

# Imperial Ideology, Christology, and the Gospel of Mark

Boris Repschinski and Samuel Kapani

*Department for Biblical Studies and Historical Theology, Innsbruck / Austria*

Traditionally the Gospel of Mark has not only been associated with the preaching of Peter, but also with the city of Rome as its place of origin. Clement of Alexandria seems to have said this,<sup>1</sup> and around the same time Irenaeus (*adv.Haer.* 3.1.1) implies as much. While the external evidence points exclusively to Rome as the place of origin of Mark's gospel, modern exegetes are much less unanimous in their opinions and often point to Syria or less frequently Palestine.<sup>2</sup> Yet those favoring Mark's gospel as a light from the east still have to grapple with the fact that it exhibits a number of features with unmistakable Roman coloring.<sup>3</sup> The gospel uses a number of Latinisms.<sup>4</sup> But it is not just the language that indicates a close connection to the Roman imperial culture. It has more recently been recognized that Mark uses metaphors and imagery that recall Roman symbols.<sup>5</sup>

That he does so in sometimes very entertaining ways becomes obvious when looking at the story of the Gerasene demoniac in Mk 5:1–20. Obviously, the story is a story about Jes-

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<sup>1</sup> At least according to Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.5–7.

<sup>2</sup> We favor a Roman origin of the gospel because we attach a lot of weight to the tradition and find the internal evidence as favoring this hypothesis. A list of the various positions and their merits can be found in Schnelle (2007) 242–243. The most forceful defence of the Syrian hypothesis is given by Kee (1977) 100–105. The main arguments leading scholars to assume a Syrian or Palestinian origin of Mark is a) the doubt that so many detailed, oral traditions about Jesus could have found their way to Rome by the year 70 CE [Broer – Weidemann (2011) 92–94], and b) Mark's assumed closeness to Jewish traditions [Crossley (2004)]. Both arguments are relatively weak. The first merely indicates that we know little about the Roman Christian community around 70 CE. Yet travel in the Roman world was widespread and is witnessed to by Paul and his co-workers. Rome also had a vibrant Jewish community.

<sup>3</sup> More recently, strong defenders of the Roman hypothesis are Gundry (1993) 1026–1045, and van Iersel (1993) 31–57.

<sup>4</sup> For an exhaustive list see Dschulnigg (1986) 276–278; also Gundry (1993) 1044. It is possible that the Latinisms are explainable as the language of Roman occupying forces, although examples in other contemporary languages, and more pertinently in the Aramaic spoken in Syria or Palestine, are from a later period [Incigneri (2003) 101 n. 169]. Yet among these Latinisms are some which would not make sense at all in a Syrian or Palestinian setting: λεπτὸ δύο, ὃ ἐστὶν κοδράντης (12:42); ἀλῆς, ὃ ἐστὶν πραιῶριον (15:16); and the description of the woman in 7:26 as Συροφονικίσσα, not just Φονικίσσα [Hengel (1985) 28–29].

<sup>5</sup> For such symbols and their reception even in Judea see Bernett (2007). Recently, the gospel as a whole is on occasion interpreted in terms of an anti-imperial discourse; see e.g. Ebner (2003); Winn (2008); Heinger (2010).

us' authority to expel demons, about a man becoming a missionary, perhaps even a story about the beginning of the Samaritan mission.<sup>6</sup> Yet the story also has decidedly Roman allusions, beginning with the name the demon gives himself, namely "Legion". It seems the demon speaks Latin: He uses one of the famous Latinisms of Mark's gospel. But a further argument can be made: In Mark's world nobody would have heard this without thinking immediately of the Roman army, divided up into Legions with a strength of about 5000 men each,<sup>7</sup> a powerful tool of colonization and always threatening to keep the sometimes appreciated, sometimes feared *pax romana*. The local populace was forced to support the legions with the proceeds from agriculture and with means of transportation. Thus it makes complete sense that this demon does not wish to be driven out from his host country which feeds him (5:10: ἵνα μὴ αὐτὸ ἀποστείλῃ ἕξω τῆς χώρας). Irony also suffuses the description of Jesus who suddenly is described in language more appropriate for a military general rather than a religious Messiah. The demon asks for an order to be sent (πέμψον ἡμᾶς, 5:12), Jesus gives the appropriate order (ἔπετρεψεν αὐτοῖς, 5:13), and finally the demons charge like a unit of storm troopers (ῥομήσεν ἡ ἀγέλη, 5:13) into the swine and down into the lake.<sup>8</sup> The pigs are a particularly humorous twist of the story. At the time, the tenth Legion by the name of "Fretensis" was since about 14 C.E. stationed in Syria and responsible for the keeping of the peace in Palestine. This legion occupied Jerusalem after its fall in 70 C. E. The *legio fretensis* had two animals in its coat of arms: The first a dolphin, reference to the legion's victories at sea, and the other a boar.<sup>9</sup> It is possible that the number of the pigs, 2000 in all, is a further allusion.<sup>10</sup> Josephus (*Bell.* 2,499-506) reports that a detachment (*vexillatio*) of about 2000 soldiers from the *legio Fretensis* raided the areas surrounding southern Syria and northern Galilee with unspeakable atrocities during the early phases of the Jewish war.<sup>11</sup>

The story of the Gerasene demoniac is only one of the many examples that illustrates how Mark's gospel does in fact react to the ubiquitous presence of the Roman imperial power. That he can do so with a lot of humor and irony is shown by the expulsion of the demon named legion.<sup>12</sup> Clear is that Mark shows acute awareness of imperial Rome as the power

<sup>6</sup> See Gundry (1993) 248; France (2002) 226.

