

τὸ κατὰ Μᾶρκον εὐαγγέλιον

The Gospel According to Mark



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December 2017

Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam

This paper strives to be a scholarly introduction to the Gospel of Mark. It discusses issues of authorship, date, as well as its purpose and its relationship to the gospels of Matthew and Luke. It discusses the sources that St. Mark used and how the famed “Messianic secret” helps make Mark’s point about who Jesus is.

Note: *I had some difficulty with this paper. I found it hard to capture the depth, complexity and profound faith of Mark’s sixteen chapters in five pages. So my apologies to the readers as this paper is considerably longer than requested. I ask the reader’s forgiveness but I felt I needed to take this journey just as Mark’s readers most likely did themselves.*

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Section I: The Gospel “According” to Mark: Author and Audience

There is something very gutsy in the way the sacred author of this, Christianity’s first full account of the life of Jesus, writes his opening sentence: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...”

Authorship

Although we do not truly know who its author was, there is almost universal agreement among early Christian leaders (Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, and Tertullian) that the Gospel was written by John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. It was to John Mark’s mother’s home that Peter fled after having escaped from prison in Jerusalem (Acts 12: 1-17). After he escaped, Peter seems to have left the management of the Church in Jerusalem to James and most likely embarked on missionary work into Asia Minor and beyond, eventually to Rome.

There is evidence that John Mark, who for a while accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their journeys to Antioch, Cyprus and into Asia Minor, actually became much closer to Peter. Peter who was unschooled, relied on John Mark as his personal secretary and hence it would be reasonable to assume that John Mark accompanied Peter on his travels. It was from Peter then that John Mark learned first-hand of the stories of Jesus’ life, his teachings and the emerging theology of Christianity itself.

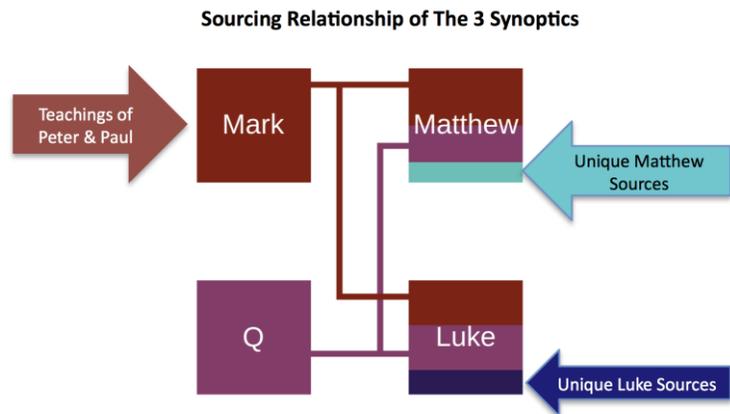
Although the evidence is not conclusive, there does seem to be sufficient backing for placing Peter in Rome somewhere in the mid 60’s AD. The apocryphal *Acts of Peter* and *The Letter to the Romans* of St Clement of Rome <c.96 AD> all have Peter leading the community of Christians there. Peter himself also seems to indicate this in his First Epistle:

“The Church here in Babylon <sic Rome>, united with you by God’s election, sends you her greeting, and so does my son, Mark” (1 Pet. 5:13)

John Mark had become so close to Peter that he is referred to as his son. Indeed, early Church tradition (e.g. Eusebius) was that Peter himself authorized Mark’s work and approved it as a true reflection of his preaching.

Today however most scholars are not as sure about the Gospel’s actual authorship. Whoever the author he was, he clearly was literate in Greek, the common commercial and social language of the Roman Empire at that time. Most scholars also agree that it was written between 65 and 70 A.D., probably in Rome shortly after the time of Paul’s and Peter’s presence there and most certainly before or at the start of the Jewish wars begun under General Vespasian and later under his son Titus who destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Most scholars also agree that Mark's was the first Gospel, preceding Matthew and Luke by about 20 years. In fact, whereas Mark pulled on existing verbal stories of Jesus that were then clarified and enhanced by the eye witness testimony of Peter and the theological opinions of Paul, Matthew and Luke borrowed heavily from Mark. They also had access to their own unique sources of Jesus stories, as well as to a further source of "Sayings of Jesus." This source is no longer available but has become known as the "Q" - short for the German word "Quelle" which means "The Source."



Mark's Audience

It is very clear that the Marcan author was not writing to Near Eastern Jews but mostly likely Gentiles and of these most probably Roman Christians. Evidence to support this theory stems from several literary phenomena unique to Mark:

- **Use of Latin:** Mark uses many more Latin words than the other Gospels that he assumes his readers understand such as:
 - *Mark 15:15 "flagellare"* – "And wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged <flagellare>, and handed Him over to be crucified."
 - *Mark 15:39 "centurion"* – "And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'"
 - *Mark 12:42 "quadrans"* – "A poor widow came, and she cast in two small brass coins, which equal a quadrans coin."
 - *Mark 15:6 "praetorium"* – "And the soldiers led him away within the court, which is the Praetorium; and they call together the whole band."
- **Aramaic Translations:** Mark conveniently translates Aramaic and Hebrew phrases and terms for his readers. If his readers were Jews there would be no need to do this.
 - *Mark 3:17* "James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means 'sons of thunder')"
 - *Mark 5:41* "He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha koum!' (which means 'Little girl, I say to you, get up!')."
 - *Mark 7:11* "...but you say, 'If a man says to *his* father or *his* mother, anything of mine you might have been helped by is Corban (that is to say, given to God)'."

- Mark 7:34 “He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, ‘Ephphatha!’ (which means ‘Be opened!’).”
- Mark 14:36 “‘Abba, Father,’ he said, ‘everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.’”
- Mark 15:22 “They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means ‘the place of the skull’).”
- Mark 15:34 “Then at three o’clock Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’.”
- **Jewish Customs explained:** Mark explains common Jewish customs and requirements under the law which most Jews would know.
 - Mark 7:3-4 “For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash the hands carefully, holding the tradition of the elders and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.”
 - Mark 14:12 “because they kept saying, ‘This must not happen during the festival. Otherwise, there’ll be a riot among the people’.”
 - Mark 15:42 “And now when the even was come, because it was the preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath.”
- **Referral to Roman Cultural Conventions and Current Events:**
 - The opening lines of this work as “good news” is a parody of Imperial proclamations that Romans would have immediately recognized.
 - He uses Roman rather than Hebrew time conventions. The Jewish daytime hours began with dawn and ended with sundown, which began the next day. The hours are seasonal, so the length of the daylight hours varied with the season of the year. The Romans began their day at midnight and counted 12 hours to high 12 noon and then 12 more hours from noon to the next midnight. We in the West today still keep Roman time.
 - Mark 6:48 “Seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them, at about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea; and He intended to pass by them.”
 - Mark 13:35 “Watch therefore, for you don’t know when the lord of the house is coming, whether at evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning...”
 - The tone and message of the Gospel are encouraging to Roman believers who were encountering persecution and expecting more as were the Christians in Rome

- Mark 8:34-38; “And having summoned the crowd with His disciples, He said to them, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and let him take up his cross, and let him follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to lose his soul? For what shall a man give as an exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in His Father’s glory with the holy angels.’”
- Mark 9:49 “For everyone will be tested with fire.”
- Mark 13:10-13) “On My account, you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all the nations. But when they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand what to say. Instead, speak whatever you are given at that time, for it will not be you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rise against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone on account of My name, but the one who perseveres to the end will be saved.”

