

MARK'S INCIPIT AND THE PRIENE CALENDAR INSCRIPTION:  
FROM JEWISH GOSPEL TO GRECO-ROMAN GOSPEL

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Mark's opening words, or incipit, are striking: ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [υἱοῦ θεοῦ]. The final two words are read by  $\aleph^a$  A B D K L W  $\Delta$   $\Pi$  33 and other authorities. Their absence in  $\aleph^*$   $\theta$  28<sup>c</sup> and various ancient versions and fathers 'may be due', Bruce Metzger explains, 'to an oversight in copying, occasioned by the similarity of the endings of the *nomina sacra*. On the other hand, however, there was always the temptation...to expand titles and quasi-titles of books.'<sup>1</sup> For this latter reason, Metzger and his colleagues decided to enclose υἱοῦ θεοῦ in square brackets. The fourth edition of the UBS Greek text and Nestle–Aland twenty-seventh edition take the same position.<sup>2</sup> Robert Guelich suspects omission due to homoioteleuton, for a series of six genitives, all involving abbreviated *nomina sacra* (i.e. ΙΥ ΧΥ ΥΥ ΘΥ) could easily lead to such a scribal error.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars, among them

1. B.M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), p. 73.

2. B. Aland, K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C.M. Martini, and B.M. Metzger (eds.), *The Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 4th edn, 1993), p. 117; B. Aland and K. Aland (eds.), *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 27th edn, 1993), p. 88.

3. R.A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (WBC, 34A; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), p. 6. V. Taylor (*The Gospel According to St Mark* [London: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's, 2nd edn, 1966], p. 152) earlier had taken the same position. See also A. Globe, 'The Caesarean Omission of the Phrase "Son of God" in Mark 1:1', *HTR* 75 (1982), pp. 209-18; P.M. Head, 'A Text-Critical Study of Mark 1.1: "The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ"', *NTS* 37 (1991), pp. 621-29.

Adela Yarbro Collins in a recent study, believe the words are a later addition.<sup>4</sup> Collins admits that the evidence is almost evenly divided, but finally concludes that it is easier to explain the addition of these words than their omission. This addition, she believes, first occurred sometime in the second century.

If the words are omitted, nothing of Mark's Christology is lost. For Jesus at key junctures in this Gospel is identified as the 'son' or the 'son of God' (cf. 1.11; 3.11; 8.38; 9.7; 12.6; 13.32; 14.36, 61; 15.39). Morna Hooker rightly comments that 'the phrase is certainly in keeping with Mark's own beliefs, and forms an appropriate heading to his book'.<sup>5</sup> Thus we may read the Markan incipit as Aland, Metzger, *et al.* have presented it, with the square brackets indicating textual uncertainty, but the presence of the words in the text signifying their fidelity to the evangelist's Christology.

Mark's opening verse is sometimes compared to the Priene Calendar Inscription in honor of Caesar Augustus (OGIS 458; c. 9 BCE).<sup>6</sup> The relevant portion reads as follows (ll. 30-41):

4. A.Y. Collins, 'Establishing the Text: Mark 1:1', in T. Fornberg and D. Hellholm (eds.), *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts* (Festschrift L. Hartman; Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995), pp. 111-27. See also B. Ehrman, 'The Text of Mark in the Hands of the Orthodox', *LQ* 5 (1991), pp. 143-56, here p. 152.

5. M.D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1991), p. 34. Other commentators have said more or less the same thing.

6. The 'Priene' Inscription, as it is usually called, is actually a composite text, extensively reconstructed with the help of parallel inscriptions found at Apamea, Eumeneia, and Dorylaeum. For the Greek text of the composite inscription, see W. Dittenberger (ed.), *Orientalis Graecae Inscriptiones Selectae* (2 vols.; Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1903-1905; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1960), II, pp. 49-59, and pp. 53-55 for ll. 30-41 cited above. See also L.R. Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* (APAMS, 1; New York: Arno, 1931; repr. Chico: Scholars Press, 1975), p. 273; V. Ehrenberg and A.H.M. Jones, *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus and Tiberius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn, 1955), p. 82. For discussion of this famous inscription, see A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York: Harper & Row, 1927), p. 366 (pls. 70 and 71); G. Pfohl (ed.), *Griechische Inschriften als Zeugnisse des privaten und öffentlichen Lebens* (Munich: Heimeran, 1966; rev. edn, 1980), pp. 134-35; H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), pp. 3-4; and M.E. Boring, K. Berger, and C. Colpe, *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 169.

