
§1 *The Forerunner and Jesus (Mark 1:1–20)*

1:1–8 / In this brief but fully packed introductory section, Mark first describes Jesus by titles that summarize for the author the proper significance of Jesus and then links him with Old Testament prophetic themes and with the historical figure John the Baptist. It is interesting that, although Mark presents the human characters in his story, even the disciples, as largely unable to perceive properly who Jesus really is until his resurrection, the reader is given in the opening line the titles that prove to be Mark's favorite terms for communicating Jesus' true dignity—**Christ** (Messiah), and **Son of God**. There is a certain secrecy surrounding Jesus in the book, but the reader is let in on the secret right at the beginning. The effect of this is that the reader is prepared to feel how tragic and grievous were the rejection of Jesus by his enemies and the misunderstanding of Jesus by his disciples. The introduction of Jesus by these titles also immediately shows that the writer proceeds out of adoration for Jesus, and that the work is written not from the standpoint of unconcerned historical observance but with deeply religious interests in mind.

The Old Testament (OT) passages (Mal. 3:1 and Isa. 40:3; see the notes on 1:2, 3) are furnished to show that John the Baptist and Jesus are to be understood in the context of the prophecies regarded by ancient Jews and Christians as holy Scripture and divine revelation of God's purposes. That is, in the writer's view, neither Jesus nor John appeared "out of the blue" but, rather, as fulfillment of God's plan of redemption. This attitude, that the OT is a record of God's work and plan and that Jesus must be interpreted as fulfillment of the work and word of God in the OT, is reflected throughout the New Testament (NT) writings and received continuing expression as the church used the OT writings as Scripture in its subsequent history. This view is, of course, formally reflected in the inclusion of the OT as part of the Chris-

tian Bible—a decision still accepted by all the major branches of Christianity today. The early Christians not only saw Jesus pre-figured in certain OT prophecies of a coming redemption, but in addition, they regarded Jesus as the culmination of all God had done in the OT. In this sense, virtually everything in the OT seemed to have anticipated and pre-figured Jesus and thus gained its “fulfillment” in him.

The passages quoted here in Mark seem to relate specifically to John the Baptist. He is seen as the **messenger** sent to **prepare the way** for Jesus; he is the **one calling in the desert**, urging Israel to **prepare the way for the Lord**. This role is made clear by Mark’s description of John as working **in the desert region** (v. 4), calling Israel to repentance and announcing one who would come after him (vv. 7-8) with an even more significant ministry.

The passage from Malachi 3:1 (quoted in 1:2) seems to have been understood by many ancient Jews and Christians as predicting a prophetlike figure of the end time, and this figure was understood, in the context of Malachi 4:5-6, like Elijah, the OT prophet (see 1 Kings 17-21; 2 Kings 1-2). Mark’s description of John’s attire (v. 6) seems intended to recall for his readers the image of Elijah, who is similarly attired in the OT (2 Kings 1:8). Indeed, the expectation of an Elijah figure and the connection between John and Elijah is made more explicit elsewhere in Mark (see the comments on Mark 6:15).

Although this connection of John with the expectation of an Elijah figure in ancient Judaism is implied here, Mark’s main intent in this section and the following verses is to relate John to Jesus. In the following verses Mark tells us that Jesus was baptized by John (1:9), at that time receiving his calling to his ministry (1:10-11), and that Jesus’ ministry in Galilee began after John’s arrest (1:14). In the present passage John is presented as a forerunner to Jesus. This means that Mark wishes to make John’s ministry the immediate historical setting for Jesus’ ministry, and in the process, he wishes to make John’s prediction of a greater one to follow a prediction (and endorsement) of Jesus.

This connection of Jesus with John is well attested in the NT. All four Gospels describe the beginning of Jesus’ ministry by referring to John (cf. Matt. 3:1-17; Luke 3:1-22; John 1:6-35); and the accounts of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles like-

wise trace Jesus' ministry from John's work (Acts 1:21-22; 10:36-38). Elsewhere in Mark there is the reported rumor that after John's execution Jesus was viewed by some (especially Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee) as perhaps a reappearance of the martyred prophet! This must imply that there were sufficient similarities in the ministries of Jesus and John to make such ideas worth considering in the minds of some. Further, in Mark's account of the temple-cleansing controversy between Jesus and the priestly authorities (11:27-33), we are told that Jesus demanded an evaluation of John's ministry as a condition for defending his own deeds, implying perhaps that the two ministries were to be seen as connected in some way.