Section II: The Roman Church’s *Sitz im Leben*

If Romans are the intended hearers of the Word, any useful exegesis of Mark therefore, would require us to place ourselves into the minds and context of his intended readers: the Christians in Rome around 60 to 70 AD. What was their *Sitz im Leben* or life situation?

Let’s start with Rome, the Eternal City, the seat of power and capital of the Empire, residence of some say up to 3 million inhabitants and home the Roman gods and of course the Emperor himself. It was grand and immense but also crowded and filthy. Most people lived in crammed, poorly built multi-level apartment buildings called *insulae* or “islands” that were prone to collapse and fire. It was so crowded that by Imperial edict wagons and carts were only allowed in the city after dark and had to be out before dawn. In spite of what we see in the movies, no one was allowed to drive a chariot in the streets, not even the Emperor; the only exceptions were the Vestal Virgins and a victorious General who had been granted a Triumph, and then only for his triumphal parade. Yet “all roads lead to Rome” as the saying goes, and indeed all governance, law, commerce, and social norms, including religious practices came and went by way of Rome. Along these same roads, the message of Christianity spread throughout the then known world, eventually to its center, Rome itself. Let us look more deeply into some other aspects of the City and this time-period, that have bearing on the editorial point of view of the author of Mark’s Gospel.

The Role of Religion in the Ancient World

During the first century, Rome was heavily influenced by Greek mythology. Most inhabitants of Rome were polytheistic, meaning they worshiped several different gods and demigods depending on their own ethnicity, personal situation and preferences. Rome contained many temples, shrines, and places of worship without a centralized ritual or practice. Romans were very comfortable with the idea that one God was as good as another. In fact, it was expected that different nations, tribes, philosophical perspectives, even families had their own local or specific “gods.” The only difference between Jupiter and Zeus after all, was that one was Roman and the other Greek. There were no Roman “missionaries” spanning the globe trying to convert anyone to the Roman pantheon.

Rome itself was a metropolis, home to many foreigners from many different cultures, including Jews; and to many other religious cults including Christians, members of several Egyptian cults such as the Cult of Isis, Greek cults such as the Cult of Mithras, etc. The religious practices of most of these groups were generally tolerated, as long as they went along with some basic Roman rituals as a sort of good faith gesture, such as paying homage to the Emperor; and as long as they did not cause trouble for others. Jews oddly enough were, for the most part, exempted from pagan rituals, but Christians were not and therein lay the source of growing animosity towards them.

The chart below is an attempt to put these religious influences into some perspective.

Religious Structure	Polytheism	Monolatry => Monotheism	Monotheism
Locus	Graeco-Roman, Egypt, Syria, Northern Barbarians	Israel & Jewish Diaspora	Christian Communities
Deity Type	Pantheon of celestial & chthonic gods and demigods	Celestial	Celestial, Trinitarian, God Incarnate
Basis of Faith	Mythology	The Law; Tanak	The Creed, Kerygma
<i>Theos Hypsistos</i>	Jupiter/Zeus, AmunRa, Others	YHWH	God the Father
Relationship of God(s) to humans	detached, fate driven, playing with pawns	Covenant with the nation, a suzerainty/vassal treaty. "I will be your God, you will be my people." (Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 31: 33)	Personal paternal love; "Abba"; sanctification thru grace
Expectation on humans	Adherence to cultic rituals,	Compliance to the law	Discipleship to the Lord Jesus
Worship Locus	Temples/homes	Temple in Jerusalem, synagogues	The Lord's supper; in one's heart
Eschatology	Various mostly ill-defined after life states: Hades, Elysium,	Sheol - very ill-defined in Talmudic literature; some apocalyptic beliefs (e.g. Isaiah, Zechariah, Maccabees, Jesus)	Heaven and resurrection in Christ, apocalyptic anticipation of the Parousia and God's kingdom to come
Impact on people's lives	Little	Study/know the law, strict compliance to the letter of the law (Pharisees); daily worship; avoid anything unclean or that violates the Shema.	Conversion, turning away from local rituals, personal sacrifice, community, martyrdom

The relevant aspect of the Roman *sitz im Leben* here is that the very nature of the one's approach to religion, and in general to the spiritual realm, impacted how people saw the world, their relationships with one another, and their personal behavior. This in turn affected their reputation as being acceptable, neighborly and loyal citizens of Rome or not. Christians by virtue of their new faith, acted and thought very, very differently than their neighbors and were

not tolerant of religions other than their own. Thus, they evoked a growing level of suspicion and hatred not only from the government, but from their fellow citizens as well.

The Imperial Cult

“Gospel” is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning “good spell” and is a translation of the Greek term **ευαγγέλιον** (evangelion). Both words mean “good news.”

People in Rome heard that term, **ευαγγέλιον**, a lot back then. It was the ancient Roman equivalent of today’s “CNN BREAKING NEWS!! They also heard the term “Son of God” **Υιός του Θεού** (...not be confused with “God the Son” **Θεός ό υιός**, the second Person of the Trinity in Christian theology), as well as other terms such as “savior” **Σωτήρας**. All of these were Imperial terms and titles. They were the “official business” seals and labels of the Imperial court.

One could have easily heard the *Praeco*, the town crier of the city, proclaiming “I bring you Good News of the Son of God and our Savior, the mighty Augustus!” The imperial cult used these words for announcing Caesar’s victories, his birthdays, his accession to power, his granting of privileges to people, or announcing imperial celebrations. It was also implied that, once announced, the citizens had a corresponding duty to offer sacrifices of thanks and praise for the good news they were hearing. Starting with Augustus, most emperors claimed some sort of divinity and as such were to be worshiped across the empire along. Rome was always known to be tolerant of local religions as long as you also paid your dues to the Roman cult when required (Jews notably exempted as mentioned above).

Mark’s Gospel however uses the word *evangelion* in contrast to the way it was used by the Imperial Cult. Mark’s *evangelion* is the good news of the birth, victory, resurrection and Kingdom of the new and true Emperor, the Lord Jesus. His *evangelion* announces that this new Conqueror is also proclaiming His great victory, but a victory not of a mere earthly military conquest but over the enormous celestial forces of evil; and it calls men and women everywhere to enlist themselves in his army, in a strategic alliance with the King to defeat the enemy of sin and death and to help Him establish a new Kingdom.

