

The Gospel in Galilee: The Mighty Acts of the Messiah (1:14—8:21)

JESUS' INAUGURAL MESSAGE (1:14–15)

The programmatic significance of these verses must be highlighted. This is the first time that Jesus speaks in Mark's Gospel, and with this Mark sums up Jesus' message. If the preceding section formed the beginning of the gospel, this passage may be understood as the hinge moment in the gospel story.

Mark prefaces Jesus' proclamation with the arrest of John. The point is that the forerunner has done his part, and Mark will explain later why he was arrested (see 6:17–18). The stronger one who baptizes with the Spirit (1:7–8) now proclaims. The locality of this proclamation is not in the wilderness but in Galilee, a cosmopolitan region belonging to Herod Antipas. The message concerns the gospel of God. For the alert listener, a connection between this and 1:1 is at once detected.

The statement of Jesus in v. 15 may be broken into two parts. First he announces what is happening, and Mark uses the Greek perfect tense here (*peplērōtai* and *ēngiken*) to signify that what Jesus proclaimed continues to have currency for his readers. Secondly, Jesus counsels a response, and Mark depicts this with the present tense, signifying that the actions of repentance and faith are to be ongoing. The key themes of Jesus' ministry and Mark's Gospel are therefore given in a nutshell: fulfillment, kingdom, repentance, faith, and gospel.

Fulfillment speaks of plot, with currents reaching back to the past. What is described as taking place is therefore to be construed as being once foretold. In this regard, there is meaning to history, and more precisely, it implies God has been faithful to his promises. It is this quality that gives his people hope.

The word kingdom (the Greek is *basileia*) should be understood primarily in the abstract sense of "reign," rather than in the concrete sense of "realm," as the Hebrew *malkût* or the Aramaic *malkûta'* makes clear. But the two ideas are associated, as reign often entails realm. Israel believes her

God is the only true ruler and creator, and so his reign cannot be abstractly divorced from history. Indeed, Israel was chosen to be God's true subjects to demonstrate concretely to the world what his reign meant. But her disobedience sent her into exile. Consequently an eschatological expectation of God's return to Zion shows in a climactic way that he is the sole king of the universe and that Israel is his special people (Ps 145:10–13; Isa 52:7). While the meaning of the kingdom may indeed be polyvalent, it should not therefore be conceived as referring to anything. Instead, it is to be anchored in the ongoing story of the one God and his people, and understood in relation to the yearning for eschatological closure.¹

Is there an OT passage that may help us situate Jesus' announcement? Isaiah 52:7 is a good candidate. This is supported by Mark's having named Isaiah as the key inspiration behind his idea of the beginning of the gospel in 1:2–3. Furthermore, the notions of God's reign and the proclamation of good news are explicitly joined together in Isa 52:7. In this passage, God returns to Zion to reign as king. Consequently, the herald announces to Zion and the cities around her the good news. This divine advent signifies for the Israelites the end of exile and the onset of eschatological blessings. Jesus' message of the kingdom may be said to relate to such a hope.

The puzzling thing is that the kingdom is described as “having come near,” which contradicts on the surface the fact of fulfillment. Not surprisingly, scholars have debated the precise meaning of the original Greek, whether *ēngiken* means imminence² or arrival.³ The consensus is that it means imminence, but this does not bring us any closer to a resolution of the apparent contradiction. That said, this phenomenon of the “now-and-not-yet” actually forms the substructure of much of Markan theology, indicating that Mark sees in it a potent theological theme. Indeed, as his narrative progresses, the reader will see that the resolution of this oxymoron lies in answering correctly the question of who Jesus is, and how the kingdom is intimately bound up with him. In this regard, “paradox” is a better word than “contradiction” (i.e., the kingdom is in a sense still future but in an important sense it may be claimed to have arrived).⁴ We will return to this topic in our treatment of chapter 4.

