New Testament Theology

The Beginning of the Gospel

A Theology of Mark

PETER ORR

Series edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

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For Ben, Ollie, Jonny, and Daniel

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Series Preface

THERE ARE REMARKABLY FEW TREATMENTS of the big ideas of single books of the New Testament. Readers can find brief coverage in Bible dictionaries, in some commentaries, and in New Testament theologies, but such books are filled with other information and are not devoted to unpacking the theology of each New Testament book in its own right. Technical works concentrating on various themes of New Testament theology often have a narrow focus, treating some aspect of the teaching of, say, Matthew or Hebrews in isolation from the rest of the book's theology.

The New Testament Theology series seeks to fill this gap by providing students of Scripture with readable book-length treatments of the distinctive teaching of each New Testament book or collection of books. The volumes approach the text from the perspective of biblical theology. They pay due attention to the historical and literary dimensions of the text, but their main focus is on presenting the teaching of particular New Testament books about God and his relations to the world on their own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus. Such biblical theology is of fundamental importance to biblical and expository preaching and informs exegesis, systematic theology, and Christian ethics.

The twenty volumes in the series supply comprehensive, scholarly, and accessible treatments of theological themes from an evangelical perspective. We envision them being of value to students, preachers, and interested laypeople. When preparing an expository sermon series,

for example, pastors can find a healthy supply of informative commentaries, but there are few options for coming to terms with the overall teaching of each book of the New Testament. As well as being useful in sermon and Bible study preparation, the volumes will also be of value as textbooks in college and seminary exegesis classes. Our prayer is that they contribute to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the kingdom and glory of God in Christ.

Peter Orr's Mark volume, *The Beginning of the Gospel,* demonstrates that underlying Mark's concise and energetic historical account of Jesus lies profound theology connected to every part of Scripture, especially the Old Testament and the writings of Paul and Peter. If Peter is Mark's historical source, Paul is Mark's theological partner. According to Orr, Mark provides "the beginning of the gospel," forging historical and theological connections between Jesus's life and ministry and the preaching of the apostles. Mark's Gospel calls us to follow Jesus, the divine Son and servant King, who inaugurates the long-awaited kingdom of God and whose death is a model for us to emulate and a ransom for our sins.

Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

Preface

THIS BOOK IS MY ATTEMPT TO CAPTURE some of the main themes of Mark's Gospel. As the shortest and earliest Gospel, Mark gives us a crisp, fast-paced picture of Jesus. However, I discovered (although it should have been obvious) that Mark does not *simply* write a stand-alone piece. Not only does he draw from the rich resources of the Old Testament, but he also consciously writes with an awareness of other New Testament voices (particularly Paul and Peter). As the first Gospel to be written, Mark is something of a linchpin for the New Testament, in fact for the whole Bible, as voices from the Old Testament and the New Testament join in a conversation that centers on the most important person in history. I hope this book helps you to become more excited about Mark and, more importantly, about Jesus.

I am very thankful to many people for their help and support during the writing of this book. First and foremost, my sincere thanks to the governing board of Moore Theological College for granting me six months of study leave to work on this volume. Thank you to my friend, colleague, and the principal of the college, Mark Thompson, for his encouragement to use my study leave in this way.

Thank you to Tom Schreiner and Brian Rosner for inviting me to contribute to this series and for their encouragement as I have written this book. Thank you to everyone at Crossway, especially to Chris Cowan whose editorial skill has greatly improved this volume.

My colleagues on the faculty at Moore College have been a wonderful support during this project in different ways. I want to especially thank

my friends and colleagues in the New Testament department—Chris Conyers, Philip Kern, Will Timmins, and Lionel Windsor. Philip, in addition to being a great friend, colleague, and department head, is a wonderful model of godly, careful teaching. It has been a delight to sit and listen to him lecture in the classes we teach together. Thanks as well to Simon Gillham, Chase Kuhn, and Paul Grimmond for their friendship and frequent encouragement.

A number of people have very kindly read portions of this book or helped with its production in other ways. Thank you to Jeff Aernie, Joel Atwood, Keith Hill, and Adam Wood. Philip Kern gave detailed feedback for which I am especially grateful.

Thanks to the wonderful church family at All Saints Petersham. I also want to acknowledge a number of friends who have, in different ways, given encouragement or support during this writing process and for whom I am very thankful to God: Ben and Sara Gray, Russ and Aimee Grinter, Luke and Anna Jackson, Paul and Caroline Ritchie, and Ross and Megan Walker.

Writing this during the COVID-19 pandemic and with borders closed, I have more than ever felt the distance from my parents Philip and Kay and my sister Susannah in the UK. I hope we can see each other soon. I am very grateful to you, Em, as always and for everything.

Finally, to the dedicatees of this book, my four sons—the arrows in my quiver/liver—I love you all and hope that you will always believe in, follow, and love the Jesus of Mark's Gospel (now get off your devices and tidy your rooms).

Soli Deo Gloria!
Peter Orr
Sydney, 2021

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ATJ	*Ashland Theological Journal*
BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
BDAG	Bauer, Walter, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentary
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NETS	News English Translation of the Septuagint
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology

NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentaries
RTR	*Reformed Theological Review*
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*

Introduction

The Beginning of the Gospel

Mark as Backstory

MARK STARTS AT THE BEGINNING. His first words are "the beginning [*archē*] of the gospel." This phrase, lacking a verb as it does, functions as the title for the book.[1] Mark has written the beginning, origin, or backstory of the gospel that has been preached about Jesus.[2]

A first-century Christian who read Mark would have understood the "gospel" as a message to be heard, not a book to be read. That is the way Mark uses the term *gospel* (*euangelion*) throughout his work (1:14, 15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9)—always a message that is preached and heard. After Mark wrote, his book became known as a "Gospel," thus creating two related but distinct understandings of the word *gospel* (i.e., a book about Jesus's life or a message about him that is preached). However, as Mark writes, the gospel was only known as a preached message. Mark, then, is providing his readers with the beginning—that is, the fleshed out, detailed backstory to the gospel they had heard preached.

1 For a detailed defense of this position see M. Eugene Boring, "Mark 1:1–15 and the Beginning of the Gospel," *Semeia* 52 (1991): 43–81.

2 I am assuming the traditional argument that the author of this Gospel is John Mark (mentioned in, e.g., Acts 12:12; 15:39). For a good survey of the issues, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 7–12.

Thinking about this book as the backstory to the gospel invites us to consider Mark in relation to the two (for want of a better word) *leading* apostles in the New Testament: Peter and Paul. Put simply, Peter is Mark's historical source while Paul is his theological conversation partner.

Peter: Mark's Historical Source

Traditionally, Mark has been associated with the apostle Peter, while Luke has been associated with Paul. In Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, he discusses "the extant five books of Papias" (a second-century bishop of Hierapolis).[3] At one point he quotes what Papias says about Mark: "Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ."[4] This quote is subject to considerable debate, but we need simply to note the clear, early association made between Mark and Peter.

A little later, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, also wrote about how the Gospels came to be written. He records that "Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him."[5] Here again, we have Mark described as the "interpreter of Peter," while Luke is associated with Paul.

There are also indications in Mark's Gospel itself that point to Peter's influence. An inclusio in the narrative has Peter as the first (1:16) and last (16:7) named disciple.[6] Richard Bauckham suggests that this may be an ancient literary device to indicate Peter as the eyewitness on

3 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History, Books 1–5*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 3.39.1.

4 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15.

5 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1., in *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Marytyr, Irenaeus*; vol. 1 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885), http://www.newadvent.org, rev. and ed. Kevin Knight for New Advent.

