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Francis J. Moloney, SDB  
Salesians of Don Bosco  
Australia–Pacific Province



# **A Costly Freedom**

## **A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel**

*Brendan Byrne, SJ*



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*For Morna D. Hooker,  
with much gratitude, affection, and respect.*



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## Introduction

This book on Mark is a companion to my earlier studies of Luke (*The Hospitality of God*) and Matthew (*Lifting the Burden*), and so completes a trilogy on the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>1</sup> Like those earlier volumes, it is offered as a contemporary interpretation of the gospel<sup>2</sup> for students and preachers. I also hope it will be a resource for reflection and spiritual reading. Specialists may find interest in the overall interpretation (the “Three Stories”; see below), as well as in what I have to say about particular passages.

Though the shortest of the canonical gospels, Mark is perhaps the most challenging of the four. For centuries it shared the fate of Cinderella in the well-known German folktale. As Cinderella languished in the kitchen until rescued by her prince, Mark suffered almost total eclipse in Christian awareness by its three longer fellows (Matthew, Luke, and John). A century and a half ago interest in the Second Gospel underwent a revival, in scholarly circles at least. Mark, it was widely agreed, was the earliest written gospel, the source for much of Matthew and Luke, and the account that takes us closest to the voice and actions of Jesus.

The verdict that Mark offered factual history was soon revised, but along with that revision came acknowledgment of the theological richness of the evangelist and, more recently, appreciation of the narrative as a literary composition of no little sophistication and skill.

While scholars may have warmed to Mark in recent years, the gospel has taken rather longer to reestablish itself in wider Christian usage. True, Mark now has his “year” (Year B) in the revised Sunday Lectionary of the

1. *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000); *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004).

2. In general, throughout this work I shall follow the convention of writing “gospel” when referring to one or other of the *documents* attributed to the four evangelists in Christian tradition and “Gospel” when referring to the basic *message* proclaimed in those documents and in other New Testament writings such as the letters of Paul.

Roman Catholic Church, which has served as a model for the lectionaries used in other traditions. But there is still some way to go if Mark's voice is to be heard and recognized among the gospel quartet.

This work aims to encourage that process. In form it is a commentary in the sense that it accompanies a reading and study of the gospel from beginning to end. However, what it presents is a personal reading and appreciation of the gospel derived from many years of teaching and also of considering how this scariest and in some ways most demanding of the four gospels might best be interpreted for believers today.

I say "scariest" because even a casual glance at Mark takes the reader into a world inhabited by demons and malign forces with which Jesus is constantly in conflict. Hostility, misunderstanding, and betrayal dog Jesus right up to the unrelieved starkness of his death. Though his resurrection is not in doubt, Mark's gospel (at least in its original form, without the appendix making up vv. 9-20 of chap. 16) never offers us the comfort of a vision of the risen Lord. We are simply left with an empty tomb, the promise of an appearance in Galilee, and three women too paralyzed with fear to spread the good news (16:1-8).

There is very little in Mark that is not repeated in Matthew and Luke, and much of the detail that is particular to Mark is puzzling and obscure (e.g., the parable of the Seed Growing Secretly [4:26-29]; the flight of the naked young man [14:51-52]). Mark also lacks content appearing in the other two gospels that has become distinctive of the Christian faith: the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-23), the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4), the parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) and the Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32), the evocation of the great judgment (Matt 25:31-46). Without these Christianity would surely be something else; without Mark it might not have been very different at all—unless we acknowledge, as I think we should, that without Mark's likely "invention" of the gospel genre<sup>3</sup>

3. By "genre" I understand a distinct artistic form such as a letter, a novel, a biography, a play, etc. By speaking of Mark's "invention" of the gospel genre I do not mean to suggest that Mark created something lacking all similarity to other literary genres in existence at the time, such as, e.g., that of the "life" (*bios*) of a famous individual. The extent to which the gospels represent a distinct literary genre is a matter of considerable scholarly discussion; see further Christopher M. Tuckett, "Introduction to the Gospels," in James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2003) 989-99, especially 990-92; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 102-7. If, as most scholars hold, Mark composed the earliest gospel, then he was the first to cast the proclamation of the basic "Gospel" (the "good news" about Jesus Christ [cf. Rom 1:3-4]) in the form of a quasi-biographical literary narrative incorporating traditions hitherto circulating in oral form.

we would probably not have the gospels of Matthew and Luke, to say nothing of John.

But why not leave it to scholars to consider this historical debt owed to Mark? What advantage is there for the church in dusting down this neglected gospel, which in many ways has been “improved upon” by Matthew and Luke?

In the first place there is the strictly theological point that the Spirit guided the early church to include this gospel among the four canonically recognized as giving authentic presentations of Jesus. Without Mark the portrait would not be complete. That, presumably, is the reason for the much more frequent appearance of readings from the Second Gospel in the revised lectionaries.

Second, despite the repetition of so much Markan content in Matthew and Luke, Mark has a distinctive voice and message that the church and the world are perhaps more open to hear now than in times past. It is not so much the content but the way Mark tells the story and traces out the path of Christian living that is distinctive, and that seems particularly attuned to address the darkness of unbelief and despair afflicting many human lives today. Differently from Matthew and Luke, Mark opens up the possibility of a fruitful and deeply human *via negativa* in Christianity—a readiness to confront absence and, in some sense, chaos, something that comes across to many people as a distinct gift.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the widespread failure of institutional Christianity on many fronts has led disillusionment to enter into the hearts of believers within once-vibrant but now deeply wounded Christian communities. While not exactly a “gospel of the church” in the sense that readily applies to Matthew, Mark seems particularly designed to address failure in community leadership, and the wider disillusionment and hopelessness to which that failure can give rise. John also does this, I think, but in a very different way. Without being anything like an expert in Markan studies, I have the feeling that this preparedness to confront absence and, in some sense, chaos is Mark’s gift.

Finally, I believe that Mark’s presentation of Jesus as the Stronger One (1:7; 3:27) who sets human beings free from demonic control, while troubling for the contemporary mind, is also a promising aspect of the gospel as regards interpretation: troubling because it takes us into a world where we, as inheritors of Enlightenment rationality, are loath to follow; promising because if a way can be found to relate the demonic motif to contemporary human life, then a reading of Mark can be a powerful force for liberation.

4. I owe this observation to my friend and colleague, Dr. Anne Elvey.

I shall say more about the demonic in the next chapter, which is devoted to the worldview presupposed by the gospel, but it may be helpful to state here at the outset what I believe to be its essential meaning. In essence the demonic has to do with control. People in the ancient world generally and the biblical world in particular spoke of demonic possession when they felt themselves held captive from within by forces and compulsions over which they had no control—transpersonal forces that robbed them of freedom of choice, stunted their human growth, and alienated them from God, from life in community, and from their own individual humanity. This sense that the world, including Israel, has fallen under demonic control is pervasive in the horizon of discourse presupposed in Mark's gospel. Its prominence invites interpreters of Mark to relate the liberating activity of Jesus to all the various "captivities"—personal, social, and economic—under which people of our time labor and which they seem powerless to control or escape. The multiple forms of addiction that burden us as individuals and as societies—huge, transpersonal forces that control us and make us their slaves—can be seen as manifestations of the demonic.