The response counselled by Jesus is repentance and faith. While such qualities have an important role in general piety, their special connection

1. Cf. Wright 1996: 220–26; and the perceptive re-examination of the data in Allison 2010: 164–204.

2. Boring 2006: 50–51; France 2002: 91–92; Marcus, 2000: 172–73.

3. Classically, Dodd 1941: 36–37.

4. Cf. the judicious treatment of Kümmel 1957.

with the kingdom of God should not be missed. In the prophetic literature, repentance (often described with the Hebrew *šûb*) is often the precondition of forgiveness and restoration (Isa 44:22; Jer 3:10–14; Hos 14:1–9). All this is often couched in corporate terms.⁵ In this regard, the pattern of sin-exile-restoration, found frequently in the story of Israel and God, may plausibly be latent here.⁶ More significantly, there can be no repentance if we do not agree with God's statement of our condition or his promise of forgiveness. Hence, repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin: we repent believingly, and we believe repentantly. Note the link back to John's ministry, as his baptism is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:4).

Leading from the above point is the idea that this faith, while directed ultimately to God, must also take the form of believing the message of Jesus. As Mark will demonstrate later, faith is not so much about trusting generally in God's faithfulness as confessing that *through the ministry of Jesus* God's faithfulness is seen. In this regard, the promises that Israel longed for are now encapsulated in the ministry of Jesus.

THE GOSPEL IN ACTION AND TYPICAL ACTIVITIES OF JESUS' MINISTRY (1:16–45)

In this section the typical activities of Jesus' ministry are presented in cameo form. Mark narrates Jesus' call of his first disciples (1:16–20), his teaching activity which is connected with the performance of miracles (1:21–39), and the foreshadowing of conflict through the story of the healing of the leper (1:40–45). Discipleship, teaching, miracles, and conflict will be motifs occupying much of Mark's Gospel. Through all these cameo-like stories, Mark gives his listeners an idea of what it means for the gospel to be in action.

The Call of the First Disciples (1:16–20)

If according to the prophetic literature, God's return to Zion takes place in tandem with the reconstituting of a covenantal community (Isa 59:20–21; 61:1–8; Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 37:21–28; Hos 2:18–23), and if, through the Spirit's anointing, the task of this reconstitution has been devolved upon Jesus, then it is not surprising that together with the gospel proclamation, Jesus would call disciples as the first step in building this reconstituted community. This is precisely what is presented in vv. 16–20.

5. Sanders 1985: 106–8.

6. See the stimulating discussion of this pattern in Stanton 1985: 377–92.

The Sea of Galilee provides the setting of the call story. Strabo (*Geography* 16:2) and Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 5:15)—both naturalists of the first centuries that straddle the Common Era—and Josephus (*War* 3:506–508) testify to its being full of fish. Many settlements arose close to its shores and gave the whole region a rather cosmopolitan character.

When understood against the first century Jewish background, Jesus' call of disciples becomes striking. As Martin Hengel has noted, the call of Jesus to follow after him goes beyond the practice of Jewish teachers or rabbis. There are no stories of a Jewish teacher calling disciples to follow him. On the contrary, people chose to follow famous teachers on their own accord (cf. *b. Erub.* 30a; *b. Ketub.* 66b). Hengel therefore proposes that Jesus' call resembles that of a charismatic or revolutionary leader, summoning people to a revolutionary war.⁷ However, this notion has to be read into the narrative, as there is no explicit mention of it. Indeed, what differentiates Jesus' call from that issued by Jewish revolutionaries is that he included a promise of transformation (v. 17). With reference to the call story of Elisha (1 Kings 19:19–21), it may be argued that the persona adopted by Jesus is that of a prophet and not a teacher. But Mark will soon describe Jesus as a teacher (1:21)! What is more important is to observe that Mark portrays Jesus' call as absolutely authoritative, as those summoned dropped their vocational tasks "immediately." Hence, we may conclude that while parallel call-stories offer insights into the meaning of the present story, it should not be used to limit the possibilities.

What does being made fishers of men mean (v. 17)? Jesus is possibly using a memorable word-play. Surprisingly, all the uses of this image in the OT are ominous, for they speak of divine judgment (Jer 16:16; Ezek 29:4–6; Amos 4:2; Hab 1:14–17). This does not seem to fit with the general drift of Mark's presentation of Jesus' ministry, especially his announcing the good news of God. Could the gospel message also entail judgment? And would the disciples help in the realization of that? Whatever the precise meaning, the summoned disciples would certainly be embarking on a new vocation that would touch the destiny of human beings.