John the Baptist is also referred to by Josephus,* the Jewish historian who wrote in the latter part of the first century A.D. His reference to John is in connection with a description of the rule of Herod Antipas, who had John executed. Josephus describes John as a figure popular with the masses, highly respected for his godliness and his strong call to righteousness, and this evidence of John's impact in first-century Palestine may help us to see why the Gospels connect Jesus explicitly with John. To do so was to associate Jesus with a highly respected religious figure of first-century Judaism, and to claim John's prophetic endorsement of Jesus was both to define somewhat Jesus' ministry by association and to distinguish Jesus as even greater than John.

From the descriptions of John the Baptist in the NT writings and in Josephus, we learn that he was a prophet-like preacher calling Israel to repentance and to preparation for the coming day of God's manifestation of salvation (for those prepared) and judgment (see Matt. 3:1-12). Part of his ministry involved immersing repentant Jews in the river Jordan, and from this practice we derive his designation as John the Baptist (or Baptizer). This ritual seems to have been a somewhat new practice in Jewish religion. It appears that the Jewish sect at Qumran (site of the Dead Sea Scrolls) may have practiced ritual immersions daily to symbolize

*Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.116-119. A convenient translation of Josephus is *Josephus*, Loeb Classical Library, 10 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), vol. 9, pp. 81-85. Note also the articles on John the Baptist in *IDB*, vol. 2, pp. 955-62, and *IDBSup*, pp. 487-88.

(and effect?) daily cleansing from religious impurity. It may be that Gentiles who became proselytes (converts to the Jewish religion) underwent a ritual immersion (baptism) as part of their conversion requirements (though scholars disagree as to when baptism of proselytes began). John's baptism rite was different. For one thing, it appears that John administered baptism only once to each repentant sinner, which is unlike the daily immersion rite at Qumran but similar to the practice of proselyte baptism. For another, John sought to bring Israel (Jews) to repentance and baptism, whereas proselyte baptism was only for non-Jews who wished to take up Judaism. So, there is no clear analogy for John's rite. The Christian rite of baptism, which dates from a slightly later time than John the Baptist, may have been patterned after John's rite in that, in this case as well, baptism was administered once to each person and the rite was required of all, Jew or Gentile, who sought to become Christians.

The final feature about John mentioned in this part of Mark is that John heralded one greater than he, who would have a still greater ministry (vv. 7-8). Whereas John baptized in water, the one coming would baptize **with the Holy Spirit**. This statement is to be seen against the background of the OT promises of a time when God would bestow his Spirit on all his people, giving them all special closeness with him and, thereby, the blessings of salvation. (See Joel 2:28-32; Ezek. 36:22-32; Jer. 31:31-34.) Obviously the Holy Spirit is not a liquid, and the language of "baptizing" with the Holy Spirit is an image intended both to associate the coming salvation with John's own ministry of baptizing and at the same time to show the superiority of one to the other by the contrast of Holy Spirit and water.

This opening of this book by reference to John the Baptist means that we are introduced immediately into the time of the adult ministry of Jesus, with no information on Jesus' childhood. Though Matthew and Luke have birth and childhood stories, Mark plunges the reader into the thick of Jesus' ministry almost immediately. Scholars disagree as to whether Mark was uninformed about Jesus' childhood or whether it was simply not a part of his interest to write about that period of Jesus' life. Whatever the reason, the absence of material on Jesus' childhood, together with the fast-paced narrative content of the book throughout, makes Mark's Gospel an arresting summary of Jesus' ministry.

1:9-13 / In this passage Jesus appears for the first time in the narrative, and the direct relevance of the introduction of John the Baptist earlier in the story becomes clear, for here Jesus is baptized by John. This of course means that Mark's narrative not only associates John with Jesus as an endorser of Jesus but also associates Jesus with John as one who accepted John's message and obeyed his call to be baptized.

A relationship between Jesus and the Baptist is attested in all four Gospels, but in the Gospel according to John many scholars see evidence that the writer attempted to make it very clear that Jesus was fully superior to the Baptist, perhaps to counter any suggestion that Jesus was a follower of the Baptist and therefore inferior to him. It is interesting, by comparison, that the Fourth Gospel does not actually say that Jesus was baptized by John (John 1:29-34) but includes a lengthy passage where the Baptist explicitly describes Jesus' superiority (John 3:22-30). In the passage before us, there is no such reluctance to associate the beginnings of Jesus' ministry with the Baptist.