Of course, handling the demonic element in the gospels calls for discernment and skill. A healthy spirituality will acknowledge the reality of spiritual forces opposed to God and to life. But to take the gospel material as an invitation to see manifestations of the demonic or the Devil everywhere is dangerous. Most of us are familiar with a certain type of religious pathology far more preoccupied with evil, with the bizarre and the occult, than with the effects of God's grace and the Spirit. So there are risks and pitfalls in this area. But the encounters with the demonic in Mark's gospel challenge us to look at our own society and consider the supraindividual, societal, and global forces exercising a dehumanizing control over people's lives today.

## **A Theological Reading**

In the title of this book I have qualified "freedom" by the adjective "costly," and added a subtitle to the effect that what I propose is a "theological reading" of Mark's gospel. Let me take these two points in reverse order. By "theological reading" I do not mean to imply that other commentaries have not been theological—at least in a general sense. What I have in mind is "theological" in the strict sense of communicating a vision of God—and, specifically, a vision of God as the communion of divine love described in Christian tradition as the Trinity. While the overt focus of Mark's gospel is on the person of Jesus, I have come to see that the narrative is equally a revelation of the Father for whom Jesus is the "Beloved Son" in whom the

Father is well pleased (1:11; cf. 9:7) and whose whole mission is impelled and energized by the Spirit sent from the Father (1:10). The rending of the heavens as Jesus emerges from baptism at the hands of John, the descent of the Spirit and the assurance of the Father's love that he hears (1:9-11) initiate a trinitarian involvement in all the subsequent events of his mission.

This divine involvement may be more explicit in moments of overt heavenly revelation, such as those that follow Jesus' baptism (1:11) and transfiguration (9:7). In fact, it runs constantly through the story, reaching a climax when the curtain of the Temple is rent in two immediately after Jesus' obedient death on the cross (15:38). In this sense the Markan narrative depicts the life of Jesus as a playing out on earth, for the benefit of humanity, of the communion of love that is the Trinity. In the person and actions of Jesus the triune God breaks the captivity of the human race to the demonic, setting it free to become truly human in relationship to that communion of love. This repair of divine-human relationship is the essence of the "Rule of God" ("the Kingdom") proclaimed and enacted by Jesus (1:15). In the person of the Son, the Godhead has become vulnerable to the hostility of the demonic in its various manifestations, a vulnerability that comes to a climax when Jesus dies on the cross, to all appearances abandoned not only by his disciples but also by the One he called "Father" (15:34; cf. 14:36). God's raising of Jesus on the third day, which Mark proclaims (16:6-7) but does not depict, assures the reader that the divine love, though vulnerable to the onslaught of evil, is destined to have the last word. It will extend its sway across the world when Jesus returns as Son of Man in glory to establish definitively the rule of God (13:24-27; cf. 14:62).

### **A Costly Freedom**

In connection with the aspect of vulnerability it very soon becomes clear as the gospel gets underway that the freedom proclaimed here will not come about without cost: a cost to Jesus, a cost to the Father, and a cost to those called to associate themselves with his life and mission. Jesus' proclamation of the "good news" of freedom associated with the onset of God's Rule (1:15) and his enactment of this freedom through his teaching and powerful works bring on hostility and grave threat to his life (3:6a; cf. 2:20). The fate of John the Baptist (6:17-29) points to what lies in store for Jesus according to a pattern that begins to emerge in the gospel: "You preach and you get delivered up." John preaches and is "delivered up" (1:9). At the turning point of the gospel Jesus begins to make clear to his disciples that he also, having preached, is going to be "delivered up" (9:31; 10:33), a process

described at length in the account of his suffering and death (14:10-11, 18, 21, 41-44; 15:1, 10, 15). Nothing brings home more powerfully the cost to Jesus personally of being “delivered up” than the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his death, when he shrinks from the “cup” of suffering that lies immediately before him and, over and over, begs that it be removed (14:32-42).

Jesus, then, is the primary bearer of the cost of the liberation proclaimed in the gospel. Because he is and remains to the end God’s beloved Son, the cost of the liberation he works for humankind is also borne by the Father. It is, I believe, counter to the understanding of the gospel to separate Jesus and the Father in the Passion—depicting Jesus as sole agent bearing the cost of the sin of humankind over against the demand and wrath of the Father. The separation of Father and Son in the work of redemption has been prominent in some traditional understandings of that doctrine, with unfortunate consequences for the image of God communicated to believers. In Mark—as also in Matthew and Luke, and Paul and John—behind the vulnerable love of the Son stands the equally vulnerable love of the Father who sent him on his mission of liberation.

Finally, as Jesus also makes clear from the midpoint of the gospel onward, the cost is one that those who follow him will have to share (8:34-38). These are, in the first instance, the disciples he has called. Like John the Baptist, like Jesus himself, they too will preach and be “delivered up” (13:9-12). A major focus of the second part of the gospel, coming to a climax in the Passion, lies on the failure of the disciples, particularly the male disciples, to come to terms with the costly aspect of Jesus’ messianic role and their association with it (8:31-33 [Peter]; 9:30-32; 10:32-34; 14:66-72 [Peter]). As Jesus goes to his death, the cost of following him becomes too much for the disciples; they desert him (14:50), though a number of women witness his death and burial “from afar” (15:40-41, 47). Jesus also foresees similar failure and betrayal in the later community when persecution intensifies the costly aspect of following him (13:12-13). What the gospel also makes clear, however, especially in the words of the (angelic) young man at Jesus’ empty tomb, is that failure before the cost does not have the last word. The disciples, forgiven and reassured, are to go back to Galilee (16:7) to see the once-crucified Jesus now raised from the dead and to begin again—and perhaps again and again—to learn and accept what following him and his mission entails.<sup>5</sup>

5. This sense of the faithfulness of God overcoming human failure and fragility, both that of the original disciples and of the subsequent communities of faith for whom the gospel

## “A . . . Reading . . .”

The remaining element in the subtitle of this work—“A . . . Reading of Mark’s Gospel”—is meant to signal that it offers simply one interpretation among many to which the gospel is open. I believe it to be a valid interpretation, well-founded in the text. However, I shall for the most part simply allow its own developing logic to commend it, without detailed argumentation or constant discussion with other scholarly points of view. Technical details and disputed points requiring further treatment I relegate to the notes. The work is similar to a commentary in that I move through the gospel continuously from beginning to end. It is unlike a commentary in that I do not feel obliged to comment upon everything in detail. My constant aim will be to assist preachers and reasonably educated readers to find theological and spiritual meaning in particular episodes and scenes, as well as in the Gospel of Mark as a whole.