Ἔδοξεν τοῖς ἐπὶ τῆς Ἀσίας | Ἑλλησιν, γνώμη τοῦ ἀρχιερέως  
 Ἀπολλωνίου τοῦ Μηνοφίλου Ἀζανίτου· | ἐπε[ιδὴ ἢ πάντα]  
 διατάξασα τοῦ βίου ἡμῶν πρόνοια σπουδῆν εἰσεν[ενκαλμ]ένη καὶ  
 φιλοτιμίαν τὸ τελειότατον τῷ βίῳ διεκόσμη[σεν] | ἐνεκαμένη τὸν  
 Σεβαστόν, ὃν εἰς εὐεργεσίαν ἀνθρώπων ἐπλήρωσεν ἀρετῆς,  
 [ὥ]σπερ ἡμεῖν καὶ τοῖς μεθ' ἡμᾶς σωτήρα πέμψασα | τὸν παύσοντα  
 μὲν πόλεμον, κοσμήσοντα [δὲ πάντα, φανεῖς δὲ] | ὁ Καῖσαρ τὰς  
 ἐλπίδας τῶν προλαβόντων [εὐανγέλια πάντων ὑπερ] | ἐέθηκεν, οὐ  
 μόνον τοὺς πρὸ αὐτοῦ γεγονότας εὐεργέτας ὑπερβαλλόμενος, ἀλλ'  
 οὐδ' ἐν τοῖς ἐσομένοις ἐλπίδα ὑπολιπὼν ὑπερβολῆς, | ἦρξεν δὲ τῷ  
 κόσμῳ τῶν δι' αὐτὸν εὐανγελίων ἢ γενέθλιος | τοῦ θεοῦ, τῆς δὲ  
 Ἀσίας ἐψηφισμένης ἐν Σμύρῃ...

It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia, in the opinion of the high priest Apollonius of Menophilus Azanitus: 'Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior [σωτήρ], both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance [φανεῖν] (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came by reason of him [ἦρξεν δὲ τῷ κόσμῳ τῶν δι' αὐτὸν εὐανγελίων ἢ γενέθλιος τοῦ θεοῦ],' which Asia resolved in Smyrna...

Comparison of Mark's incipit with this part of the inscription seems fully warranted. First, there is reference to good news, or 'gospel'. In Mark the word appears in the singular (εὐαγγέλιον), while in the inscription it probably appears twice in the more conventional plural (εὐανγέλια). Secondly, there is reference to the *beginning* of this good news. In Mark the nominal form is employed (ἀρχή), while in the inscription the verbal form is employed (ἄρχειν). Thirdly, this good news is brought about by a divine agent. In Mark this agent is 'Jesus the Anointed', υἱὸς θεοῦ (either in the incipit, or as declared elsewhere in the Markan Gospel), while in the inscription the agent is 'Augustus', the 'savior' and 'benefactor', θεός. In many other inscriptions and papyri Augustus is referred to as υἱὸς θεοῦ, or *divi filius* (IGR 1.901; 4.309,

315; ILS 107, 113; P.Ryl. 601; P.Oslo 26; etc.).<sup>7</sup> The use of the word ‘to appear’ (φανεῖν), moreover, only enhances the divine element.

Mark appears deliberately to highlight parallels between Jesus’ behavior and his treatment at the hands of the Romans, on the one hand, and Roman traditions and practices concerning the ruler cult, on the other. Several intriguing parallels quickly come to mind:

1. *The ‘Gospel’*. The emperor’s reign or victory was announced as ‘gospel’ or ‘good news’ (εὐαγγέλιον or εὐαγγελίζεσθαι). The good news was celebrated as a religious event. For example, cities rejoiced and offered sacrifices to the gods upon receiving the good news (εὐαγγελίζεσθαι) of the royal heir’s coming of age. The calendrical inscription from Priene, mentioned above, describes the birthday of Augustus ‘the beginning of the good news for the world’. Plutarch says that ‘a number of people sailed for Lesbos, wishing to announce to Cornelia the good news [εὐαγγελιζόμενοι] that the war was over’ (*Pomp.* 66.3).<sup>8</sup> Jews also understood and employed this terminology. When word spread of Vespasian’s accession to the throne, ‘every city celebrated the good news [εὐαγγέλια] and offered sacrifices on his behalf’ (Josephus, *War* 4.10.6 §618). Josephus later relates: ‘On reaching Alexandria Vespasian was greeted by the good news [εὐαγγέλια] from Rome and by embassies of congratulation from every quarter of the world, now his own... The whole empire being now secured and the Roman state saved [σώζειν] beyond expectation, Vespasian turned his thoughts to what remained in Judaea’ (*War* 4.11.5 §§656-657).