6 Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 124–25.

whose testimony the narrative depends.[7] Other details highlight Peter as well—such as the double reference to Simon Peter in 1:16 (Jesus saw "*Simon* and Andrew the brother of *Simon*") and the inclusion of Peter's name in 16:7 ("go, tell his disciples *and Peter*").[8]

Peter is certainly the most prominent disciple in the Gospel, mentioned by Mark more frequently (proportionally) than by Matthew or Luke. At points in the narrative Peter is the disciple who is the focus, perhaps most notably in his dialogue with Jesus in 8:31–38 (cf. 9:5; 10:28; 11:21; 14:29, 37, 54–72).[9] Furthermore, while Mark frequently "narrates what different characters see and hear . . . the act of remembering is only attributed to Peter."[10] In 11:21 Peter remembers the fig tree Jesus cursed, and in 14:72 he remembers Jesus's prediction of his denial. These and other features that highlight Peter's perspective suggest that Mark is telling his Gospel primarily through the lens and perspective of Peter.[11]

One potential objection to this view is that Mark often portrays Peter in a negative light. However, we will see that the portrayal of Peter is complex and certainly not wholly negative. In any case, the first readers of Mark would know that Peter ultimately underwent a transformation, and the Gospel itself indicates that this would happen (e.g., 16:7).

None of these features provides incontrovertible proof of Petrine influence on Mark's Gospel, but together with the testimony of Papias and Irenaeus they point to a likely link between Peter and Mark's Gospel. Mark, it seems, has written his Gospel from Peter's perspective.

7 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 132–45.

8 Michael Bird, "Mark: Interpreter of Peter and Disciple of Paul," in *Paul and the Gospels: Christologies, Conflicts and Convergences,* ed. Michael F. Bird and Joel Willits, LNTS 411 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 35.

9 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 126.

10 Finn Damgaard, "Persecution and Denial—Paradigmatic Apostolic Portrayals in Paul and Mark," in *Mark and Paul: Comparative Essays Part II: For and Against Pauline Influence on Mark*, ed. Eve-Marie Becker, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, and Mogens Müller, BZNW 199 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 297.

11 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 155–82.

Paul: Mark's Theological Partner

This close connection between Mark and Peter meant that any possible relationship between Mark and Paul was left largely unexplored until the nineteenth century with the publication of two monographs by the German scholar Gustav Volkmar.[12] Volkmar argued that Mark's Gospel was essentially an allegorical defense of Paul. He suggested that Jesus in Mark represents Paul, Jesus's family stands for the Jerusalem church led by James, and the Pharisees correspond to Paul's opponents.

Volkmar's argument was largely refuted by Martin Werner in a 1923 monograph.[13] As a result, although the relationship between Paul and Mark was periodically touched on in scholarship, it was not until the publication of an article by Joel Marcus in 2000 that scholarly focus turned to the question.[14] Marcus's article has sparked a mini-revival in the study of Mark's dependence on Paul, and if we can speak of a scholarly consensus, it seems to be now held that Mark wrote under the theological influence of Paul.

One of the clearest connections between Paul and Mark is their use of the word "gospel" (*euangelion*). The word "gospel" occurs four times in Matthew (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; 26:13), twice in Acts (Acts 15:7; 20:24), and not at all in Luke or John.[15] Its appearance seven times[16] in Mark makes it the New Testament book with the most occurrences outside of Paul (the only two other occurrences are in 1 Pet. 4:17 and Rev. 14:6). In the New Testament, this is a particularly Pauline and Markan word. Even the phrase with which Mark starts his work, "the beginning of the gospel," is found in

12 Gustav Volkmar, *Die Religion Jesu* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1857); Gustav Volkmar, *Die Evangelien oder Marcus und die Synopsis der kanonischen und ausserkanonischen Evangelien nach dem ältesten Text mit historisch-exegetischem Commentar* (Leipzig: Fuess, 1870).

13 Martin Werner, *Der Einfluss paulinischer Theologie im Markusevangelium: eine Studie zur neutestamentlichen Theologie*, BZNW 1 (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1923).

14 Joel Marcus, "Mark—Interpreter of Paul," *NTS* 46 (2000): 473–87.

15 Luke does frequently use the verb *euangelizō*.

16 It also appears an eighth time in Mark 16:15, but I have omitted this since 16:9–20 is likely not original.

Paul when he reminds the Philippian church of their partnership with him "in the beginning of the gospel" (*en archē tou euangeliou*; Phil. 4:15).[17]

The strong parallels are found not only in the frequency of usage but also in the ways in which Mark and Paul employ the word *gospel*. Paul tends to refer to "the gospel" without modifiers (e.g., Rom. 1:16; 10:16; 1 Cor. 4:15).[18] Apart from 1:1 and 1:14, Mark also writes the word without any modifiers, as opposed to Matthew who tends to use modifiers (e.g., "the gospel of the kingdom" in 4:23; 9:35; 24:14).

For Paul, the gospel can be an "episodic narrative"[19] expressed in two stages as seen in 1 Thessalonians 4:14: "we believe that [1] Jesus died and [2] rose again." Or it can be expressed in multiple episodes as in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8: "[1] Christ died . . . [2] was buried . . . [3] was raised . . . [4] appeared." It seems that part of Mark's reason for writing is to "render the Pauline oral gospel episodic narrative for the first time into a written long-form episodic narrative."[20]

Paul and Mark share a number of additional theological convictions. I will touch on these in later chapters, but at this stage I can note the following: the inability for people to naturally understand the cross (cf. Mark 8:31–33 and 1 Cor. 1:18); the attitude to the law, particularly concerning food (cf. Mark 7:18–19 and Rom. 14:20); the temporal priority of mission to Israel and then to the world (cf. Mark 7:26–27 and Rom. 1:16); the relationship between Jesus and Rome (cf. Mark 12:17 and Rom. 13:1).[21]

17 Paul here is referring to the beginning of the Philippians' association with the gospel. So G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 318.

18 Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel*, trans. James Boyce, Donald Juel, William Poehlmann, and Roy A. Harrisville (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 127.

19 Margaret Mitchell, "Mark, the Long-Form Pauline εὐαγγέλιον," in *Modern and Ancient Literary Criticism of the Gospels: Continuing the Debate on Gospel Genre(s)*, ed. R. M. Calhoun, D. P. Moessner, and T. Nicklas, WUNT 451 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 211.

20 Mitchell, "Mark, the Long-Form Pauline εὐαγγέλιον," 211.

21 For more see Mar Pérez i Díaz, *Mark, A Pauline Theologian*, WUNT 2.521 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 45–190.

For Marcus, however, their shared understanding of the cross is their clearest point of similarity. For both Mark and Paul, the death of Jesus, in addition to bringing salvation, is an "apocalyptic event"—that is, one that reveals what could not otherwise be known.[22] Paul speaks of the cross in apocalyptic terms in 1 Corinthians 1–2 (e.g., the cross being the "secret and hidden wisdom of God" in 1 Cor. 2:7). As Mark narrates the crucifixion, he highlights the apocalyptic phenomena that occurred around Jesus's death (particularly the darkness of 15:33 and the torn curtain of 15:38). His narrative climaxes with a moment of "apocalyptic revelation" when the centurion grasps his identity as the Son of God—precisely at the moment of his death (15:39).[23]

These parallels between Mark and Paul are significant. As Marcus puts it, "The other Gospels do not concentrate on the cross as single-mindedly as Mark does. Nor do they share to the same extent the Markan emphasis that this apocalyptic demonstration of divine power took place in an arena of stark human weakness."[24] He notes that Mark is the only Gospel that narrates the first human confession of Jesus's sonship as occurring at the cross.[25]

There may be a particular connection between Mark's Gospel and Paul's letter to the Romans. Scholars (inevitably!) debate the location from which Mark wrote his Gospel, but a good case can be made that he wrote from Rome.[26] For example, it has been noted that ten of the eighteen Latinisms in the New Testament (i.e., Greek transliterations of Latin loanwords) are found in Mark's Gospel (e.g., *dēnarion* in 6:37; 12:15; 14:5; *praitōrion* in 15:16). This is "a frequency which is higher than any other Greek literary text of the period."[27] The "most likely

22 Marcus, "Mark—Interpreter of Paul," 479.

23 Marcus, "Mark—Interpreter of Paul," 480.

24 Marcus, "Mark—Interpreter of Paul," 482.

25 Marcus, "Mark—Interpreter of Paul," 483. Cf. Matt. 16:16; Luke 1:32, 35; John 1:49.

26 See Brian J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark's Gospel*, BIS (Leiden: Brill, 2003), for a more comprehensive defense of this position.

