

§ 020

THE TIME OF THE BEGINNING

¹ *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* ¹

Mark 1:1

¹ *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* ²

Luke 3:1-2

Introduction

1. *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God* (Mark 1:1). The first verse seems to be a title.
 - Whether it is intended to refer to the entire Gospel or only to the ministry of John the Baptist is not clear.
 - Since in Acts 1:22 the starting point of the Good News is stated to be “from John’s baptism” (cf. also Acts 10:37; 13:24; Matt 11:12; Luke 16:16; John 1:6), Mark may have this in mind here.
2. Another possibility, however, is that by the use of the word *archē* (“beginning”) Mark is imitating the opening verse of the LXX (*en archē*, “in the beginning,” Gen 1:1) and wants his readers to realize that his book is a new beginning in which God reveals the Good News of Jesus Christ.
 - Taken in this way, the first verse is not only a title for the entire book but a claim to its _____³ origin.⁴

¹ *The Holy Bible: English standard version*. 2001 (Mk 1:1). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

² *The Holy Bible: English standard version*. 2001 (Lk 3:1-2). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.
LXX Septuagint

³ **divine**

⁴ Wessel, W.W. (1984). Mark. In F.E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (F.E. Gaebelin, Ed.) (618). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

3. The word “beginning” has biblical overtones which lend an awesome ring to the opening phrase, and serves to recall that it is God who initiates redemption on behalf of men.⁵
4. A.T. Robertson says that the word *Gospel* here (εὐαγγελιον [*euaggelion*]) comes close to meaning the record itself as told by Mark.
 - Swete notes that each writer has a different starting point (ἀρχή [*archē*]).
 - Mark, as the earliest form of the evangelic tradition, begins with the work of the Baptist,
 - Matthew with the ancestry and birth of the Messiah,
 - Luke with the birth of the Baptist,
 - John with the Pre-incarnate Logos,
 - Paul with the foundation of each of the churches (Phil. 4:15).⁶
5. The name *Jesus* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Joshua* (both words have been anglicized), which means *Yahweh* (or simply *God saves*).
 - As a common name in the first century, it was shared by two or three other persons who are mentioned in the New Testament: Barabbas (Matt 27:16–17, NRSV, NEB), Jesus Justus (Col 4:11), and Joshua (Acts 7:45; Heb 4:8, KJV).
 - Josephus referred to about twenty different persons who had the name.
 - Mark used it eighty times without stressing the theological significance of the name.
6. The Greek word *Christ* is the equivalent of the Hebrew *Messiah* (again both are anglicized) and is actually translated *Messiah* in some passages by the NRSV, NEB, REB, and GNB.
 - Both mean *the anointed one*, i.e., a person commissioned by God for a special task.
 - In the Old Testament priests (Exodus 29:7, 21), prophets (1 Kings 19:16), and kings (1 Sam 10:1) were anointed for special tasks.⁷
7. The term *Christ* or *Messiah* was originally a title, but by Mark’s day it was on the way to becoming a proper name (cf. 9:41).

⁵ Cf. E. Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus* (Göttingen, 1963), p. 10 who recalls not only Gen. 1:1 and John 1:1 but Hos. 1:2 LXX, ἀρχὴ λόγου κυρίου πρὸς Ὡσηε; Prov. 1:1; Eccl. 1:1; Cant. 1:1.

⁶ Robertson, A. (1997). *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Vol.V ©1932, Vol.VI ©1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Mk 1:1). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

⁷ Mark did not describe Jesus as a priest, and he said very little explicitly about him as a prophet (cf. 6:4, 15; 8:28); but in 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32 he described him as the king of the Jews/Israel. In the first century some Jews looked forward to an anointed king who, they hoped, would restore the kingdom of David and consummate the age.

- The word appears only seven times in Mark,⁸ probably reflecting accurately the reluctance of Jesus to employ it or to accept it when used by others because of its nationalistic connotations.
 - The only instance where Jesus used it with reference to himself is Mark 9:41 and there in an oblique way.
8. For Mark and his readers/hearers Jesus was the one above all others who was anointed by God for the greatest task of all times.
- Evidently at his baptism (Mark 1:9–11) Jesus was formally anointed for his special mission.⁹

Commentary

1. *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar* (Luke 3:1). As an author with historical aptitude, Luke gives an exceptionally full chronology for the commencement of John's public appearance.¹⁰
 - He does this because, on account of the preparatory nature of his work, it is really also the time-indication for the beginning of the public appearance of Jesus (which commenced only about six months later); Luke is chiefly concerned throughout to let the full light fall upon Christ.
 - Here he states that the divine charge to John to act openly as the forerunner of Christ was given "*in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar*".¹¹
2. It is at once apparent that, as far as Luke is concerned, the important thing to be dated most carefully is not the birth or the death of Jesus but the _____¹² of the work of the forerunner of Jesus, with whom and whose work the entire Messianic career of Jesus began.
 - Moreover, Luke piles up these items solely for the purpose of dating, not, as some think, for the purpose of describing the political and the ecclesiastical situation

⁸ Here; 8:29; 9:41; 12:35; 13:21; 14:61; 15:32; also 1:34 as a variant reading.