<sup>7</sup> See Gilliver (2003) 25.

<sup>8</sup> Helpful are the parallel texts collected by Derrett (1979). He refers particularly to 2/4 Macc, but also to Philo and Josephus.

<sup>9</sup> For a history of this particular legion see Dabrowa (1993); Klinghardt (2007).

<sup>10</sup> So Klinghardt (2007) 37.

<sup>11</sup> See Lau (2007), for the reference and its analysis. Garroway (2009) 62, points out that it is doubtful that ordinary people knew the precise numbers of people within Roman military units. Such an argument rests, of course, on assumptions that can neither be proven or disproven.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, it is also possible to interpret this story in more sinister modes, where Jesus becomes suddenly the more powerful warlord than the Romans [Lau (2007)]. Yet the rather scurrilous narrative suggests heavy irony

in a world that is at the same time the place for Mark's mission – and for the man finally liberated from the legion as well: He becomes Jesus' ambassador in the decapolis.

There are however, various ways of interpreting this conclusion.<sup>13</sup> For some, Mark is writing a gospel that, among other things, aims to show that Jesus and the Christian movement are politically neutral or even cooperative with the Roman government.<sup>14</sup> However, this minority position has not found many adherents. More influential is the thesis that the gospel's Roman imagery transports anti-imperial sentiments.<sup>15</sup> More recently attention has been paid to the fact that writings which are highly critical of political structures also tend to reproduce them in their critique. This certainly holds true for many apocalyptic writings, and Mark's gospel also exhibits such features.<sup>16</sup>

Yet if one accepts the idea that Rome is looming large in the background of Mark's gospel, then two questions arise. The first is the question of Mark's method of incorporating Roman imagery into his gospel, and the second is what purpose Mark is trying to serve.

This paper suggests that Mark uses the rhetorical device of figured speech in his use of Roman imagery. The purpose of figured speech in antiquity is certainly irony, but it goes beyond the insertion of a touch of humor into a narrative, it serves the purpose of undermining existing structures. Hence the second part of our thesis: Mark's purpose behind the use of Roman imagery is to provide Christian believers with a literature of resistance that has antecedents in the apocalyptic literature of Second Temple Judaism. Thus Mark's story of Jesus is also a story of political opposition – and of political alternatives. Before a number of Markan passages are provided to illustrate the plausibility of our thesis, we will need to clarify what is meant by figurative speech, and what is meant by resistance.

## 1 Figured Speech

Already during the first century BCE the rhetorician Pseudo-Demetrius (*Eloc.* 287) attested to the wide use of *figurae* or *σχήματα*, and Quintilian (*Inst.* 9.2.65) does so as well during the

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more that the replacing of one occupying force with another.

<sup>13</sup> At this point we have to express our sincere gratitude to Dr. Hans Leander. He very kindly provided us with an electronic copy of his dissertation *Discourses of Empire: The Gospel of Mark from a Postcolonial Perspective*, which was submitted to the University of Gothenburg in December 2011. He studies the various ways scholars have interpreted the Roman connection of Mark's gospel and argues, that a European colonial heritage probably has caused biblical scholars to neglect Mark's need to negotiate its imperial context.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Brandon (1967) 220–221; Roskam (2004); Winn (2008).

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Belo (1981); Myers (1988); Waetjen (1989); Horsley (2001). Most recently this has been discussed by Leander (2011), who must be thanked for providing a copy of his dissertation to the authors.

<sup>16</sup> Liew (1999a); an abbreviated argument for this thesis in Liew (1999b).

reign of Domitian.<sup>17</sup> Quintilian asserts that figured speech found its origin with the rhetorician Zoilus (4th cent. BCE) who wrote that „a speaker pretends to say something other than what he actually says“ (*Inst.* 9.1.14), or, as Cicero put it, „saying one thing and meaning another“ (*Inst.* 9.1.29). Yet Quintilian refines these definitions by attaching a purpose to them when he writes: „We excite some suspicion to indicate that our meaning is other than our words would seem to imply; but our meaning is not, in this case, contrary to what we express, as is the case in irony, but rather a hidden meaning which is left to the hearer to discover“ (*Inst.* 9.2.65). Such subterfuge needs a certain degree of sophistication, since as soon as it is obvious, it is no longer a subterfuge. Figured speech, therefore, is dissimulative speech. This dissimulation can be achieved by three roads. The first is ἔμφασις, implied meaning; the second is πλάγιον, deflection, and the third is ἐνάντια, saying the opposite. In the following examples from Mark’s gospel we will concentrate on ἔμφασις, although all three modes of speech occur in Mark’s gospel.