27 Michael P. Theophilus, "The Roman Connection: Paul and Mark," in *Paul and Mark: Comparative Essays Part I: Two Authors at the Beginnings of Christianity*, ed. Oda Wischmeyer, David C. Sim, and Ian J. Elmer, BZNW 198 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 50.

place for Latinisms to predominate is in the city of Rome, where the Latin and Greek languages were closely intermingled as nowhere else at the time."[28]

If Mark did write from Rome (and I am only raising it as a possibility), it is interesting to note that the two descriptions of the "gospel" at the beginning of Romans ("the gospel of his Son" in Rom. 1:9; "the gospel of God" in Rom. 1:1) match those at the beginning of Mark ("the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" in Mark 1:1; "the gospel of God" in Mark 1:14).

Mark has strong parallels in theological emphases with Paul, particularly his letter to the Romans. That is not to say that there aren't parallels with other New Testament writers. However, the shared theological emphases between Mark and Paul suggest a closer affinity between the two writers.

Reading Mark with Peter and Paul: Mark as Backstory

Michael Bird has helpfully shown that lining up Mark's Gospel with *either* Peter *or* Paul is reductionistic. In fact, the New Testament associates Mark with *both* Peter (1 Pet. 5:13) *and* Paul (e.g., Acts 12:25; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 1:24). He suggests that the Gospel of Mark reflects the influence of both and is best thought of as "Petrine testimony shaped into an evangelical narrative conducive to Pauline proclamation."[29]

How does this help us read Mark's Gospel? In the first place it reminds us that Mark is writing both history *and* theology. He is writing a historical account of what Jesus said and did. Though not an eyewitness himself,[30] Mark writes his account in conversation with one of the main eyewitnesses who was with Jesus for almost the duration of the events that are described. At the same time, Mark is not simply writing "pure history," if such a thing even exists. Comparing

28 Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans*, 102.

29 Bird, "Mark: Interpreter of Peter and Disciple of Paul," 32.

30 The suggestion that the young man in 14:51–52 who flees naked is a reference to Mark is intriguing but unlikely.

Mark to the other Gospels shows that he has made choices concerning the order of his narrative and what he includes and omits. These choices are made for theological reasons. When, for example, we read of people's repeated inability to grasp the truth about Jesus, Mark is showing us the theological point that without Jesus opening people's eyes (as he does so dramatically in 8:22–26), they cannot grasp the truth of who he is.

This book traces some of the main theological themes in Mark's Gospel. Consequently, the connection with Paul in particular will help us as we read the Gospel. Although the Gospels come first in our New Testament (because they describe the earliest events in the period), it is helpful to remember that Paul's letters were the first widely circulated Christian writings (with 1 Thessalonians probably the first written).[31] And so, while Mark and Paul both write about the gospel, they do so from different perspectives. Paul unfolds the significance of the gospel for the churches that he writes to, while Mark gives the beginning—the backstory—of the gospel as it is found in the life and teaching of Jesus.

Mark is writing in the context of an already known and understood gospel, particularly in the form in which it was preached by Paul. Therefore, although we can and should read Mark on his own terms, by titling his work as "the beginning of the gospel," he is deliberately inviting people to read it in conversation with the already known and preached gospel. This is not an argument that Mark necessarily writes with a copy of Paul's letter to the Romans in front of him (although this is not impossible) but that he is writing in conversation with (particularly) the form of Pauline Christianity that we see expressed in Paul's letters.

There are a number of implications that flow from this relationship between Mark and Paul. First, we should not expect that every concept that Mark introduces will receive the fullest explanation. We see this even with his reference to the gospel. As I noted, it is introduced in the

31 The Gospel writings themselves may draw on early written sources, but these do not seem to have been widely circulated (such that they only survive in the form in which they are found in the Gospels).

first verse and referenced six other times in the book (1:14, 15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9), but it is nowhere defined. Mark assumes that his readers will have an understanding of the content of the gospel (the preached message about Jesus) and offers a basic commentary on that gospel message. Twice he refers to the widespread proclamation of the gospel ("all nations" in 13:10; "the whole world" in 14:9). Mark writes in a context where this has already begun to happen.

Second, Mark's Gospel was written for Christians. This does *not* mean that a non-Christian could not read it and come to understand the gospel. Mark's Gospel obviously includes enough to bring a non-believer to faith (as no doubt has happened throughout history). However, this does not negate the fact that Mark wrote for Christians with an awareness of the basic gospel message. We see a parallel in Luke's Gospel, which was written to give a Christian (whether Theophilus is a real or stylized person) "certainty concerning the things" that he had been taught (Luke 1:4).

Third, understanding Mark to be writing in self-conscious conversation with Paul will help us at different points of interpretation. One of the challenges in reading the narrative sections of the Bible is that sometimes it can be hard to know why a writer has included a particular account. What theological point is he making? Reading Mark in conversation with Paul (in particular) gives us a control, in that often the theological point being made will have a parallel in Paul.

Fourth, this reading of Mark helps us in the other direction also—as we read Paul's letters. We can see the theological points that Paul makes grounded and narrated in the life of Jesus. This does not merely establish their truthfulness (showing that Paul is faithfully discharging his role as an apostle of Christ); it also allows us to see his theological points demonstrated and lived out. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 2:14 Paul writes, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." We see this reality played out across the narrative of Mark's Gospel as people consistently fail to grasp the truth about Jesus.

Thinking of Mark as the backstory to the gospel finds an imperfect parallel in the writings of C. S. Lewis. I say "imperfect" because analogies like this can easily take on a life of their own! However, it may help to think of the relationship between Mark and Romans as *somewhat* similar to the relationship between *The Magician's Nephew* and the more famous *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.[32] This more well-known volume was written first. *The Magician's Nephew* was written five years later (with three books in between) but narrates events that occurred before the story contained in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.* The books each stand alone as wonderful works of fiction, but readers who have read both have a richer, fuller, and more complete understanding of the overall story arc.[33]

Mark writes to narrate "the beginning of the gospel"—to give the backstory to the proclamation of the message about Jesus. The title also anticipates the end of the book. Famously, the book finishes with the women fleeing from the empty tomb in amazement and not saying anything to anyone "for they were afraid" (16:8).[34] The risen Christ does not appear, and the Gospel seems to end in an anticlimactic way. However, the identity of this volume as "the beginning of the gospel" fits with the abruptness of the ending. Mark writes in a context where the gospel is known and where people *have* communicated the gospel, unlike the women who fled because of fear. He also writes with an implied encouragement that his readers will continue to be involved in the proclamation of the gospel. The abrupt ending reflects the fact that "Mark's Gospel is just the *beginning* of the good news, because Jesus's story has become ours, and we take it up where Mark leaves off."[35]

32 C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950); C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (London: Bodley Head, 1955).

33 I refuse to enter into the highly charged debate about the proper reading order of the Narnia series!

34 The Greek is even more abrupt, with the last word being the word "for" (*gar*). Because of this abruptness, a number of longer endings can be found in some manuscripts, but it seems unlikely that any of these are original.