When the Markan evangelist begins his Gospel with the words that echo an important element of the Roman imperial cult, he is making the claim that the good news of Jesus Christ is genuine. Neither Julius Caesar nor any one of his descendants can rightly be regarded as the ‘son of God’; only Jesus the Messiah.

2. *Omens and Prophecies*. Often omens and prophecies preceded the accession or death of an emperor. We have Sulla’s prophecy, ‘either by divinity or by shrewd conjecture’, of Julius Caesar’s eventual

7. On the meaning of θεός and υἱός θεοῦ in reference to Augustus and to the Gospel of Mark, see T.H. Kim, ‘The Anarthrous υἱός θεοῦ in Mark 15,39 and the Roman Imperial Cult’, *Bib* 79 (1998), pp. 221-41.

8. For more examples, see J. Schniewind, *Euangelion: Ursprung und erste Gestalt des Begriffs Evangelium Untersuchungen* (2 vols.; BFCT, 2.25; Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1927–31), II, pp. 131-32; G. Friedrich, ‘εὐαγγέλιον’, *TDNT* II, pp. 724-25.

dictatorship (Suetonius, *Divus Julius* 1.3). Caesar's murder was foretold to him by 'unmistakable signs' (*Divus Julius* 81.1), among which was the death of a small bird carrying a sprig of laurel (81.3). Several omens supposedly prior to, during, and shortly after the birth of Augustus were remembered, at least many years after the fact. Suetonius relates that the senate, fearing the fulfillment of the prophecy of a coming king, 'decreed that no male child born that year should be reared' (*Divus Augustus* 94.3). The parents of Augustus had portentous dreams, such that following his birth the child was regarded as the 'son of Apollo' (94.4). Jupiter appeared in one dream and foretold that Augustus would become the 'savior of his country' (94.8). On one occasion the toddler Augustus commanded noisy frogs to be silent and they obeyed (94.7). The death of Augustus was preceded by many omens and signs. According to Suetonius: 'His (Augustus's) death...and his deification after death, were known in advance by unmistakable signs' (*Divus Augustus* 97.1).

Although Mark does not say anything about the birth of Jesus (as do the Matthean and Lukan evangelists—complete with omens, dreams, and prophecies), omens do attend the baptism (Mk 1.10-11), the transfiguration (9.2-8), and the crucifixion and death of Jesus: daytime darkness (15.33) and the tearing of the Temple veil (15.38). The most astounding omen of all was the subsequent discovery of the empty tomb and meeting the mysterious young man who proclaimed Jesus' resurrection (16.1-8).

3. *The Roman Triumph*. Following a great victory a 'triumph' (θρίαμβος; *triumphus*) was held, at which time the emperor's sovereignty and divine status were reaffirmed (e.g. Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 22). The tradition was ancient and had become part of the Greco-Roman mythology: 'There was a story about Dionysius that, after subduing India, he traversed the greater part of Asia in this way, that he himself was surnamed "Triumph" [θρίαμβος], and that processions after victories in war were for this very reason called "triumphs"' (Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander* 6.28.2). In the same passage Arrian tells of a story, which he regards as false, in which Alexander, having conquered India, imitates Dionysius (6.28.1-3). In one of his classic poems, Virgil (70–19 BC) flatters Augustus, following his victory at Actium (31 BC): 'Heaven's courts have long enough grudged you to us, O Caesar, murmuring because you pay attention to earthly triumphs [*triumphos*]!' (*Georgics* 1.503-504). At the end of the work Virgil

alludes to the Emperor's triumphal procession following his victory: 'Thus I sang of the care of fields, of cattle, and of trees, while great Caesar thundered in war by deep Euphrates and gave a victor's laws unto willing nations, and prepared the path to Heaven [*viamque adfectat Olympo*]' (*Georgics* 4.559-562). In more prosaic terms Suetonius tells us that Augustus brought treasures from Rome, which he freely distributed during his triumph in Alexandria (*Divus Augustus* 41.1). In Jewish history the most memorable triumph was celebrated in Rome following Titus's capture of Jerusalem in AD 70 (cf. Josephus, *War* 7.5.4–6 §§123-157). In his opening summary of *Jewish War*, Josephus promises his readers that he will tell of the Roman victory and of Titus's 'return to Italy and triumph [θρίαμβος]' (*War* prologue §29). Two stone reliefs on the inside of the Arch of Titus, in the Roman Forum, depict this event.