Ancient rhetorical theory does not only describe what figured speech is, it also gives rules on when to apply it. Thus Quintilian outlines three conditions under which figured speech is appropriate. The first of these is a situation in which open speech is dangerous or unsafe. The second pertains to a situation in which it is unseemly to speak openly, and a third reason for applying figured speech is its elegance (*Inst.* 9.2.66). The search for elegance can be safely ruled out with regard to Mark since the gospel is certainly the least elegantly phrased. And Pseudo-Dionysius points out that figured speech is particularly apt when speaking about the fatherland (*Inst.* 9.2.92) since things that cannot be said openly can be said obliquely. Thus Pseudo-Dionysius recommends the Athenian politician who recommends in times of severe financial crisis „to make use of our victories“ but actually implying that the golden statue of the goddess of Victory should be melted down. Innuendo maintains propriety. This pertains particularly to situations when critiquing those in power. When flattery is shameful and opposition dangerous, figured speech becomes the middle road Pseudo-Dionysius recommends (*Eloc.* 289; 293; 294). And Quintilian asserted: „We may speak against tyrants ... as openly as we please ... provided always that what we say is susceptible of a different interpretation ... And if the danger can be avoided by any ambiguity of expression, the speaker’s cunning will meet with universal approbation“ (*Inst.* 9.2.67). Figured speech, then, becomes the language of those who cannot speak openly.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Here only a brief summary can be given with regard to figured speech, yet see Whitlark (2012) 164-171 for further discussion and literature. Important also: Lausberg (1989) §§ 750–§§ 910.

<sup>18</sup> Notable, and surprisingly not exploited by Whitlark (2012), is that the opposite of figured speech, namely παρησία, or open speech, is the hallmark of friends and social equals. See Fitzgerald (1996); Repschinski (2008).

Figured speech as a form of political dissent gained importance in the Roman Imperial period. Under Augustus and Tiberius laws against slandering not only the Roman State but also its *princeps* were enacted. Informers became widespread.<sup>19</sup> Utterances in both public and private life were susceptible to be reported to Imperial authorities to a degree that had Tacitus exclaim about such informers that „every corner of the Roman world had suffered their attacks“ (*Ann.* 31.28).

With this background it becomes clear why Mark uses figured speech when he has a critique of the empire to offer. Figured speech offers protection against informers and subsequent punishment while at the same time allowing for political dissent. Dissimulation is a common and perhaps acceptable form of political resistance. It allows Mark to judge and critique the Roman empire in the light of his story of Jesus and foster resistance. But what is resistance, and which purposes does it serve?

## 2 Resistance

Religious literature always has a political component, and Jewish literature is no exception to this truism. Yet with the emergence of Hellenistic domination by the Ptolemies and later the Seleucids, Israel developed a particular form of literature which can be termed a literature of resistance. This literature took the form of apocalypticism.<sup>20</sup> Apocalyptic literature did not propose a unified answer on how to deal with the phenomenon of oppression, yet books like Daniel, the Animal Apocalypse, the Apocalypse of Weeks or others agreed in one basic tenet: Foreign domination was to be resisted.

Occasionally such resistance would find its outlet in revolt, rebellion, and revolution. The Maccabean revolt or the Jewish War are examples, or any of the more modern revolutions. Such violent – or sometimes non-violent as in the case of Ghandhi’s resistance through non-cooperation and non-violence – forms of resistance are the exception. Their aim is to bring about social change and a reversal or re-ordering of power structures. Yet beyond actual rebellion there are forms of resistance which are harder to pin down but may include „foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage“<sup>21</sup>. Such forms of resistance do not necessarily have the overthrow of power structures in mind, yet they are ways to empower those which little ascribed power.

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<sup>19</sup> See Rutledge (2001).

<sup>20</sup> See Albertz (1992). His theory has been updated and considerably refined recently by Portier-Young (2011).

<sup>21</sup> See Scott (1985) xvi, who studied peasants in Malaysia. Further literature can be found in Portier-Young (2011) 5 n.10.

Between these two poles there may be a whole spectrum of forms of resistance. Yet this leads to the problem of defining resistance.<sup>22</sup> Obviously, resistance is related to power and seeks to limit it and diminish its outcome.<sup>23</sup> Apocalyptic literature is replete with examples of showing imperial power as limited and in the end inferior to divine power assisting those oppressed.<sup>24</sup> As such resistance is always a response to domination and its concomitant mechanisms of enforcing it. Therefore, if resistance is designed to influence the effectiveness of power structures, resistance itself has to be an intentional action designed to, and effecting, a limit on domination.<sup>25</sup>

Apocalyptic literature fulfills these criteria to a remarkable degree. Thus there are clear antecedents should Mark's gospel also function as literature of resistance. But these criteria also clarify the kind of questions we need to ask of Mark's gospel. First, we need to see whether Mark actually uses figured speech in order to critique the Roman imperial powers. Secondly, we need to ask whether Mark is actually successful in his critique in terms of limiting the effectiveness of its domination. For this purpose we have chosen three examples.

### 3 Three Examples from Mark's Gospel

#### 3.1 Mark 1:1

Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [υἱοῦ θεοῦ]. {Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ (Son of God)}.