35 Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 1096.

It is right to approach Mark's Gospel as a coherent and stand-alone account of Jesus's life. It can be read wholly and meaningfully on its own terms. This present volume will not simply be a study of Mark in conversation with Paul. I will also concentrate on what Mark himself says about the different themes we consider. However, Mark's Gospel, as the first Gospel to be written, invites us to read it in conversation with the rest of the New Testament (and, as we will see, the Old Testament), as it narrates for us "the *beginning* of the gospel."

1

Divine Identity

Jesus Christ, the Son of God

EVEN THOUGH MARK WRITES a book to explain the origins of the gospel, his central focus is on Jesus since the gospel is *about* Jesus.[1] Therefore, this book on Mark will really be a book about Jesus! I will more narrowly concentrate in this chapter on two aspects of Jesus's identity: (1) the titles used of him and (2) how his miracles reveal his divine identity. There will be overlap between the sections since some of the titles indicate his divine identity. There is, however, more to say about Jesus because Mark says much about what Jesus does. So although this chapter focuses on Jesus, the remainder of the book will build on our understanding of who he is.

The Titles of Jesus

In this section, then, I will examine the titles of Jesus. Whole monographs have been written on each of these titles; thus, all I can do here is sketch the main contours that each brings to Mark's picture of Jesus.

1 One can understand the Greek expression *euangelion Iēsou Christou* in 1:1 as a subjective genitive—that is, "the gospel preached by Jesus Christ." We do read of Jesus proclaiming the "gospel of God" in 1:14. However, as I have argued above, the titular nature of 1:1 fits better with the idea that this book describes the beginning of the gospel *about* Jesus, rather than the gospel that Jesus preached.

In a book that starts by identifying its main character as the "Christ" and "the Son of God" (Mark 1:1),[2] that pivots on Peter confessing Jesus as the Christ (8:29), and that climaxes (to a degree) with the confession of the Roman centurion that Jesus was the "Son of God" (15:39), the titles used of Jesus are clearly significant. Certainly, Mark's view of Jesus cannot be reduced to a study of the titles, but to neglect them would be to overlook a rich seam of information about the person of Jesus.

Christ

Although "Christ" (*Christos* in Greek; *Messiah* in Hebrew) is not the most common title in Mark, its use in 1:1 seems to indicate that it is the fundamental way in which Mark presents Jesus, employed as it is by Peter in his pivotal confession in 8:29. In three places, Jesus uses it, albeit somewhat obliquely, to refer to himself. In 9:41 he refers to the disciples as those who "belong to Christ." In 12:35 he poses the question whether the Christ is merely the "son" of David. In 13:21 he warns the disciples not to be deceived if people tell them that the Christ has come. The final two occurrences of the title are used by others at his trial and crucifixion. In 14:61 the high priest asks Jesus if he is "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed," and Jesus responds that he is (14:62). In 15:32 the chief priests and scribes mock Jesus by challenging "the Christ, the King of Israel" to come down from the cross so that they might believe.

This final instance equates "Christ" and "King of Israel." Although in the Old Testament priests (e.g., Ex. 28:41) and prophets (e.g., 1 Kings 19:16) were anointed, the term *messiah* in the world of first-century Judaism primarily referred to kings, who were also anointed (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:1).[3] The expectation of a messiah par excellence (see 1 Sam. 2:35) was primarily an expectation of an anointed king who would crush God's enemies and rule the nations (Ps. 2:2). In the first century,

2 Some express considerable doubt concerning whether "Son of God" in 1:1 is original since it is missing in some very significant early manuscripts. For the sake of this work, I cautiously assume the phrase's inclusion. For a succinct argument for its originality, see Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1989), 6.

3 M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 249.

messiah language, though diverse,[4] does speak to a specific problem: "determining who is and who should be in charge."[5] Although the term is uniquely Jewish and Christian, "Persians, Greeks, Romans, and others had their own ways of talking"[6] about unique leaders who would come and "inaugurate a new and better order."[7]

However, in presenting the Christ as dying on the cross, Mark narrates something unheard of: a messiah or Christ who *suffers*. This did not cohere with the anticipation of the triumphant, all-conquering king inside or outside of Judaism. Peter's rebuke of Jesus reflects the incongruity of a suffering messiah (Mark 8:31–32). As Paul puts it, the notion of a crucified Christ was "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). Paul's gospel, which centered on "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), thus finds its origins in the life and teaching of Jesus himself.

Jesus's identity as Christ is, however, one aspect where we see a difference between Paul and Mark. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is reluctant to take this identity upon himself, whereas in Paul's letters it is by far the most common way for him to refer to Jesus. We will see that twice Jesus interprets the title "Christ" by using "Son of Man" (Mark 8:29–31; 14:61–62), his preferred title. Son of Man (as we will see below) was not a title to which first-century people attached considerable expectation. By employing it, therefore, Jesus could more easily speak of himself without the misunderstanding and fervor that "Christ" might have generated.

This underlines Mark's historical agenda and reminds us that he is not merely writing theology. In writing of Jesus before the cross and

4 As Joshua W. Jipp, *The Messianic Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 75, puts it, "There is no single meaning to *messiah* or messiah language."

5 Matthew V. Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 272.

6 Novenson, *Grammar*, 272.

7 Christian Habicht, "Messianic Elements in the Pre-Christian Greco-Roman World," in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco,* ed. Peter Shäfer and Mark R. Cohen, Studies in the History of Religions 77 (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 47 (cited in Novenson*, Grammar,* 272).

resurrection, Mark shows that Jesus wanted to downplay unhelpful expectations and stress his impending suffering and death, thus favoring Son of Man language. Paul, writing from the perspective of the resurrection, appropriately refers to Jesus as Christ—a title that speaks more universally to Jesus's exalted status. Nevertheless, Paul's language of "Christ and him crucified" underscores the point that this is not the Christ of popular expectation.

Son of God

Many argue that "Son of God" is the key title in Mark's Gospel.[8] God himself identifies Jesus as his Son at his baptism (1:11) and transfiguration (9:7), and demons (who are presumed to have supernatural knowledge)[9] twice address him as such (3:11; 5:7). Furthermore, the placement of this title at the beginning (1:1, 11), middle (9:7), and end (15:39) of the Gospel points to its significance for Mark.[10]

The two affirmations from God that Jesus is his Son evoke Psalm 2:7 ("You are my Son; today I have begotten you"), which, in turn, is a meditation on God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:14. As with "Christ," it seems that "Son of God" is primarily an expression of Jesus's kingship. Thus, "Mark's use of Messiah and 'Son of God' finds unity in the notion of God's appointed eschatological ruler."[11]

However, "Christ" and "Son of God," while both evoking the notion of kingship, do subtly differ from one another. If *Christ* was a particularly Jewish term, *Son of God* was one used by both Jews and Gentiles.[12] In the Old Testament the term *son* "not only had its usual biological meaning, but often designated the category to which someone or something belonged."[13] So in the Old Testament "son of God" could be used "for a being who belongs to the heavenly world"—that

8 See Adam Winn, *Reading Mark's Christology Under Caesar: Jesus the Messiah and Roman Imperial Ideology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 53.