To keep the book within reasonable size and expense I have not, except in a very few places, set out the text of the gospel in English translation. The translation to which I adhere most closely is that of the New Revised Standard Version. I would urge readers to have this by them as they consult or work their way through the book. Of great assistance to more serious students will be a synopsis of the three Synoptic Gospels, such as Burton H. Throckmorton’s *Gospel Parallels*, the most recent edition of which uses the NRSV.<sup>6</sup> But, of course, the first and most necessary resource is the Old or First Testament, allusion to which, whether overt or implicit, stands behind so much of the text of the gospels.

## Some Presuppositions

Before entering on the commentary proper I would like to make clear certain matters I am presupposing with little or no further justification. All can be pursued at greater depth in the introductory sections of more detailed commentaries on the gospel.

First of all, I am taking the gospel in its final canonical form, rarely pausing to identify sources or traditions that might be thought to lie behind it. Reconstruction of such sources is in any case a hazardous matter in the

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was written, is the major emphasis of the recent commentary of Francis J. Moloney (*The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002]); see especially 352–54.

6. *Gospel Parallels: A Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels* (5th ed. Nashville: Nelson, 1992).

case of Mark, generally considered to be the earliest written gospel. Reference, however, to Mark's "final canonical form" raises the issue of the so-called Appendix, a summary of appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples, making up Mark 16:9-20.<sup>7</sup> This appendix alleviates the strangeness of ending the narrative at 16:8 with a simple report of the women's fear and failure to act on the instructions they received from the young man at the tomb. It is canonical in the sense of being included within the scriptural canon of mainstream Christian traditions. It is, however, lacking in most of the earliest and best manuscripts and seems to have been unknown to early Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen. In the judgment of most scholars it represents a later attempt both to overcome the literary and theological abruptness of the ending at 16:8 and to provide Mark with a resurrection story more closely resembling the accounts in the remaining three gospels. While not omitting comment on Mark 16:9-20 in its place, I shall adhere in this study to what is virtually the unanimous judgment of scholars and interpret the Gospel of Mark on the supposition that it ended, albeit paradoxically and mysteriously, at 16:8, with the fear, flight, and silence of the women.

Again along with most scholars, I accept that Mark was the earliest written gospel—indeed, the pioneer of the gospel genre—and as such a forerunner and significant source for Matthew and Luke.<sup>8</sup> As to when the gospel was written, it seems to me indisputable that Jesus' long discourse on the future in Mark 13 presupposes the destruction of the Temple by the Roman armies at the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and the acute theological anxiety and expectation of the end caused by that event in the hearts of believers. This means that the gospel must have been written while that event remained a recent and disturbing memory. A date shortly after 70 C.E. (within the range 70–73) seems appropriate.

As regards authorship, the document we are considering came to be known, at least by the late second century C.E., as "the Gospel according to

7. Besides this "longer ending" (16:9-20), there is also a "shorter ending" of two sentences, comprising the women's report to Peter and the Lord's commissioning of the disciples. This appears in some late manuscripts, usually as a preface to the longer ending.

8. I would also hold that, in addition to drawing from Mark and sources particular to themselves, Matthew and Luke relied on another source, consisting largely of teachings and sayings of Jesus, that scholars reconstruct and call "Q" (from the German *Quelle* [= "source"]). Without being definite about the nature of this source—especially whether it existed in written as well as in oral form—it seems necessary to postulate some such fount of tradition in order to account for the large amount of non-Markan material that Luke and Matthew have in common, and so to embrace the "Two-Source" theory of relationship among the three Synoptic Gospels.

Mark.” The historian Eusebius, writing early in the fourth century, cites an earlier tradition, that of the second-century bishop Papias, who records that the “Elder” (John) was wont to speak of Mark as the “interpreter of Peter.” This “Petrine” understanding of the gospel’s origin became traditional in the church. It fit well with the reference to “my son, Mark” in the greeting at the close of the First Letter of Peter (5:13) and also with the sense of Rome as the place of composition, a view that finds considerable support in the text as well.

The traditional association of Mark’s gospel with Peter came under challenge with the rise of the modern critical approach to the gospels in the nineteenth century. The conclusion that the gospel reached its final shape only after a lengthy process during which the traditions about Jesus underwent considerable shaping in the early communities did not sit easily with the view that Mark’s gospel in its final form reflected the testimony of someone (Peter) who had been an eyewitness to the events recorded. Later still came the recognition that the author of the gospel was not, as originally thought, a mere recorder or editor, but a writer and theologian of no mean skill, capable of shaping the traditions about Jesus into a powerful narrative presentation of his person and mission.

But these considerations distancing the gospel account from eyewitness testimony about Jesus are not incompatible with an acceptance, in line with the tradition, that the Markan gospel is peculiarly indebted in some way to the witness of Peter. It is hard to account for the authority it enjoyed, an authority that led to its becoming a model and source for the similar compositions of Matthew and Luke, if it were not believed to rest on ancient and notably authoritative apostolic witness.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, in the absence of any other claimants it is perfectly appropriate to respect the ancient attribution of the gospel to a person called Mark, though whether this author is to be identified with the “John Mark” who appears for a time as a companion of Paul and Barnabas in Acts (12:12, 25; 15:37-39) and the “Mark” mentioned in Pauline literature (Col 4:10; Philemon 24 and 2 Tim 4:11) we cannot know. In any case, I shall refer to the author as “Mark” throughout this study.

The traditional view of Rome as place of composition has also come into question. It remains, though, the majority opinion, since it has much to commend it. The gospel seems to emanate from a location removed from the Jewish milieu. Mark feels obliged to explain Jewish customs to non-Jews (see especially 7:3-4), employs Latin loanwords, and betrays a weak knowledge

9. For a vigorous defense of the Petrine authority behind Mark see Martin Hengel, *Der unterschätzte Petrus: Zwei Studien* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 70–78.

of Galilean geography. The only truly correct human perception of the identity of Jesus from the human side comes from the Roman centurion who has supervised his execution (15:39), and in general there is a sense of the Gentile rather than the Jewish world as the primary focus of mission. Above all, the warnings and prophecies Jesus utters in the discourse on the future in Mark 13 resonate uncannily with accounts of the atrocities perpetrated against Christians in Rome in the year 64 C.E., when the emperor Nero made them the scapegoats for the fire unleashed by him that devastated much of the city.<sup>10</sup> The gospel, moreover, both subtly and more overtly betrays a preoccupation with Rome and the Roman *imperium* as a pervasive, oppressive force, hostile to the liberating rule of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

None of these considerations requires the composition of Mark's gospel strictly and specifically in Rome. The fact that Jerusalem and its fate also bulk large in the narrative may suggest a location closer to Palestine. All that is essentially demanded is a location where both the culture and might of Rome prevailed—and that, of course, was the case throughout the Mediterranean cities of the time.<sup>12</sup>

In any case, exact determination of the place of composition is a matter of scant importance for the kind of interpretation I purpose to undertake here. More important is to recognize that Mark wrote for a community that, while engaged in the spread of the Gospel to the wider world, had very recently experienced a sharp and devastating persecution. Keyed up in expectation of Jesus' imminent return as Son of Man and judge of the world, the community felt dismay and disillusionment at the seemingly endless postponement of that return despite the presence of signs and portents suggesting it to be at hand, notably the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman armies in 70 C.E.