The word θρίαμβεύειν does not occur in the Gospels, but does appear in 2 Cor. 2.14 ('thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph') and Col. 2.15 ('having disarmed the rulers and authorities, he put them on display, having triumphed over them'), which appear to be deliberate allusions to the Roman *triumphus*. For early Christians Jesus' triumph would be celebrated in his return (see comments on παρουσία below). In Mark, Jesus' entry into the city of Jerusalem (Mk 11.1-11) may have impressed inhabitants of the Roman world as the prelude to a triumph of sorts, but that was as far as it went. Jesus receives no honors and no acclaim. His affirmation of a close relationship with the Deity leads to cries of blasphemy and to his condemnation to death (14.61-64). Jesus finally receives a triumph, but it is a mock 'triumph' at the hands of the Roman soldiers,<sup>9</sup> who dress him in a purple robe (πορφύρα) and give him a scepter and a crown (στέφανος) of thorns (instead of a laurel wreath), then salute him: 'Hail, king of the Jews!' (15.16-20). This greeting mimicks the well known greeting extended to the Roman emperor: (*H*)ave Caesar! or (*H*)ave Imperator! (e.g. Suetonius, *Divus Claudius* 21.6: 'Hail, Emperor, they who are about to die salute you'). The soldiers' mockery of Jesus stands in sharp contrast to the picture of genuine respect the Romans not long after Mark's publication would offer to Vespasian and his son Titus: 'At the break of dawn, Vespasian and Titus issued forth, crowned [ἐστεφανωμένοι] with laurel and clad

9. See T.E. Schmidt, 'Mark 15.16-32: The Crucifixion Narrative and the Roman Triumphal Procession', *NTS* 41 (1995), pp. 1-18.

in the traditional purple robes [πορφύρα]... Instantly acclamations rose from the troops' (Josephus, *War* 7.5.4 §§124-126).

4. *Hailed in Divine Terms.* The various inscriptions cited above illustrate well the language of the imperial cult, by which the Roman emperor was viewed as divine. These expressions were not confined to public inscriptions, but appear on coins, in poetry, and in didactic and polemical literature. The legend of a coin struck in honor of Augustus reads: ἐπιφάνια Αὐγούστου ('manifestation of Augustus'). According to Virgil, the great Roman poet: 'This is he whom you have so often heard promised to you, Augustus Caesar, son of a god [*divi genus*], who shall again set up the Golden Age' (*Aeneid* 6.791-793). Philo knows that Augustus was called 'savior and benefactor' (Philo, *Flacc.* 74; cf. *Ad Gaium* 148, 149). Philo's remark that Augustus 'never wished anyone to address him as a god [μηδέποτε θεὸν ἑαυτὸν ἐθελῆσαι προσειπεῖν] but was annoyed if anyone used the word' (*Ad Gaium* 154; cf. Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 53.1; *Tiberius* 27) speaks well of Augustus but reveals the popular tendency nonetheless. Even Herod the Great, despite the risk of offending his own people, sought in various ways to promote the emperor cult in those parts of his realm that were not heavily populated with Jews.<sup>10</sup> Suetonius (*Vitellius* 2.5) tells us that Lucius Vitellius, well known for his flattery, was the first to worship Gaius Caligula as a god (*adorare ut deum*). Dio adds that Caligula called himself Zeus Latiaris and sometimes impersonated Poseidon and Apollo, as well as other gods and goddesses (59.28.5-6). Caligula's blasphemous vanity was well known to Jewish writers. According to Philo, the emperor imagined he had 'soared above humanity and had ranked himself among the gods' (*Ad Gaium* 218). Later Josephus adds that Caligula 'wished to be considered a god and to be hailed as such' (*War* 2.10.1 §184; cf. *Ant.* 18.7.2 §256).

In Mark's Gospel Jesus is recognized as God's son by no less an authority than God himself (Mk 1.11; 9.7: σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς μου). Perhaps even more dramatic, from the point of view of a first-century Roman, is the confession of the Roman centurion: 'Truly this man was υἱὸς θεοῦ' (Mk 15.39). The Vulgate offers a literal translation: *vere homo hic filius Dei erat*. But in Latin inscriptions υἱὸς θεοῦ is usually translated *divi filius* ('son of deity'). Even such appellations as 'son of the Most High

10. See M. Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D.* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), pp. 101-103.

[υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου]’ (Mk 5.7) and ‘holy one of God [ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ]’ (Mk 1.24), though clearly derived from Jewish language and background (Gen. 14.18-20, 22: עֲלִיּוֹן אֱלֹהִים [Hebrew] ‘God Most High’; 4Q246 2.1: בֶּרַךְ עֲלִיּוֹן [Aramaic] ‘son of the Most High’), would not have been foreign to the Greco-Roman world. We see this in the cry of the slave girl with the familiar spirit: ‘These men are servants of the Most High God [τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου]’ (Acts 16.17). Of course, it could be argued that the language here is not genuinely pagan, coming as it does from the pen of the Lukan evangelist. But ‘most high god’ is attested in non-Jewish, non-Christian sources: ‘Epikteto fulfilled his vow to the most high god [θεῷ ὑψίστῳ]’; and ‘the assembled worshippers set in place this stele for god, Zeus most high [θεοῦ Διὸς ὑψίστου]’.<sup>11</sup> Although this usage may ultimately derive from Jewish influence, it is nonetheless important evidence that such a form of address given Jesus would still have a familiar ring to it in the Roman world.

5. *Healing*. Because of their divinity, it was believed that the Roman emperors could in some instances effect healing. According to Suetonius:

A man of the people, who was blind, and another who was lame, together came to [Vespasian] as he sat on the tribunal, begging for the help for their disorders which Serapis had promised in a dream; for the god declared that Vespasian would restore the eyes, if he would spit upon them, and give strength to the leg, if he would deign to touch with his heel. Though he had hardly any faith that this could possibly succeed, and therefore shrank even from making the attempt, he was at last prevailed upon by his friends and tried both things in public before a large crowd; and with success (*Divus Vespasianus* 7.2-3).

Healing miracles find prominent expression in the evangelists’ portraits of Jesus’ ministry. In Mark’s Gospel they are especially prominent when the ratio of miracle stories to length of the Gospel is taken into account (1.21-28, 29-31, 32-34, 40-45; 2.1-12; 3.1-6, 7-12; 4.35-41; 5.1-20, 21-43; 6.35-44, 47-52, 53-56; 7.24-30, 31-37; 8.1-10, 22-26; 9.14-29; 10.46-52). Jesus’ use of spittle to heal the blind (Mk 8.22-26; Jn 9.1-12) and the deaf-mute (Mk 7.31-37) parallels Vespasian’s use of spittle to heal the blind man (Suetonius, *Divus Vespasianus* 7.2-3).

11. See discussion in G.H.R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, I (North Ryde: Macquarie University, 1981), pp. 25-29.



6. *Seated or Standing at God's Right Hand.* Being seated at the 'right hand' of deity was another important part of the ritual and symbolism of the emperor cult. A coin minted in Rome in AD 55 depicts 'divine' Claudius seated at the right hand of Augustus ('God from God'!) atop a chariot drawn by four elephants.<sup>12</sup> A later sculpture depicts Hadrian, dressed as Zeus, 'standing side by side with the image of Iuppiter/Zeus himself'.<sup>13</sup>

The single most significant self-reference made by Jesus in the Markan Gospel is his assertion that the High Priest would see him 'seated at the right hand' of God (Mk 14.61). Although based on Ps. 110.1, an Old Testament text cited and alluded to many times in the New Testament, the image of sitting at God's right hand would, quite apart from familiarity with the Jewish Scriptures, evoke in the minds of Romans ideas of the emperor cult. It is not Caesar who sits next to God, the Markan evangelist avers; it is Jesus.

7. *Libations in Honor of Caesar.* Beginning with Augustus's libations were to be poured out at every banquet, public and private, in honor of the emperor: καὶ ἐν τοῖς συσσιτίοις οὐχ ὅτι τοῖς κοινοῖς ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἰδίοις πάντα αὐτῷ σπένδειν ἐκέλευσαν ('they ordered all, not only in public but also in private banquets, to pour libations to him'; Dio 51.19.7). One also thinks of the eating and drinking ceremonies observed by adherents to Mithraism. To these ceremonies Justin Martyr refers, complaining that they are done in imitation of the Lord's Supper (cf. *1 Apol.* 1.66.3). It is of course entirely possible that Christian observation of the Lord's Supper was itself viewed as imitation of Mithraic practices.

In his final meal with his disciples Jesus shares a cup of wine. Evidently he describes it as his 'blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many' (Mk 14.24). In various ways the Matthean and Lukan evangelists make explicit the link between the cup and Jesus' reference to his blood (cf. Mt. 26.27b-28; Lk. 22.20b), which in Mark is only implied. Paul's tradition of the Supper adds the saying, 'Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me' (1 Cor. 11.25). The cup in

12. H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1936), p. 201 + pl. 38.

13. Cf. H.S. Versnel, *Triumphus: An Inquiry into the Origin, Development and Meaning of the Roman Triumph* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), p. 69; cf. Taylor, *Divinity*, pp. 44-45.

remembrance of Jesus may have suggested a parallel to the libations drunk in honor of Caesar.