We offer, finally, some interesting observations about the first disciples. The first named, Simon, will be given the nickname Peter later (3:16), indicating the key role he will play. His name is always mentioned first in groupings (3:16; 5:37; 9:2; 13:3; 14:33). Accordingly, he often functions as the spokesman for the disciples. We may also expect him to be the older brother of Andrew, since he is named first in that pair (v. 16). Simon, James,

7. Hengel 1981: 18, 21, 52.

and John together form the inner circle, and become the privileged audience of Jesus' special miracles and revelation (5:37; 9:2; 14:33).

Jesus' Teaching and Miracles (1:21–34)

Mark introduces his readers to yet another important locality in Jesus' Galilean ministry: Capernaum (v. 21). The name in Hebrew means "village of Nahum." According to Josephus, it was prosperous and had a thriving fishing industry (*War* 3:516–21). This explains why a toll-booth was set up in its vicinity (2:1; 14). A detachment of Roman troops was also stationed there (cf. *Matt* 8:5–13), further indicating its importance. It was also Peter and Andrew's village (1:29), and probably the center of Jesus' Galilean ministry (see 2:1; 9:33; *Matt* 8:5–17 || *Luke* 7:1–10).

The first miracle story of Mark takes place on a Sabbath and it concerns both word and deed: these are described as being performed with unrivalled authority (vv. 22, 27). The comparison with the scribes to the latter's detriment prepares Mark's readers for more stories about the conflict between Jesus and the scribes later on (2:6, 16; 11:27).

The appearance of a demon-possessed man in the synagogue (v. 23) sets the stage for the introduction of one hallmark of Jesus' ministry: his exorcistic work. Three other accounts of exorcism are given in 5:1–20; 7:24–30; and 9:14–29. Mention of such an activity is also found in summaries or general reports such as 1:32–34; 1:39; 3:11–12, and in the Beelzeboul controversy of 3:22–30. All this indicates how important the motif is. Although there was much interest in exorcism in the Mediterranean world around the time of Jesus, there were actually very few exorcistic narratives available and very few exorcists named.⁸ This scarcity throws into bold relief the frequent depiction of Jesus as an exorcist.

Exorcistic practices of Jesus' day are often referred to by scholars for understanding better his exorcism. Accordingly, the mention of Jesus' identity (v. 24) is construed as the demon's attempt to gain power over him, and Jesus' silencing word (v. 25) becomes his countermove to regain the initiative.⁹ As interesting as such parallels may be, they fail to explain what Mark is doing. In all his exorcism stories there is no power struggle but the simple giving of a command, uncluttered by techniques or incantations. The

8. Apollonius (Philostratus *Life of Apollonius* 1:3–5, 19); Eleazar (Josephus *Antiquities* 8:45–48) and possibly Hanina ben Dosa (*b. Pesah.* 112b). Solomon was also regarded by some as an exorcist. See discussion in Witmer 2012: 22–60.

9. Hull 1974: 67–69.

exclamation of the crowds that his teaching (i.e., shown by exorcism) is new and authoritative (v. 27), says just as much.

Jesus is addressed as “the Holy One of God” (v. 24). A similar title is used in the OT for Aaron (Ps 106:16), Elisha (2 Kings 4:9), and possibly Samson (a variant reading of Judg 16:17 in the LXX). Judging from these occurrences, the title’s meaning may simply be that a certain person has been set apart for some special ministry. But Mark’s portrayal of Jesus, while certainly containing this notion, also goes beyond it. He shows how Jesus, as the bearer of the Holy Spirit, drives out uncleanness. In this respect, it may be instructive to note the passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls that speak of the eschatological elimination of ritual impurity by “the holy Messiah” (1Q30) and by God’s holy Spirit (1QS 4:18–23). This testifies to the Jewish belief that only at the eschaton can all forms of uncleanness be rooted out of Israel by an agent of God who bears the Spirit.