Other features of the Markan community emerge from the gospel. Cut off from synagogue and Temple, they have made their houses the locus of worship, the place where they experience the presence and power of Jesus.

10. In reference to this persecution the Roman historian Tacitus, *Annales* xv, 44, describes the Christians as "hated for their abominations" and speaks of an initial arrest followed by the arrest of others on the basis of information obtained from those arrested first. In Mark 13 Jesus speaks of betrayal by family members and being hated by all (vv. 12-13a).

11. For an interpretation of Mark as pervasively reflecting hostility to Rome see Brian J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark's Gospel*. Biblical Interpretation 65 (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

12. This discussion of the place and date of composition of Mark's gospel is much indebted to the very balanced survey provided by Moloney, *Gospel of Mark* 11-15, who in the end (p. 15) suggests somewhere in "southern Syria" as the location for the Markan community.

The gospel seems to want to consecrate this sense of domestic church.<sup>13</sup> It also, particularly in the way it presents the male disciples of Jesus, appears to address a situation in which leadership has failed, in which family life, in particular, has been riven by persecution, and in which women have done better than men in coping with the suffering inevitable in the following of Jesus. These features, and others, will emerge as we move through the narrative.

This reading of Mark's gospel, like those I have already undertaken in regard to Luke and Matthew, presupposes the modern sense of the gospels as narratives designed to promote faith in Jesus and involvement in his mission rather than as conveyors of information about his historical life. Critically examined, they do of course convey such information, though not in the sense or to the degree that would be the case in a modern biographical study. For Mark, as for all the gospel writers, Jesus is the risen and exalted Lord, carrying out his messianic mission through the power of the Spirit. Though Mark would seem to have believed that Jesus truly entered upon his messianic status following his resurrection and exaltation to God's right hand, he nonetheless portrays him as already empowered with the Spirit and exercising a messianic ministry during the brief years of his earthly ministry. There is a continuity, then, between the depiction of that ministry and the risen life of the Lord that is unique to the gospels and forms the basis of their being read as living Word in believing communities to this day. The gospels are not simply about "back then" in the sense of communicating information about Jesus. They are about "now" in the sense of inviting readers and hearers to enter into the narrative and identify with the characters so as to come, like them, under the power and challenge of the living Lord.

If Mark is indeed, as most scholars believe, the first of the gospels and the pioneer of that literary genre in Christian circles, then we ought recognize its extraordinary achievement. The evidence of the earliest Christian writer, Paul, suggests that the essence of the "Gospel" for the earliest believers was the simple message that the teacher and master crucified by Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem had been raised from the dead and exalted at God's right hand, to fulfill in a totally unforeseen and transcendent sense the role of Israel's messiah (cf. Rom 1:3-4; 1 Cor 15:3-5, 22-28). He was now continuing this role through the power of the Spirit that energized the life and mission of the community of believers. In all likelihood it was Mark who gave literary expression to the project of expanding this basic core of the Gospel into an

13. See Michael F. Trainor, *The Quest for Home: the Household in Mark's Community* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001).

extended account of the last days of Jesus' life (Passion narrative) and prefaced this by pressing more or less free-floating traditions about Jesus' earlier life and teaching into a narrative framework that became "the beginning of the Gospel" (Mark 1:1). In so doing, Mark—or the community that sponsored him—created an immensely powerful narrative instrument to communicate a sense of the person of Jesus and the call to discipleship that he holds out to believers in every age.

That said, readers of the early twenty-first century cannot simply pick up the Markan narrative and enter it without further ado. Some preliminary understanding of the worldview it presupposes is necessary if we are not only to avoid going astray in interpretation but also to appreciate the full power of the narrative for our time. The titles and roles the gospel employs in regard to its principal character, Jesus, emerge from that worldview—even if, as applied to him, they undergo radical transformation. Hence, before I begin to comment on the gospel passage by passage, I invite the reader in the following chapter to journey with me for a while into that original Markan world, to review the significant features of the worldview presupposed in the gospel and the background to the titles and roles it applies to Jesus. This will prepare the ground for a survey in a final introductory chapter of the distinctive meaning those same titles acquire in the gospel and of the interplay of the roles inscribed in them. This interplay of roles—or "stories about Jesus," as I prefer to call them—creates, in my understanding, the dramatic tension that sustains the narrative. I urge the reader to regard the material in both chapters, along with the schematic outline that completes them, as essential preliminary reading to the study, in whole or part, of the actual text of the gospel.

# The Worldview Behind Mark's Gospel

Mark's gospel, like virtually all the rest of the New Testament, reflects the intersection of two worlds: the biblical-Jewish world and the wider Mediterranean world in which Hellenistic culture prevailed under the dominant power of Rome. A fusion of these two worlds had, of course, been under way since the conquests of the Macedonian Greek, Alexander the Great, in the late fourth century. This gave rise to the form of Greek-speaking Judaism known as Hellenistic Judaism, which chiefly prevailed in the Jewish settlements outside Palestine (the Diaspora) but was not without influence in the Land itself. While acknowledging the fusion of these two worlds, it is also possible to point to features of the gospel that reflect one world or the other in a more distinct way. It is not my intention here to provide anything like a comprehensive survey of the worldview behind the gospel, but simply to indicate and describe some aspects I believe to be necessary for an understanding of Mark. In this, without excluding the wider cultural world, I will focus primarily on aspects of Jewish ideas and beliefs presupposed in the gospel.<sup>1</sup> From time to time it will be necessary to stray also into the early Christian usage (in regard, for example, to "gospel") Mark seems to presuppose.

## Eschatology and Apocalyptic

Mark's gospel, again in common with early Christianity as a whole, is heir to a distinctive mode of imagining and describing reality dubbed "apocalyptic." Before we go any further down this track—where we shall encounter several other terms liable to daunt and alienate the nonspecialist—let me clarify what I understand by this term and its closely related fellow "eschatology." To take up the second term first: "eschatology" has to do with speculation or

1. In what follows I am indebted to the succinct and clear survey of the topic provided by Dennis E. Nineham in the Introduction to his commentary, *The Gospel of Saint Mark* (Harmondsworth, UK: Pelican, 1963) 43–48. Forty years on, it has not been surpassed.