In connection with his baptism, Jesus experiences a vision that Mark presents as Jesus' call to his own ministry. This vision of **heaven** (Greek, "the Heavens") **being torn open** (Greek, "splitting apart") apparently signifies both that God is about to act directly and that Jesus is given an intimate glimpse of divine purpose. The action may allude to Isaiah 64:1, where the prophet prays for God to "rend the heavens and come down," in a passage appealing for divine salvation for the people of Israel (64:1-12). The point of the allusion would be that Jesus' calling by God is to be seen as the fulfillment of the prayer and hope for God's new deliverance and revelation that Isaiah 64 reflects.

The descent of the Spirit of God upon Jesus **like a dove** shows that Jesus is commissioned by God. This reminds the reader of Isaiah 61:1, where God's servant describes his calling as involving God's spirit being upon him. ("The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me.")

The voice from heaven is clearly God's, and the statement alludes to several OT passages, identifying Jesus with revered figures from the passages in question. **You are my Son** echoes Psalm 2:7, a psalm originally addressed to the ancient Jewish kings. A son **whom I love** echoes Genesis 22:2, where God addresses Abraham, telling him to offer his son ("your only son,

Isaac, whom you love"). **With you I am well pleased** reflects Isaiah 42:1, where God points to his servant as one chosen to speak for him.

It appears that Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42, and perhaps Genesis 22:2, were understood by some in Mark's time as foreshadowing the Messiah (the anointed one, the Christ), and so the allusion to these passages implicitly designates Jesus as the one foreshadowed. As we will see in subsequent passages, Mark wishes to enhance and enlarge the significance of Jesus beyond his simply being the Messiah, but the allusion to these verses from the OT means that Mark wishes also to claim for Jesus the honor attached to the Messiah figure of Jewish hope.

This vision and the accompanying voice from heaven are similar to the OT accounts of prophets who were called by God to speak to Israel. Isaiah (6:1-13) and Ezekiel (1:1-2:10) give extended descriptions of such experiences, but such visions and accompanying experiences of being called by God seem to have prompted the ministry of several other prophets as well (e.g., Amos 7:1-9:1). Certainly Mark saw Jesus as more than a prophet, but this account seems to describe the beginning of Jesus' ministry as provoked by a prophetic calling experience. It is worth noting that Jesus elsewhere likens himself to a prophet (6:4) and that some people so regarded him (6:15; 8:28). But though the form of the calling here is like that of OT prophets, the substance of the call is to serve as God's chosen Son!

All the Synoptic Gospels describe Jesus undergoing a period of temptation in a desert area shortly after his baptism, but there are interesting peculiarities to the account in Mark. For one thing, although the accounts in Matthew (4:1-11) and Luke (4:1-13) describe the Spirit *leading* Jesus into the desert, Mark says that the Spirit **sent him out into the desert** (1:12). Though we do not really know what was behind Mark's choice of words here, the effect is to make the temptation seem more of an unsought and uncomfortable experience, an ordeal. The fact that it is the Spirit who drove him into the desert means that the testing there was God-ordained, part of the necessary preparation for God's chosen Son. For another thing, Mark alone refers to **wild animals** in the desert experience (1:13), and his intention, apparently, is to show the dangers of the scene. Some scholars suggest that the writer

alludes here to the creation accounts, in which Adam in the garden names the animals (Gen. 2:18-19), the significance of the possible allusion being that Mark may be portraying Jesus as a new Adam signifying a new beginning for the human race. (I am not persuaded by this suggestion, however.)

All three Synoptic Gospel accounts describe the temptation as lasting forty days, and we should note two things about this figure. First, it is a round number and therefore is probably not intended as an exact description of the chronological length of the temptation period. Second, it is worth noticing that the forty days of Jesus' temptation in the desert seem to echo the traditions that Israel spent forty years in the desert (Deut. 29:5) and that Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai waiting to receive the law (Exod. 24:18). The point of the probable allusions to these traditions is to make Jesus' desert period a time of new revelation and salvation equivalent to the revelation given to Moses and Israel in the classical, Exodus time.