This verse has been considered as the title or incipit of Mark's entire gospel.<sup>26</sup> It is a typically biblical style of beginning a book, found with variations in Matthew and Revelation, in the OT (Prov 1:1; Eccl 1:1; Hos 1:2), and in early Jewish works (Cant 1:1-2; Enoch 1:1). As such it engages a Jewish discourse.<sup>27</sup> Yet a dialogue with the socio-political and religious situation of Mark's community indicates other possible discourses and intentions of the gospel.

<sup>22</sup> Such a definition cannot be attempted here. Instead, we summarize the excellent discussion given by Portier-Young (2011) 5-45, who, after reviewing some attempts at a definition, rejects a firm definition in favor of a descriptive approach.

<sup>23</sup> Barbalet (1985); the definition is given on p. 539.

<sup>24</sup> Examples are given by Portier-Young (2011) 7-8. A good illustration is the supernatural attack on the imperial agent Heliodorus in 2 Macc 3:25-28, who in the face of divine power (δυναστείαν) is rendered helpless (ἀβοήθητον).

<sup>25</sup> van Walraven – Abbink (2003).

<sup>26</sup> Winn (2008) 92; France (2002) 50-53; Myers (2000) 122; et al.

<sup>27</sup> Marcus (2000) 145-46; Winn (2008) 93.

The verse begins with an anarthrous ἀρχή, which in Greek can mean: “beginning, origin, starting point, foundation,” and “dominion, rule, governing principle, power,” both of which are well attested. The absence of the definite article seems perhaps indicative of Mark’s intent to echo Gen 1:1, as in Jn 1:1. But Mark’s ἀρχή does not refer to the beginning of all things or even creation, but is defined by the following genitive, τοῦ εὐαγγελίου.<sup>28</sup> Mark’s gospel has been by and large accepted as written around 70 C.E., the period around the Jewish Revolt, the subsequent destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and Vespasian’s triumphal procession in Rome. The crushing of the rebellion in Jerusalem turned out to be a “longed-for resolution of a crisis” in Rome.<sup>29</sup> In line with this good news, the ἀρχή in Mark’s incipit seems loaded with imperial allusions, like the phrase ἀρχὴ Ρωμαίων (Roman power) familiar to his readers.<sup>30</sup> It is this latter connection that interests us here.

With the battle of Actium (28 B.C.E), the victorious Octavian (Augustus) was lauded for bringing about undisturbed peace in the empire after a century of civil wars. Vespasian’s victory, too, was celebrated with festivals as it was seen as a beginning of a new era of peace and stability following on the heels of the excesses of the Julio-Claudian line of emperors. It was invested with a divine aura.<sup>31</sup> These celebrations are invariably linked with cultic sacrifices and sacred rites are offered. In the Roman Empire, εὐαγγέλιον was, therefore, associated not only with political propaganda, but has also a strong religious significance.<sup>32</sup> Mark’s first audience would have, therefore, grasped the figured speech attached to these concepts. But Mark’s use of triumphant metaphors such as ἀρχή and εὐαγγέλιον reflects an ideological twist of the Roman emperor cults. In fact, Mark’s “Gospel” does not proclaim another Roman victory but is “a declaration of war upon the political culture of the empire”.<sup>33</sup>

Mark connects his work with this cult of the emperor, whose birthday, accession to power, and even forthcoming royal visit were hailed as good tidings (εὐαγγέλια).<sup>34</sup> This is suggested by the famous inscription found at Priene, Asia Minor, dated 9 B.C.E. It is a document that celebrated the birthday of Augustus as the first day of the year in a reform that unified the various calendars used in the Roman Empire. In this text the birthday of the emperor Augustus is proclaimed as ἤρξεν δὲ τῷ κόσμῳ τῶν δι’ αὐτὸν εὐαγγελίων ἢ γενέθλιος τοῦ θεοῦ (the beginning of the good tidings for the world). In the inscription

<sup>28</sup> France (2002) 51-2.

<sup>29</sup> Leander (2011) 201.

<sup>30</sup> Leander (2011) 196-7.

<sup>31</sup> Vespasian is believed to have restored the sight of a blind and cured a man with a diseased hand (Suetonius, Vesp. 7; Tacitus, Hist. 4.81). Similarly in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is depicted as one having power to cure sicknesses (1:29-34, 40-45; 2:1-12; 3:1-6; 5:25-34; 6:5, 53-56; 7:31-37; 8:22-26; 10:46-52). Leander (2011) 203.

<sup>32</sup> Myers (2000) 123.

<sup>33</sup> Leander (2011) 203.

<sup>34</sup> France (2002) 52; Myers (2000) 122; Winn (2008) 96.

Augustus is referred to as savior, benefactor, and finally as god.<sup>35</sup>

The title υἱὸς θεοῦ or *divi filius* (son of god) was both a royal and imperial title. It was a Roman propaganda focused upon eulogizing Caesar as the “divine man.”<sup>36</sup> The deification of the emperor, therefore, gives εὐαγγέλιον its significance and power. The emperor is more than a common man, his ordinances are glad tidings and his laws are sacred writings.<sup>37</sup> To a first-century Greco-Roman reader unfamiliar with the Christian message it would have been absurd to see Mark’s gospel proclaiming the εὐαγγέλιον Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ θεοῦ rather than that of Caesar, son of god. Mark stresses this title as a description of Jesus, and it reappears at important points in the gospel (3:11; 5:7; 15:39).