## 2 *A Costly Freedom*

teaching about what is going to happen in the future—not just any time in the future, but the final future (the Greek word *eschatos* means “limit”). Eschatology refers, then, to the last acts or events in the cosmic drama: the end of the present world, or at the very least its radical transformation. Concepts such as resurrection (of the dead), final judgment (by God), postearthly reward (heaven) or punishment (hell) are eschatological because their application lies beyond the limit of present human existence.

“Apocalyptic” is an adjective describing a cast of thinking or mode of literary expression in which or through which some content, usually about the future, is expressed. Strictly speaking, what makes a text “apocalyptic” is the presentation of its content as something received by “revelation” (the Greek word *apokalypsis* means “revelation” or “unveiling”): a privileged figure—a prophet or seer—receives this revelation through interviews with angels or through being taken on a heavenly tour where details of the divine intent for the future are disclosed. Characteristic of apocalyptic discourse is vivid imagery depicting upheavals and calamities on a cosmic scale (earthquakes, stars falling from heaven, moon turning into blood, and so forth). Such discourse sets the conflict between good and evil in starkly dualist mode; there are no shades of gray. A profound pessimism prevails concerning human possibility in the present era. Sin is pervasive; hope for improvement rests entirely on divine intervention and a radical renewal of the world amounting virtually to a redo of the original creation. When something is referred to as “apocalyptic,” the reference is usually to this kind of content rather than to the mode (revelation) through which the content has been made known.

The purpose of apocalyptic discourse is to give encouragement to the faithful now suffering the evils of the present age. It does so by imparting privileged and prior information concerning the divine plan and program whereby God or God’s agent(s) will soon intervene. A moment of reckoning and judgment will arrive, which will mean exposure and condemnation for the wicked, vindication and reward for the faithful, who will then share the final triumph of God’s rule (the “kingdom of God”). It is this sense of a divinely-ordained program of events leading up to a radical, final reckoning that ensures that eschatology plays a large role in apocalyptic discourse.

### **A New “Exile”: Captivity to the Demonic**

This apocalyptic way of viewing both the present and the future situation came to particular prominence in Palestinian Judaism in the centuries just prior to the rise of Christianity. Its paradigm literary expression (“apoca-

lypse”) appears in the book of Daniel, written in the mid-second century B.C.E., in response to the religious and cultural oppression visited upon Jews by the regime of the Antiochean Seleucid Greek ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Several centuries earlier, Jews had returned from exile in Babylon (587–538 B.C.E.) with the hopeful prophecies found in the latter part of the book of Isaiah (chaps. 40–55) ringing in their ears. The exilic prophet (“Second Isaiah”) responsible for these oracles had proclaimed freedom from captivity, a homecoming across the desert attended by miracles surpassing the original Exodus (from Egypt), and a glorious restoration of national life in renewed covenant relationship with God.

Because of their prominence in later Christian discourse it will be helpful to recall a couple of these texts:

Get you up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good news;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good news,  
lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
“Here is your God!” (Isa 40:9)

Addressed to the remnant of the people who had remained home in the ruins of Jerusalem, the passage announces the “good news” (“gospel”) that, through action on the part of Israel’s God, the captives have been set free and are on their way home. A later oracle picks up the same “good news”:

How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,  
who brings good news,  
who announces salvation,  
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” (Isa 52:7)

We should note the reference to the “reign” of God in the last line. The liberation has come about because, as oracles elsewhere in this part of Isaiah make clear, Israel’s God has broken the rule of the gods of Babylon who, acting through that empire’s rulers, had held Israel captive. The expression “tell good news” (Hebrew *mbsr*) emerges from passages such as these (cf. also 41:27; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1; Nah 1:15) as virtually a technical term communicating this sense of freedom from captivity and the establishment of God’s (YHWH’s) rule (“kingdom”), not only in Israel but on a world scale. The all-important Christian term “gospel” has its biblical (Old Testament) origin in texts such as these.

#### 4 *A Costly Freedom*

The reality of life back in Palestine in the centuries that followed hardly lived up to the assurances contained in these oracles of Isaiah. Save for a brief period of independence under the Maccabees in the second century B.C.E., the Jewish people simply exchanged one form of subjection for another, becoming a client state or satellite of whichever power (Persian, Ptolemaic Egyptian, Seleucid Greek) happened to be dominant at the time, before eventually coming under Roman rule in the decades leading up to the New Testament era. Since the prophecies of Isaiah had clearly failed to find literal fulfilment, they came to be read in a new way: not with reference to the return from Babylonian captivity in the late sixth century B.C.E., but in the hope of a divinely wrought liberation from a far more pervasive state of captivity now in place. Within the framework of the apocalyptic cast of thinking outlined above, the captivity in question was human subjection to the demonic world, led by the prince of demons, variously known as “Satan,” or “Belial,” or “Beelzebul.” This sense of enslavement to evil powers operating on a supernatural level did not suppress the sense of more physical captivity under occupying political powers such as Rome. On the contrary, the latter were widely understood to be simply instruments manipulated by demons for their own evil ends.

I said in the Introduction that it is best to think of the demonic as having to do essentially with control. People in the ancient world attributed to demons control of storms and other manifestations of nature out of control and threatening to human life. Demons could also enter into human beings and bring about illness of various kinds—physical (sickness), psychological (madness), and moral (vice, alienation from God, resistance to divine grace). In general the demonic world was held to be “unclean,” standing over against the “cleanliness” or “holiness” associated with God and communicated by God to the covenant people, Israel (cf. Exod 19:6: “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation”). How to preserve the covenant “holiness” and avoid contamination with the unclean and destructive force of the demonic world was a major preoccupation of the Jewish religious system around the time of Jesus.

#### **“Gospel”**

A text from the Dead Sea Scrolls,<sup>2</sup> the Melchizedek Scroll (11Q13), despite its fragmentary condition, sheds remarkable light on the way in which the Isaiah “gospel” texts such as the two cited above and a later text,

2. These texts, found from 1947 onward in caves around Khirbet Qumran on the western shore of the Dead Sea, represent the most significant discovery in biblical archaeology in the

Isa 61:1-2, were being read in apocalyptic Jewish circles as expressions of liberation from the grip of the demonic. This scroll is worth quoting at some length:

Its interpretation (reference is to the Jubilee year [Lev 25:13]) at the end of days concerns those in exile which . . . he took captive, about whom he said “to proclaim liberty to captives” (Isa 61:1). (Melchizedek) will make them return. He will proclaim liberty for them . . . and make atonement for their sins. . . . And that which he says concerning the end of days by means of Isaiah the prophet who says: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, that publishes peace, that brings good tidings of good, that publishes salvation, that says to Zion: ‘Your heavenly one (lit. “your God”) is King’ (Isa 52:7)” [and they shall be freed from the hands] of Belial and from the hands of all the sp[irits of his lot.] . . . and “He that brings good tidings” is [the an]ointed of the Spirit (Isa 61:1), about whom Daniel spoke . . . as is written about him (Isa 52:7), “Saying to Zion, ‘your God rules.’”<sup>3</sup>