Acclaimed by God at his baptism, gifted with the Spirit of God, and directed by the Spirit into this testing, Jesus is also helped by angels (v. 13). Matthew (4:1-11) and Luke (4:1-13) both devote greater space to the temptation scene, but even the briefer Markan account makes it clear that this episode is the testing and preparation for the one just called to do the work none other was called to do. Early here in the Gospel story Jesus encounters Satan (v. 13) under adverse circumstances and, as the narrative implies, wins against him, setting the tone for the theme of Jesus' conflict with demonic powers so prevalent throughout the rest of the book.

1:14-20 / Linking the beginning of Jesus' ministry with the arrest of John has the effect of associating Jesus with John's ministry still more plainly than indicated in the preceding passages. This is especially so in view of the partial similarity of their messages. In 1:4 John comes "preaching . . . repentance" and here in 1:15 Jesus utters a similar message.

There are, however, important differences between Jesus and John given in the passage before us. Here Jesus is said to proclaim that the kingdom of God has drawn near and that the day of fulfillment (**the time**) has come. This conviction that God's

chosen time had come is similar to the Baptist's sense of urgency and his belief that he was called to prepare Israel for the day of God's salvation (1:4–8), but Jesus' words reflect the conviction that the day of God's rule has come even nearer than John knew. In Mark, Jesus' message is called **the good news of God**, but this is not said of John's words; this seems intended to give Jesus' message a special significance above the message of John.

The urgent conviction reflected in Jesus' words sets the tone for the rest of the story of his ministry and, together with his acclamation as God's Son, marks his work with momentous significance. "**The kingdom of God**" here means the rule of God, and Jesus' message signifies that God has begun to establish his rule in a world viewed by many religious Jews as under the tyranny of Satan and evil. The kingdom of God thus represents the triumph of God's plan of salvation over human sin and demonic opposition. An ancient Jewish prayer reads, "May God establish his kingdom in our lifetime," and Jesus' announcement is to be heard in the context of the hope reflected in that prayer. The reader must not underestimate the central importance of this message of the approaching kingdom of God for understanding properly Jesus' ministry. Virtually everything in his behavior and teaching was based on this conviction about his day as the time of the approach of God's rule, and the accompanying conviction about his role as its herald and, indeed, its dramatic vehicle.

Jesus' summoning of the four men to be his disciples has the effect immediately of widening the circle of attention to include Jesus and the group chosen to accompany him. Elsewhere in the book we will see evidence that Mark addresses the topic of Christian discipleship, and in this account we see what must be role models in the immediate response of the four men to Jesus' authoritative call.

Jesus' summons to discipleship includes the promise that the men will become **fishers of men**; that is, they are called to enter into his mission and not to be observers. Later, we learn of twelve men thus called, and we are told specifically that they were given a ministry modeled after Jesus' own (3:13–19). The effect of this episode is to give the readers followers of Jesus with whom to identify themselves. The readers are thereby drawn into

the story, and the Christian reader especially is to follow the calling and duties, the trials and failures, of the disciples with a view to drawing lessons for living.

Additional Notes §1

1:1 / Gospel is a term in Greek (*euangelion*) that was used in the contemporary world to refer to a message of good news but that seems to have acquired a special significance for early Christians as a technical term for the message of salvation through Jesus. (See, e.g., Mark 1:14–15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9; Rom. 1:1, 16–17; 1 Cor. 4:15.) Here too the term refers to the *message* about Jesus, not the book. The term *Gospel* was not applied to books until the second century, when we have references to the “four Gospels,” meaning the canonical writings attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The Son of God. These words are missing in some important early witnesses to the NT text. The claim that Jesus is Son of God appears at several points in Mark, indicating that Jesus’ divine sonship is an important part of Mark’s portrait (cf. 1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 14:61–62; 15:39), and this causes most scholars to believe that the title was originally here in the opening of the book and that it was accidentally omitted in some copies. It is very significant that Jesus is called the Son of God only by God (1:11; 9:7), by demons (3:11; 5:7), and by one man, the centurion at the cross (15:39), illustrating Mark’s emphasis upon the blindness of people to Jesus in his own ministry. (See “Son of God,” *NIDNTT*, vol. 3, pp. 634–48.)

