

# COMMENTARY

## I. THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE GOOD NEWS: MARK 1:1-15

### **A. The Opening Line (1:1)**

#### BEHIND THE TEXT

The earliest evidence associating Mark with this Gospel dates from about A.D. 110 and depends on the witness of Papias, preserved in the fourth-century church history by Eusebius (→ Introduction). No other name has ever been attached to this Gospel. Mark's name was probably attached before the end of the first century. As soon as the Gospels began to circulate (and widespread early circulation is likely; see Bauckham 1998, 9-49), they would have to have had a name attached (see Hengel 1985, 64-81) if only as a shorthand means of identification.

The fact that about 96 percent of Mark is reproduced in the other Gospels raises the question about its survival. The early link with Peter's name may well be important. According to Papias, Mark was Peter's interpreter in Rome. Like so much else in the history of the early Christian community, any involvement of Mark with Peter in the earliest days is shrouded in mystery. Later tradition has Peter in Rome—and its widespread currency suggests that there is some substance to that view. But it is unlikely that Peter planted the church in Rome any more than Paul. Tradition reports that Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome under Nero. But again the hard evidence is slender. Richard Bauckham (2006, 155-82) has shown that the tradition of a connection with Peter is stronger than has sometimes been thought.

### Papias on Mark and Peter

The earliest evidence for a connection between Mark and Peter comes from a quotation in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* (3.39.14-16) from Papias, bishop of Hierapolis. Papias wrote near the beginning of the second century, cites "the elder" named John, quite possibly referring to a period about A.D. 80 (so Bauckham 2006, 14).

Scholars do not agree on Papias' reliability. On the one hand, some discount the connection between Mark and Peter (Marcus 2000, 21-24). Others think the evidence is strong (Bauckham 2006, 155-82, 202-39; Hengel 1985, 50-52). In addition to the Papias reference, Bauckham notes the frequency of references to Peter and the literary signals that Peter is the main eyewitness source and that Mark tells the story predominantly from Peter's perspective.

Mark's story of Jesus needs to be understood within two historical contexts. First, Jesus' life is set geographically in Galilee, Judea, and occasionally in the surrounding territories. Jesus lived during the era of 2TJ, in the late 2TP. The people of Judea and Galilee (along with the rest of the ancient Near East) were under foreign occupation. Since 63 B.C., the Romans have been occupying the land, with ruthless efficiency. Judea was under the direct rule of a procurator and a client king (→ 6:14-29 BEHIND THE TEXT sidebar, "Herod Antipas").

For the majority of the population, the deliverance to their homeland and the return to the glorious time of peace that was promised by the prophets of the exile seemed to be, at best, disappointing. There was a sense in which they saw themselves as still in exile, still longing for the restoration promised by the prophets. Most people, of course, probably just got on with life. Others longed for the day when, once again, God would dwell in the midst of his people, the temple would again be God's earthly dwelling place, and his holy people would thrive.

Some considered a serious willingness to be obedient to God's call to be a holy people to be the only conditions under which God would once again dwell in their midst. For many, the big problem was the Romans—a Gentile occupying force. For others (the Sicarii), the situation was so intolerable that they engaged in guerilla warfare against the occupying forces. Still others (the Dead Sea sect) completely withdrew from the society. Others (the Pharisees) believed this purity was to be maintained within society at the same time as they sought to extend priestly levels of purity to all of Israel. For a minority (the temple authorities), the situation worked to their advantage.

The second setting of Mark's Gospel was that of the author and his first readers. It was probably written and read in Rome (but see Marcus 2000, 33-39) before it circulated throughout the known world. Within that setting, the language Mark used in his Gospel at key points was brought into sharp relief by the Imperial cult that dominated the religious marketplace in Rome and, indeed, the empire.

Jesus' ministry was conducted in an occupied land, subdued and pacified by the Romans. The Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, was sustained under the feet of the legions who kept problems in this small Jewish client state under control. And it might have been heard with particular sharpness in Rome, in the physical shadow of the imperial power. Religion and politics were inextricably bound together in this context.

In most Bibles, a footnote at the end of verse 1 draws attention to a significant textual issue. Most modern translations include the words **Son of God**. But while the majority of Greek manuscripts include the words **Son of God** (*hoiou theou*), some of the oldest manuscripts do not. The decision to adopt the longer reading is reached by considering textual evidence as well as literary and theological grounds.