Hence Mark’s *evangelion* is very much an “in your face” slam at the Imperial cult and, by definition, a challenge to the Emperor and the empire itself. To pagan Romans a simple act of ritual sacrifice, especially to the emperor, represented adherence to Roman tradition, loyalty to the Empire and gratitude for its protections. Refusal was treason. Christians of course, the foot soldiers in Christ’s heavenly army, as we’ve seen above, would simply not comply. For them, doing so would be treason to the True Emperor.

The Reign of Nero

Nerō Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (37 - 68 AD) was the last Roman emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. He was adopted by his great-uncle Claudius and became Claudius' heir and successor. Like Claudius, Nero became emperor with the consent of the Praetorian Guard. Nero's mother, Agrippina the Younger, was likely implicated in Claudius' death and Nero's nomination as emperor. She dominated Nero's early life and decisions until he cast her off. Five years into his reign, he had her murdered.

Soon he started to play an active role in government and foreign policy. Several successful military campaigns were waged including the First Jewish War. Nero also focused much attention on diplomacy, trade and the cultural life of the empire, ordering theatres built and promoting athletic games. He made public appearances as an actor, poet, musician and charioteer. In the eyes of traditionalists, this undermined the dignity and authority of his person, status and office. His extravagant, empire-wide program of public and private works was funded by new higher taxes that were much resented by the middle and upper classes. Various plots against his life were revealed; the ringleaders, most of them Nero's own courtiers, were executed.

In 68 AD Rome's discontented civil and military authorities chose Galba as the new emperor. , After learning that he had been tried in absentia and condemned to death as a public enemy, Nero took his own life on June 9th. He was the first, but by no means last, Roman Emperor to commit suicide.

Nero's rule is usually associated with tyranny and extravagance. Tacitus claims that the Roman people thought him compulsive and corrupt. Among the greatest of Nero's extravagancies was, according to Tacitus, the Great Fire of Rome in 64 A.D., which destroyed or damaged all but 3 of Rome's 14 districts and economically devastated the city. Although many Romans believed that the Great Fire of Rome had in fact been started was by Nero – some say to clear the way for his planned palatial complex, the **Domus Aurea** (*The Golden House*), a rumored mile-long palace to be made of gold - Nero found a convenient scapegoat in the new and widely hated sect called "Christians." Christians were rounded up and by the hundreds and horribly tortured in public spectacles.

Besides Tacitus, Suetonius also mentions that Christians were killed under Nero's reign, but does not say anything about the fire. Scholars disagree about whether Christians were persecuted solely under the charge of organized arson or for other general crimes associated with Christianity such as treason against the Imperial Cult as we have seen above. Regardless, historians generally believe that this first Roman attack on the church was widespread and horrific. This Emperor was not one to snub one's nose at. The ire of this emperor was among the incredible issues that the people of Christ's church in Rome dealt with every day.

The Jewish Community in Rome

We know a lot about the Jews in Rome from the writings of Philo, Cicero and Tacitus. Many contemporary scholars estimate that there were as many as 50,000 Jews living in Rome during Mark's day. Their position indeed was at once singular and exclusive for they had privileges accorded to no others. The origin of the Jewish colony at Rome may be traced back to 63 B.C., when Pompey The Great brought back a large number of Jewish prisoners from the fall of Jerusalem. These were sold as slaves, but even as such they were constantly difficult to deal with because of their obstinate adherence to their faith and peculiar customs. Consequently, many were eventually freed and became known as *libertini*. Given that they had little means to travel back to Israel, they took up residence in Rome and formed a sizable a community of their own on the far side of the Tiber, in an area called Trastevere (literally “across the river”).

For reasons having more to do with keeping domestic tranquility, as well as to leverage the financial capabilities of the Jewish community, emperors from Julius Caesar onward (with a few exceptions such as Tiberius and Caligula), granted special privileges to them. These included freedom to worship as they wished, freedom from military service and from certain taxes, the recognition of the Sabbath as a day of rest, the right of living according to the customs of their forefathers, full jurisdiction over their own members, etc.

The negative impact of these freedoms was that Jews often would not associate with their gentile neighbors. The Jewish community was large, fairly wealthy and segregated. Hence, they were on the one hand hated and scorned; on the other hand, they seemed to have gained a certain status as special, exclusive - even fashionable - especially among ladies of the patrician houses. Some scholars believe that the number of Gentile converts to Judaism was large. Still larger were those whom St. Luke in Acts calls ‘God-fearers’ (σεβόμενοι τὸν Θεόν), *i.e.* people who adopted the Jewish monotheism, attended the synagogue services, and observed the Sabbath and certain portions of Jewish law. These ‘God-fearers’ were not only in Rome but everywhere Jewish communities were to be found. They became a sort of “semi-Jew” who also retained much of their pagan identities. The powerful Jews of Rome were a mixed blessing for the small little Christian sect. Some Roman Jews in fact became converts, whereas other continued the same opposition to the Church that was being waged in Jerusalem (recall the martyrdom of St Stephen, the arrest of Peter and Paul, etc.) and across the empire in other diasporic Jewish communities (recall Saul/Paul’s planned persecution of Christians in Damascus).

The Christian Community in Rome

We do not know how Christianity gained a foothold in Rome. The most likely source were non-apostolic Jewish converts arriving from the east, particularly from Jerusalem, who brought this new faith with them. In describing Pentecost, Acts 2:1-12 specifically mentions visitors from Rome as being in the audience to hear Peter’s speech. However, it got there, we do know that Christianity had become a major presence in the city of Rome by the late 40s A.D.

Like most Christians in the ancient church, Roman Christians met in small groups for fellowship and for celebrating the Lord's Supper, as well as to share and discuss stories of Jesus. For example, Paul mentioned a specific house church that was led by married converts to Christ named Priscilla and Aquilla (Romans 16:3-5). The references to other individuals throughout his letter suggest the possibility of other Christian meetings in which these believers participated. The evidence points to the existence of at least three house/churches, with the possibility of even more. As Paul hints, The Roman Church was notable:

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.... To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 1:1-7)

As we saw above, Rome was very tolerant of other religions especially those polytheistic cults like Rome's itself. The authorities didn't care who or what you worshiped as long as you completed your obligations under the Imperial Cult and didn't create problems with other religious systems. For Christians and Jews however, both of which were fiercely monotheistic – there is only ONE God and their refusal to participate in what Romans saw as harmless rituals, positioned them as not only as anti-social but anti-Rome itself. Consequently, Christians and Jews began to experience intense persecution.

In addition, there is also ample evidence that specific groups of Christians within the church in Rome began to experience conflicts. Specifically, there were clashes between Christians of Jewish origin and Christians who were Gentiles. The early Roman churches were dominated and led by Jewish converts who were now disciples of Jesus. However, when Claudius expelled all Jews from the city of Rome, Jewish Christians had to leave and only the Gentile Christians remained. Therefore, the church grew and expanded largely as a Gentile community from 49 - 54 A.D. When Jews were allowed back into Rome after Claudius' death, the returning Jewish Christians came home to find a church that was much different from the one they had left. This resulted in disagreements about how to incorporate the Old Testament law into following Christ. Specific debates surfaced over rituals such as circumcision, whether it was permissible to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, which holy days of Jewish law were to be celebrated, etc. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul takes the liberty to instruct both factions on how to live in harmony and properly worship God as a new culture -- a new church.