There are some other significant points that bear mentioning so as to complete this Markan motif. The first is that Mark usually describes the demons as unclean (*pneumata akatharta*), indicating what sort of framework we are to use to understand these stories. The issue of ritual uncleanness looms large in Mark’s Gospel (1:40–45; 6:25–34; 7:1–23). Ritual uncleanness separates the affected from the corporate life of the nation of Israel. In the case of demon possession, not only is the person unclean, he is also controlled by what is antagonistic to God. Hence, being exorcised meant that he was liberated to belong to God and to participate in the corporate life of his people.

Secondly, the exorcism leads the crowd to exclaim that Jesus has taught with authority (v. 27). This signifies that Jesus’ activities of teaching and exorcism cannot be divorced from each other, as his word and deed are intimately related. His exorcism is in a profound sense also his teaching.

Thirdly, it is the exorcism that leads the crowd to introduce the adjective “new” to describe Jesus’ teaching with authority. The word “new” is significant, as it points to eschatological newness. The demons’ fear of being destroyed supports this proposal, as it shows they do not regard Jesus as any ordinary exorcist. Early Jewish and Rabbinic thought locates the destruction of demons at the eschaton (see *Pesiq. R.* 36:1 where the agent is the Messiah; *Num. Rab.* 19.8; cf. *Zech* 13.2). This fits in with the eschatological horizon of Jesus’ gospel proclamation (1:15), with the added implication that the kingdom of God has invaded the territories long held by demonic forces. There is therefore a Markan escalation in the two confessions of the crowds (1:22; 1:27) which incidentally forms an *inclusio* (bracket).

Fourthly, the authority by which Jesus performs exorcisms is absolute. This was mentioned earlier but it bears repeating. Jesus does not use

formulas or incantations, or make appeal to God’s word. A simple command is issued and there is no tussle. Perhaps this is the significance of the crowd’s confession that ends the story: “He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him” (1:27).

Fifthly, the demon reveals the true identity of Jesus. Thus far, the true identity of Jesus has not been fully revealed to or discerned by people. The voice that spoke in 1:11 was probably meant only for Jesus to hear. Indeed, Mark’s narrative has this characteristic: demonic forces know Jesus’ identity but people continue to puzzle over it.

Finally, Jesus commands silence. Why? It may be that unclean entities are not allowed to confess the identity of clean entities. More probably, it is part and parcel of an important theme in Mark: the theme of secrecy. Mark will narrate many stories hereafter exhibiting a similar phenomenon. Why this is so will be clarified only when the whole Gospel has been read.

Once the tone is set, Mark goes on to show another aspect of Jesus’ ministry: healing (vv. 29–31). Interestingly, the healing is performed on Peter’s mother-in-law, to rid her of fever. By a simple grasping of her hand, Jesus raises her from bed (v. 31). Upon being healed, she serves Jesus and his company. Some scholars detect here a paradigm for discipleship.¹⁰ The raising of Peter’s mother-in-law is analogous to resurrection from spiritual death, and her immediate service to Jesus sets the example for later believers: they are raised so as to serve.

Widening of Jesus’ Ministry (1:35–39)

The story hints at Jesus’ prayer-life (the Greek imperfect *proseucheto* suggests habitual praying). Mark mentions three times that Jesus prays, and these reports are made at important moments of his ministry: here at the beginning of his ministry; in 6:46 after the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:15 tells us the crowds want to make Jesus king because of this miracle); and in 14:32–42, where the Father’s will is affirmed and unswervingly followed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The description of Jesus’ praying, the comment of Peter and Jesus’ response may be seen as a whole. Through prayer the temptation of reveling in a celebrity status is preempted, and one’s calling from God is affirmed and strengthened. Hence, instead of meeting those who were so desirous of seeing him, Jesus declares the one reason for his having come is to preach the gospel. This must mean leaving Capernaum—even if he was treated as a celebrity there—in order to go to other villages which have yet to hear his message. Through this cameo, Mark achieves elegantly his purpose of

10. Boring 2006: 66.

portraying the spread of Jesus ministry. At the same time he explains what this ministry is all about: not self-aggrandizement (we will see later how important such a theme is to Mark), but the propagating of the gospel of God.