9 Winn, *Reading Mark's Christology*, 53.

10 Winn, *Reading Mark's Christology*, 53.

11 Winn, *Reading Mark's Christology*, 53.

12 Boring, *Mark*, 250.

13 Boring, *Mark*, 250.

is, an angel (e.g., Job 1:6). It could be used of Israel (e.g., Ex. 4:22) and of kings (e.g., Ps. 2:7), the nation or person that particularly belonged to God. In the New Testament, it is used of Christians (e.g., Matt. 5:9; Rom. 8:14). In Jewish contexts, a human being could be designated "son of God" in an unremarkable way—meaning they belonged to God. However, in Gentile thought, the term had a more supernatural flavor, in that kings and rulers were understood to be sons of the gods in a more particular sense. This gives irony to the centurion's confession of Jesus as Son of God (Mark 15:39), a "title that a Roman soldier would normally attribute to the Roman emperor."[14]

"Son of God" as a title, then, can point to Jesus's divine identity, but it raises the question, what type of divine identity? Roman emperors were *made* (i.e., declared to be) gods by the people following their achievements. As such, they were not regarded as gods in the same way that, say, Jupiter was. They were not understood as gods by nature or as preexistent gods. What *kind* of deity, if any, does Jesus possess by virtue of being the Son of God? Some commentators suggest that Jesus *became* Son of God at his baptism—that is, he was *adopted* as Son of God in a manner *somewhat* analogous to a Roman emperor. They point to similar language in Romans 1:4 where it has been argued that Paul is teaching that Jesus *became* Son of God following his resurrection. However, this is a misreading of Paul since in the previous verse Paul has already identified Jesus as God's Son at his birth (Rom. 1:3).[15]

Indicators in Mark's Gospel show that, like Paul, Mark has a *stronger* view of Jesus's deity and considers him to be the *preexistent* Son of God.[16] Prior to the declaration of his sonship at his baptism, Jesus does not perform any miracles or do anything that would *merit* his adoption as Son. That is, the declaration of his sonship at the beginning of the narrative suggests that Jesus is *recognized* rather than *made* Son of God.

14 Michael F. Bird, *Jesus is the Christ: The Messianic Testimony of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 52.

15 On this, see Peter Orr, *Exalted Above the Heavens: The Risen and Ascended Christ*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 31–35.

16 Michael F. Bird, *Jesus the Eternal Son: Answering Adoptionist Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 82.

Furthermore, the fact that Jesus is recognized as Son of God by God himself and other supernatural beings (Mark 3:11) suggests that he is not merely a "temporary" (i.e., recent) "visitor to the heavenly council, like the prophets, but rather a *permanent* member."[17]

The high priest seems to understand this strong claim to deity inherent in the title "Son of God" when he asks Jesus if he is the "Son of the Blessed [i.e., of God]" in 14:61 (we will return to this complex interaction below). Jesus's affirmation that he is the Son of the Blessed is met with the charge of blasphemy. Jesus claims that he is "the Son of God on a level with God and with divine authority."[18]

The term *Son of God* for Mark, in addition to pointing to Jesus's royal identity (overlapping as it does with *Christ*), is a strong indicator of his deity.

Son of Man

Between Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ (8:29) and his rebuke of Jesus for suggesting that he should die (8:32), Jesus does two things. He commands the disciples to be silent, and he teaches them that the Son of Man would suffer and die (8:30–31). This subtle change in title ("Christ" in 8:29 to "Son of Man" in 8:31) suggests that the titles are not hermetically sealed from one another. Although Jesus speaks of his suffering in terms of the Son of Man, he does so in response to Peter's confession of the Christ.

This is a title, like Christ, that is uniquely Jewish and Christian. It follows the sense of "son of God" in belonging to a category—that is, a son of man is a human being, someone who belongs to the category of "man."[19] This prosaic usage is seen in places such as Numbers 23:19; Psalm 8:4; and Ezekiel 2:1. However, the term seems to have a more specific reference in Daniel 7 where a "son of man" is presented before

17 Simon Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 206 (emphasis in original).

18 David E. Garland, *A Theology of Mark's Gospel: Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,* Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2015), 241.

19 Boring, *Mark*, 251.

God ("the Ancient of Days") and given "dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him" (Dan. 7:13–14).

Although Son of Man is clearly a biblical image and even though Daniel views the figure as an eschatological agent to come, there was not a widespread expectation of a coming Son of Man figure in Second Temple Judaism. As I argued above, Jesus may have deliberately chosen the term to refer to himself because it would not have created the same expectations as "Son of God" or "Christ." Reading across Mark's Gospel, we see that Jesus uses the title in three particular contexts: referring to his return (8:38; 13:26; 14:62); to his authority (2:10, 28); and to his suffering, death, and resurrection (8:31; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33–34; 10:45; 14:21, 41).[20]

Perhaps the most significant use of this title is found in his trial when the high priest asks Jesus if he is "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed" (14:61). Jesus affirms that he is but then says that they "will see the *Son of Man* seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (14:62). In his answer, Jesus combines the language of Daniel 7:13 ("with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man") and Psalm 110:1 ("sit at my right hand") to point to his role as a heavenly judge who will share the very throne of God. He will exercise "divine power" since he shares "equality with God."[21] The one who is on trial will one day judge the world as the divine Son of Man.

Jesus's identity as Son of Man sharpens some of the seeming tensions we have already seen in Mark's presentation of Jesus. He is a real human being *and* one who shares equality with God: man and God. He is one who will possess glory and honor but also one who will suffer and die as a ransom for many. The term also neatly reflects the hiddenness-revelation motif in the Gospel (that I will examine in chapter 2). It conceals Jesus's identity in the sense that it does not create the same sense of expectation that "Christ" or "Son of God" would. However,

20 Boring, *Mark*, 251.

21 Garland, *A Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 240.

the term reveals as well as conceals. For those who have "ears to hear" (4:9), the term speaks of Jesus's authority and glory.

Lord

The title "lord" (*kyrios*) can refer to a master or be used as a polite address akin to the English "sir." However, in the Bible it carries particular importance since the Septuagint uses *kyrios* to render the Hebrew divine name "Yahweh" (often "LORD" in English translations of the Old Testament).

On several occasions, Jesus is addressed as "Lord" when it seems to be used simply as a term of polite address (e.g., 7:28; cf. 11:3). Of more interest is where the term seems to refer both to God and Jesus. In 1:3 Mark quotes Isaiah 40:3, which calls for people to prepare for the "Lord"—that is, God in the original context (Isa. 40:3: "prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God"). To apply this text to Jesus implies that, at least on some level, God and Jesus can be identified.

Jesus describes himself, the Son of Man, as "lord even of the Sabbath" in Mark 2:28. This is not a formal title used in the Old Testament, but Exodus 20:11 declares that "the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." Again, this suggests that Jesus's description of himself in Mark 2:28 is an implicit claim to deity. When Jesus dramatically heals the demon-possessed man whom "no one could bind" (Mark 5:3), Jesus tells him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you" (5:19). The man goes on his way, and Mark says he "began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much *Jesus* had done for him" (5:20). In 12:36–37 Jesus corrects the scribes' view that the Christ is a mere descendent of David. He points out that in Psalm 110:1, David "in the Holy Spirit" calls him "Lord." Furthermore, God invites him to share his heavenly throne with the words "sit at my right hand" (12:36). The Christ, then, is David's Lord and shares the heavenly throne of God. In the Old Testament and in Jewish Second Temple literature, only God sits on the throne in heaven. Human agents may rule on behalf of God *on earth,* but they never

share God's throne in heaven. By applying this psalm to himself, Jesus is making the exalted claim that, in Richard Bauckham's language, he is included in the "unique divine identity."[22]

Although not as frequent as some of the other titles, "Lord," then, is a Christologically significant title. It is also a central title for Paul, especially in his formulation that "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). For Paul, as for Mark, the attribution of the title "Lord" to Jesus points to his divine identity (cf. Rom. 10:12; 1 Cor 8:6).[23]

Teacher

By far the most common title for Jesus in Mark's Gospel is "Teacher," which occurs on the lips of the disciples (4:38; 9:38; 10:35; 13:1), of those in the crowd who interact with Jesus (5:35; 9:17; 10:17; 10:20), and of the Jewish leaders (12:14, 19, 32). Jesus refers to himself as "Teacher" in 14:14. The related Greek terms *rabbi* (9:5; 11:21; 14:45) and *rabbouni* (10:51)—both rendered in the ESV as "Rabbi"—are also used. The verb "to teach" (*didaskō*) is used seventeen times in Mark, with all but two instances referring to Jesus's activity (1:21, 22; 2:13; 4:1, 2; 6:2, 6, 34; 8:31; 9:31; 10:1; 11:17; 12:14, 35; 14:49). The noun "teaching" (*didachē*) is used five times (1:22, 27; 4:2; 11:18; 12:38) to describe the activity of Jesus.

