

THE BIG HAMMER

J. Noel Meredith

The two predominant characters of the Book of Acts are Peter and Paul. Peter is the chief actor in chapters 1-12 and Paul in 13-28. Around these two great leaders for Christ we have several secondary figures whose names appear now and then in Acts and other New Testament documents. John Mark was such a man. "John" was his Jewish name meaning "Jehovah is gracious," and "Mark" his Roman name meaning "the big or large hammer."

The first definite reference to John Mark is found in Acts 12:12:

And when he [Peter] had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.

What a wonderful place to meet a man—at "prayer meeting"!

The following observations may be made about Mark: (1) He was a Christian living in Jerusalem in A.D. 44. (2) He was apparently living with his mother whose name was "Mary." (3) His mother must have been a widow since no mention is made of her husband and the property was in her name (Acts 12:12). (4) His mother was a widow of some means or affluent inasmuch as she is described as the owner of a spacious house large enough to accommodate a large Christian gathering; and having the services of a maid named "Rhoda" (meaning rose) (Acts 12:13f). (5) Mark was the "cousin" of Barnabas (Col. 4:15) who was also well to do (Acts 4:36). (6) Peter had converted Mark and calls him "My son" in his first missive (1 Pet. 5:13).

Having brought a contribution from Antioch to Judea, Barnabas and Saul leave Jerusalem and taking John Mark with them return to Antioch. (Acts 11:27-30; 12:25). In A.D. 45 or 46 Barnabas and Saul embark on the first missionary journey and take Mark with them as "their attendant" (Acts 13:1-5). "Attendant" is translated from *huperetes*, and means literally, "an under rower, subordinate rower." He assisted Barnabas and Saul in their work. In the papyri the word frequently means a person who handles documents and delivers their contents to others. Thus, Mark may have done secretarial work also.

For some unknown reason when the missionary company reached Perga in Pamphylia "John departed from them and returned to Jerusalem" (Acts 13:13). Why Mark discontinued the journey has long been a mystery. Did he get homesick? Did he learn of bad news at home and rush back? Was he afraid of robbers on the journey ahead? Did he disagree with Paul over his taking the lead over Barnabas or because he was preaching to Gentiles? All of these have been advanced as reasons why he went back along with some others. But, since the New Testament does not tell us why, we are at a loss for the real reason. Whatever caused Mark to go back, Paul was displeased (Acts 15:36-41).

In the early 50s Paul suggested a second missionary journey to Barnabas. A "sharp contention" arose between them over taking Mark long again.

Barnabas proposed that they take Mark along with them again. In making the proposal, Barnabas used the aorist infinitive, *sunparalabein*. It is as if he said, "Let's take him along one more time." Paul answered with the present infinitive, *me sunparalabanein*. "What! Keep on taking him along?" the apostle implied in his reply. Paul had not forgotten the defection on the former trip, and he was in no mood to risk it again (*How to Use the Greek New Testament*, Guy N. Woods, pp.42,43).

It must have been a sad feeling to Mark to know he had been the subject of a dispute between two great men. However, it all worked out for the better for there were now two missionary units. Paul took Silas and returned to Asia Minor and Barnabas took Mark and sailed unto Cyprus (Acts 15:39f). Barnabas was good to help young men in need and had formerly helped Paul (Acts 9:26)!

It is about ten years before we hear about John Mark again. Paul writes from his Roman prison around A.D. 62, mentioning Mark in a favorable way. In Philemon 24, he is with Paul and listed as a "fellowworker" and in Colossians 4:10, Paul sent Mark's greeting to the Colossians and adds: "If he came unto you, receive him." It will also be noted that Mark must have been planning a visit to Asia Minor.

The last mention of Mark is in A.D. 68, when Paul from his Roman cell wrote Timothy in Ephesus and asked him to come to him before winter and to "take Mark and bring him with thee; for he is useful to me for ministering" (2 Tim. 4:11). At last "The Big Hammer" has lived up to his name in the eyes of the venerable Apostle. Paul was big enough to forget his defection. Mark made good in the estimation of Paul. ~

Deceased