8. *The Emperor's 'Advent' and the Promise of a New World Order.* The anticipated arrival of the emperor was referred to as a *παρουσία* (Latin: *adventus*). In honor of the Roman emperors 'advent coins' were struck, for example, a coin struck in AD 66 in honor of Nero reads *adventus Augusti* ('the coming of Augustus'). An inscription in honor of Hadrian speaks of the 'first *παρουσία* of the god Hadrian'.<sup>14</sup> P.Tebt. 48 announces the *παρουσία* of the king to the forum. This manner of speaking is known to Judaism of late antiquity, as seen in Josephus, who also speaks of the '*παρουσία* of the king' (*Ant.* 19.8.1 §340; cf. *3 Macc.* 3.17; *T. Abr.* 13.4-6). The advent of the emperor was sometimes thought of as the inauguration of a new era. As already noted above, Virgil spoke of Augustus 'who shall again set up the Golden Age' (*Aeneid* 6.791-793). The emperor could inaugurate a new era because of his link with heaven. This idea is seen in Alexander the Great, who evidently thought of himself as a mediator between heaven and earth. According to Plutarch, Alexander 'believed that he came as a heaven-sent governor [θεόθεν ἀρμοστής] to all, and as a mediator [διאלλακτής] for the whole world...he brought together all people everywhere, uniting and mixing in one great loving-cup, as it were, people's lives, their characters, their marriages, their very habits of life' (*Moralia* 329C = *De Alex. Fortuna* 1.6). Virgil's poetry in honor of Augustus reflects similar ideas.

Early Christians spoke of the *παρουσία* of Jesus, at which time judgment would take place (Mt. 24.3, 27, 37, 39; but earlier in Paul, cf. 1 Cor. 15.23; 1 Thess. 2.19; 3.13; 4.15; 5.23; and in other writers, cf. Jas 5.7, 8; 2 Pet. 1.16; 3.4; 1 Jn 2.28). In Mark the word *παρουσία* is not employed, but the expectation of Jesus' return is emphasized in ch. 13 (esp. vv. 26-27, 33-37) and plays an important part in Jesus' reply to Caiaphas: 'You will see the Son of Man...coming with the clouds of heaven' (14.62). The proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God (Mk 1.15) would relate to the Roman world as the promise of a new world order. Only the 'son of God' could make such a promise and effect such a result.

9. *Post-Mortem Deification.* After his death the successful and respected emperor was deified, that is, enrolled among the gods. Among

14. Both examples are from Deissmann, *Light*, pp. 371-72.

the most respected were Julius Caesar, whose military prowess was greatly admired, and his nephew Caesar Augustus, whose remarkable, lengthy, and successful reign laid the foundation on which the Roman empire—and the emperor cult—would rest for generations to come. According to Suetonius:

[Julius Caesar] died in the fifty-sixth year of his age, and was numbered among the gods, not only by formal decree, but also in the conviction of the common people. For at the first of the games which his heir Augustus gave in honor of his apotheosis, a comet shone for seven successive days, rising about the eleventh hour, and was believed to be the soul of Caesar, who had been taken to heaven; and this is why a star is set upon the crown of his head in his statue (*Divus Julius* 88.1).

A similar legend grew up around Augustus. After describing the death and cremation of the emperor, Suetonius relates: ‘There was an ex-praetor who took oath that he had seen the form of the Emperor, after he had been reduced to ashes, on its way to heaven’ (*Divus Augustus* 100.4).

A central component in early Christianity’s proclamation of the risen Jesus is his enthronement, at God’s right hand, as God’s Son, who lives forever. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus repeatedly foretells his death and resurrection (8.31; 9.31; 10.33-34), while he confesses to Caiaphas that he will be seen seated at God’s right hand, coming with the clouds of heaven (14.62). The centurion’s confession that Jesus was ‘truly the son of God’ (15.39) is the equivalent of deification, but the discovery of the empty tomb and the (angelic?) announcement that he has risen (16.4-7) provide divine confirmation of the truth of Jesus’ predictions.

To return to Mark’s incipit and the Priene Inscription, it seems clear that the evangelist has deliberately echoed an important theme of the Roman imperial cult. However, the appeal to Isa. 40.3 (‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord...”’) in Mk 1.3 also suggests that the ‘good news’ of Second Isaiah is also in view. Occurrences of ‘good news’ or ‘gospel’, which in Hebrew is **בִּשְׂרָה**, are found in the second half of Isaiah.<sup>15</sup> There are five passages in all (Isa.