Despite these many obstacles, the church at Rome experienced healthy growth throughout the first century. This explains why the apostle Paul was so eager to visit the Christians in Rome and provide additional leadership during their struggles:

"I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong — that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I

have had among the other Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.” Romans 1:11-15

In fact, Paul was so desperate to see the Christians in Rome that he used his rights as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar after being arrested by Roman officials in Jerusalem (see Acts 25:8-12). Paul was sent to Rome around 60 AD from Caesarea and spent several years under house arrest in his own rented house (although he had to wear chains all the time) for another two years. During this period, he was given unusual liberties that enabled him to continue his ministry and write several of his epistles. Paul attained quite a reputation among the Christian and Jewish community but also among the Romans themselves. In fact, there is evidence that he was befriended by Cicero and may have even met Nero himself.

We know from church history that Paul was eventually released from house arrest. However, under the persecution by Nero, he was arrested again but this time he was imprisoned in the Mamertine prison. From there, Church tradition holds that he was beheaded as a martyr around 68 AD.

Peter too apparently was in Rome at the same time also according to legend. Not much is known about what he did while there. Not even Paul calls him out by name in any of his letters as he did with many other prominent Romans. Most ancient writers indicate Peter was martyred around 67 AD also during Nero’s persecution. These traditions say he was crucified upside down in the Neronian Gardens on the Vatican hill.

Theologically, these very early communities had a very minimal and basic understanding of the **κήρυγμα** (kerygma). This formula taught them “Jesus, Christ, Son of God, Savior” but there is little evidence that they had any deeper understanding of what each term meant. They most likely had heard stories and preaching about Jesus, especially from Peter. They eventually had insights from Paul via his letter and eventually his presence but they had no complete narrative of the life and teachings of Jesus. They were also a deeply apocalyptic community and awaited with great anticipation the return of Jesus as Lord to establish a new order on earth. This is called in Greek, the “Parousia” meaning the “arrival” or “presence after absence.” Christians meant it to mean Christ’s return in glory.

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars of heaven will fall, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send His angels, and gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest part of earth to the farthest part of heaven.” (Mark 13: 24-27)

It was this hope in – more so, this fixation on - the Parousia that most likely motivated them towards the radical, unusual behaviors that they were known for among their fellow Romans.

Why would anyone sell all they had and give it to the poor, live in common communities, risk the ire of Nero and your neighbors and eventually go so willingly to their tortuous deaths during the persecutions? Why? Well to be among the “elect” of course. To be among the favored in the new kingdom and to share in the glory of the new and true Emperor, Jesus Christ.

“Divine Men” and False Prophets

People of ancient Hellenistic cultured were familiar with any number of God-associated humans who were wise or artistic or who accomplished much or were great leaders. Many also were workers of amazing feats and miracles. These wonder workers were known as “divine men” or **θειος ανηρ** (*Theos Aner*).

According to Pastor Theodore Weeden, it could be that one of the reasons for Mark’s Gospel is that he saw a need to refute what he regarded as a false, Hellenistic Christology – one of the first heresies if you will - that of seeing Jesus merely as yet another ‘divine man.’ There were apparently some in the Christian community of Rome, who saw Jesus merely as a superhuman earthly savior, endowed with miraculous powers and supernatural knowledge which he passed on to his followers. There were also some who claimed to be “divine men” themselves saying that if Paul can be considered an “apostle” just because he said he had a vision of the Lord, they too have had visions and so are also Apostles. Some went so far as to claim that they were the Christ returned to earth as He had promised. Mark’s Jesus smacks such claims down and decisively so.

“Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘Look, He is there!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. But take heed; see, I have told you all things beforehand.” (Mark 13: 21-23)

Mark seems to acknowledge that, yes, Jesus had some of the earmarks of a “divine man” in that he worked many wondrous deeds but Jesus is so much more. He is in fact God’s Son as the Father’s message at his Baptism by John pointed out: “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). Moreover, Jesus was on a mission to follow a plan laid down by the Father, which ultimately led to his suffering and death.

Jesus sums up his mission when he refers to himself as the ‘Son of Man.’ It is his clue that the plan which is his responsibility to carry out, will cast him in a very different light than any “divine man” who had ever existed. The term “Son of Man” is used 80 times in all the Gospels, 14 of them in Mark. In every case but one, Jesus is the user of the term and He always states it in the third person. Yet, it is fairly clear that, although the reference is at times cryptic (Mark 13:26-27, 34), the term is clearly a reference to Jesus himself (e.g., Mark 2:10; 8:31)

The origins of the term “Son of Man” come from several sources in the deuterocanonical and apocryphal writings of the Old Testament: Ezekiel, Daniel, the Similitudes of Enoch and Ezra. There are many nuances to the term’s meaning, but suffice it to say the term essentially refers to a heavenly, messianic figure who:

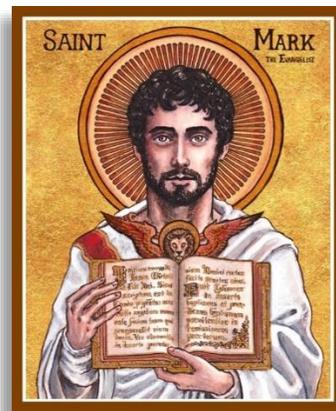
- Must suffer to bring about the new order of God’s Kingdom
- Has authority over this world (Mark’s ‘Son of Man’ claims authority over nature, authority to forgive sins, authority over the Sabbath itself, and even over death)
- And is exalted and sits in judgment over the world (Mark’s ‘Son of Man’ will return in glory).

Jesus is saying that he IS this type of Messianic figure. He is no “*run of the mill*” Theos Aner!

The Influence of the Greek Drama

Pastor Theodore Weeden describes another aspect of how Romans (or any of the educated people of the ancient world) would have read a story. The emphasis was on the characters not on the details of events. Stories were often recounted out loud, with various people playing parts of the main characters. Characters were described in intricate detail: what they did and said, why they did it and where and when, who was involved, and of course the consequences or outcomes of their action. There would usually be discussion about the story and judgments made to extrapolate some moral lessons, both good and bad, from what the various characters said and did. In short, the characters conveyed the author’s meaning. As Weeden says “They wrote history not so much in the interest of accurate information as in the interest of guiding the reader to a moralistic interpretation of the world”.

Mark’s Gospel, written in Greek, would have been read and understood via this approach and thus the characters are important: The Jewish religious establishment, the crowds, the Disciples, the receivers of Jesus’ miracles, the demons, and of course Jesus himself. Readers would focus on what do these characters teach me.



