Mark 1:1-8

[1]The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ (the Son of God). [2] As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way. [3] A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'" [4] John (the) Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [5] People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. [6] John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He fed on locusts and wild honey. [7] And this is what he proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. [8] I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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Context

As noted in a previous commentary, the gospels of the Season of Advent follow a particular pattern. For the Second Sunday of Advent the Gospel readings focus on the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist as the precursor or forerunner of Jesus, the one who came to "Prepare the Way of the Lord," by calling the people to turn back to God. The readings often include passages from the Old Testament, particularly from the book of Isaiah. This Sunday the first reading is taken from Isaiah 40 and succinctly proclaims: "*A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the LORD! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!*" All of these first reading OT prophecies are associated with John the Baptist, and his role as the one who fulfills these prophecies is emphasized. Like Isaiah, John the Baptist's message was one of repentance and conversion, a fitting Advent theme.

Mark 1:1-13 is generally considered the "prologue" for this oldest of the gospels. The reason for this designation is that these verses supply the key to the entire Gospel by introducing the central figure of the account. In accordance with the prophetic word, Jesus appears in the wilderness of Judea, summoned by the call of John the Baptist. His baptism and sojourn there constitute his first public acts

and provide the foundation for his subsequent ministry. The Gospel of Mark will be the account of Jesus' encounter with evil in the world. Throughout Jesus decisively encounters Satan and receives help from God. This is what it means for Jesus to go out to the wilderness.

The motif of the wilderness dominates the prologue. The prophetic note of the voice of one crying in the wilderness (v.3) serves to introduce John the Baptist, whose ministry in the Jordan valley attracts Jesus of Nazareth (vv.4–8). Situating John "in the wilderness" (v.4) binds the account of his ministry to Isaiah's prophetic announcement of Mark 1:2–3, which quotes the Isaiah 40 verse mentioned above.

The lower Jordan valley where the baptisms are taking place is part of the wilderness scene and was called "desert" in both the Old and New Testament periods. After the baptism of Jesus, he remains in the wilderness where he was tempted (vv.12–13). Thus in vv. 1–13 the wilderness is the location common to the several events related, and serves to underline the unity of the initial section. In v. 14 the locale changes: Jesus leaves the wilderness and returns to Galilee to begin his ministry following the imprisonment of John.

In the prologue, the principal unifying term is "wilderness." But there is also repeated reference to the person of the Spirit within this section (vv. 8, 10, 12). The allusion to the one who baptizes with the Spirit in the summary of John's message (v. 8) prepares for the reference to the Spirit at Jesus' baptism, vv. 9–11, while the role of the Spirit in the temptation (vv. 12–13) associates this unit with the previous ones. The fact that the Spirit is introduced into the record only rarely beyond the prologue suggests that Mark has consciously unified his opening statement by a threefold reference to the Spirit.

The most striking characteristics of the Marcan prologue are its abruptness and its silences. This is surprising because the one introduced is not an ordinary person but the Son of God, acknowledged by the heavenly voice, who in the initial phases of his public ministry provokes wonder and astonishment by the authority of his teaching and the power of his mighty acts. The evangelist makes no attempt to provide an historical explanation for John's presence in the wilderness or for Jesus' appearance before John. The prophetic voice and the Son of God appear, veiled in mystery from the very beginning.

Yet their appearance in the wilderness is full of meaning precisely because the veil has been removed and the significance which it has in the divine plan of redemption has been disclosed. Mark openly declares this in the initial verse of his account. Accordingly, with a few broad strokes the prologue discloses Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God; Jesus is joined to the people of Israel in the waters of the Jordan, the Spirit confirms his divine mission, and quickly, Jesus is engaged with the forces of evil. All of this in the wilderness.

Perhaps reading too much into the stark opening prologue, it is interesting that the OT scroll we know as the Book of Numbers, is not its name in the original Hebrew. There its name is *Bemidbar*, "In the Wilderness." It is a book that moves the people from God's covenant at Sinai, through the wilderness and all its encounters with evil, up to the banks of the Jordan and the Promised Land. In this gospel, St. Mark moves from the promise of covenant's fulfillment, there in the wilderness at the banks of the Jordan River, not to the Promised Land, but to the Promised Redeemer.