⁹ Brooks, J.A. (2001, ©1991). *Vol. 23: Mark* (electronic e.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (38). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹⁰ Luke's most important item for the date is this fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, whose name and title always appear in this order and never reversed. [Lenski, R.C.H. (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (172). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.]

¹¹ Geldenhuys, N. (1977). *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*. The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (134). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

¹² **beginning**

that prevailed at this time; for the mere naming of rulers and high priests does not describe a situation.

- Luke lifts the reference to the Roman emperor¹³ into prominence in a neat way by making this a phrase and by placing it at the head whereas all the minor rulers are added by means of a genitive absolute and by ending with another but a different phrase with regard to the ecclesiastical rulers, cf. verse 2.¹⁴

3. *Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene.* Here Luke gives a further indication of the specific time:

- Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judaea from AD 26–36;
- Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, ruled as tetrarch over Galilee and Perea from 4 BC until AD 39, when he was dismissed from his post by Caligula as a result of his attempt to change his title from “tetrarch” to the higher one of “king”;
- Philip, son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra, was the best of the Herod family, and ruled from 4 BC to AD 34 as tetrarch over a region that *inter alia* included Ituraea and Trachonitis;
- Lysanias (the younger)¹⁵ ruled over Abilene, to the north of Philip’s territory.¹⁶

4. *During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* After indicating the chronology by reference to secular rulers, Luke proceeds to state that the events took place in “the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas”.

¹³ Tiberius was emperor from the death of Caesar Augustus in AD 14 (on 19th August) until AD 37. Some consider that his fifteenth year is reckoned here from the time when he was appointed co-ruler of the provinces by his step-father Augustus in A.D. 11–12. But no example is produced of his regnal years being counted from any other epoch than his actual accession. According to the Roman reckoning, this would make his fifteenth year AD 28–9. But in Syria the reigns of monarchs were reckoned according to a method retained from the days of the Seleucid dynasty, by which a new regnal year started in September–October. Tiberius’s second year would by this computation have started in September–October of AD 14, although in fact he had donned the purple only a month earlier; and his fifteenth year would be deemed to start in September–October of AD 27. [Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 134.]

¹⁴ Lenski, R.C.H. (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel* (172). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

¹⁵ It was formerly considered that it was a historical error on the part of Luke to mention Lysanias as ruling over Abilene at that time. Inscriptions have, however, been discovered which prove that while several years previously (about 36 BC) one Lysanias ruled over Abilene as king, another Lysanias (probably a descendant of the former one) later governed the same territory as tetrarch (cf. our exposition in the footnotes).

¹⁶ Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 134.

- Annas was really high priest from AD 6 to 15 (when he was dismissed from his post by Valerius Gratus, the Roman governor).
 - In practice, however, he still retained and exercised a considerable share of the high-priestly power, especially during the high-priesthood of Caiaphas, his son-in-law, and of a number of his own sons.¹⁷
5. All these chronological data, taken together, show that John was called to appear as forerunner of Christ in public between the years AD 26 and 29. Probably the exact year was AD 27.¹⁸
 6. By mentioning the names of the various secular and spiritual leaders, Luke not only assigns a date to the public appearance of John and especially of Jesus (a few months after John), but by this means also depicts the political and religious relations and circumstances in Palestine at that time—the milieu in which the ministry of John and Jesus took place.
 7. This list of names points to dark conditions.
 - a. In the first place it makes us think of the administration of Tiberius which was characterized by severity and cruelty.
 - It was shortly before the date indicated here that Tiberius went into semi-retirement on the island of Capri,¹⁹ leaving affairs in Rome in the hands of his unscrupulous and despicable favorite Sejanus, until the latter’s ambition o’ervaulted itself and compassed his ruin in the year AD 31.
 - “In the reign of Tiberius Caesar” reminds us of the moral degeneration and political chaos in the Roman Empire, which in the course of time brought about its downfall.
 - b. In the second place the names show us the Holy Land under the domination of a pagan power that arbitrarily divided the country up and placed it under different rulers (most of whom were also moral degenerates and maladministrators).
 - c. In the third place, especially, the expression “during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas” points to the chaos which had set in even in sacred matters—the

¹⁷ Luke’s uncommon expression ἐπὶ ἀρχιερέως Ἄννα καὶ Καϊάφα, “Annas and Caiaphas being high priest” (singular and not plural), thus indicates the real state of affairs: although the Romans had deposed Annas, and Caiaphas was the official high priest, Annas nevertheless in reality still exercised some high-priestly authority.