### Son of God in Mark 1:1

All extant Greek NT manuscripts (about six thousand) are handwritten copies of the original text (called autographs). These autographs no longer exist, so scholars compare existing copies, which are not identical. By doing this they hope to get as close to the text written by Mark (and other NT writers) as possible.

In reaching their conclusions on Mark 1:1, scholars weigh evidence differently. Those who think the shorter reading (omitting *hoiou theou*) is closer to the original argue that it is easier to explain why scribes would add the words "Son of God" than why they would delete them. Furthermore, it explains why one of our earliest major manuscripts (A = Alexandrinus from the fifth century) includes the phrase but only in a corrected form (see Collins 2007, 130).

But those who consider the longer reading the original argue that the words were omitted by a copyist because of homoeoteleuton. This refers to the

repetition of words with identical endings, causing the copyist's eye to skip the final phrase (France 2002, 49; Guelich 1989, 6).

On textual grounds alone, the evidence is finely balanced, perhaps tipping toward the shorter ending. But other factors cast doubt upon this conclusion, including the literary and theological significance of this phrase in Mark's narrative, especially the conclusion to the crucifixion in 15:39. The inclusion of the phrase is wholly consistent with Mark's perspective.

## IN THE TEXT

Opening lines matter. Classic literary lines like Dickens' famous "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times" etch themselves on the memory. Mark's opening line is like that: it captures in one pithy sentence the entire theological direction of his story of Jesus. Careful attention to these words gives significant clues to the rest of the narrative.

■ I The opening word translated **The beginning** already tells us something of Mark's perspective. The basic meaning is clear enough: Mark is saying that God's good news, **the gospel**, has its beginning with the inauguration of the mission of Jesus. This in itself is noteworthy. Unlike the other Gospels, Mark does not begin with birth narratives (see Matthew and Luke) or a prehistory (see John). Some suggest that Mark does not know any details of Jesus' life before his baptism. This view has little to commend it. However, it does imply that the birth stories are not essential for this telling of the story of Jesus. For Mark **the gospel** has to do with the long-standing purposes of God as set out in Scripture. So he starts by establishing the identity of Jesus and the character of his mission.

If the opening few words of Mark are clearly an introduction, it is less clear what is being introduced. Since the ministry of John the Baptist is the precursor to Jesus' own work, it could be argued that **the beginning** refers primarily to the work of the Baptist and thus points to 1:1-8.

A stronger case can be made for arguing that it includes all that occurs up to 1:13, concluding with the wilderness test. The voice from heaven, the descent of the Spirit, and the challenge of the Satan are all part of establishing Jesus' mission and identity.

A third alternative points to everything up to the end of 1:15, Jesus' appearance in Galilee, the beginning of his ministry, and the proclamation of the good news (Collins 2007, 131). This final suggestion has the advantage of allowing **gospel** in 1:1 and 1:14-15 to form a literary bracket around this initial section. All of these suggestions are plausible.

Another possibility is that Mark has a bigger picture in mind as he writes. That is, Mark sees the coming of Jesus and his ministry as the beginning of God's previously announced purposes that are now coming to fulfillment. The

beginning of the good news thus includes the whole story. It reaches back into Scriptures, and then on to the preparatory work of John, the proclamation in word and deed by Jesus as well as his passion, his resurrection, and his reconstitution of the scattered disciple band in Galilee, those who would continue the mission. This view does not exclude any of the others. Indeed, Mark is frequently polyphonic, that is, the message of the narrative is almost always more than the sequence of events shown in the narrative.

That Mark chooses the same word that opens the LXX in Gen 1:1 (*en archēi*) may signal that this story is a new beginning of God's good purposes. It evokes the same anticipation as Genesis. The same God who brought order out of chaos was doing a new thing in the face of Roman occupation and the disastrous spiritual leadership that Mark thinks is given by the temple elite.

Allusions to the OT Scriptures are deep and all-pervasive in Mark, and at least as significant as the direct citations. For Mark, Isaiah is a particularly important intertextual source for illuminating the story of Jesus and explaining exactly what God is doing. According to Isa 43:19, God announces his purposes through the prophet in the context of exile: "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert [*poiēsōen tēi erēmōi hodon*] and streams in the wasteland."