This Reading at the Start of Advent. As noted in last week's commentary, the season of Advent has its own goals, purpose, and sense. That does not include jumping right into the infancy narratives. While one might argue that is where the story of Jesus begins in "time," it is not a complete idea to describe what is unfolding in "time" but has been planned since the foundation of the world. The danger of beginning with the infancy narratives is that the real story of salvation can get lost in the all-too-familiar Christmas scenes. Those scenes will be celebrated in their own time and place – the Christmas season. But this is Advent.

On the First Sunday of Advent each year, we hear some of Jesus' teachings about the "End Times." In each case, the text is taken from a passage that comes from the end of Gospels when Jesus seems to be speaking about apocalyptic events. The Second and Third Sundays of Advent focus on the preaching of John the Baptist. The emphasis is on the role of John as Herald. Finally, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent the Gospel reading relates to some of the events that immediately preceded Jesus' birth, including Joseph's dreams (Year A: Matt 1:18-24), the Annunciation by the angel Gabriel (Year B: Luke 1:26-38), and the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (Year C: Luke 1:39-45).

The Gospel readings of the four Sundays of Advent come to us in reverse chronology. We start with the end of time. We continue to the period when Jesus was an adult. We end in the days before his birth. Like a funnel, Advent opens with a giant theme, the grandness of Christ the King, and it ends with a specific one, the child lying in a Bethlehem manger. And so we begin not with the "life" of Jesus as a chronology, but *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.*

Here at the beginning of Mark's Gospel we discover, not the manger scene, but the meaning of a gospel as proclamation, and the importance of the titles "Christ" and "Son of God." Mark reminds us that *gospel* originally meant "good news." Christianity did not begin with a new book. Its Scripture was that of the Jewish people. Christianity began with a "new message" about what God known through that Scripture had done in Jesus Christ. The good news itself is a simple message of salvation in Jesus.

At the beginning of a new Liturgical Year, it is good to be reminded that Advent is a season of preparation and trust that the *good news*, the *gospel*, has begun in the promises of God, taken form and shape in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and will come to fruition in the second coming of our Lord and Savior.

Commentary

Questions At The Beginning

Mark begins his writing with a statement by the narrator: "*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ (the Son of God)*." For the people in Mark's narrative the realization of who Jesus is will come only in starts and stops. As readers of this gospel, right from the beginning, we are given the answer to the question, "Who is he?" We already know this narrative is good news for us; news about what will happen to us and for us. Yet even as the opening answers big questions, we are left with other important questions, ones that will help us to plumb the depth of this good news.

Question 1: What is the "*beginning of the gospel*"? Is the beginning just the prologue (vv. 1-13 or vv. 1-15 where the word *euangelion* forms "bookends")? Is the entire book the beginning of the Gospel? There are approximately 10 different scholarly positions on this simple phrase. For my own part, given Mark's pattern of moving the narrative along with little gloss, enhancement, or embellishment, I think Mark's intention seems best seen by reading vv. 1–4 as follows: the good news *concerns* Jesus the Christ, but it *begins* with the wilderness prophet John.

The word "beginning" (*archē*) has a biblical suggestion which lends a grand ring to the opening phrase – just as John the Evangelist opens with "*In the beginning…*" Each usage serves to recall that it is God who initiates redemption and salvation. Mark might begin with John the Baptist and his wilderness prophetic role, but it only serves to point to the activity of God in providing salvation for all people. The prophetic testimony cited in vv. 2–3 finds its fulfillment both in the ministry of John and in the coming of Jesus into the wilderness. The emphasis thus falls upon the unity of God's action in its historical unfolding; the whole complex of events from the appearance of John to the beginning of Jesus' ministry is a single movement, the beginning of the gospel.

Question 2: What is the "gospel" (good news) of Jesus Christ? R.T. France (*The Gospel of Mark,* NIGTC, 53) writes about the grammar: "The genitive [Jesus Christ] may, in theory, be read either as subjective ('the gospel proclaimed by Jesus Christ') or objective ('the gospel about Jesus Christ'). Some commentators take up positions on one side or the other, but most prefer to have it both ways" . While France thinks it is more natural to read the genitive as objective and notes that it is the more normal usage in the rest of the NT, he also notes that vv. 14-15 make clear that the good news is also preached by Jesus.