Healing of the Leper (1:40–45)

With this story Mark hints at the religious ramifications of Jesus' ministry, especially his healings, and how these may lead to conflict with the religious authorities.

What is known as leprosy in the Bible is not Hansen's disease. Instead the term is used to refer to a variety of skin diseases. Leviticus 13:45–46 shows the lengths to which someone afflicted with it has to go to avoid contaminating others: he had to wear torn clothes, leave his hair unkempt, wear a mask to cover the lower part of his face, and cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" in order to ward people off. He also had to live in colonies, separated from society. More burdensome was the religious meaning of such a dreaded disease. It was regarded as incurable, being a result of God's judgment (see Num 12:9–15; 2 Chron 26:16–21; cf. also the telling remark in 2 Kings 5:7). Such a person could not appear before God in the Temple. With this background, we can understand the desperation that drove the leper to meet Jesus and thus violate some social customs. Instead of standing afar and calling to Jesus, this leper goes to him, falls poignantly on his knees and beseeches Jesus to heal him (v. 40).

Jesus shows his compassion (see excursus) and does the surprising thing by touching him, thus breaking a taboo. Moreover, Jesus declares him clean. To show the efficacy of Jesus' declaration, Mark uses his favorite word "immediately." If Jesus can declare someone clean, what becomes the role of the priest, since in the OT he is the only one who can pronounce a leper clean (Lev 13:2–6)? With this, we come to the ominous note in vv. 43–44.

Excursus: Was Jesus Incensed or Compassionate?

The attitude of Jesus towards this breaking of an important social custom is occluded by a textual uncertainty: whether Jesus was incensed or compassionate (v. 41). Many commentators choose to follow the reading *orgistheis*,¹¹ found in manuscript D (*Codex Bezae*) and supported by some

11. This means "being incensed." See France 2002: 115; Guelich 1989: 72; Marcus 2000: 206; for a contrary view, see Collins 2007: 177, 179; Gundry 1993: 95; Metzger 1994: 76.

old Latin manuscripts. Their decision is based mainly on the consideration that it is the harder reading and *splanchnistheis*¹² is therefore to be construed as introduced by later scribes to ameliorate a difficult reading. The reading adopted by NA28 (*splanchnistheis*) and followed by the NRSV is not without its strengths. First of all, an overwhelming majority of manuscripts support this reading. This weight of external attestation, which is early and wide, should not be easily dismissed. Secondly, D is a rather eccentric manuscript.¹³ When D is the only Greek manuscript that offers support, we should be wary of the reading. Thirdly, elsewhere in Mark 3:5 and 10:14, the potentially embarrassing description of Jesus' anger has not been tampered with in the manuscript tradition. If scribes purportedly introduced an "easier" reading at 1:41 because of the potentially embarrassing reference to Jesus' anger, one would have expected them to do the same in the later two passages. But this did not happen. Finally, *orgistheis* could be the "easier" reading after all, in that it chimes in better with *embrim samenos*¹⁴ just two verses down. We will adopt the reading *splanchnistheis* in our commentary.

The word *embrimaomai* in v. 43 is often used to describe the uncontrollable rage or fury of animals. Why is this word used of Jesus? Was it the failure of the leper to follow an express order that Jesus in his prescience saw? Was it the ravages of disease? Was it the temple authorities? Mark does not tell us, but what may be instructive here is to think of the narrative function of such a tantalizing description of Jesus' emotion. Mark is probably foreshadowing unpleasant conflict to come in his narrative. The phrase "testimony to them" (v. 44) may be discussed in this connection. The word "them" may possibly bring together Moses and the priest to form one group. More probably, it refers to the entire group of priests, without implicating Moses.¹⁵ What is more crucial is the determination of the force of the Greek dative *autois*. Is it to be construed as a dative of advantage (i.e., "to them") or disadvantage (i.e., "against them")? If it is the former, the testimony is meant to show that all the regulations of the priests have been complied with (see Lev 13–14).¹⁶

12. This means "being compassionate."

13. Metzger and Ehrman 2005: 71–73.

14. This means "warning sternly."

15. Hooker 1983: 82.

16. Gnilka 1978: 91; Marcus 2000: 207.

If the latter, the testimony is meant to indict them.¹⁷ The two other occurrences of such a phrase in Mark are found in 6:11 and 13:9, and they are all used in contexts of opposition. This prompts us to treat the dative here as a dative of disadvantage. So the healing of the leper becomes damning evidence either for the priests' unbelief in Jesus' ministry (but Mark has not said anything about this yet) or the failure (whoever these people are) to effect true purity in Israel.