¹⁸ Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 134.

¹⁹ The picture drawn by Tacitus and Suetonius of the private vices of Tiberius should not be accepted uncritically; these writers depend largely on sources biased against Tiberius. Soured and embittered as he later became, not without reason, he was in his earlier years a capable and equitable ruler.

religious life of God's people—as a result of the pagan domination by which high priests were arbitrarily deposed and supplanted by others.

8. During a period when conditions in the world and in Palestine were dark and desperate, God at length called John to come forth in public as forerunner of the Deliverer.

- It was not on his own initiative or at his own discretion that John commenced his preaching and preparatory work.
- It was the word of God that came to him: God commissioned him in a clear and personal manner and also gave him the necessary equipment to undertake the work.²⁰

Conclusion

THE GOSPEL

The term “gospel” or “evangel” was not a word first coined among the Christians. On the contrary, the concept was significant both in pagan and Jewish culture.²¹ Among the Romans it meant “joyful tidings” and was associated with the cult of the emperor, whose birthday, attainment to majority and accession to power were celebrated as festival occasions for the whole world. The reports of such festivals were called “evangels” in the inscriptions and papyri of the Imperial Age. A calendar inscription from about 9 BC, found in Priene in Asia Minor, says of the emperor Octavian (Augustus): “the birthday of the god was for the world *the beginning of joyful tidings* which have been proclaimed on his account” (*Inscr. Priene*, 105, 40).²² This inscription is remarkably similar to Mark's initial line and it clarifies the essential content of an evangel in the ancient world: *an historical event which introduces a new situation for the world*. In this perspective the Roman would understand Mark's proclamation of Jesus the Messiah. Beginning with the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry, Mark announces Jesus' coming as an event that brings about a radically new state of affairs for mankind.²³

²⁰ Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 134.

²¹ On the concept “gospel” see J. Schniewind, *Euangelion. Ursprung und erste Gestalt des Begriffs Evangelium* (Gütersloh, 1927–31); G. Friedrich, *TWNT II* (Eng. Tr. 1964), 707–737; R. Asting, *Die Verkündigung des Wortes im Urchristentum* (Stuttgart, 1939), 300–457.

²² For this and related texts see G. Friedrich, *op. cit.*, 724 f. Bibliography on the Priene inscription is listed in n. 35 to Friedrich's discussion.

²³ Cf. E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (New York, 1956), 157–159. G. Friedrich, *op. cit.*, 725 rightly comments on the parallel between “evangel” in the imperial cult and the Bible: “Caesar and Christ, the emperor on the throne and the despised rabbi on the cross, confront one another. Both are evangel to men. They have much in common. But they belong to different worlds.”

There is, however, another aspect to the meaning of “gospel.” Mark’s own understanding of what constituted “joyful tidings” drew heavily on the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, as the twofold citation of Ch. 1:2–3 makes clear. The explicit reference to Isaiah indicates that the gospel receives its proper interpretation only in the light of the coming salvation promised in the prophetic word. Especially in Isaiah the Hebrew terms signifying “good news” concern the announcement of future salvation, or of the time of salvation.²⁴ In this context to proclaim salvation on God’s authority is itself a creative act; in a sense it inaugurates the reality of which it speaks.²⁵ This fact points up the difference between the biblical concept of joyful tidings and that found in the imperial cult. For the Roman an evangel was retrospective, a reflection of the joyous event which has already taken place. In the prophetic word there is a distinctively forward-looking eschatological perspective. The messenger of joy will announce the beginning of the time of salvation and thereby introduce it (cf. Isa. 52:7–10).