Schweizer (*The Good News According to Mark*) states: "The Greek word *euaggelion* denotes 'good news,' primarily of a victory in battle. This term figures prominently in stories of the lives of the Roman emperors who were honored as gods" (p. 30). James Edwards (*The Gospel According to Mark,* 24) expands on Schweizer's comments:

> In 9 B.C., within a decade of Jesus' birth, the birthday of Caesar Augustus (63 B.C. - A.D. 14) was hailed as *euangelion* (pl.). Since he was hailed as a god, Augustus' "birthday signaled the beginning of Good News for the world." In the Greco-Roman world the word always appears in the plural, meaning one good tiding among others; but in the NT *euangelion* appears only in the singular: *the* good news of God in Jesus Christ, beside which there is no other. The concept of "good news" was not limited to military and political victories, however. In the prophet Isaiah "good news" is transferred to the inbreaking of God's final saving act when peace, good news, and release from oppression will be showered on God's people (Isa 52:7; 61:1-3). For Mark, the advent of Jesus is the beginning of the fulfillment of the "good news" heralded by Isaiah."

Robert Fowler's *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* stresses that first century rhetoric was meant to do something to the hearers. He offers this comparison:

> At the most superficial level, the aims of the joke and of the Gospel of Mark are similar: both seek to do something to the hearer or reader. In particular, both stories use covert means to induce an understanding or a belief in the reader or hearer. What they then do with the belief they have elicited differs immensely. The joke induces a belief to deceive the hearer only momentarily, until the deception is dropped and the belief exploded in an instant of comic revelation. The Gospel of Mark is also designed to elicit belief, but a belief that bids to have a profound and lasting significance for the reader's life and to persist long after the initial encounter with the story. In other words, both stories use the rhetorical resources of narrative to affect the reader, but the aim of Mark's Gospel is more difficult to achieve. The joke is designed to seduce us temporarily; the Gospel is designed to seduce us permanently [p. 10]

Brian Stoffregen writes:

> I think that *euaggelion* is word that evokes a response. It is like shouting, "We won!" or "Victory is ours." When game show contestants are told that they've won, there is shouting and jumping and waving of arms. The words are more than just information. They are an event that engulfs the hearers.
>
> What if these opening words were paraphrased: "The beginning of the **victory** of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God"? How might that color our reading/hearing of the rest of the story? I think that, among other things, we might be better able to see the many ironies in this story of Jesus – the many times when the **victor** appears much more like a **victim**.

Perhaps Mark's already anticipates how many times the disciples will not understand the terms "Christ" and "Son of God" and this purposely used *euaggelion* at the beginning to remind them all that happens is "good news."

Question 3: What was meant by "Christ"? Is it a title? Is it part of Jesus' name?

- The Greek *christos* is used to translate "anointed" or "Messiah." It might have made sense to a Greek audience. But it would be hampered by its first century usage to refer to wrestlers who had "greased up" before their match to make it more difficult for their opponents to gain a tactical hold on them during the match.
- The uses of "Messiah" or "anointed (one)" in the OT do not help much in understanding Jesus as Messiah.
- The word is used of "the anointed priests" (Leviticus 4:3, 5, 16, 6:22; 2 Maccabees 2:10)
- The word is used of the king. (Throughout 1 and 2 Samuel)
- The word is used of Cyrus, the Persian King (Is 45:1)
- The word is used of the prophets (Ps 105:15; 1 Chr 16:22)
- Often, in the Psalms, it refers to God giving victory to a king (his "anointed") (2:2; 18:50; 20:6; 132:17?)

Would the Jews have understood the term "Christ" to refer to a conquering king? an anointed priest? a prophet? What seems to be widely accepted by scholars is that there was no one single understanding of "messiah" by first century Judaism – certainly not as modern day Christians understand the term.