In this imperial religio-political context, the addition or omission of the phrase “Son of God” might be a reflection of the controversy over how to relate to imperial authorities as ‘Mark’ began to circulate.<sup>38</sup> The new Roman emperor Vespasian (69-79 C.E.), the second Augustus, who claimed to be divinely appointed and to be the fulfillment of Jewish messianic prophecy and hopes, seemed to have created a Christological crisis for Mark’s community. Mark’s incipit is a rejection to such a claim, and is, therefore, a “bold and carefully crafted response to the claims of Flavian propaganda”.<sup>39</sup>

### 3.2 Mark 11:1-11

Bringing over the anti-imperial nuance of 1:1 to this pericope, Mark revives the “good tidings” proclaimed in Jesus Christ. He seems well aware that the image of a march into the city of Jerusalem amid Davidic acclaim would have connoted for his first readers the military procession of a triumphant warrior with both royal and messianic overtones. We have examples of some Jewish revolutionaries like Judas Maccabeus who returns home from a military victory and is greeted with hymns and “praising God” (1 Macc 4:19-25), and enters Jerusalem amidst singing and merrymaking (1 Macc 5:45-54), and Simon the brother of Judas who enters Jerusalem and is met by crowds “with praise and palm branches, with harps, cymbals, stringed instruments and with hymns and songs” (1 Macc 13:49-51). Also some Roman officials like Marcus Agrippa (Josephus, *Ant.* 16.2.1 §§12-15) and Archelaus (Josephus, *Ant.*

<sup>35</sup> Winn (2008) 96-7.

<sup>36</sup> The Second Triumvirate composed of Antony, Octavian, and Lepidus formally deified Caesar as *Divus Iulius* (the divine or deified Julius) in 42 BC, and Caesar Octavian henceforth became *Divi filius* (“son of a god”) as the adoptive son and heir apparent to Caesar.

<sup>37</sup> Myers (2000) 123.

<sup>38</sup> Leander (2011) 208.

<sup>39</sup> The textual evidence for the inclusion of “Son of God” in the original text is ambiguous. The highly political nature of the title as responsible for the varied textual evidence is suggested by Winn (2008) 179.



17.8.2 §§194-239) entered Jerusalem amidst acclamations by the people.<sup>40</sup> It also alludes to the triumphal entries of emperors into Rome, which was a matter of prestige and honor.<sup>41</sup>

Jesus' triumphal entry in fact fulfills to some extent a certain pattern of a royal procession: "(a) A victory already achieved and a status already recognized for the central person. (b) A formal and ceremonial entry. (c) Greetings and/or acclamations together with invocations of God. (d) Entry to the city climaxed by entry to Temple, if the city in question has one. (e) Cultic activity, either positive (e.g., offering of sacrifice), or negative (e.g., expulsion of objectionable persons and the cleansing away of uncleanness)."<sup>42</sup> In Mark 11 Jesus obviously enters into the city amid acclamations, proceeds to the Temple precinct and ends with the gaze at its surrounding.

But in the light of the Roman emperors entering Rome with pomp and majesty, the scene of Jesus entering the city on a donkey is nothing but a staged mockery of the empire signaling irony and ambivalence. This episode which is normally subtitled as the "Triumphal entry into Jerusalem" appears to those reading Mark from a political angle as sheer "political street theatre."<sup>43</sup> Addressing to his readers' knowledge and experience of typical Greco-Roman military entrance processions, Mark seems to intend it as "a satire on military liberators."<sup>44</sup> In comparison with the procession of a conqueror, the way Jesus enters the city seems to be a conscious subversion of those triumphal allusions of a warrior-king.<sup>45</sup>

The final destination of the entrance narrative is the Temple of Jerusalem, a clear allusion to the imperial triumphal processions who always ended in a temple with the sacrifice of an animal. The emperor, or in his absence his representative, symbolically appropriates a city by way of a sacrificial ritual without which the ceremony is incomplete.<sup>46</sup> Cultic sacrifices played an important role, especially in the light of the deification of emperors, for they granted them authority and power. The negligence of this customary official welcome was seen as an insult and often led to severe consequences. By the strange act of Jesus looking around the Temple precincts, Mark breaks up the narrative and gives his "triumphal entry" an

<sup>40</sup> Catchpole (1984); Evans (2000) 139.

<sup>41</sup> See Nero's entrance to cities including Rome (Suetonius, *Ner.* 25.1-3), Antony into Ephesus (Plutarch, *Ant.* 24.3-4) and triumphal processions in Rome (Josephus, *J.W.* 7.132-157).

<sup>42</sup> Catchpole (1984) 321; Evans (2000) 139-40; Duff (1992) 56-69, describes at length the entry procession of the warrior king in Zechariah 14, of Alexander, and the Greco-Roman warriors. He also provides some pattern of these triumphal entry processions.