Unlike Matthew, Mark does not give us sustained blocks of Jesus's teaching. Rather, Jesus's periodic teaching in Mark seems to function to highlight his authority. In 1:21–28, we encounter Jesus teaching in a synagogue where the people are astonished since "he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes" (1:22). While in the synagogue, he drives out a demon by speaking, and again the people respond with astonishment ("What is this?") as they recognize a "new teaching with authority" (1:27). Jesus's identity as teacher is not simply an educational or instructional role but a function of his authority as one sent by God. In fact, the authority of Jesus's words points to his

22 See Richard Bauckham, "Is 'High Human Christology' Sufficient? A Critical Response to J. R. Daniel Kirk's *A Man Attested by God*," *BBR* 27, no. 4 (2017): 508–9.

23 See Gordon Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 558–85.

divine authority since although heaven and earth will pass way, his words "will not pass away" (13:31).[24]

Scholars commonly observe that not much of Jesus's teaching features in the letters of Paul. However, there are significant parallels between Jesus's teaching in Mark and some major issues in Paul's letters, namely, divorce (Mark 10:2–9; 1 Cor. 7:10–11), honoring the emperor (Mark 12:13–17; Rom. 13:1–8), and the great command to love (Mark 12:30–31; 1 Cor. 13:13; Rom. 13:8–9).[25]

Other Titles

Other titles used of Jesus include "prophet," used by Jesus of himself (Mark 6:4) and by the people trying to understand him (6:15; cf. 8:28); "shepherd," which appears in the Zechariah 13:7 quotation that Jesus applied to himself in Mark 14:27 (cf. 6:34); "holy one of God," spoken by the demons (1:24); and "bridegroom," an Old Testament image expressing God's relationship to Israel that Jesus applied to himself (2:19–20).

The significant title "King of the Jews" is used five times in the context of his crucifixion (15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26), and the related "King of Israel" (in parallel with "Christ") is used by the chief priests and scribes when Jesus hangs on the cross (15:32). Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, calls Jesus "Son of David" as he cries out for mercy (10:47, 48), and Jesus uses the same expression to correct a misunderstanding—that the Christ was merely an earthly descendent of David (12:35). In contrast, as we have seen, he reminds the temple audience that David calls the Christ "my Lord" (12:36, citing Ps. 110:1). His throne is not merely the one in Jerusalem but at God's right hand.[26]

Mark's narrative gives shape to how we are to understand Jesus even as it expresses some of the *apparent* contradictions in Mark's

24 Bird, *Jesus the Eternal Son*, 99.

25 Margaret Mitchell, "Mark, the Long-Form Pauline εὐαγγέλιον," in *Modern and Ancient Literary Criticism of the Gospels: Continuing the Debate on Gospel Genre(s)*, ed. R. M. Calhoun, D. P. Moessner, and T. Nicklas, WUNT 451 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 216.

26 So Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 151.

Christology—that is, portraying him as both "the powerful, truly divine Son of God" and as "truly human, fully identified with human weakness and victimization."[27] The different titles used of Jesus are not actually contradictory but bring out the different aspects of his singular identity.[28] The three dominant themes that emerge are authority, glory, and suffering. These are held together especially in the title that Jesus most frequently uses of himself, "Son of Man."

I have noted that 14:61–62 contains three titles: Christ, Son of [God], and Son of Man. As Michael Bird strikingly puts it, these verses act as something of a "christological blender, with the major titles driven together and defined by each other."[29] The terms are not collapsed into one another but are "pressed into the definition created by Mark's overarching narrative of the Messiah commissioned to enact God's reign and to die a martyr's death on the cross."[30] Even more than that, this human agent of God is also the one who shares his throne as "Lord" and "Son." The titles of Jesus do more than point to his divine identity, but they certainly do not do less—something that is underlined when we consider his miracles.

Jesus's Miracles and His Divine Identity

By providing a narrative of Jesus's life, Mark can *show* what Paul can only *state*. This is particularly relevant when we consider Jesus's divine identity. While Paul affirms or assumes the deity of Christ in his letters (e.g., Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:5–11; 1 Cor. 8:6),[31] Mark can portray Jesus doing what only God can do. Perhaps most obvious is his healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1–12. Before healing this man, who had been lowered on a mat before him, Jesus tells him that his sins are forgiven (2:5). The onlooking scribes question Jesus's words, asking, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (2:7). Knowing their thoughts, Jesus

27 Boring, *Mark*, 258.

28 Winn, *Reading Mark's Christology*, 60.

29 Bird, *Jesus is the Christ*, 51.

30 Bird, *Jesus is the Christ*, 51.

31 On this see Chris Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, WUNT 2.323 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

proceeds to heal the paralytic, thus demonstrating that "the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (2:10).

This miracle pulls us into the debate concerning Jesus's deity. There is no *explicit* statement of Jesus's deity in Mark like we have in John 1:1 ("the Word was God"). However, we do have accounts in Mark where Jesus does what only God can do, such as forgive sins, calm a storm (4:35–41), and provide food for thousands of people (6:30–44; 8:1–10). Debate centers on whether Jesus does these miracles because he *is* God, or because he has received power and authority *from* God. If we return to the healing of the paralytic, Jesus does not say that the healing demonstrates his deity but that, as the Son of Man, he has authority on earth to forgive sins.

J. Daniel Kirk presents a strong argument for the view that Mark presents Jesus exclusively as a human being (albeit an "idealized" one). For Kirk, "Mark draws us to recognize in the character of Jesus a specially designated human person embodying the divine prerogatives rather than a human embodiment of Israel's God."[32] Or more sharply, "authority to act for God, even in the divine prerogative of establishing forgiveness of sins, does not indicate ontological divinity or preexistence."[33]

Kirk's volume is certainly correct in what it affirms: the Jesus of Mark's Gospel *is* presented as an idealized human being, the human being par excellence. However, is Kirk correct in what he denies? Is it true that Mark does not view Jesus as divine?

To answer this question, I will examine three of the more spectacular nature miracles in Mark's Gospel and consider whether Mark presents Jesus as actually sharing the characteristics of God and whether people relate to him as God.[34] I will return to the healing of the paralytic at the end.

32 J. R. Daniel Kirk, *A Man Attested by God: The Human Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 263.

33 Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 279.

34 These two aspects are modified from Beniamin Pascut, *Redescribing Jesus's Divinity through A Social Science Theory*, WUNT 2.438 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

Jesus Calms a Storm (4:35–41)

The greatness of the miracle is clear—Jesus calms a great windstorm with just his words (4:37–39). His control over the sea, as has often been noted, matches the control that Yahweh demonstrates in the exodus. However, debate centers on whether Jesus is acting *as* God or as one who has received power and authority *from* God.