15. For the semantic range and usage of **בִּשְׂרָה** in the Hebrew Bible, see J. Bowman, ‘The Term “Gospel” and its Cognates in the Palestinian Syriac’, in J.B. Higgins (ed.), *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of T.W. Manson* (Manchester:

40.1-11; 41.21-29; 52.7-12; 60.1-7; 61.1-11). Three of them (Isa. 40.1-11; 52.7; 61.1-2) were very important in the development of Jesus' theology and that of the Early Church.<sup>16</sup> The first passage promises the restoration of Jerusalem, via a new exodus from bondage and a new occupation of the promised land. The second passage speaks of the coming herald who will proclaim the good news of the reign of God. In the Aramaic tradition, 'Your God reigns', is paraphrased, 'The kingdom of your God is revealed'. It is probable that this language is what underlies Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom (cf. Mk 1.14-15). The third passage speaks of the anointed messenger who proclaims recovery of sight to the blind, relief to the oppressed, and good news for the afflicted. This passage is alluded to in Jesus' reply to John's messengers (cf. Mt. 11.2-6 = Lk. 7.18-23).<sup>17</sup>

The vision of Second Isaiah approximates the Roman imperial cult's promise of the new world order. Talk of 'good news', which envisions law and order, health and prosperity, and justice and mercy, would ring a familiar chord in the ears of both Jews and Gentiles. 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, while on the other hand he has boldly announced to the Roman world that the good

Manchester University Press, 1959), pp. 1-18; and O. Schilling, 'בשר', *TDOT* II, pp. 313-16.

16. I explore this subject further in 'From Gospel to Gospel: The Function of Isaiah in the New Testament', in C.C. Broyles and C.A. Evans (eds.), *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition* (VTSup, 70.2; FIOTL, 1.2; Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 651-91.

17. The passage is also alluded to in 4Q521 and is part of a messianic vision. On this, see E. Puech, 'Une Apocalypse Messianique (4Q521)', *RevQ* 15 (1992), pp. 475-519; J.J. Collins, 'The Works of the Messiah', *DSD* 1 (1995), pp. 98-112.

Years ago F. Hahn ('Der Apostolat im Urchristentum: Seine Eigenart und seine Voraussetzungen', *KD* 20 [1974], pp. 54-77, esp. pp. 69-75) suggested that Christianity's concept of apostle is drawn from Isa. 61.1. Hahn is correct. I would add that the importance attached to this prophetic text derives from Jesus himself and is, in some respects, consistent with earlier Jewish interpretive tendencies (as seen, for example, in 11QMelchizedek).

news for the world began not with Julius Caesar and his descendants, but with Jesus Christ, the true son of God.<sup>18</sup>

From this I think we can infer that one very important aspect of the Markan evangelist's portrait of Jesus is comparison to the Roman emperor and the emperor cult. Given the obvious dangers, why did the evangelist do this? I think he did so partly in response to the historical circumstances in which he found himself. At the time of his writing, which was probably in the mid to late 60s, the Roman empire was in a state of political turmoil. The golden era of Augustus (30 BC–AD 14) was over. Imperial succession had proven to be disappointing, to say the least. Whereas the Senate had deified Julius Caesar and his nephew Augustus, this honor had been denied to the eccentric and lecherous Tiberius (AD 14–37)<sup>19</sup> and the cruel and murderous Gaius Caligula (AD 37–41).<sup>20</sup> The honor was bestowed, out of pity, upon the stuttering and

18. It should be pointed out that the epithet 'son of God' does not bear an exclusively Hellenistic imprint. There are several references in the Hebrew Bible to 'son(s) of God' or 'son(s) of the Most High' (cf. Gen. 6.2, 4; Job 1.6; 2.1; 38.7; Pss 29.1; 82.6; 89.6; Hos. 2.1; Dan. 3.25). Israel's king is sometimes related to God as 'son' (2 Sam. 7.14; Ps. 2.7; 89.26-27). Even in later wisdom literature, the righteous man is called God's 'son' (Sir. 4.10; Wis. 2.19). On the question of the Jewish and Palestinian background of this epithet, especially in reference to 4Q246, see J.A. Fitzmyer, 'The Palestinian Background of "Son of God" as a Title for Jesus', in Fornberg and Hellholm (eds.), *Texts and Contexts*, pp. 567-77. Fitzmyer concludes that 'the use of such a title for (Jesus) was not necessarily the product of missionary activity among Gentiles in the eastern Mediterranean world' (p. 575). This sensible conclusion stands in contrast to older German scholarship, which understood the New Testament's use of 'son of God' as wholly derived from Hellenism; cf. G.P. Wetter, *Der Sohn Gottes* (FRLANT, 26; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1916); R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951–55), I, pp. 130-31; F. Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (London: Lutterworth; Cleveland: World, 1969), pp. 291-93.