This activity of God in Mark is, therefore, not the first. Rather it is in continuity with what God has already done, a perspective that is confirmed by the rich intertextuality that we find in these opening lines. But it is also a "new thing." The beginning words thus have a dual referent—the Gen 1:1 opening of Scripture with God's completely new thing and an allusion to Isa 43:19, again linking to the citations from the OT in the next two verses. Isaiah, in turn, echoes Exodus language.

The word **gospel** translates *tou euangeliou*. This could also be translated as "good news" (so NRSV). In favor of **gospel** is the fact that Mark uses the noun form of the word six more times (1:14, 15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9). Mark's reception history in the early church (see Bauckham 2006, 12-38) shows that very early the term becomes a word that encapsulates the whole story of God's action in Christ.

Paul in particular used this term as a noun. If Paul's usage of the term was already commonplace by the time Mark wrote, there is every reason to suppose that it influenced Mark here. Mark, however, appears to be the first one to have used the term to describe the narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Although none of the other books we call Gospels used this designation internally to identify itself, their similarity to Mark caused them very early also to be called Gospels.

## The Genre of Mark

Scholars of an earlier generation argued that the gospel form itself is one of a kind. But more recent study (Burridge 2004) has called that into question. Rather, the gospel form is a subset of ancient *bios* (“life,” as in “biography”). Burridge notes several generic features in common between the Gospels and *bioi* including opening features, the dominance of Jesus as subject of a large number of verbs, and similar internal and external features. The Synoptic Gospels fit in the overall genre of *bioi*. This means that the interpretation of Mark needs to focus on Jesus.

This denotation as the good news about Jesus must not obscure the deep OT roots of the word. In Isa 52:7, the prophet used the participial form (*euangelizomenou*) when lauding those who announce good news. Those who announce the good news proclaim peace (*shalōm*), salvation, and the reign of God. Mark undoubtedly uses **gospel** here due to Isaiah (see Guelich 1989, 13-14).

But how would this term be *heard* during the chaos and fear of Rome in the mid to late 60s? Although the Priene Inscription may be more explicitly reflected in Luke 2, the language and tone of this inscription may also be relevant for Mark 1:1. This is the context in which Mark “dared to put forward the Christian gospel and declare that the true son of God was Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and ‘king of the Jews’—not some would-be Roman emperor” (Evans 2000, 79; but see Guelich 1989, 14).

The dubious claims of the Imperial cult in which the emperor is hailed as divine and Caesar is lord are contrasted with Mark’s perspective that Jesus is actually the beginning of God’s *shalom*, God’s peace. Salvation is in him, not in Caesar. Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. Despite the divine claims of the Roman emperors, this could scarcely be the meaning of Isaiah’s good news: peace, salvation, and of the reign of God. All of this would certainly have been a challenge to the hegemony of Rome.

Mark is quite clear, of course, that this is more than a battle against the Romans. In Isaiah, the beautiful feet are those “who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (52:7). Some scholars hear a military nuance of victory in battle here, and think this is important for Mark (Marcus 2000, 146). But Mark’s perspective is that violence is not the way of Jesus (see Wright 1996). Violent opposition to the empire only leads to the scenario behind Mark 13, in which the destruction of the temple is the disastrous consequence of the current direction in political thinking and activity.

Rather, this is indeed good news: The gospel of God’s redemptive activity in Jesus Messiah. His activity transcends, but does not exclude, the flesh-

and-blood world. Throughout the subsequent narrative there is clear evidence that God is indeed acting in strength.

This good news is **the gospel about Jesus Christ**. The precise translation of the genitive in Greek here yields different nuances. Is this the gospel *about* Jesus in the sense that the good news tells the story of Jesus? Or is it that the content of the good news *is* Jesus? That is, Jesus himself is the good news from God. Either is possible. This is likely an instance where both nuances are present. It is even possible that the genitive is used by Mark deliberately to include both nuances.

**Jesus** is a very common name. **Christ** becomes almost a proper name in Paul. But Mark probably intends readers to hear *Jesus, the Messiah* (see 8:27-31).

A particularly difficult decision faces translators of the next phrase, **the Son of God**. If this is read (see textual discussion), then it coheres well with an important theme (1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 13:32; 14:61; 15:39). Second, the phrase does not have an article—so it could be translated simply as “son of God.” But this anarthrous form is more likely to mean “the son of God,” just like *archē* is translated using “the” even though it does not have the article in Greek. Whatever the conclusions reached on textual grounds, the absence or presence of these words in this line make no difference to the overall theology of Mark: this is *the good news about Jesus Messiah, Son of God*.