Question 4: What is meant by "Son of God?" This phrase (two words in Greek *huiou theou*) is missing in many ancient manuscripts – which is why you often see the phrase in parentheses. When Biblical scholars consider such things, normally shorter readings are to be preferred over longer ones. It is more likely that copyists would add to a text rather than to delete. However, the omission of these words might be explained by an oversight in copying. The first six words in Greek all end with "*ou*," so a copyist may have jumped to the last "*ou*" before he should have.

It's also noted that the Greek of these opening verses do not have a definite article ("the"). The same is true when the centurion could be confessing: "Truly, this man was **a** son of God" (15:39). The demons, however, declare: "You are **the** Son of **the** God" (3:11) and "Jesus, (a) Son of **the** Most High God" (5:7). In contrast, definite articles are always found in the phrase: "**the** Son of **the** human". A grammatical argument can be made for supplying "the" in the phrase "Son of God." I present this bit of grammar so that we might understand how Mark's first readers/hearers might have understood the phrase.

If it were Greeks hearing this for the first time, I would think that their reference would be to their mythological children of gods. For example, Hercules was a son of the god Zeus and the human mother Alcmene.

A Jewish audience, based on Psalm 2, might think that "a son of God" (v. 7) was a king. Note also that "anointed" (*christos* in LXX) is used in v. 2.

These words do something to the hearers. They create a picture in their minds from their own experiences of someone called "Son of God." It is likely that this picture at the beginning is a wrong one – and Mark will seek to change it through his story.

John or Jesus?

[2] As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way. [3] A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'"

We often interpret vv. 2-3 in light of Matthew and Luke where they clearly refer to John the Baptist. John is presented before the OT quotes are given. However, in Mark, the only person who has been named prior to the quotes is Jesus. Note also, for those who have difficulty memorizing scripture, Mark's quote is a hybrid: v. 2 seems to come from Ex 23:20 (LXX) and Mal 3:1 (MT) and v. 3 from Isaiah 40:3, but not quoted exactly.

Some scholars do some interesting investigation based on the phrase "As it is written" (*kathos gegraptai*) that begins v.2. They note that such a phrase is never used at the start of a new sentence in the Septuagint (LXX) or the New Testament. But when it is used, the phrase is an introductory formula, bridging what has preceded and the quotation that follows. The only preceding person is Jesus. Grammatically, this means that vv. 2-3 should be connected to Jesus rather than John the Baptist. While that is all well and good, one must be aware that Luke spends a lot of effort fixing Mark's grammar when he seems to take over Mark's narrative.

In Scripture classes I have often read the parallel passage from Luke with the high tone of a university educator. I read Mark's prologue with the stereotypical voice of a New Jersey longshoreman. The difference reflects the grammatical acumen of the two writers. With that in mind, I'd suggest the scholarly twisting of "As it is written…" should give way to a more practical answer: Mark is pointing to John the Baptist regardless of where his grammar points.

It is also good to keep in mind is that the proper context for understanding the gospel is the promise of future salvation found in the latter half of Isaiah. The citation in vv.2-3 is a composite quotation from Ex. 23:20; Mal. 3:1 and Isa. 40:3. It evokes the image of the forerunner Elijah. In the exegetical tradition of the rabbis these texts had already been combined, in the conviction that the "messenger of the covenant" (Ex. 23:20) is Elijah (Mal. 3:1; 4:5).