Section III: The Gospel Message to The Church in Rome

With all of this as backdrop to the concerns and thought processes of Mark's audience, we can better understand his message and his editorial point of view in conveying it.

Mark's Christology: Messiah as Suffering Servant of YHWH

The main point of Mark's Gospel is that Jesus is the true and only Messiah, but he is a Messiah unlike any that had been expected for over 4000 years. He is not a conquering worldly king, but a poor, servant of God – the Son of God in fact - whose salvific mission required him to suffer and die. The entire story, which is mostly tales of Jesus' actions rather than sermons and preaching, climaxes with the final actions of the crucifixion and resurrection. That's the punch line. The point of the story is that this Messiah, the real Messiah, God' true anointed ONE, must suffer and die then be raised and exulted. It was God's plan all along.

The scared author knows this is not what his readers want to hear or fully understand or even believe, which is why all that precedes it is a slow, methodical journey of discovering this fundamental truth. For this reason, some scholars describe Mark's Gospel as a "passion narrative with a long introduction."

The Messianic Secret

Mark empathizes with his readers that the "suffering Messiah" is not easy to comprehend so in episode after episode, he presents evidence of this truth, only to have many of the characters fail to see it. The lack of perception is especially true for those characters who should understand it: The Disciples and the Jewish leaders. Over and over, they simply don't get Jesus' big secret – what some scholars call the Messianic Secret – despite the evidence right before them that Jesus is Son of God and Messiah. He is not what they expected and that presumption blinds them to the truth. Moreover, those least entitled and least expected to understanding this secret - the gentiles, the unclean whom Jesus heals, the demons – they see it instantly and state it clearly and often loudly. They are more open to the possibilities of how God may actually work His will. Yet these are told to be silent as if God is saying, everyone needs to figure this out for themselves, especially those who I need to believe because the day is coming when I will have to rely on them.

That explains why Mark is so especially hard on the disciples. The Twelve are a "composite character" in this Greek drama. Readers reflecting on the actions of the Disciples: of repeated denial in the face of evidence, of pettiness and competition, and of ego and self-centeredness, would begin to see the moral lesson that that is not how a real disciple of Jesus should be. More to the point, that is not how I want to be.

I sometimes wonder that since Mark knew Peter so well, having spent so much time with him, that perhaps he witnessed Peter's deep sorrow at having been so blind to the reality of Jesus, his friend and Master. Daniel B. Wallace from the Dallas Theological Seminary would agree with

this stance. I imagine Peter and Mark sitting together in the evening while Peter recalls all the times when he was so dumb, or at least so naive that he missed the sacred mission of his Lord, and then of course retelling how he abandoned Christ in the garden and the triple denial at Pilate's palace. "None of us understood who he was and we all deserted him just when he needed us. How could I have been so blind? So cowardly?" Perhaps Mark is saying to the reader, grasping the deep nature of the Messiah is really hard and given that even those who knew and loved him didn't get it, you should not feel so bad if you don't. After all, it took them having to experience the resurrected Lord before things fell into place. But in time and with prayer and reflection on what you now know to be true, that Christ is in fact risen, perhaps you will grasp it too.

The turning-point where the big secret starts to become revealed, is the story of a man who progressively gains his ability to see again thanks to Jesus restoring his sight. Jesus has to work the miracle twice before the man actually sees clearly. The story stands at the halfway mark of Mark's sixteen chapters and seems to be an allegory of what is happening to the Apostles.

"They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought to him a blind man whom they begged him to touch. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. Then, putting spittle on his eyes and laying his hands on him, he asked, 'Can you see anything?' The man, who was beginning to see, replied, 'I can see people; they look like trees as they walk around.' Then he laid his hands on the man's eyes again and he saw clearly; he was cured, and he could see everything plainly and distinctly. And Jesus sent him home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.' (Mark 8: 22-26)

Like the blind man, due to Jesus' persistent working at it, the Apostles finally begin to see who Jesus really is. It is Peter who has the big "Ah HA!" moment.

"Jesus and his disciples left for the villages round Caesarea Philippi. On the way, he put this question to his disciples, 'Who do people say I am?' And they told him, 'John the Baptist, others Elijah, others again, one of the prophets.' But you," he asked them, 'who do you say I am?' Peter spoke up and said to him, 'You are the Christ.'" (Mark 8: 27-29)

Even still the mission of the Messiah is not completely clear to them. And so, Jesus begins to teach them, why he is here and how he will bring about the fulfillment of his mission. In Mark 8; 31-33, Jesus reveals how he is to be handed over to the Chief Priests and scribes to suffer and put to death, only to rise again after three days. Peter takes Jesus aside and questions how this could be true. Jesus' response is to chide Peter for not yet fully grasping this Messiah's purpose.

"Get behind me Satan! You are not thinking as God does but as humans do!" (Mark 8: 33)

We can again imagine Peter telling John Mark "I still didn't get it. I was so blind as to how God's plan worked...it was so beyond our measly human power to know." It was not until six days

later that Jesus invites Peter as well as James and John up to a high mountain and allows them to witness the Divine plan in its fullest:

“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain on their own by themselves. There in their presence he was transfigured: his clothes became brilliantly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them. Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. Then Peter spoke to Jesus, ‘Rabbi,’ he said, ‘it is wonderful for us to be here; so let us make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ He did not know what to say; they were so frightened. And a cloud came, covering them in shadow; and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.’ Then suddenly, when they looked round, they saw no one with them anymore but only Jesus.” (Mark 9:2-8)

Perhaps now, with the overt and clear sanction of the Most High God and in the presence of Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, they will finally understand God’s mysterious and amazing plan to overthrow evil in the world. This plan, God’s plan, is not like anything they could have imagined and it will take a heroic commitment of faith for them to want to be partners with him in accomplishing it. This Messiah, the true Messiah, is very different indeed.

My Attempt at Exegesis

That brought me back to pondering why Mark used of the word **ευαγγέλιον** (evangelion) to begin his Gospel. He could have said, “Here is the story of Jesus” or “These are the chronicles of Jesus”. The other Gospel writers certainly all begin more like that - very differently than Mark. So why use this very specific Imperial term **ευαγγέλιον**?

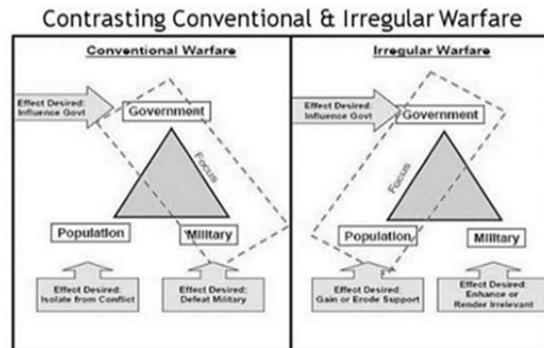
It came to me that by co-opting the modus operandi of the imperial court, Mark is positing Christ in fact as the new Emperor and Commander-in-Chief of heaven’s hosts. The new and true Emperor, Jesus, is indeed a conquering Messiah, a Davidic Warrior much like the tradition expected who is waging a very real war, but not by attacking physical armies or by overthrowing worldly powers. This war is focused on overthrowing the underlying sources of power for those forces in the world – evil itself. Jesus’ war is against the root causes of evil, so that his victory is thorough and permanent and will be eventually dramatically different than anyone expected. Mark is saying the real Messiah is not so far off the traditional concept of how Mashiach or the Christ was to be. The real Messiah, Jesus, did in fact come to wage a war. And it would be brutal and bloody and total.