In keeping with this usage in Isaiah, Mark’s opening verses center attention both on the earliest apostolic preaching about “Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,” and on the joyful tidings announced by Jesus himself (Ch. 1:14 f.).²⁶ In the initial phrase of Mark’s Gospel and the summary of Jesus’ Galilean proclamation, the word “gospel” has not yet come to mean a written document. It refers to a living word of hope from the lips of an appointed messenger.²⁷

In Mark 1:1 “gospel” is the technical term for Christian preaching, and the words which qualify it should be understood objectively, “the good news concerning Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.”²⁸ Mark’s Gospel as a whole gives an interpretive account of the historical appearance of Jesus; it is concerned with his teaching far less than the other

²⁴ Cf. G. Friedrich, *op. cit.*, 707–710, 714–717, 721, 726 f. The connection between בְּשֵׂרָה and בְּשֵׂרָה in the OT and εὐαγγελίζομαι and εὐαγγέλιον in the NT has been found in the preservation of the Semitic terminology of the OT in the Galilean Aramaic of the Palestinian Syriac Version of the Gospels. See J.W. Bowman, “The term *Gospel* and its cognates in Palestinian Syriac,” in *New Testament Essays. Studies in Memory of T.W. Manson*, ed. A.J.B. Higgins (Manchester, 1959), 54–67.

²⁵ This has important implications for the ministry of John and Jesus, both of whom proclaim “the gospel.” Cf. A. Schlatter, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Stuttgart, 1929), 175: “John did not only prophesy; he was himself prophesied. He gave the people not simply hope for the future; with him began the fulfillment of this hope.”

²⁶ G. Friedrich, *op. cit.*, 728 tends to disbelieve that Jesus actually used the term “gospel” in Chs. 1:15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9; it is the evangelist who is responsible for the term. Against this opinion see J.W. Bowman, *Prophetic Realism and the Gospel* (London, 1955), 64–68, who rightly notes that these references reflect an early period when the gospel was something which Jesus heralded, rather than something that he was himself.

²⁷ Not until the second century did the term “gospel” come to designate a particular kind of document. The transition from the one usage to the other reflects the second century evaluation of the canonical Gospels as authoritative proclamations of the one gospel concerning Jesus Christ.

²⁸ Rather than “the good news which Jesus the Messiah proclaimed.” Cf. N. B. Stonehouse, *op. cit.*, 12

Gospels. Consistent with this “Jesus the Messiah,²⁹ the Son of God”³⁰ in verse 1 should be understood as the content of Christian proclamation. The superscription indicates that Mark’s primary concern is to delineate the historical content of the primitive Christian message of salvation. It also suggests the general plan of his work by anticipating the crucial points in the history he relates. The recognition that Jesus is the Messiah in Ch. 8:29 is the point of transition to the second half of the Gospel where Mark clarifies what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. The climax is reached in Ch. 15:39 with the affirmation that Jesus is the Son of God. It is evident that the first line of Mark’s Gospel invites the reader to consider every aspect of the Gospel from a distinctly Christological perspective.³¹

The primary reference in Mark 1:1 is to the ministry of John and the fulfillment of the hope of Israel. This hope is distinctly eschatological in character; the forerunner announces the coming of the Messiah who introduces the new age of redemption promised through the prophets. For this reason the transition from Mark’s initial verse to the day of the Lord is not as abrupt as is sometimes supposed. The coming of John signaled both the beginning of the joyful tidings of salvation and the intrusion of the rule of God.³²

²⁹ Mark’s usage of the designation “Messiah” in Chs. 8:29; 12:35; 14:61 and 15:32 show that he is presupposing in Ch. 1:1 the traditional connotations of the term. Accordingly, Χριστοῦ in Ch. 1:1 is not a proper name but a titular designation, parallel to υἱοῦ θεοῦ.

³⁰ For “Son of God” in Mark see below on Chs. 1:11; 3:11; 8:38; 9:7; 12:6; 13:32; 14:36, 61; 15:39. It is widely recognized that the figure of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel is altogether supernatural. Cf. E. Lohmeyer, *op. cit.*, 4: “The Son of God is not primarily a human but a divine figure ... He is not merely endowed with the power of God, but is himself divine as to his nature; not only are his word and his work divine, but his essence also.” Cf. J. Bieneck, *Sohn Gottes als Christusbezeichnung der Synoptiker* (Zürich, 1951); W. Grundmann, “Sohn Gottes,” *ZNW* 47 (1956), 113–133. In the ultimate sense “Son of God” is a mysterious term which Jesus alone can clarify. What Son means is determined by what Jesus is, by what he does, by what he says, and it is this revelation which dominates Mark’s Gospel.

³¹ Cf. R.P. Meye, *Jesus and the Twelve. Discipleship and Revelation in Mark’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids, 1968), 30: “Mark and the community in which his work originated worshipped Jesus as the Son of God. The narrative of Mark’s Gospel and its origin with the worshipping Church, as well as its continual use by the worshipping Church, makes this abundantly clear.”

³² Lane, W.L. (1974). *The Gospel of Mark*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (42). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.