Why is there a need for silence in v. 44? The next verse gives the effect of the leper's failure to keep Jesus' injunction, and this may be regarded as a partial explanation of Jesus' charge: the resultant publicity prevented Jesus from entering villages openly. However, it has also been suggested that Jesus does not want to be misconstrued as challenging the Temple authorities, since it is their function to make ritual purity possible.¹⁸ But such a proposal is problematic, because the priest does not play the role of a miracle worker but a certifier. Accordingly, Jesus' healing would not have been perceived as challenging the priest's authority. It may be better to look at the immediate Markan context, and at the larger interest Mark has in Jesus' commands to silence (i.e., the secrecy motif).¹⁹ As the Markan narrative unfolds, it will be seen that this motif has an important theological function. The meaning of Jesus' identity and ministry (incorporating here the spectacular healings and miracles) can only be grasped fully in the light of the cross.

CONFLICT WITH RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES (2:1—3:6)

Up to this stage, Mark has shown the reader the critical significance of Jesus' ministry. He has also narrated the increasing popularity of Jesus. However, Jesus does not have the requisite social credentials. This sets the stage for conflict. Mark 2:1—3:6 brings together five controversy stories to paint with a broad brush the key issues between Jesus and the religious leaders. These stories also foreshadow the final conflict in Jerusalem.

Mark uses structural devices, so as to help his audience better to appreciate and remember the critical points. An influential proposal suggests that a concentric (chiastic) structure may be found. In this scheme, the first story corresponds with the last, or fifth in this case, the second with the fourth, and the third stands as the center piece (see Diagram 1).²⁰ The center piece reveals the real cause for the disagreements between Jesus and the

17. France 2002: 120; Guelich 1989: 77.

18. Crossan 1991: 322.

19. Collins 2007: 179.

20. Dewey 1980: 109–30.

There also appears to be an intensification of hostility as the stories progress, climaxing in the plot to put Jesus to death by widely-divergent groups.

Healing of the Paralytic 2:1–12

This first conflict story may be regarded as setting the tone for the other conflict stories. The main issue between Jesus and the religious authorities revolves around his claims, which they think threatened their inherited traditions. In some ways, the story also foreshadows the final conflict with the religious authorities in Jerusalem. In the passage about the Jewish hearing of Jesus (14:55–65), the twin themes of blasphemy and the Son of Man are found (14:62, 64), just as they are in this episode. Notably, Jesus refers to himself as the “Son of Man” for the first time. This is Jesus’ preferred way of referring to himself, and carries important christological freight.

Capernaum is the setting. Depending on how the Greek phrase *en oikō* (v. 1) is construed, it may refer either to Jesus’ home²² (so NRSV) or Peter’s house (cf. 1:29).²³ As usual, a crowd gathers. Roofs of houses in first-century Galilee might be reached easily by the wooden ladder outside.²⁴ Since they were thatched and made of mud, they could be dug through easily. Such an inconsiderate act would usually have led to angry reprisals, but Mark does not tell us the reaction of the crowd or the owner of the house because his focus is elsewhere. We may assume that the paralytic was participatory in the initiative to seek Jesus. Hence, Mark tells us that Jesus sees their (i.e., the whole group) faith, but speaks to the paralytic (v. 5).

Jesus’ response in v. 5 appears somewhat inappropriate, but it becomes comprehensible when we bear in mind the biblical assumptions that (i) the greater problem bedeviling humanity is their estrangement from God (i.e., sin); and (ii) sin and sickness may be related. The latter is amply attested in the literature of the ancient world and the OT (e.g., Deut 28:27; Ps 107:17–18). A rabbinic saying runs: “A sick person does not arise from his sickness until all his sins are forgiven him” (*b. Ned.* 41a). Hence, healing and forgiveness often intersect (e.g., Ps 41:3–4; 103:3; Isa 38:17; 53:4–6).²⁵ However, this is not always the case (cf. John 9:2–3), as there may be other factors at work.