First, consider what Jesus does. It seems irrefutable that Jesus is acting *as* God, doing what no other human figure in history has done. He does not simply pray to God; he acts as God. He rebukes the wind and the sea just as God was said to do at the exodus. Psalm 106:9 (Ps. 105:9 LXX) celebrates how God "rebuked [*epetimēsen*] the Red Sea, and it became dry." In Mark 4:39, Jesus "rebuked [*epetimēsen*] the wind" and spoke to the sea before it became calm. The disciples respond in amazement, asking, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (4:41). Psalm 107 declares that God "made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed" (Ps. 107:29). As Richard Hays puts it, "For any reader versed in Israel's Scripture, there can be only one possible answer: it is the Lord God of Israel who has the power to command wind and sea and to subdue the chaotic forces of nature."[35]

Nevertheless, Kirk points to Psalm 89. The Lord celebrates the ideal son of David—the one whom he has anointed and strengthened (Ps. 89:20–21), the one whom God will make "the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth" (Ps. 89:27). Furthermore, because of their unique relationship, God also promises this Davidic king that he "will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers" (Ps. 89:25). Controlling the chaos of the sea, Kirk argues, is certainly "divine power, but Psalm 89 shows that even in this particular, God is capable of extending this power such that it is embodied in a human agent."[36] Similarly, in Exodus 14:16 the Lord tells Moses to "stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it" (cf. Ex. 14:26). Jesus, it seems, is acting in a way that is consistent with the Old Testament understanding of the unique

35 Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX; Baylor University Press, 2014), 22 (cited in Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 441).

36 Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 441.

leader of his people—he is given control over the wind and the waves *by God* not because he is God himself.

Is Jesus doing anything more than Moses did in Exodus 14:16 or that God promised his eschatological king would do in Psalm 89:25? To answer this, we need to consider how Jesus expects his disciples to respond to him.

In favor of Jesus acting as God's *representative*, it is argued that his rebuke of the disciples in Mark 4:40 is for their lack of faith. And faith, Jesus will later teach, is directed toward *God* (11:22). The implication being that if the disciples had trusted *God,* they too would have been able to calm the storm.[37]

However, faith in Mark is also directed toward *Christ*. In 2:5 Jesus responds to the faith of the friends of the paralytic—a faith that is clearly directed to him and his power to heal their friend.[38] In 5:34 the woman who has just been healed by Jesus from her continual discharge of blood is commended by Jesus for her faith, which had been directed toward him: "Your faith has made you well." We see the same in the encounter with the blind man who called out, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (10:48). Jesus tells him, "Your faith has made you well" (10:52). Once again, faith is directed toward Jesus. In 5:36 Jesus tells the synagogue ruler with the dying daughter not to fear but to believe—presumably in Jesus. In 6:6 Jesus is amazed by the faithlessness of his fellow townspeople—a lack of faith arising from their failure to understand who Jesus is. The father of a demon-possessed boy asks Jesus to help him "if [he] can do anything" (9:22). Jesus gently rebukes him: "All things are possible for one who believes." Again, the object of faith is Jesus himself. The man responds by asking Jesus to help him believe (9:24)—something only God can do. In 9:42 he issues a severe warning to anyone who "causes one of these little ones who believe *in me* to sin."

37 Joanna Dewey, "The Markan Jesus, Jesus's Actions, And the Kingdom of God," in *Let the Reader Understand: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Struthers Malbon*, ed. Edwin K. Broadhead, LNTS 583 (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 73.

38 Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 115.

Certainly, Jesus teaches the appropriateness of faith in God in 11:22, which he expands in 11:23–25 in terms of *prayer*; however, the more frequent object of faith in Mark's Gospel is Jesus himself. Of course, Jesus directs people to a right understanding of, trust in, and worship of God (7:7). It is, however, inaccurate to say that Jesus "insistently proclaims not himself but God."[39] Again, it might be true that faith is directed toward Jesus as God's representative, but Mark claims so much more. He is narrating what Jesus implies in John 14:1—if you believe in Jesus, you believe in God.

What Jesus does (calms the storm) and how he expects his disciples to react (have faith in him), declare his divine nature. He is the fulfillment of Israel's eschatological hope (Ps. 89:25) but also the one whom people relate to as they relate to God. In fact, Psalm 89 confesses of God himself, "You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them" (Ps 89:9). As we will see in the next two miracles, in Jesus's actions there is a fusing of identity between the eschatological agent and God himself.

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand (6:30–44)

In perhaps one of the most famous miracles in Mark's Gospel, Jesus provides food for a crowd of five thousand men together with women and children. The crowd has tracked down Jesus and his disciples. He spends the rest of the day teaching them because, Mark tells us, "he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (6:34). At the end of the day, his disciples suggest that the people need to be sent away to the surrounding villages to buy something to eat (6:36). Jesus responds by telling the disciples to give the crowd something to eat. This is impossible, so they reply, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" (6:37). When Jesus learns that they have five loaves and two fish, he has the crowd sit in groups (6:38–40). Then, taking these loaves and fish, "he looked up to

39 Elizabeth S. Malbon, *Mark's Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 216.

heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all" (6:41). Mark tells us that everyone ate and was satisfied and that twelve basketfuls of bread and fish were left over (6:42–43).

The description of the crowd as being "like sheep without a shepherd" (6:34) may be, as is often argued, an allusion to Numbers 27 where Moses, in the face of his own death, prays to the Lord to appoint "a man over the congregation" who will lead the people so that "the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd" (Num. 27:16–17). The Lord answers the prayer by telling Moses to take "Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him" (Num. 27:18).

For Kirk, this passage depicts Jesus as a "royal Moses figure."[40] Like Moses, he is the one who "shepherds shepherdless Israel in the wilderness by teaching the people (v. 34) and ultimately by feeding the people by the hands of his disciples and the miraculous provision of bread (vv. 39–44)."[41] The connection to David may not be as close to the surface, but the promise of "superabundant provision of food with the restoration of David's line" in Amos 9:11–15 points in that direction.[42] What Jesus does, he does as a human being. This is underlined by the fact that the disciples share in the miracle too by distributing the bread and the fish (as they do with the bread in the parallel miracle in 8:1–9). Jesus "does not reserve this miracle for himself as one indicating his unique divine authority or ontology, but instead extends the authority to his disciples as those capable of doing the same."[43]

Kirk concludes,

> Mark is not here introducing a new, divine Christology such that Jesus is playing the role of divine shepherd as such (e.g., Ps. 23; Ezek. 34:11–16) but is instead building on the high human Christol-

40 Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 452.
41 Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 452.
42 Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 452.
43 Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 454.

ogy where the faithful human king represents the divine shepherd through his tending of the flock (e.g., Ezek. 34:23–24).[44]

Perhaps most strikingly is the parallel with Elisha in 2 Kings 4:42–44 where Elisha provided bread for a hundred men so that there were leftovers.[45]

However, is Mark presenting Jesus as *more* than the fulfillment of these eschatological expectations? Adela Yarbro Collins notes several ways in which Jesus's actions amplify what Elisha does. First, the magnitude of the miracle is greater. Elisha takes twenty loves to feed one hundred people, while Jesus takes five loaves and two fish to feed five thousand people. Second, as Collins puts it, "God plays a more direct role in the Elisha story."[46] He sends Elisha, and as he performs the miracle, Elisha instructs his servant, "For thus says the LORD" (2 Kings 4:43). The narrator concludes that the miracle was done "according to the word of the LORD" (4:44). In Jesus's case, although we do read of him looking to heaven and saying a blessing, "there is little indication that the miracle is God's rather than Jesus's."[47]

It is right to see Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament expectations of Moses/Joshua (Num. 27:17), David (Ezek. 34:1–31), and Elisha (2 Kings 4:23–24).[48] But even in the Old Testament, the expectation is that God himself will shepherd his people. We saw earlier that the citation of Isaiah 40:3 in Mark 1:2–3 orients us to the expectation that the coming one will be God himself. A few verses later, Isaiah promises that the Lord God will come "with might" (Isa. 40:10) and that he will "tend his flock like a shepherd" (40:11). The expectation of a coming human shepherd is combined with the expectation of God himself coming. We see a similar dynamic in Ezekiel 34:8–18 where the Lord himself