We see here two Isaiah “good news” passages (Isa 52:7 and 61:1) being cited together and related to a coming liberation to be brought about through the agency of a high-priestly figure (a latter-day Melchizedek) who will inaugurate a Jubilee year of release, make atonement for sin, and liberate the faithful. The captivity from which they are to be set free is said again and again (as elsewhere in the Qumran literature) to be captivity to “Belial and the spirits of his lot”—that is, the demonic world. It is not clear from the text whether Melchizedek is to be identified with the one “anointed of the Spirit,” whose task is to proclaim in terms of Isa 52:7 the rule of God. However, we see joined together here a striking cluster of motifs that reappears in the Gospel of Mark: the Isaiah “good news” (“gospel”) texts, freedom from demonic control, atonement for sin brought about by a priestly agent of God, and the proclamation by an “anointed one” (Messiah?) of the rule of God. In short, the text announces the good news of the displacement of demonic rule by that of God.

This text from Qumran shows that, just before the rise of Christianity, a Jewish apocalyptic sect consciously associated the Isaiah “good news” texts with the awaited eschatological intervention of God. Like the early

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twentieth century. They shed immense light on the life, religious expression, and hopes of a Jewish apocalyptic sect just prior to the rise of Christianity.

3. Reconstructions of the text vary greatly. For a more complete reconstruction and translation see Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: the Qumran Texts in English*, tr. W. G. E. Watson (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 139–40.

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Christian movement it understood Isaiah's messenger of good news as referring primarily to the salvation it longed for in its own era.<sup>4</sup> The New Testament "gospel" language almost certainly flows within this stream set in motion by (Second) Isaiah and subsumed within the wider framework of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology.<sup>5</sup>

Quite lacking, however, in the Jewish background is anything corresponding to the Christian use of the singular noun *euangelion* in the sense of "gospel." In the wider Greek-speaking world this word (almost always in the plural form *euangelia*) occurs in formal announcements of birth, marriage, or anniversaries. A distinctive usage appears in connection with the proclamation of the accession or birthday of rulers, notably the Roman emperor, of which an inscription from Priene in Asia Minor (9 B.C.E.) is the best known example:

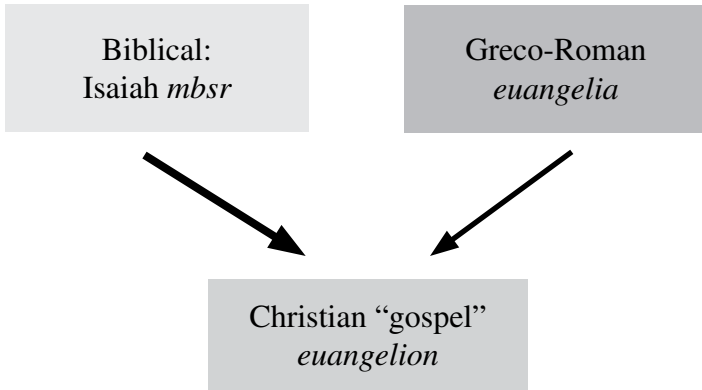
. . . the birthday of the god (Caesar Augustus) has been for the whole world the beginning of the gospel (*euangelia*); concerning him, therefore, let all reckon a new era beginning from the date of his birth.

A sacral aura, the sense of a new age dawning, attaches to such usages in a manner not dissimilar to the claims made by Christians in connection with God's raising of Jesus and installing him as Messiah and cosmic Lord (Rom 1:3-4; cf. Mark 12:35-37). It is likely, then, that when the message of and about Jesus came to be proclaimed in Greek-speaking milieus the early proclaimers of that message found close at hand a Greek term, *euangelion*, that not only picked up the nuances attaching to "telling good news" in the biblical (Isaianic) background but brought rich resonances of its own as well. As regards the background to the Christian use of "gospel," it is probably necessary, then, to reckon both with influence from the biblical Isaianic tradition and with a certain "inculturation" within the wider Greco-Roman milieu.

We can set it out diagrammatically as follows:

4. A similar use of the Isaiah "good news" text is to be found in psalms emanating from another Jewish movement: *Psalms of Solomon*, especially Psalm 11; cf. also a further Qumran text, 4Q521 (The "Messiah of heaven and earth"), where there is reference to a "Messiah" in connection with the performance of marvelous works described in language from Isaiah.

5. On this see especially the significant study of the influence of Isaiah's "New Exodus" motif upon Mark by Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1997) 96-102.



In the earliest Christian writings, those of Paul, “gospel” appears at times in the form “the gospel of God” (1 Thess 2:2, 8, 9; Rom 1:1; 15:16), a phrase that also sums up the content of Jesus’ proclamation according to Mark 1:14. The phrase “gospel of God” probably represents the earliest use of “gospel” and very likely goes back to the preaching of Jesus himself. Couched within the Isaianic framework, the “good news” is that the liberating rule of God is close at hand. In early Christian usage, however, the “gospel” proclaimed by Jesus rapidly became the “gospel *about* Jesus”—because of the absolute centrality of his person and destiny in the implementation of the rule of God. Thus more normally for Paul the content of “the gospel” is focused on the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus:

the gospel concerning his Son:  
who was descended from David according to the flesh  
designated Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness, by  
resurrection from the dead,  
Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 1:3-4)

It is “the gospel of Jesus Christ” or “about Jesus Christ” in the sense that in raising him from death and establishing him as Messiah and Lord, God has set in place the key instrument for bringing about the downfall of the old era and its captivity to evil powers. The “good news” about his messianic installation is at one and the same time the “good news of God” since that installation is instrumental in bringing about the rule of God, the original intent of the Creator for the world.<sup>6</sup>

6. Paul gives clear expression to this when, albeit working “backward” from “the End,” he writes in 1 Corinthians 15: “Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God

**The Rule (or “Kingdom”) of God**

While central to the preaching of Jesus, the notion of the “kingdom” or “rule of God” is somewhat elusive.<sup>7</sup> I find it helpful to start with the negative: to think first of what it is displacing, namely the opposing “rule” of Satan that holds Israel and the rest of humankind in its dehumanizing grip. Within the apocalyptic Jewish worldview that Mark’s gospel shares, the human world, including Israel, has fallen out of the hands of God to languish under the opposing regime of Satan. In this situation the faithful cherish the hope and long for the moment when God, as both creator of the world and covenant partner of Israel, will break this captivity and restore or bring to fruition for the first time the original divine intent for human beings and the world. The rule of God, then, is not something to be established, as it were, on neutral ground. It has to reclaim hostile territory, dislodging the regime of Satan, now currently and ruinously in power. Thus the “good news” about the onset of God’s rule that Jesus proclaims (1:15) and the “works of power” by which he expels demons are intimately linked. They are, in effect, opposite sides of the same coin. The exorcisms, healings, even the subjection of destructive natural forces (such as the storm on the lake [4:35-41]), are instances in which God’s rule is gaining a foothold in both human affairs and the wider world.