## B. As It Is Written (1:2-3)

### BEHIND THE TEXT

The importance of Scripture, and particularly of Isaiah, to Mark is difficult to exaggerate (see Marcus 1993, who titles a chapter “The Gospel according to Isaiah”). His first direct reference to Scripture is introduced as **it is written in Isaiah the prophet**. Mark believes that what God is now doing in Christ is the new thing promised in Isaiah but also in continuity with God’s announced good purposes in the past. Marcus notes that “each of the initial five pericopes in Mark’s Gospel has strong connections with the second half of the book of Isaiah” (Marcus 2000, 139). This sense of looking to Isaiah goes well beyond these first direct citations or even the first few verses. Isaiah is cited or alluded to elsewhere (1:11-12; 7:6; 9:48; 10:45[?]; 11:17; 13:24-25; 14:24[?]), but the influence extends beyond citations and allusions to themes.

These first citations are not only from Isaiah, however. Mark 1:2*b* and *c* are a combination of Exod 23:20 (LXX), which is verbally closer, and Mal 3:1 (MT), contextually closer to Mark’s citation, and 1:3 to Isa 40:3 (LXX) (see Guelich 1989, 7-8). Why, then, does Mark say **in Isaiah the prophet**? This problem was noted early, with three major MSS (A, L, W, and the Textus

Receptus) reading “in the prophets.” The earliest MSS, however, read **in Isaiah the prophet** and is certainly the more likely.

At least two solutions are on offer. First, Mark is unaware of the combination because he simply takes over already combined material from a source. He could well have used an already existing combination; it seems unlikely that he would be unaware of the fact, since he uses the wider context of Mal 3:1 to develop the picture of John.

Second, Mark himself has woven together Isaiah with these texts and subtly modified them for his purposes. Mark, of course, does not always identify his sources for citations. But where he does, it is probably an important clue as to how the citation ought to be understood. It is also likely that Mark would note that the judgment motif of Malachi is close to that of the Baptist’s announcement. Malachi is important for explaining John’s role and mission *in Israel* (see Öhler 1997, 31-37; Taylor 1997, 8).

But Mark’s purpose here is to focus on the good news, and that has to do with Jesus, predominantly taken from Second Isaiah. But all of this would be seen in light of Isaiah since the Baptist’s ministry *with respect to Jesus* is best explained in terms of Isaiah. Mark has other combined citations (1:11; 12:36; 14:24, 27, 62). More likely is Isaiah’s critical role in Mark’s theological purposes (so Marcus 1993, 12-47). This introduction is the fullest in the Gospel and is far more likely in view of Mark’s evident skills as a writer (see Marcus 1993, 17).

### Isaiah 40:3 at Qumran

Isaiah 40:3 is also important at Qumran—the site of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The vision for the community, set out in IQS includes the hope that it will be “the most holy dwelling . . . a house of perfection . . . in order to establish a covenant in compliance with the everlasting decrees and . . . atone for the earth . . . and there will be no iniquity . . . And when these exist as a community in Israel . . . they are to be segregated from within the dwelling of the men of sin to walk to the desert in order to open there His path. As it is written, ‘In the desert . . .’ and then follows a citation of Isa 40:3 (IQS 8:8-14). All of this is predicated upon full compliance with the Law. This community also sees itself as the initial stage of fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.

### IN THE TEXT

■2 The Jewishness of Mark’s initial statement is clear with the phrase **it is written** and signals a citation from Scripture. In common with other NT writers Mark thinks that Scripture, written in the past, has continuing impact on the present. This is a connecting phrase (*kathōs gegraftai*), showing that the previous words are an opening line, not a title (see Guelich 1989, 7).



Thus, the beginning of the good news is connected to Isaiah. And the story of Jesus is grounded firmly in God's big purposes. These were announced beforehand in Scripture in general but particularly in Isaiah. And they are now coming to fulfillment in Jesus' story. The Scripture cited is **in Isaiah the prophet**. The importance of Isaiah has already been noted. However, of the quotations that follow, only 1:3 comes from Isaiah.