<sup>43</sup> Myers (2000) 294-5. Well over half of the episode concerns the instructions given by Jesus to "two disciples" in preparation for the procession (11:1-7). This gives the impression that all is being deliberately planned and choreographed – hence the suspicion of "street theater."

<sup>44</sup> Myers (2000) 295.

<sup>45</sup> Duff (1992) 70-71.

<sup>46</sup> Duff (1992) 64; Dawson (2000) 176.

ironic twist.<sup>47</sup> This anticlimactic ending can be read as “creating a destabilization of imperial notions of power.”<sup>48</sup> The narrative of the cursing and withered fig-tree (Mk 11:11-14.20-21), immediately following the temple scene of Jesus merely looking around, heightens this sense of mockery, but also inserts an element of judgement on the temple. The obvious element of mockery is amplified with a story implying impending doom for the temple ritual. The son of God, instead of entering the city and appropriating it in a temple ritual, rejects it.<sup>49</sup>

The echo of Zechariah 14 embellished with elements of Greco-Roman entry processions also manifests an irony. In it, the divine warrior appears on the Mount of Olives, enters Jerusalem in procession with his holy ones, appropriates the Temple, and inaugurates a new age of blessedness centered on the Jerusalem Temple. On the contrary, in Mark’s story, the entry parade abruptly and anticlimactically ends, and Jesus simply leaves the Temple and the city.

Jesus’ command to get the colt of a donkey can also be explained in relation to the system of official transport, a Roman practice called ἀγγαρεία, “pressed transportation.”<sup>50</sup> Jesus is shown to challenge a system in which the requisition of transport was the prerogative of the wealthy and influential alone, not of the poor.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, on the one side, Jesus’ demand may hint at his assumption of political authority, at least on par with Roman authority, and on the other Mark’s critique of the system itself from the victim’s point of view. The word ὁ κύριος (the Lord) itself refers to the status of influential and powerful people who could exercise a right of impressment.<sup>52</sup>

The Marcan Jesus imitating the Roman way is, therefore, a mockery of Roman imperial symbols to his first readers. Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem on “requisitioned” transport was a symbolic action meant to confront both the authorities who perpetuated an unjust and ex-

<sup>47</sup> Duff (1992) 70.

<sup>48</sup> Leander (2011) 272.

<sup>49</sup> Duff (1992) 70.

<sup>50</sup> Evans (2000) 142. In this Roman practice, the local population is required to procure beasts of burden for transportation. Roman soldiers carried heavy loads, and in order to keep pace they compelled local populations and their beasts of burden into service. It is a form of forced labour, an oppressive system hated by Roman subjects, and was a source of bitterness and friction in the Roman provinces. It is a Persian loanword having its root in the Persian empire (c. 500-300 B.C.E.) who developed a postal service system by enforcing local transportation. See Leander (2011) 274. To quote the Greek philosopher Epictetus: “But if there be a press, and a soldier should lay hold of it [your ass], let it go, do not resist, nor murmur; if you do, you will receive blows, and nevertheless you will also lose the ass.” (Epictetus, *Diatr.* 4.1.79).

<sup>51</sup> Dawson (2000) 177f gives further on the historical evidences on this monolithic system of the Romans. There apparently existed exploitation of the people by unscrupulous imperial officials, the military and powerful landowners regarding transportation. There was abuse within the system at all levels. The poor and the outcasts had neither status nor the money to access the system.

<sup>52</sup> Marcus (2009) 773.

exploitative system, and also to challenge the crowd whose recourse of action in oppressive situations was generally to complain to the authorities in the hope that someone “in authority” might act on their behalf.<sup>53</sup> The Hosanna cries in 11:9-10, which are recitations of the Hallel psalms that were sung during the Passover in remembrance of the Exodus, invoke the Exodus tradition and the Jewish longing for liberation from oppressive foreign rule.<sup>54</sup>

A person such as the Marcan Jesus would have lacked all legal rights to make use of ἀγγαρεία, and even less so his disciples. On the contrary, they belonged to the wider category of people who, as Roman subjects, could be compelled to supply the Romans with means of transportation. Due to the story’s low verisimilitude, the depiction is just miraculous and humorous. By twisting the roles and presenting Jesus and the disciples as successfully practicing ἀγγαρεία, Mark’s requisition doubtlessly would have mocked the emperor. The phrase “The Lord has need of it” is “a mimicry of the imperial practice of ἀγγαρεία”, and the reference to Jesus as ὁ κύριος emphasizes this.<sup>55</sup>

Mark has constructed the Jerusalem portion of his Gospel in such a way that there are two triumphal processions: one upon Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem when he does not sacrifice (11:1-11). The second is the procession to the Place of the Skull at which he sacrifices himself (15:16-27).<sup>56</sup> To this we now turn.

### 3.3 Mark 15

The trial and crucifixion scene of Jesus bear a constant allusion to royalty. As mentioned above, Mark has crafted his crucifixion narrative as a procession to parallel a Roman imperial triumph.<sup>57</sup> Jesus’ greatest moment of weakness is ironically presented as a moment of power, a Roman triumph that places Jesus in the same category as the great rulers of the Roman world. This reversal of fortune is clear as Mark unfolds his intent through various characters and scenes: those who are attempting to humiliate and kill Jesus are unwittingly providing him with his own triumph.<sup>58</sup>

The bound Jesus portrays a state of impotence, an ironical contrast to the unfettered power associated with kingship. This scene already prepares for the sarcastic tone of Pilate’s initial question: “Are you the king of the Jews?” (15:2). Mark has reserved this particular title “king of the Jews” exclusively for his Jesus’ encounter with the Roman authorities (15:2, 9,

<sup>53</sup> Dawson (2000) 179.