To speak in this way of a foothold already obtained is to move on from the background apocalyptic worldview to the presentation of the Kingdom in the gospel itself. In pre-Christian Jewish expectation the advent of God’s rule is still a matter of hope. It lies on the “other side,” as it were, of a final struggle with the forces of evil, forces that will not give in before inflicting great suffering and distress upon the faithful. For Mark—and we can say with confidence for Jesus himself—Kingdom eschatology is more complex. The definitive establishment of God’s rule may still be a matter of hope, but the contest with evil is already well under way and the power of the Kingdom is already beginning to transform human lives when it finds acceptance through repentance and faith (Mark 1:15). A study of Mark’s gospel will

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the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet (15:24-25). . . .When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all” (v. 28).

7. Strictly speaking the English word “rule,” rather than “kingdom,” corresponds more exactly to the idea conveyed by the Greek term *basileia*, since what is in view is not a localized political entity but more a regimen or regime. However, because the phrase “kingdom of God” has become established in Christian parlance I shall for the most part speak of “the kingdom.”

show that, while Jesus presupposes the conventional understanding of the rule or kingdom of God in the minds of his hearers, a great deal of his instruction is aimed at challenging and transforming that understanding in order to make it conform with his vision of God and the way God is already reaching out in relationship to human beings here and now. The parables, in particular, are designed to address this revisioning of the nature of the Kingdom and the timescale or “program” of its arrival in the world.

### **Agents of God's Rule (Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man)**

While some saw the Kingdom as coming about through direct divine action, more widespread was the view that God would employ intermediary figures as instruments to this end. A variety of views in regard to such figures prevailed. For the purpose of filling in the background to Mark's gospel I shall focus simply on the three roles summed up in the titles “Messiah” (Christ), “Son of God,” and “Son of Man.”

#### *1. “Messiah”*

When Christians approach the topic of messianism they have to be wary of reading back into Jewish literature the developed messianic understanding with respect to the person of Jesus that Christianity simply takes for granted. Messianic expectation in Judaism, where it existed at all, took a variety of forms. “Messiah” in Hebrew simply means “anointed” (hence the Greek translation *christos*, rendered in English as “Christ”). Since anointing with oil was a standard Israelite ritual for installing a person in office, priests and kings (and, figuratively, prophets [cf. Isa 61:1; Ps 105:15]) could bear the title “the anointed.” In the main, though, the phrase “the Lord's Anointed” became a respectful title for the king (cf. Pss 2:2; 18:50; 84:9; 132:10, 17; etc.). In the centuries following the return from exile in Babylon, disillusionment with the various forms of social and political subjection under which Jews labored led to the hope, in some circles at least, for a restoration of the Davidic dynasty and specifically for the rise of a “son of David” who would set Israel free from foreign control, and rule in righteousness, prosperity, and peace (cf. the late oracle in Jer 33:14-26). As king, this ruler would be “the Anointed One” or “Messiah,” but neither the title nor the role envisaged anything more than human status. The expectation, which can now be called “messianic” in the technical sense, was simply for a righteous ruler who would restore in Israel the glories of the Davidic “golden age.” While references to such a figure appear most prominently in the Dead

Sea Scrolls,<sup>8</sup> the most complete description is to be found in a few phrases from a collection of (noncanonical) psalms dating from the first century B.C.E., the *Psalms of Solomon*:

See, Lord, and raise up for them their king,  
 the son of David, to rule over your servant Israel . . .  
 Undergird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers, to purge  
 Jerusalem from Gentiles who trample her to destruction . . .  
 He will gather a holy people whom he will lead in righteousness . . .  
 There will be no unrighteousness among them in his days,  
 for all shall be holy, and their king shall be the Lord Messiah.<sup>9</sup>

Though renewal in a religious sense is prominent in this description, overtly political and even military aspects are not lacking. What is absent is any sense that carrying out the messianic role will involve suffering and death. It is no surprise, then, to find Jesus in the Gospel of Mark struggling to suppress or combat expectations pinned on him in terms of this conventional view of messiahship—especially in the minds of his disciples.

## 2. “Son of God”

As in the case of “Messiah,” the title “Son of God,” despite the exalted sense in which the Gospel of Mark applies it to Jesus, does not in and of itself imply divinity. There is a minor though fairly widespread motif running through the Old Testament in which Israel is metaphorically described as God’s “son” or “child” (Exod 4:22-23; Hos 1:11; 11:1; Sir 36:17; etc.).<sup>10</sup> Hence all Israelites, unlike members of other nations, can regard themselves as “children of God” (Deut 14:1; cf. Rom 9:4). This privilege was crystalized in the person of the king, who, in a figurative sense, was regarded as “begotten” by God (Ps 2:7; cf. LXX Ps 110[109]:3), and hence as enjoying a filial relationship with God (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 89:26-27). Neither the Old Testament nor later Jewish literature employs “son of God” in a strictly messianic sense, though the circumstantial evidence that the title was so used is very strong.<sup>11</sup> As readers of Mark we have to be aware that when the

8. For relevant references to the Qumran evidence see Brendan Byrne, “Jesus as Messiah in the Gospel of Luke: Discerning a Pattern of Correction,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65 (2003) 80–95, especially 80–81.

9. *Pss. Sol.* 17:21-22, 26, 32. Translation by R. B. Wright in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 2:667.

10. Cf. Brendan Byrne, “Sons of God”—“Seed of Abraham.” *AnBib* 83 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979) 9–78.

11. Cf. *ibid.*, 223.

gospel speaks of Jesus as God's "Son," depending upon who is speaking, a range of understandings is available: from the "merely messianic" in a conventional sense (cf. 14:61) to the full-blown transcendental sense in which Jesus is the "beloved Son" of God (1:11; 9:7; cf. 12:6; 13:32).

### 3. "Son of Man"

With "Son of Man" we arrive at by far the most controversial description the gospels apply to Jesus. "Son of Man" translates an awkward Greek phrase, *ho huios tou anthrōpou* (lit. "the son of the man"), which occurs throughout the gospels (14 times in Mark), always on the lips of Jesus as a reference to himself (John 12:34 being the only exception). Differently from the instances of "Messiah" ("Christ") or "Son of God," no one *confesses* Jesus as "Son of Man."<sup>12</sup> The phrase seems to be more indicative of a *role* than of a title. The gospel tradition never stops to explain the role designated by the phrase, apparently assuming that the implied audience will understand what it means. The appearance of something so clumsy in the Greek seems to suggest that in this phrase something important from the Aramaic background is being preserved.