Jesus’ speech caught the attention of the scribes. These were people of letters, as the Greek *grammateus* makes clear. However, in the Jewish

22. Collins 2007: 184 (tentatively).

23. France 2002: 122; Marcus 2000: 215.

24. Roubos 1986: 350–92.

25. Brown 1995.

context, the primary body of learning was the Torah, and hence, scribes in Mark's Gospel were people who knew and taught the Torah.²⁶ From their point of view, only God can forgive sins.²⁷ So they criticize Jesus inwardly: "He's blaspheming" (v. 7). To be sure, the priest has been given the role to pronounce God's forgiveness through the rituals of the Temple. But it is unlikely Jesus is challenging the Temple here.²⁸ In fact, as the drift of the narrative indicates, Jesus' pronouncement is deemed to have arrogated to himself the sole prerogative of God.²⁹

Blasphemy in the OT is a capital offense (Lev 24:10–16). Although there was no technical definition of what constituted blasphemy in Jesus' day, the extant Jewish evidence connects it to speaking against God, pronouncing his unique name or claiming the unique prerogatives of God (*m. Sanh.* 7:5).³⁰ Forgiveness of sins is one such prerogative (Exod 34:6–7; Isa 43:25; 44:22). This is reinforced continually through the annual Yom Kippur festival. However, there may be one instance where forgiveness of sins is attributed to a human being. In a fragment from the Qumran caves (4Q242), it is said that a Jewish diviner (or exorcist?) forgave Nabonidus's sin. Because of its fragmentary nature, its meaning remains highly debated.³¹ Alternatively, this fragment may be regarded as the exception that proves the rule. All this means the religious leaders' response in Mark is historically credible.

Mark's phrase *ei mē heis ho theos* (v. 7) should be translated "except 'God is one.'" This clumsy construction serves to make reference to the Shema (Deut 6:4–5), which functions somewhat like a Jewish creed. The Shema confesses that for Israel there is only one God, and she is to love this one God with her entire being.³² From the way the Markan narrative is set up, Jesus' claim is interpreted by the scribes to have transgressed the sacred boundaries of their confession of one God. Jesus is therefore regarded as having put himself in an equal position with that one God. The Shema, therefore, should be the frame of reference for understanding this controversy.

Jesus' reply to the scribe's unspoken accusation (v. 9) has puzzled many readers. It is often assumed Jesus wants to demonstrate that it is easier to talk

26. Saldarini 1988: 152.

27. This implies we are not taking the verb of v. 5 as a "divine passive." Jesus then becomes the one who offers forgiveness. See France 2002: 125–26; cf. the fine study of Hofius 1994: 125–43.

28. Klostermann 1950: 23; Witherington 2001: 115.

29. Collins 2007: 185; Gundry 1993: 112.

30. On Jewish attitudes, see Bock 1998.

31. See discussion in Hägerland 2011: 154–58; and Hogan 1992: 149–57.

32. See Tan 2008: 181–206.

(i.e., to pronounce forgiveness of sins) than to act (i.e., perform a healing),³³ but is there more than meets the eye? Furthermore, it is puzzling that Jesus would seek to demonstrate his authority to forgive by healing, since the ability to work miracles was not understood as proving that one possessed the special prerogative of God. As the narrative plays itself out, *Jesus does not answer which is easier*, but proceeds to demonstrate his authority by healing. Perhaps the way forward is to think of Jesus as conveying the notion that the healing and the offer of forgiveness are regarded as closely integrated, and not dichotomized. Both are beyond human ability, and come only as a gracious gift from God. This falls in line with much prophetic expectation, where the concept of eschatological shalom involves both reconciliation and renewal (Jer 33:6–9; Hos 2:16–23). But for those who have eyes only for the tangible, the healing will speak to them.

There is also an implicit challenge to the scribes' theological understanding. If Jesus has indeed blasphemed by usurping God's authority, how could he have healed, since God is presumably the one behind the healing?