<sup>54</sup> Leander (2011) 268, 276.

<sup>55</sup> Leander (2011) 275.

<sup>56</sup> Incigneri (2003) 168.

<sup>57</sup> Schmidt (1995) 1-18; Winn (2008) 129.

<sup>58</sup> Winn (2008) 132.

12, 18, 26). The use of this title is rather provocative in an imperial discourse due to its revolutionary, anti-imperial potential. The Roman reluctance to let Jewish leaders call themselves kings is evident in this trial scene.<sup>59</sup>

Mark builds the sarcasm of the imperial discourse in the mocking scene of the soldiers. The usage of the term *πρατώριον* (praetorium) could indicate two things: the Roman military headquarter in Judea and also the imperial world at large. It is here that the victorious generals were crowned, dressed in purple, and acclaimed by their soldiers.<sup>60</sup> The wearing of the purple robe, the crown of thorns like the laurel crown, and the parallel homage to Jesus as was to the victorious rulers like the act of saluting, prostrating before them, and verbally recognizing their powerful position betray the imperial ideology in it. The use of *ὅλην τὴν σπεῖραν* (the entire cohort of soldiers, 15:16) – a tenth of a legion (two to six hundred soldiers) – at the execution of a criminal is also indicative of Mark's intent.<sup>61</sup> The attention received by Jesus, a condemned man to the Roman cross, is indicative of the sarcasm Mark intends in his narrative.

The figure of Simon of Cyrene reignites the flame of hatred towards the oppressive system of forced transportation. In fact, this scene is a hard proof of the Romans practice called *ἀγγαρεία*. The usage of the word in this part of the passion narrative is clear: The Roman soldiers *ἀγγαρεύουσιν* (compel) Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross (Mk 15:21).<sup>62</sup> Simon of Cyrene could also resemble the official lictor who carried over his shoulder a double bladed axe, the instrument of the sacrificial victim's death, the bull, during the triumphal entrance procession. Both Jesus' journey to crucifixion and a Roman triumph end at the "place of the head" (Golgotha and Capitol Hill).

The mockery reaches a certain height with two royal themes: the inscription over Jesus' cross, "The King of the Jews" (15:26) and the description of his crucifixion between two brigands, "one on his right and one on his left" (15:27), a sign of royal enthronement seen in a Roman triumph. This can be described as the climactic event in a "sick parody of royal coronation."<sup>63</sup> Jesus' crucifixion shows that he is certainly not royal, but for the Marcan Christian reader, the mocking inscription and the centurion's saying, regardless of his intention, unwittingly expressed the truth about Jesus.<sup>64</sup>

The offering of the wine mixed with myrrh (15:23) parallels the symbolic offering of a cup of wine to the victorious ruler, which he, after refusing as a sign of humility, poured out

<sup>59</sup> Marcus (2009) 1034. The Jewish counterpart is "king of Israel," as in Mark 15:32.

<sup>60</sup> Schmidt (1995) 1-18; Marcus (2009) 1046; Winn (2008) 129ff.

<sup>61</sup> The attendance of the whole cohort is practically unlikely. Thus the expression is probably indicative of Mark's narrative intent.

<sup>62</sup> Leander (2011) 274.

<sup>63</sup> Marcus (2009) 1051; Incigneri (2003) 168.

<sup>64</sup> Leander (2011) 299.

onto the altar. Immediately thereafter the sacrifice would be performed. In Mark we see this parallel: Jesus' refusal of the wine is followed with the words, "and they crucified him" (15:23-24).<sup>65</sup> The tearing of the temple veil (15:38) could remind the first readers of the "splendid veil" which Vespasian had paraded through the streets of Rome in 70 C.E.<sup>66</sup>

Mark's narration of the darkness which fell upon the land for three long hours (15:33) finds an interesting parallel in Roman ruler mythology, i.e. the Roman practice of apotheosis of rulers founded on the account of Romulus' death and divine ascension. Plutarch writes in his biography of Romulus (*Rom.* 27,6-7):

Suddenly strange and unaccountable disorders with incredible changes filled the air; the light of the sun failed, and night came down upon them, not with peace and quite, but with awful peals of thunder and furious blasts driving rain from every quarter, during which the multitude dispersed and fled, but the nobles gathered closely together; and when the storm had ceased, and the sun shone out, and the multitude, now gathered again in the same place as before, anxiously sought for their king, the nobles would not suffer them to inquire into his disappearance nor busy themselves about it, but exhorted them all to honor and revere Romulus, since he had been caught up into heaven and was to be a benevolent god for them instead of a good king.<sup>67</sup>