In Hebrew idiom "son of . . ." is used to designate membership of a class or guild: "sons of the prophets" = "the prophets." Hence "son of man" (Hebrew *ben 'adam*) simply indicates a member of the class human = "a human being" (cf. Ps 8:4, where "son of man" stands simply in parallel to "man"). In Ezekiel the prophet is addressed over and over again as "son of man," indicating his mortal, human status over against God.

Most significant is the appearance of the phrase in Dan 7:13-14, where, before the throne of God, dominion, glory, and kingship are bestowed upon "one like a son of man":

13. As I watched in the visions of the night,  
I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.  
And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.
14. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away,  
and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

12. There is a singular usage in Acts 7:56, where the dying Stephen confesses to a vision of "the Son of Man"; elsewhere the phrase occurs only in two allusions to Dan 7:13 in Revelation (1:13; 14:14).

The prerogatives here bestowed on the “son of man” are later (Dan 7:21-22, 27) conferred upon “the holy ones of the Most High,” who many consider to represent the persecuted faithful to whom the book of Daniel as a whole is addressed. The vision is indicating their coming vindication. This would imply that the “son of man” (or “human one,” in contrast to the “beasts” who represent various oppressing empires) is a collective symbol for the faithful in Israel—though some scholars see already here in Daniel a reference to an exalted angelic figure, pictured in human form.

Such a development is certainly to be seen in the “Similitudes” section of the (postbiblical) *(First) Book of Enoch* (37–71), where the Danielic son of man has stepped out from purely symbolic status to become a glorious, heavenly figure who reveals mysteries to the elect in the present and who will come at the end of time to execute judgment and usher the elect into the bliss of the eternal kingdom. This view of the Son of Man has clear links with the considerable number of references in the gospel tradition to the Son of Man as an eschatological figure destined to play a very similar role. But whether the gospel tradition presupposes such a development is a matter of controversy, since it is not certain that the section of *I Enoch* in which it appears (the Similitudes) really antedates the gospels.<sup>13</sup> Many would hold, however, that Jesus and/or the early Christians were familiar with the “Son of Man” concept found in the Similitudes of Enoch even if not precisely with the Similitudes themselves. In other words, the apocalyptic, eschatological expectation, drawn from Daniel 7, of a heavenly Son of Man figure, coming in judgment, was “in the air” at the time, as an expression of hope for the suffering faithful.

The preservation of the phrase “Son of Man” in the gospels, despite its great awkwardness in Greek translation, suggests that its appearance in the tradition goes back to Jesus himself. In what sense, however, might he have used it? Though (with the exception of John 12:34) it always appears as a self-designation of Jesus, some (e.g., Rudolf Bultmann) would argue that originally Jesus spoke of a Son of Man distinct from himself to whose eschatological coming he pointed (cf. Mark 8:38); the identification of the coming Son of Man with Jesus in the gospels would then be the work of early Christian tradition. While Bultmann thought that Jesus used “Son of Man” only with reference to an eschatological figure distinct from himself, others (e.g., Geza Vermes), maintaining that the Aramaic phrase *bar enash* can function as a circumlocution for “I” (cf. the English usage of “one” in this

13. Though *I Enoch* is widely represented in the Qumran [Dead Sea Scroll] literature, the section containing the Similitudes is not.

sense), claim that the “Son of Man” statements referring to present earthly status and suffering (e.g., Mark 2:10, 28; 10:45) go back to Jesus, but without any reference to Daniel. The relevance of the circumlocutory usage to Jesus has, however, been challenged (e.g., by Joseph Fitzmyer).<sup>14</sup>

Whatever may have been Jesus’ own usage, “Son of Man” in Mark’s gospel clearly has links with Daniel and indeed seems to presuppose the developed Danielic tradition seen in *1 Enoch*: note especially the references to the “coming” of the Son of Man “with clouds” in Mark 13:26 and 14:62; cf. Dan 7:13. The sense emanating from Daniel 7 of vindication and divinely bestowed authority following upon obedient suffering admirably holds together the three categories in which the “Son of Man” sayings appear in Mark: present authority (since the Son of Man gives authoritative rulings [2:10; 2:27]); future coming in judgment (8:38; 9:9; 13:26; 14:62), and especially the sense of present suffering that will find future vindication (8:31; 9:12; 9:31; 10:33–34; 10:45; 14:21 [twice]; 14:41). The role denoted by the phrase would seem to have been particularly appropriate for what Mark wanted to communicate about Jesus and about what discipleship entailed for those called to follow his way. On two key occasions the Markan Jesus responds in terms of “Son of Man” (8:31; 14:62) when others (Peter: 8:29; the High Priest: 14:61) have spoken in terms of “Christ” (“Messiah”) or “Son of God” (“Son of the Blessed One” in 14:61). The latter titles are applicable to Jesus but stand in need of “correction” in terms of “Son of Man”: Jesus fulfills the function they indicate by obediently undergoing suffering now, with the hope of vindication by God (resurrection and exaltation) and installation as eschatological judge of the world (13:26–31; 14:62).<sup>15</sup> Jesus uses “Son of Man” with reference to himself and in this sense interchangeably with “I,” but not simply as equivalent to “I”: he uses it self-referentially when hinting at or alluding to a mysterious status or destiny that attends him, which is beyond the present ken of his hearers and which the allusion to Daniel captures best.

In reference to “Son of Man” I have gone beyond the background presupposed in the gospel to discuss the usage of the gospel itself. This is because in the case of this title/role it is so hard—and indeed ultimately impossible—to sift out with certainty what belongs to background, what to the historical Jesus, what to the early tradition, and what to the evangelist

14. For a succinct survey see Moloney, *Gospel of Mark*, 212–13.

15. My understanding of “Son of Man” in this Danielic sense aligns with that of Morna Hooker (*The Gospel according to Saint Mark* [London: Black, 1991] 88–93) and Francis Moloney (*Gospel of Mark*, 212–13).

himself. I hope, though, that the brief discussion of worldview that I have provided in relevant areas will assist understanding of the gospel and, more immediately, will serve as background for the presentation of the Markan drama in terms of “three stories,” which I offer in the chapter to follow.

Readers who are still with me following this survey of the apocalyptic background to Mark’s gospel will, I trust, now be in a better position to enter the narrative world of the gospel on something like its own terms. I do not minimize the imaginative effort required, but I would hope that words and concepts grown colorless in religious parlance—“gospel,” “kingdom of God,” “demon,” etc.—will have become more concrete and more precisely evocative of the realities to which they refer. In particular I would wish to insist that describing something as “apocalyptic” and/or “eschatological” does not mean that reference is being made to something otherworldly, having little or no connection to present human existence and its concerns. Jewish apocalypticism was and is a symbolic way of referring precisely to the present world and its ills, and of expressing hope for the transformation of this world through the faithful action of God. Partaking of that worldview, while to some extent in dialogue and tension with it, the Gospel of Mark has, I believe, something vital to say to the present and future of our world as we know it.