The phrase "Son of Man" is used in Mark's Gospel for the first time in v. 10. Much has been discussed about this title;³⁴ we offer here just a summary of the key proposals, and indicate the stance taken.³⁵ This phrase has been understood as a circumlocution for "I," as referring to generic man or to an indefinite man, or even to a special class of men. It has also been understood as a messianic title. The view adopted here is that in its Aramaic form it can refer to man in general. In Dan 7:13, however, the phrase (without the article) is used poetically to contrast the beasts representing the earthly empires with the human figure that stands for God's purpose and kingdom. Because of the importance of the book of Daniel in Jewish speculation on the end time, this literary figure is often utilized to speak of the climax of the kingdom story and the deliverance of God's beleaguered people. In fact in the Similitudes of Enoch (*1 En* 37–71, dating unsure)³⁶ and *4 Ezra* (post AD 70), this figure is regarded as the Messiah. What all this means is that Dan 7:13 becomes the seedbed for the understanding of the role of the Son of Man in some circles, and may thus add new possibilities to an ordinary phrase.

With this serving as background, we can then argue: (1) that Jesus uses this designation to refer to himself (always with the definite article);³⁷

33. Marcus 2000: 217–18; Stein 2008: 120.

34. See discussion in Burkett 1999; and recently, Hurtado and Owen 2011.

35. This is similar to Dunn 2003: 759–61.

36. See discussion in Boccaccini 2007: 415–98.

37. See Hurtado's conclusion in Hurtado and Owen 2011: 166: "the expression's

(2) that he may have in mind the figure of Dan 7:13 as the exposition of the meaning of his ministry; (3) that such a term does not automatically convey the above idea, as the ordinary usage may refer to man in general; (4) that Jesus sees fit to remain ambiguous for important reasons; (5) that he sometimes also pours in new content to the meaning of the phrase such that even the usage of Dan 7:13–14 cannot fully explain it; and (6) that there is a profound convergence between his kingdom message and his self-understanding, because in both instances, hiddenness/ambiguity is a characteristic which could only be penetrated by faith. This is precisely how Mark presents Jesus, and it will be demonstrated as his narrative progresses.

To be sure, Dan 7:13–14 does not mention the authority to forgive sins. However, since the Son of Man is the figure who brings an end to the dominions of the world and unleashes the eschatological age, it is not difficult to extend this further to suppose he may be connected with the reconciliation between God and his people, a concept within which forgiveness is to be understood.

Without allowing the details to cloud the main point, we may say this controversy story highlights a major aspect of Jesus' work: the forgiveness of sins. What has troubled Israel throughout her checkered history, namely the problem of sin, may potentially be resolved by Jesus. That said, we must not miss how the story is presented. Some scribes perceive Jesus' actions as arrogating to himself the unique prerogative of God. There is no attempt on the part of Jesus either to clarify this or to avoid being misunderstood. Every dutiful Jew would have the obligation to do so when it concerns so important a tenet of the community as the Shema. Instead, Jesus provokes the scribes further by claiming to have the authority, as the Son of Man, to forgive sins, and backs it up with healing. The exclamation of the crowd serves, then, to highlight Jesus' uniqueness (v. 12). So an implicit question is raised. It is not about Jesus' status vis-à-vis the Temple. Instead, it is about his claims and the one God confessed in Israel's Shema.

primary linguistic function is to refer [to Jesus], not to characterize . . . it is the *sentence/saying* that conveys the intended claim or statement, *not the son of man's expression it-self*.² This is brilliantly put but we would like to add that the expression was not plucked out of thin air, meaning it was used because it could potentially carry a profound freight that was bequeathed by tradition. In other words, saying "The Son of Man is so-and-so" conveys more significance to the community than saying "Jesus is (or I am) so-and-so." This being the case, the referential directions run in both ways: Daniel 7 and Jesus of Nazareth. The phenomenon shows creativity at work, a creativity that is consistent with the type that surrounds also Jesus' kingdom message. All this means the tradition is mined for creative speech and act, which in turn breathes new life into the tradition.