I see Jesus’ war as what today’s Generals would call “asymmetrical.” *Asymmetric warfare* is “leveraging inferior tactical or operational strength against the vulnerabilities of a superior

opponent to achieve disproportionate effect with the aim of undermining the opponent's will in order to achieve the asymmetric actor's strategic objectives." Jesus' strategic objective: the removal of this world and the establishment of his Father's Kingdom and to do so without much in the way of earthly resources.

As I read Mark, I believe Jesus' war plan is adhering to principles of this unconventional warfare strategy. He is powerless in a conventional military sense, but in an asymmetrical sense he has the strategic and even tactical advantage.

Asymmetric Warfare



After a failed, pre-emptive strike by Satan in the desert immediately after Jesus' baptism, our new and true Emperor's offensive strategy begins clandestinely -with him looking like an ordinary, humble rabbi or perhaps an Essene, to allow him to stealthily slip behind enemy lines. He may even have let those observing him believe he was just another of the "divine men" who were known for performing tricks and motivating people. Perhaps even the so-called Messianic Secret, may have been intended all along as a subversive tactic because Jesus can carry out his mission more effectively if his true identity is just below the radar. Even when confronted by Pilate he maintains his undercover identity "Pilate questioned him: 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus said to him in reply 'It is YOU <sic "not me"> who say so'."

Quietly however, Jesus' plan shows its sophistication and direction. He starts to establish his military apparatus with himself as commander-in chief and as insurgent king. He then recruits and trains his officers; and then recruits and trains his troops, his foot-soldiers. Simultaneously, he executes a series of pinpointed guerrilla attacks designed to chip away at the infrastructure of the established order. When the time is right, he slowly reveals his ultimate goal: his strategic intent if you will:

"As he was leaving the Temple one of his disciples said to him, 'Master, look at the size of those stones! Look at the size of those buildings!' And Jesus said to him, 'You see these great buildings? Not a single stone will be left on another; everything will be pulled down.'" (Mark 13: 1-2).

Eventually the plan comes to the decisive battle on the cross by which he overthrows the structure of the world and the ungodly forces that power it. With his resurrection - Victory at last!

“And the veil of the Sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The centurion, who was standing in front of him, had seen how he had died, and he said, 'In truth this man was Son of God.'” (Mark 15: 38-39).

Let me expound a bit more on how I see the tactics and overall theatre plan of Jesus’ war.

Establishing the Military Apparatus:

The Declaration of War: This is: *“The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1: 1).* This “good news,’ this evangelion, is not like a typical imperial proclamation announcing that a victory HAD taken place. This proclamation is that the war has now begun. It is a declaration of war! But this war is different. Since it is led by the Son of God, with the backing of His Father, the Lord Most High, a victorious outcome of the war is a forgone conclusion.

The Anointing of the new King and His Appointment as Commander-in-Chief: As David was anointed by Samuel with oil, Jesus is anointed by John the Baptist with water. (Mark 1: 9). Then as Nathan prophesized to David:

“I declare to you that the Lord will build a house for you: When your days are over and you go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.” (1st Chronicles 17: 10-14).

In Mark 1: 10-11, this prophecy is fulfilled:

“And at once, as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on you.'”

In chapter 9, at the scene of the Transfiguration, God again confirms the authority of the Davidic Warrior, when in the presence of Moses and Elijah God says, “This is my beloved Son! LISTEN TO HIM!” In other words, He is in charge; He is the commander-in-chief!

Establishing the Officer Corps: As would be the case with any military commander, Jesus’ first task is to establish his Officer Corps:

“As he was walking along by the Lake of Galilee he saw Simon and Simon's brother Andrew casting a net in the lake -- for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them,

'Come after me and I will make you into fishers of people.' And at once they left their nets and followed him. Going on a little further, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they too were in their boat, mending the nets. At once he called them and, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the men he employed, they went after him." (Mark 1 -16-20).

Later in Mark 2: 13-14 he will add Levi and by Mark 3: 16-19, the Corps is fully assembled:

"And so, he appointed the Twelve, Simon to whom he gave the name Peter, James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James, to whom he gave the name Boanerges or 'Sons of Thunder'; Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, the man who was to betray him."

Training of The Officers: Time and again, and often with great frustration ("Have you eyes and do not see, ears and do not hear?" Mark 8:18), the Commander finds opportunities to train these twelve officers on whom he must rely if his plan is to work.

"Then he began to teach them that the Son of man was destined to suffer grievously, and to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and to be put to death, and after three days to rise again; and he said all this quite openly" (Mark 8: 31-32)

And he provides practical instructions on how his officers are to behave:

"Then he summoned the Twelve and began to send them out in pairs, giving them authority over unclean spirits. And he instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a staff -- no bread, no haversack, no coppers for their purses. They were to wear sandals but, he added, 'Don't take a spare tunic.'¹⁰ And he said to them, 'If you enter a house anywhere, stay there until you leave the district.'¹ And if any place does not welcome you and people refuse to listen to you, as you walk away shake off the dust under your feet as evidence to them.'¹² So they set off to proclaim repentance; and they cast out many devils, and anointed many sick people with oil and cured them." (Mark 6: 7-12)

Recruiting the Troops: Jesus also needed foot-soldiers to infiltrate the enemy camps and disrupt the *status-quo*. But to serve in Jesus' armed forces one must be willing to put it all on the line. In this war, many will be required to make the ultimate sacrifice.

"He called the people and his disciples to him and said, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. Anyone who

wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. What gain, then, is it for anyone to win the whole world and forfeit his life? And indeed, what can anyone offer in exchange for his life? For if anyone in this sinful and adulterous generation is ashamed of me and of my words, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.' (Mark 8: 34-38)

Basic Training for the Troops: So that they can be prepared, Jesus informs His troops of what battle conditions will be like in the field and it is not pretty.

"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this is something that must happen, but the end will not be yet. For nation will fight against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is the beginning of the birth-pangs. 'Be on your guard: you will be handed over to sanhedrins; you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will be brought before governors and kings for my sake, as evidence to them, since the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. 'And when you are taken to be handed over, do not worry beforehand about what to say; no, say whatever is given to you when the time comes, because it is not you who will be speaking; it is the Holy Spirit.

I contend that all of the many parables in Mark: The Sower, The Lamp on a Stand, The Mustard seed, The Tenants, as well as the teachings about The Widow's mite, the signs of the end of days, the warning to be "watchful" and more, are all part of the training for his officers and troops.