**I will send my messenger ahead of you.** This comes almost word-for-word from Exod 23:20 (LXX), but the Exodus context has little to do with Mark's. In Exodus, Yahweh is the One who will send an angel. The word **messenger** (Heb.: *mal'ak*; Gk.: *angelos*) can be either a human or a heavenly figure. Yahweh's angel will lead the people in the wilderness. They, in turn, are to heed his voice.

In Mark, almost all agree that **my messenger** refers to John. The messenger is to **prepare your way**. The notion of "way" (Heb.: *derek*; Gk.: *hodos*) assumes great importance in Mark as the way of the Lord, a journey with Jesus on mission, to the cross and then again in mission on which the disciples are invited to embark (see Marcus 1993).

This part of the citation is clearly related to Mal 3:1, where the messenger is preparing the way for Yahweh to come in judgment to Israel (Mal 2:17—3:5). But Mark has made a subtle but significant alteration. Instead of **prepare the way before my face** as in Malachi, Mark changes "my" to "your." As a result, the words point to Jesus. On one level, the change simply made the text fit with the historical narrative. That is, John would prepare the way for Jesus. But at another level, Mark is saying that Jesus Messiah is linked to God, and what is attributable to God in Scripture is attributable to Jesus Messiah, Son of God.

■ **3** Mark follows the LXX form of Isa 40:3, highlighting that John is **a voice of one calling in the desert**. John is in the wilderness crying out, **Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him**. Once again, the quotation is not exact and the changes matter.

In Isaiah, the call is to prepare the way *for Yahweh* and to make the paths straight *for our God*. Mark follows in preparing the way for the Lord, but changes the last word to **for him**, making a direct equation between Lord (*kyrios*) and Jesus, who is the likely antecedent of him (*autou*). Thus Mark states indirectly but clearly that "to prepare the way of Jesus as Lord is also to prepare a way for the Lord God" (Collins 2007, 137).

The implications of this for Mark's Christology are important. As Hooker notes, "God's advent in salvation and judgment has taken place in Jesus" (1991, 36). Such an astonishing claim fits both the Second Temple and Roman contexts that we noted earlier. Evans argues that

in mimicking the language of the Imperial cult and in quoting Isa 40:3 Mark appears to have welded together two disparate, potentially antagonistic theologies. On the one hand, he proclaims to the Jewish people the fulfillment of their fondest hopes—the good news of the prophet Isaiah. But, on the other hand, he has boldly announced to the Roman world that the good news of the world began not with Julius Caesar and his descendants, but with Jesus Christ the true son of God. (Evans 2000, 77)

The conflation of these OT citations is important for Mark. While Isaiah functions as the controlling interpretative framework, the use of Mal 3:1 in particular brings the motif of purifying the people in preparation of the coming of the Lord more clearly into the frame. Thus, the voice is not only announcing that the time of the exile is over but also expecting the people to be prepared for the mission of God. “In essence, as the immediate context bears out, he is calling the people of Israel to prepare themselves not only for the visitation of God, but also for following his commands” (Hatina 2002, 182). This, as we shall see, is a journey with the Holy One of God, on his mission, with his authority and proclaiming his message, the message set out in 1:14-15.

## C. John the Baptist (1:4-8)

1:4-8

### BEHIND THE TEXT

The location of the wilderness where John was baptizing is probably in the southern part of the Jordan Valley east of the river a few kilometers north of where it empties into the Dead Sea. The term translated as **desert** (*erēmos*) may give the impression of a bleak place without vegetation. But the term is better translated as “wilderness” (so NRSV), meaning an uncultivated place some distance from human habitation. That description fits Bethany in Jordan, which is today widely accepted as the site of Jesus’ baptism. And it suits Mark’s claim that people from Judea and Jerusalem came to be baptized by John in the Jordan.

Jesus came there as well. Murphy-O’Connor speculates that Jesus encountered John while on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Despite the vegetation near the site with wild boar and vipers in the dense reeds, the area in general is inhospitable (see Murphy-O’Connor 1990, 359, 361).

The location also has symbolic significance since Mark links John with Elijah, the eschatological prophet who is the voice in the wilderness. Thus, “John appeared exactly where Elijah had disappeared (2 Kings 2:4-11)” (Murphy-O’Connor 1990, 360 n. 7). Taylor thinks this location helps explain 1:13 (1997, 46).