrdom." The next morning the pagans again dragged St. Mark through the streets until his head separated from the rest of his body. The chosen apostle was steadfast and strong until death.

His relics rest in a reliquary built under the altar of St. Mark Cathedral on Abba Roweiss ground (formerly Abba Roweiss monastery), in Abbasseya, Cairo.

Thus the youth, whose love was steadfast and strong, grew up to be a chosen apostle who received three crowns: the Crown of Discipleship, the Crown of Evangelism, and the Crown of Martyrdom.

May the steadfastness and strength of St. Mark's love for the Lord Jesus Christ inspire us all and may we keep ever before us the example of those who endured to the end.

H.G. Bishop Youssef
Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

<https://www.suscopts.org/resources/literature/180/st-mark-steadfast-and-strong-from-youth/>