The Guerrilla Warfare: Undermining the World's Capacity to Resist God's Plan

In many wars (The American Civil War, World War II just to name two), part of a total war strategy is to attack the sources of supply and war material production. If one removes the capacity to make war, one hastens the end of the war. Similarly, our Davidic Warrior, Jesus, sets out to attack the root cause – the production centers - of evil in the world. If he can rid the world of the generators of evil, he will conquer evil and secure the Kingdom of God for eternity. He does this by conducting a sort of "psychological warfare" a "counter intelligence" effort. He introduces counter information and questions to get people to think, is what I used to believe really true? Is it right? I see Jesus, therefore conducting a series of carefully orchestrated attacks, ambushes and skirmishes to cripple the source of evil: sin. He also conducts several full-scale assaults on the visible signs of evil: disease and death itself.

The Attack on Self-Righteousness and Hypocrisy: In the new order, what is in one's heart is what will matter. There is no room for hypocrisy. This Messiah seeks authentic, humble and obedient followers who seek the kingdom as much as He does.

“The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered round him, and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them. For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, keep the tradition of the elders and never eat without washing their arms as far as the elbow; and on returning from the market place they never eat without first sprinkling themselves. There are also many other observances which have been handed down to them to keep, concerning the washing of cups and pots and bronze dishes. So the Pharisees and scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?' He answered, 'How rightly Isaiah prophesied about you hypocrites in the passage of scripture: This people honors me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. Their reverence of me is worthless; the lessons they teach are nothing but human commandments. You put aside the commandment of God to observe human traditions.' And he said to them, 'How ingeniously you get around the commandment of God in order to preserve your own tradition! For Moses said: Honor your father and your mother, and, Anyone who curses father or mother must be put to death. But you say, "If a man says to his father or mother: Anything I have that I might have used to help you is Korban (that is, dedicated to God)," then he is forbidden from that moment to do anything for his father or mother. In this way, you make God's word ineffective for the sake of your tradition which you have handed down. And you do many other things like this.'” (Mark 7: 1-17)

Another example is the cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11: 15:19)

The Attack on Greed and Obsession with Riches: The currency in the new order is love and selflessness, not money and arrogance.

“He was setting out on a journey when a man ran up, knelt before him and put this question to him, 'Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not kill; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not give false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother. 'And he said to him, 'Master, I have kept all these since my earliest days.' Jesus looked steadily at him and he was filled with love for him, and he said, 'You need to do one thing more. Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But his face fell at these words and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth. Jesus looked round and said to his disciples, 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!' The disciples were astounded by these words, but Jesus insisted, 'My children,' he said to them, 'how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of God.' They were more astonished than ever, saying to one another, 'In that case, who can be saved?' Jesus gazed at them and said, 'By human resources it is impossible, but not for God: because for God everything is possible. Peter took this

up. 'Look,' he said to him, 'we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'In truth I tell you, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times as much, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land -- and persecutions too -- now in this present time and, in the world to come, eternal life.'
(Mark 10: 17-30)

The Attack on Ambition: Preoccupation with “Me first!” has no place in God’s new kingdom. Like Alexander’s formidable phalanxes, Jesus’ army must be a “band of brothers” (and sisters), each having the other’s back, each serving one another.

“They came to Capernaum, and when he got into the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?' They said nothing, because on the road they had been arguing which of them was the greatest.⁵ So he sat down, called the Twelve to him and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.'”
(Mark 9: 33:35)

“James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached him. 'Master,' they said to him, 'We want you to do us a favor.' He said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' They said to him, 'Allow us to sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I shall drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I shall be baptized?' They replied, 'We can.' Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I shall drink you shall drink, and with the baptism with which I shall be baptized you shall be baptized, but as for seats at my right hand or my left, these are not mine to grant; they belong to those to whom they have been allotted.’(Mark 10: 35-40)

The Attack on Hatred and Bigotry: In the new kingdom that which divides us is gone. All are welcome into God’s grace. All are needed to build the Kingdom.

“At once a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him and came and fell at his feet. Now this woman was a gentile, by birth a Syro-Phoenician, and she begged him to drive the devil out of her daughter. And he said to her, 'The children should be fed first, because it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to little dogs.' But she spoke up, 'Ah yes, sir,' she replied, 'but little dogs under the table eat the scraps from the children.' And he said to her, 'For saying this you may go home happy; the devil has gone out of your daughter.' So she went off home and found the child lying on the bed and the devil gone.” (Mark 7: 25-30)

The Attack on Sin: Jesus can and will destroy sin and its consequences.

“Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, ‘My child, your sins are forgiven.’ Now some scribes were sitting there, and they thought to themselves, ‘How can this man talk like that? He is being blasphemous. Who but God can forgive sins?’ And at once, Jesus, inwardly aware that this is what they were thinking, said to them, ‘Why do you have these thoughts in your hearts? Which of these is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to say, ‘Get up, pick up your stretcher and walk’? But to prove to you that the Son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth’ -- he said to the paralytic-‘I order you: get up, pick up your stretcher, and go off home.’ And the man got up, and at once picked up his stretcher and walked out in front of everyone, so that they were all astonished and praised God saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this.’ (Mark 2: 5-12)

Skirmishes with Disease: Jesus the warrior will defeat sickness and disease. These were thought to be signs of God’s displeasure and made one “unclean” before God under Jewish tradition but no longer in the new age of God’s Kingdom. Jesus cures a woman with suffering with hemorrhage, a paralytic, blind people, a man with a withered hand, lepers, those afflicted with deafness and countless other miracles in Gennesaret, Capernaum, Bethsaida, and the region around Tyre. In the new Kingdom, those who are ill are an opportunity for followers of Christ to become instruments of God’s mercy and love, not opportunities to condemn and shun.

The Attack on the Devil Himself: Jesus conducts many frontal attacks on the Headquarters – the “Command and Control Center” - of evil itself – The Devil and his minions. He takes the battle right to their home turf. Whenever and wherever he encounters demons, he literally scares the “bejesus” out of them, even driving one group over a cliff – which was not very good news for the owners of the pigs.