Mark's first statement is from the Law, and agrees verbatim with the text of Ex. 23:20 in the Septuagint. It is enriched by a formulation originating in the Hebrew text of Mal. 3:1, although the first person has been altered to the second in the interest of the messianic interpretation of the passage. It is important to note that all three OT passages, blended in this fashion, are all related to the wilderness tradition and have a significant function in the prologue itself. Ex. 23:20 contains God's promise to send his messenger before the people on a first exodus through the wilderness to Canaan. In Isa. 40:3 the messenger announces the second exodus through the wilderness to the final deliverance prepared for God's people. In both the citations from "the Law and the Prophets" the theme of an exodus through the wilderness is dominant and appropriate to Mark's purpose. The blended citation functions to draw attention to three factors which are significant to the evangelist in the prologue: the herald, the Lord and the wilderness. In the verses which immediately follow, the significance of each of these elements is emphasized by Mark who sees in the coming of John and Jesus to the wilderness the fulfillment of the promised salvation of which the prophet Isaiah had spoken. In stressing the element of fulfillment at the beginning of his account Mark conforms the narrative to the apostolic preaching, in which the theme of fulfillment was of strategic importance.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist is a crucial figure in the history of revelation and redemption. In retrospect, his appearance in the wilderness was the most important event in the life of Israel for more than three hundred years. The absence of a prophet throughout this period had been interpreted to signify that the prophetic task was accomplished. Yet all clung to the hope that the "faithful prophet" would appear, the Prophet like Moses, whose coming would signal the events of the "last days" (Deut. 18:15–19; 1 Macc. 4:42–46; 14:44). The very fact of John's appearance was an eschatological event of the first magnitude, and signified that the decisive turning point in the history of salvation was at hand. It was

John, the preacher of radical repentance, who initiated the messianic crisis. To speak of the gospel of Jesus is to speak of the good news which began with John.

From Mark's perspective, John is important not for his own sake but as the beginning of the unfolding drama of redemption which centers on Jesus of Nazareth. The brevity of Mark's presentation of John serves to project into sharp relief two features of the Baptist's ministry which were of special significance to him: (1) John's career was the result of divine appointment in fulfillment of prophecy; (2) John bore witness to the supreme dignity and power of the Messiah, whose coming was near.

Briefly and concisely vv. 4–8 describe the Baptist's ministry. Mark focuses attention on three elements in John's ministry, each of which is related to the OT prophecies with which he has prefaced his Gospel: (1) John was a man of the wilderness; (2) he performed his ministry of baptism in the wilderness, and so prepared the way of the Lord; (3) he announced one greater than himself who was to come after him. Each detail of the five verses is related to one or more of these three emphases.

Those who heard John would not have failed to recognize the familiar prophetic call to repentance. But in response to his preaching John called for an action which was wholly novel—baptism in the Jordan River. It has been conjectured that John's baptism was derived from the Jewish practice of baptizing proselytes, or from the rites of initiation practiced at Qumran. No clear line of dependence can be shown in support of these theories. Baptism appears rather as a unique activity of this prophet, a prophetic sign so striking that John became known simply as "the Baptizer."

The absence of qualifying clauses makes it difficult to ascertain the exact nuance in the phrase, "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*." The biblical concept of repentance, however, is deeply rooted in the wilderness tradition. In the earliest stratum of OT prophecy, the summons to "turn" basically connotes a return to the original relationship with the Lord. This means a return to the beginning of God's history with his people, a return to the wilderness. Essential to the prophetic concern with repentance in Hosea, Amos and Isaiah is the concept of Israel's time in the wilderness as the period of true sonship to God, a status into which the Lord is going to lead his people once again in a future time. The correlation between the wilderness and repentance was not John's innovation and must have been understood by his contemporaries. John's call to repentance and his call to come out to him in the wilderness to be baptized are two aspects of the same reality. It is a call to renew sonship in the wilderness. The peculiar urgency in the call lies in the fact that the crisis of God's final act is close at hand.

The same correlation should be seen between baptism and the wilderness. The summons to be baptized in the Jordan meant that Israel must come once more to the wilderness. As Israel long ago had been separated from Egypt by a pilgrimage through the waters of the Red Sea, the nation is exhorted again to experience separation; the people are called to a second exodus in preparation for a new covenant with God. Both John's call to repentance and his baptism are intelligible as aspects of the prophetic tradition which expected the final salvation of God to be unveiled in the wilderness.

Repentance in John's proclamation is conditioned by the action of God, who is about to enter history in a definitive fashion. The opportunity and urgency for repentance lie in the fact that the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit is close at hand. As the people heed John's call and go out to him in the desert far more is involved than contrition and confession. They return to a place of judgment, the wilderness, where the status of Israel as God's beloved son must be re-established in the exchange of pride for humility. The willingness to return to the wilderness signifies the acknowledgment of Israel's history as one of disobedience and rebellion, and a desire to begin once more. John's proclamation of the forgiveness of sins provides the assurance that God extends grace as well as judgment. It is in the context of judgment and grace that the people of Jerusalem and Judea go out to the wilderness to be baptized by John.