The possible resemblance with this imperial ruler mythology profoundly subverts the Marcan imperial discourse, opening for his audience a way of identification with Jesus not ruled by imperial logic. Rome is thereby given a secondary importance. Though Mark does not supply a position that directly opposes Roman power nor offer a fixed position vis-à-vis Rome, he points instead towards a continuous process of destabilizing identifications, depriving it of its priority of interpretation and its right to dictate standards.<sup>68</sup>

The reality of Jesus' identity unfolds with the word of the Roman centurion: ἀληθῶς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν (truly, this man was Son of God, Mk 15:39). Apart from the incipit, Jesus is presented as God's Son at his baptism (1:9–11). Initially, only the unclean spirits express knowledge of Jesus' identity as Son of God (3:11, 5:7; cf. 1:24, 34). At the narrative's midpoint, the divine voice is heard again on the mount of transfiguration (9:2–9), and even though Peter, James and John are present, they are unable to understand who Jesus is (9:10, 32). In the final section of Mark, Jesus is identified as the Son of God at four separate instances (12:6–7; 35–37; 14:61–62; 15:39), but it is only at the end of Mark's narrative that a human character recognizes Jesus' true identity as the Son of God without any injuncti-

<sup>65</sup> Winn (2008) 130-131.

<sup>66</sup> Incigneri (2003) 204. According to Josephus, one of the prizes carried in the great Triumph was the veil of the Jerusalem Temple (JW 7.162). For Josephus, the loss of the Temple was like a great rupture in the creation that the veil symbolized, and it is likely that Mark also knew that the veil contained this cosmic symbolism.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted by Leander (2011) 301-02.

<sup>68</sup> Leander (2011) 303-05.

on to keep it secret. The profession of the centurion is the narrative climax of the gospel.<sup>69</sup>

The centurion alone sees ἀληθῶς (truly) the mystery of the dominion of God. This challenges particularly those for whom the sight of an impaled, degraded, and dying prisoner mocks the very notion of sovereignty, with which the term “son of God” was intimately connected. But this local representative of Roman power now sees that it is neither the emperor nor his revolutionary opponents but “this man,” who has just died in agony on a Roman cross, is the true revelation of divine sonship and hence of royal sovereignty.<sup>70</sup> With his confession, Jesus assumes the imperial title υἱὸς θεοῦ, and the Roman centurion bears witness to the transference of the imperial title to Jesus. The saying clearly echoes the imperial cult and, more specifically, the title of its most revered figure: divi filius Augustus.

#### 4 Conclusion

This study could give only a few samples of Mark’s use of imperial imagery in telling the story of Jesus. There are more passages that could be mentioned. The discussion among the disciples who might be the greatest among them, and Jesus answer to them (9:34-35), or the request of the brothers James and John to sit at the side of Jesus in his glory (10:35-45) are part of such pericopeae. The use of the „kingdom of God“ is a further example. But the present selection gives a good overview of Mark’s purpose.

Reading the gospel of Mark from a Roman imperial perspective has yielded surprising results. The first of these is the pervasiveness of the imagery of absolute Roman power throughout the gospel. Marcan terminology is very suggestive in applying this terminology again and again. Secondly, Mark does not apply this terminology in order to add some Roman flavor or cultural background to a writing that on the surface treats of rather local events from a backwater of the Roman empire. His motives reach much further than that. The gospel wishes to deliver a harsh critique of Roman power. Again and again Mark takes some of the imagery surrounding the imperial show of power and might, and he turns this around into a mockery. In the end, this mockery is designed to delegitimize the powers that be. And thirdly, Mark, does not rest with the critique of the imperial might, but he offers an alternative in the person of Jesus who turns out to be the exact opposite of what a Roman emperor would look like. And precisely at the moment of the most terrible inversion of Roman power in the death of Jesus as a crucified criminal, it is a representative of the Roman military who shifts allegiance and professes Jesus as the true son of God.

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<sup>69</sup> Leander (2011) 298.

<sup>70</sup> Marcus (2009) 1067-68.

It has also become clear that Mark's critique of empire utilizes figured speech to a large extent. The images and phrases that evoke imperial power are first and foremost suggestive in nature. Mark shuns open criticism of imperial power, yet his veiled references are sharp in their analysis and damning in their evaluation of imperial pretenses. This rather serious charge against Roman power sometimes hides behind a humorous story such as the exorcism at Gerasa, or underneath something as serious as the passion of Jesus. Yet in all these stories it is up to reader to unearth the allusions made, the critiques offered, and the alternatives proposed.

A last observation seems to us worth mentioning: As Mark constructs his story of Jesus with the help of figured speech as a critique of Roman imperial power, it is of course intriguing that Mark reverts to the very images he criticizes in order to portray Jesus as ultimately victorious. The question might be asked whether Mark does not indeed enter a vicious circle in which his alternative offered in fact is a repetition of what the gospel wants to replace.<sup>71</sup> Yet Mark's narrative strategy of inversion of these symbols avoids this trap of a circular argument. While using imperial imagery in his gospel, Mark subverts and delegitimizes it by his portrait of Jesus who is the rightful bearer of imperial authority in his weakness and death.

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<sup>71</sup> For such a critique levelled against Matthew's use of kingdom imagery see Carter (2001).

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