44 Kirk, *A Man Attested by God*, 453.

45 For a discussion of the parallels, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 320.

46 Collins, *Mark*, 320.

47 Collins, *Mark*, 320.

48 See James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 195.

promises that he will come and shepherd his people: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep" (Ezek. 34:15). However, he will also "set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd" (Ezek. 34:23). The Old Testament anticipates that both the Lord and the eschatological David will shepherd the people. Certainly, the characteristic of having compassion on his people is one that God himself displays throughout the Old Testament.[49]

When we combine the greatness of the miracle, the Old Testament expectation of the Lord himself coming as shepherd, and the indication in Mark 1:2 that Jesus himself fulfills the expectation of this divine coming, it seems that there "is little question that for Mark, in some mysterious way the great shepherd Yahweh is himself present in Jesus."[50]

Jesus Walks on Water (6:45–52)

Jesus walks across the sea of Galilee to join the disciples in their boat as they row against a strong wind, making slow progress. When the disciples see Jesus, they cry out in terror, thinking he is a ghost (6:48–49). He reassures them and then enters the boat, and as he does so, the wind ceases (6:50–51). Mark adds a postscript to the effect that the disciples were "utterly astounded" because "they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (6:51–52).

By walking on water, Jesus does what only God can do. Reflecting on the exodus, Isaiah describes the Lord as the one "who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters" (Isa. 43:16).[51] However, while the exodus involved Israel walking through the waters *on* dry land, Jesus is here walking *on* water.[52] Job describes *God* as the one who

49 Rikk E. Watts cites the following texts as examples: Ex. 33:19; Deut. 30:3; Isa. 14:1; 49:10, 13, 15; 54:8; 55:7; 60:10; Jer. 12:15; 30:18; 33:26; 42:12; Ezek. 39:25; Hos. 1:6–7; 2:23. See his "Mark," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 161.

50 Watts, "Mark," 161.

51 Pointed out by Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 285.

52 Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 70.

alone "trampled the waves of the sea" (Job 9:8). Jesus's reassurance of the disciples in Mark 6:50 ("it is I") is the simple Greek phrase "I am" (*egō eimi*). No doubt this could be Jesus simply identifying himself, but in such a charged scene it may have more Christological significance, evoking God's own description of himself in Exodus 3:14, "I AM WHO I AM," which is alluded to elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Deut. 32:39; Isa. 41:4; 51:12). Thus, "when Jesus speaks this same phrase, 'I am,' in his sea-crossing epiphany, it serves to underscore the claim of divine identity that is implicitly present in the story as a whole."[53]

There is also a detail in the text that seems superfluous. In 6:48 Mark tells us that Jesus "meant to pass by them." In Exodus 34:6 the Lord "passed before" Moses in the cloud as he revealed his character to him. In 1 Kings 19:11, as Elijah hides from Ahab and Jezebel in a cave, "the LORD passed by."[54] Perhaps the most intriguing possible allusion is Job's description of the Lord as the one who "passes by me," followed by a confession of his inability to understand God:

> Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not;
> he moves on, but I do not perceive him. (Job 9:11)

This inability to correctly perceive God parallels the disciples' inability to understand (Mark 6:52) and "accords deeply with Mark's emphasis on the elusiveness of the divine presence in Jesus."[55]

I could consider other miracles (e.g., raising Jairus's daughter from the dead in 5:41–42), but the ones we have looked at are sufficient to see that in addition to presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's eschatological and messianic hopes, Mark depicts him in some elusive way (to borrow Hays's language) as the Lord himself who has come to save his people.

We need to briefly return to Mark 2, for this is the passage that Kirk presses most strongly in suggesting that Mark does *not* present Jesus

53 Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 73.

54 See Collins, *Mark*, 334.

55 Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 72.

as divine. The scribes object that only God can forgive sins (2:7), and Jesus proves them wrong by healing the paralytic and demonstrating that he, the Son of Man, *also* has the authority to forgive sins. In other words, according to Kirk, Jesus corrects them not by asserting his deity but by showing that they have an overly narrow view of who can forgive.[56] However, the scribes are correct—this kind of forgiveness *is* the purview of God alone. Jesus is not doing what John the Baptist did—merely declaring that forgiveness is available (1:4).[57] Rather, he is sovereignly declaring this man's sins to be forgiven. That is, Jesus is not simply forgiving offenses committed against him personally. The scribes are correct: Jesus assumes the position of deity. Therefore, "once one grants that Jesus offers genuine forgiveness to the paralytic in the place of God (v. 10), then one must also conclude that there is an overlap in identity between Jesus and God."[58]

Conclusion

This chapter may feel like a ground clearing exercise. We have to deal with the person of Jesus in terms of his titles and the question of his deity. However, for two reasons this chapter has done more than just get this topic out of the way, so to speak. First, every other theme I consider in this book is connected to and ultimately derived from this fundamental theme of who Jesus is. We would not be interested in what Mark says about the death of Jesus if we are not first convinced of the identity of Jesus.

Second, Jesus's person is central to Mark not simply because he is the main character but because of the way that Mark frames his work—the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In framing his work as articulating the *beginning* of the gospel, he then immediately qualifies the gospel as being about Jesus Christ. The only other time the word

56 Kirk, *A Man Attested*, 278–79. Kirk writes, "In this first story about Jesus's authority Mark does not mean to tell us that Jesus is, in fact, divine in some proto-Chalcedonian sense" (278).

57 A point made by Kirk, *A Man Attested*, 274–75.

58 Pascut, *Redescribing Jesus's Divinity*, 191.

"gospel" is clarified with a genitive phrase (as here) is in 1:14 when Mark tells us that Jesus went into the region of Galilee, proclaiming "the gospel of God." There is a parallel with the beginning of Romans. Paul describes himself as set apart for the "gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1), which is "concerning his Son" (1:3). Paul is an apostle of God's gospel that concerns his Son. Mark writes the beginning of the gospel of God concerning Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark and Paul not only share an understanding of how the gospel relates to both God and Jesus but also an understanding of Jesus's divine identity. Mark's conception of "Jesus' pre-existence as a *divine son*"[59] who comes into the world matches Paul's conviction in Romans and elsewhere (cf. Rom. 8:3; 10:6; Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:6–8 etc.).[60]

However, in sharing these convictions about Jesus's identity, Mark is not simply replicating what Paul says in his letters. We have seen that Mark reflects the historical situation of Jesus's ministry and his preference for "Son of Man" to refer to himself (as opposed to Paul's more frequent use of "Christ"). This is a term that, I have argued, conceals as well as reveals. As we consider the topic of revelation in the next chapter, we see that this perfectly suits Jesus's agenda. He hides his identity from those on the *outside* and reveals it to those on the *inside*.

Mark's narrative portrays the identity of Jesus through Jesus's own words and actions. Yet, as we continue, we will see that the identity of Jesus is not only communicated through his words and actions but also through the words and actions of other people in response to Jesus.[61] This first chapter has only introduced the identity of Jesus. Each subsequent chapter, even as it touches on its own theme, will help us build a fuller picture of Mark's portrayal of Jesus.

59 Bird, *Jesus the Eternal Son*, 78.

60 See Gathercole, *Preexistent Son,* 23–45.

61 In *Mark's Jesus*, Malbon analyzes Mark's Christology through the following headings: "What Jesus Does," "What Others Say," "What Jesus Says in Response," "What Jesus Says Instead," and "What Others Do." Although I have not formally adopted this schema, I have tried to bear these different relationships in mind.