“And He healed many who were ill with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and He was not permitting the demons to speak, because they knew who He was.” (Mark 1:34)

“And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out the demons.” (Mark 1:39)

“They reached the territory of the Gerasenes on the other side of the lake, and when he disembarked, a man with an unclean spirit at once came out from the tombs towards him. The man lived in the tombs and no one could secure him anymore, even with a chain, because he had often been secured with fetters and chains but had snapped the chains and broken the fetters, and no one had the strength to control him. All night and all day, among the tombs and in the mountains, he would howl and gash himself with stones. Catching sight of Jesus from a distance, he ran up and fell at his feet and shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What do you want with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God? In God’s name do not torture me!’ For Jesus had been saying to him, ‘Come out of

the man, unclean spirit.' Then he asked, 'What is your name?' He answered, 'My name is Legion, for there are many of us.'¹⁰ And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the district.¹ Now on the mountainside there was a great herd of pigs feeding,² and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us to the pigs, let us go into them.' So, he gave them leave. With that, the unclean spirits came out and went into the pigs, and the herd of about two thousand pigs charged down the cliff into the lake, and there they were drowned. The men looking after them ran off and told their story in the city and in the country round about; and the people came to see what had really happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there -- the man who had had the legion in him -- properly dressed and in his full senses, and they were afraid. And those who had witnessed it reported what had happened to the demoniac and what had become of the pigs. Then they began to implore Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed begged to be allowed to stay with him. Jesus would not let him but said to him, 'Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you.' So, the man went off and proceeded to proclaim in the Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him. And everyone was amazed." (Mark 5: 1-20)

"Now the woman was a Gentile, of the Syrophenician race. And she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter." (Mark 7:26)

"When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again.'" (Mark 9:25)

"Now after He had risen early on the first day of the week, He first appeared to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons." (Mark 16:9)

The Ultimate Victory

Conquering Death: the power of the old order rests in its ability to end a life when it chooses. But this Messiah puts death in its place by taking away that power on its command.

"While he was still speaking some people arrived from the house of the president of the synagogue to say, 'Your daughter is dead; why put the Master to any further trouble?'¹⁶ But Jesus overheard what they said and he said to the president of the synagogue, 'Do not be afraid; only have faith.' And he allowed no one to go with him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. So they came to the house of the president of the synagogue, and Jesus noticed all the commotion, with people weeping and wailing unrestrainedly. He went in and said to them, 'Why all this commotion and crying? The child is not dead, but asleep.' But they ridiculed him. So, he turned them all out and, taking with him the child's father and mother and his

own companions, he went into the place where the child lay. And taking the child by the hand he said to her, 'Talitha kum!' which means, 'Little girl, I tell you to get up.' The little girl got up at once and began to walk about, for she was twelve years old. At once they were overcome with astonishment, and he gave them strict orders not to let anyone know about it, and told them to give her something to eat. (Mark 5: 35-43)

Establishing Eternal Life:

The ultimate victory over death comes in Chapter 16 when Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James and Salome came to the tomb to anoint the body of the crucified Jesus only to find the stone rolled away and a young man sitting inside. Not only is he risen but he lives and reigns forever as will all the elect in his new kingdom.

“Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you.” (Mark 16: 6-7)

“And so, the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven; there at the right hand of God he took his place...” (Mark 16:19)

To Be a Disciple of Christ, Especially in Rome

For Christ’s asymmetrical warfare strategy to end in total victory, the battle must be waged long after He is gone from this earth. He needs and wants his army to continue His fight against evil and to expand the battle lines to the ends of the earth.

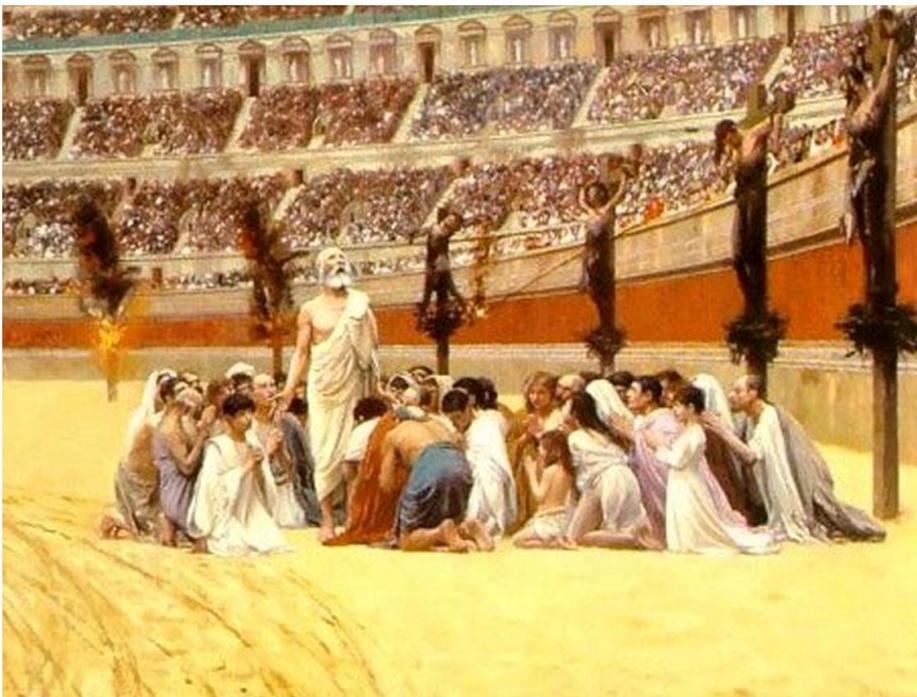
“And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” (Mark 16: 15-18)

But to be one of His soldiers, one of His Disciples, it requires much. This was not news to the first recruits in Rome where at any moment, soldiers of the Emperor might appear at your door to take you into custody. For them being Christian was a participatory sport.

“When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and

follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." (Mark 8: 34-38)

For these soldiers of Christ, the cross was not just a symbol nor was it a fate belonging to Jesus himself. It may well have been the destiny of each of his followers.



Section IV: Lessons for US Today

The Gospel of Mark is truly “Good News” in that it shows us that our God has a plan, and that we have a roadmap to salvation given to us by God’s Field Marshal Himself, Jesus. This Gospel is not mere philosophy nor a morality play nor a myth. It is a way to live.

It is also an invitation to enlist into the great cause of Christ and his on-going salvific mission. Mark calls us, as he did with his original audience to enjoin the battle with Christ because that battle continues to our present day. Any cursory viewing of our TV or reading of a newspaper or Facebook postings shows us where the war is waging. Greed, hatred, violence, abuse, bigotry, self-righteousness, and vain ambition abound. Jesus’ need for new foot-soldiers continues therefore even to us. In our here and now world, the forces of evil continue to battle against the good.

The way to enlist is to deny ourselves for the sake of Him and the Kingdom. He does not mean to deny ourselves of any one particular thing, like giving up candy during Lent, or even erotic love as a celibate. The pathway that Mark lays out to discipleship is to deny making oneself the center or object of our life and to place Jesus there as our focal point. To be a true disciple means we continue to repent, to each day re-take control of our life and then to relinquish control to Him.

How do we do this? Mark’s Jesus says we must take up our own cross and then keep our eyes on him, to fixate on him, to follow him – but to where? To Calvary...and if we get that far we continue to follow him to eternal glory through resurrection.

If all of this seems hard to grasp and even scary, that’s OK. We have lots of company. The readers of Mark’s Gospel can certainly empathize. So can Peter and the Apostles. So can Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome. So can Jesus Himself as he begged that this cup pass from him as he hung seemingly abandoned on the cross.

For us now, all we can do is pray and “Be watchful! Be alert! For you do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13: 32-33). Lucky for us that we have the “good news” of Mark to assure us all will be well in the end.

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