19. Tiberius withdrew to the island of Capri (Suetonius, *Tiberius* 40-41). His neglect of the state led to several setbacks, 'to the great dishonour of the empire and no less to its danger' (*ibid.*, 41). At Capri, Tiberius established his 'holy places', where he could indulge his sexual appetites for young children and sodomize persons of all ages, from infancy to adulthood, including women of high birth (*ibid.*, 43-45).

20. The youthful Caligula 'could not control his natural cruelty and viciousness, but was a most eager witness of the tortures and executions of those who suffered punishment' (Suetonius, *Caligula* 11). From chs. 22 to nearly the end of his narrative (ch. 56), Suetonius relates Caligula's 'career as a monster' (*Caligula* 22.1). While

cowardly Claudius (AD 41–54),<sup>21</sup> but was denied to his murderous and insane successor Nero (AD 54–68).<sup>22</sup> In the later part of his rule, Nero rescinded Claudius's enrollment among the gods,<sup>23</sup> which meant that at the time of Mark's publication, no Roman emperor since Julius Caesar and Augustus enjoyed divine status. Following Nero's assassination three would-be emperors filled the office in brief, rapid succession (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius). Suicide and murder were the order of the day.<sup>24</sup> Morale in the empire was waning. To compound the difficulties was the Jewish war, which exploded in AD 66, catching Rome completely unprepared. The governor Gesius Florus (AD 64–66) had been murdered,<sup>25</sup> the Roman squadrons stationed in Judea and Galilee had been annihilated,<sup>26</sup> and the war, at least in its early stages, was not going well. Had Mark been written in 68 or 69, which seems probable, the social backdrop would have been one of anxiety and foreboding. One emperor after another, each seemingly worse and more impotent than his predecessor, had failed—and each one had been hailed 'son of God'! The emerging cynicism would have been equalled only by the growing fear and alarm. It was against this setting that the Markan

watching young men rehearsing for a play, the hated emperor was struck down and stabbed more than thirty times (*ibid.*, 58.2-3).

21. According to Suetonius, 'throughout almost the whole course of his childhood and youth he (Claudius) suffered so severely from various obstinate disorders that the vigor of both his mind and his body was dulled, and even when he reached the proper age he was not thought capable of any public or private business' (*Claudius* 2.1). The terrified Claudius, hearing of Caligula's murder and not knowing that he himself was about to be proclaimed emperor, was found hiding behind curtains (*ibid.*, 10.2; cf. chs. 36-37, for additional examples of his cowardice). Of his mannerisms Suetonius relates that 'his laughter was unseemly and his anger still more disgusting, for he would foam at the mouth and trickle at the nose; he stammered besides and his head was very shaky at all times, but especially when he made the least exertion' (*ibid.*, 30). He was poisoned by his wife Agrippina and stepson Nero (*ibid.*, 44.2-3).

22. The whole of Nero's reign was marked by murder, cruelty, and numerous acts of insanity (cf. Suetonius, *Nero*, esp. 26–39).

23. Suetonius, *Nero* 33. Claudius's divine honors were later restored by Vespasian (*ibid.*, *Vespasian* 9).

24. Galba was 'butchered' by his soldiers (Suetonius, *Galba* 19.2). Otho committed suicide (*ibid.*, *Otho* 11.2). Vitellius was murdered (*ibid.*, *Vitellius* 17.2).

25. Suetonius, *Vespasian* 4.5. Josephus, however, does not tell us what befell the procurator.

26. Josephus, *War* 2.17.10 §§449-456; 2.19.7-9 §§540-555.

evangelist 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.

The good news of Isaiah, fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, had now become the good news for the entire world. As the true son of God, Jesus offers the world genuine good news, which no Roman emperor could ever hope to offer or bring to pass. It is in this context that the Markan evangelist boldly sets forth his apologetic. Despite rejection at the hands of his own people (and the most important people, as importance would have been measured at that time), and a shameful death at the hands of the most powerful people, Jesus was indeed the son of God, humanity's true Savior and Lord. Mark's purpose is to narrate the story of Jesus in such a way that such a confession will appear compelling and plausible to Jews and Romans alike.