John's Message

"One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. [8] I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John's message is telescoped to focus upon a single theme, the proclamation of a person still to come who will baptize the people with the Holy Spirit. As seen in the Notes, it is not clear what Mark means by this expression, nor is it clear that John understands the very messianic terms he uses – at least in their fullness. In referring to this new Baptizer, whose dignity overshadowed his own, John avoided traditional messianic terms. The precise identity of the Coming One remained hidden, apparently, even from John.

"To come after someone" is technical terminology for discipleship among the scribes and rabbis of the first century, and this usage is reflected in Jesus' summons to men to come, or follow after him (cf. Ch. 1:17). It is possible, therefore, that John is saying, "He who is coming is a follower of mine." Yet he affirms that he is not worthy of performing the most menial task, from which even the Hebrew slave was released, the removal of the master's sandals. In no stronger manner could the mystery and the dignity of the Coming One be emphasized.

The reference to the bestowal of the Spirit is appropriate to the wilderness context of John's proclamation. Isaiah describes Israel's trek in the wilderness as a march under the guidance of the Spirit of God (Isa. 63:11); it was the Spirit who gave the people rest in the wilderness (Isa. 63:14). As the first exodus had been going forth into the wilderness under the leadership of God's Spirit, the prophet announces the second exodus as a time when there will be a fresh outpouring of the Spirit (Isa. 32:15; 44:3). With this concept in mind John calls the people to the wilderness in anticipation of the fulfillment of the prophetic promise. It is this note of anticipation which Mark emphasizes by reducing John's message to two statements, both of which point forward to something to come. They affirm that John is the forerunner of the Messiah (Ch. 1:7) and that his baptism is a preparation for the messianic baptism to come (Ch. 1:8).

By introducing his Gospel with an account of the ministry of John, the evangelist re-creates for his own contemporaries the crisis of decision with which John had confronted all Israel. It is not enough to know who John was, historically. What is required is an encounter, through the medium of history, with that summons to judgment and repentance which John issued. Because the church recognized John's role in redemptive history as the pioneer of the kingdom of God, it accorded him a prominent place in the Gospel tradition. It refused to allow his memory to slip uninterpreted into the past, but made his witness a part of the continuing Christian proclamation. John was the first preacher of the good news concerning Jesus.

A Reflection

The Messiah is not coming to a people who are unprepared. The requirements of preparation include repentance, forgiveness of sin, and baptism – themes that are associated with Lent, but are well placed in Advent

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Notes

Mark 1:1 ***The beginning****:* The Greek *archē* (beginning) always signifies 'primacy' whether a) of time: *beginning (origin),* b) of place: *point of origin* or *departure,* or c) of rank: *power, dominion, kingdom, office.* Where it is used in the temporal sense of the point at which something begins, this point can be thought of as included in the temporal process or as prior, external to, and as the source and origin.

Son of God. There is debate as to whether or not this phrase is in the original text of Mark's gospel. The phrase is missing in some important early witnesses such as Sinaiticus. It is likely that in these

cases the phrase was accidentally omitted due to similar endings in the abbreviated forms of the sacred names: ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΥ ΙΥ ΧΥ ΥΥ ΘΥ. The last four words look similar because each is written as a *nomen sacrum* (divine title). The first corrector of Codex Sinaiticus (a) added ΥΥ ΘΥ before it left the scriptorium. However, not all ancient manuscripts wrote the word "Son" as the *nomen sacrum* ΥΥ, so this is not a conclusive argument. It is more likely that "Son of God" was accidentally dropped than that a copyist expanded the introductory title, especially since the major manuscripts (Vaticanus, Bezae, and the Freer Gospels) support the reading. The title appears at a few key points in Mark (1:11; 15:39), pointing to the unique, intimate relationship the messianic Jesus had with the Father.