1:2 / It is written in Isaiah the prophet is literally “as it is written in Isaiah the prophet.” This is the wording in the earliest manuscripts, but in many later ones the reading is “as it is written in the prophets.” Most scholars suspect that the latter reading arose because the quotations given in vv. 2–3 are in fact from Mal. 3:1 and Isa. 40:3, and so some copyists may have felt it necessary to avoid the impression that the writer had mistakenly credited Isaiah with a statement from another prophet. We do not know for sure why the writer attributes this composite quote to Isaiah alone, but it may be that he was using a list of OT prophecies prepared as a teaching aid and that the passages cited here were listed under the name of Isaiah.

Ahead of you, who will prepare your way: The quote is not exactly the same as the Hebrew text of Mal. 3:1. It is especially interesting that in Hebrew we read “to prepare the way for *me*.” Here in Mark the prophecy seems to be addressed to Jesus—the *you* here in v. 2.

1:3 / The Lord: This probably refers to Jesus, who is given this title elsewhere in the NT (in Mark cf. 5:19; 11:3; also, e.g., 1 Cor. 8:6; Acts 9:1–29).

1:4 / A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins: John's baptism was the immediate demonstration of repentance, just as responding to an evangelistic invitation is seen in some church circles.

1:5 / The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem: Mark of course probably does not mean that *everyone* from these areas went!

1:6 / John's dress and diet seem to reflect the strict life of a desert monk. From other references (Matt. 11:7–8, 16–19) we get the impression that John lived by strong ascetic standards, perhaps modeled somewhat after the Nazirite vow described on the OT, involving abstinence from wine among other rules (see Num. 6:2–21; Judg. 13:5–7; 16:17; Amos 2:11–12).

1:8 / The Holy Spirit: The accounts of John's message in Matt. 3:11 and Luke 3:16 say that the one coming will baptize with "Holy Spirit and with fire." The "fire" is probably a symbol of the coming judgment mentioned in those passages. Here (and in Acts 1:5) there is no reference to judgment, and so only the Holy Spirit is mentioned, referring to the coming salvation.

1:9 / Nazareth: It is the uniform Gospel tradition that Jesus' hometown was Nazareth, a small town in central Galilee otherwise of no importance in history. (See *MBA*, 228; *IDB*, vol. 3, pp. 524–26.)

1:10 / Like a dove: Though paintings of the scene often show the Spirit in the form of a dove alighting upon Jesus' head, the comparison refers to the gentle way that the Spirit came upon Jesus, and no conclusion about the visible form of the Spirit is intended.

1:12 / The desert: The area in view here is probably the barren area near the northern shore of the Dead Sea. In 1:4 we have been told that "John came . . . in the desert region," and the fact that he was arrested by Herod (Antipas) probably means that John's ministry was centered near the southern end of the Jordan River.

1:14 / John was put in prison: Mark does not explain John's imprisonment and he does not tell the outcome here. In 6:14–29 he gives a rather full account of these matters.

Galilee is the name given to the part of ancient Palestine north of Samaria. Jesus seems to have made Galilee (his home area) his major area of ministry. The area was administered by Herod Antipas, a client ruler for the Romans, while Judea in the south was administered by a Roman military governor.

1:16 / Simon . . . Andrew: These two are described as brothers in other Gospel traditions (Matt. 4:18; 10:2; Luke 6:14; John 1:40), as are James and John Zebedee (Matt. 4:21; Luke 5:10). It is interesting to note that Simon (Peter, cf. 3:16) and John became much more frequently mentioned in Christian tradition than Andrew or James (mentioned as martyred in Acts 12:2).

Simon Peter is prominent among the disciples in all the Gospels and in most Christian tradition is regarded as the representative and chief of the twelve apostles.

Casting a net . . . fishermen: Fishing was a major industry in Roman times around Lake Galilee, and the impression one gets here is that these four men were partners of small (or perhaps large!) businesses. They were in all likelihood "middle class" economically, for the Zebedee brothers, at least, had employees in their family business (1:20).

1:17 / Fishers of men: Many scholars think that we have an allusion to Jer. 16:16 where God promises "fishermen" to find the Israelites so that they may be brought to judgment and ultimate restoration. Jesus' words here may be intended to hint that Jesus' ministry marks the time of the fulfillment of this prophetic promise. Of course, Mark does not restrict the disciples to "fishing" for Israelites, for he knows that the prophet's words took on larger meaning in the international mission of the church.