Some scholars compares this beginning of Mark to the Priene inscription about Caesar Octavian from 9 BC, which also uses the term "good news" and speaks of his birth as "the birthday of the god [that] was for the world the beginning of his good news." This is "the epiphany or advent of a deity" (Witherington 2001:70). Mark's gospel is about a person who makes a similar yet distinct claim to deity, a divine figure different from those Mark's Gentile audience may have been accustomed to hearing about.

Mark 1:2 ***the prophet Isaiah.*** The passage names Isaiah in the introductory formula and cites wording from Exod 23:20, Mal 3:1, and Isa 40:3. Malachi 3 speaks of a prophet to come like Elijah (also 4:5–6), while Exod 23 points to a messenger (lit., "angel") who leads the way. After the citation, Mark comments only on the portion from Isaiah that describes activity "in the wilderness," which explains his introductory formula. This is the only OT citation made by the narrator in this Gospel (the other OT citations in this Gospel are made by Jesus).

Mark 1:6 ***clothed…***: The reference to John's clothing and diet serves to emphasize that he is a man of the wilderness. Both his garb and his food are those familiar to the wilderness nomad, and characterize life in the desert. The reference to the leather girdle about the Baptist's waist recalls a characteristic feature of another man of the wilderness, the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). The explicit identification of John with Elijah, however, is not made until Ch. 9:9–13.

Mark 1:7 ***untie the straps of his sandals.*** An important cultural detail; in later Judaism, untying the thong of someone's sandal was considered too menial a task for a Jewish slave to perform (*Mekilta Exodus* 21.2; *b. Ketubbot* 96a). If such an understanding goes back to John's time, then John was saying that the One to come is so great that John is not worthy even to perform the most menial of tasks for him. Thus, by comparison he is less than a slave. This kind of humility appears in John's Gospel (John 3:27–30).

Mark 1:8 ***he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*** This allusion to baptism is associated with the arrival of the eschaton in the OT (Isa 35:15; 44:3; Ezek 11:19; 36:26–27; 37:14; Joel 2:28–29 [3:1–2]). God's decisive act on behalf of humanity was announced as approaching in the baptizing ministry of the Messiah. This is why cleansing (water baptism) and repentance (what that cleansing represents) were part of John's ministry of preparation (1:4). Participation in John's baptism showed a readiness to receive the greater baptism that the coming One would bring. Preparation for forgiveness of sins leads to forgiveness when the greater One to whom John pointed is embraced. In OT thinking, when someone is cleansed and forgiven, God can indwell that person with the presence of his Spirit (Ezek 36:25–27). This summarizes Mark's gospel: cleansing, forgiveness, and the intimate divine presence all come through the Messiah to those who, in faith, embrace repentance and reorientation in their lives.

We should be a bit cautious here and not impose a range of meanings upon Mark's use of the Greek word *baptizo* which means "to wash" -- usually by dipping or immersing in water. Note its use in Mark 7:4. Symbolically, it can mean: "ritual purification," "immersion". What meaning(s) are implied by the phrase "He will baptize in the Holy Spirit"? How is that the similar or different from John's baptism in

water? I can't find that Jesus ever baptized in the Holy Spirit in the gospel of Mark. The word *pneuma* ("spirit") occurs 23 times.

Only 4 of those include the word *hagios* ("Holy"):

- Jesus will baptize in the Holy Spirit (1:8)
- Blaspheming against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable (3:29)
- David spoke by the Holy Spirit (12:36)
- The Holy Spirit will speak for those who are brought to trial (13:11)

Two others refer to Spirit (capital "S")

- Jesus' baptism (1:10)
- Jesus' being driven into the wilderness to be tempted (1:12).

Eleven times it is used with "unclean". Three more times, "unclean" or "evil" is implied. The "spiritual" theme in Mark centers more on the unclean ones – who often recognize Jesus and whom Jesus is able to cast out.

Perhaps the "baptism in the Holy Spirit" refers to the tempting persecution and suffering that the disciples would go through (13:9-13). Jesus uses "baptism" in reference to his suffering and death and indicates that at least James and John will undergo the same type of baptism (10:38-39).

There is no evidence in Mark that he understands "baptism in the Holy Spirit" in the manner assumed by Charismatics and Pentecostals.

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