CHAPTER 1

Suspended Christology

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Introduction: A Gaze through the Keyholes of History

"Christology" is a theological latecomer. Reformed theologian Balthasar Meissner coined the technical term for the question about Jesus only in the seventeenth century in his book *Christologia sacra*, published in Wittenberg in 1624.[1] This is a long time not only after the New Testament was written but also a long time after the councils of the fourth and fifth century had defined the orthodox perspective on Jesus, that is, had determined who he would be for the Christian community, regardless as to whether they call themselves Anglican, Evangelical, Lutheran, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Reformed, or Roman Catholic today. Our common foundations are the New Testament texts *and* the ecumenical councils, and thus our notion of Christology comes with a long history, which only began after the New Testament was put to page. We must keep this in mind when we apply the concept to the New Testament and ask for a New Testament text's "Christology."

German New Testament scholar Reinhard von Bendemann is aware of this gap and proceeds with caution. Bendemann suggests that when it comes to the New Testament, the term "Christology" should only be used in quotation marks.[2] Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, a well-known scholar of Mark,

1. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, "Christologie," in *Lexikon der Katholischen Dogmatik*, ed. Wolfgang Beinert (Freiburg: Herder, 1997), 59.

2. Reinhard von Bendemann, "Die Fülle der Gnade—Neutestamentliche Christologie," in *Jesus Christus*, ed. Jens Schröter, TdT 9 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 71.

does in fact do so in some of her publications, providing the same rationale.[3] The awareness is that we are dealing with a late theological category applied to earlier texts that might even be at odds at times with the texts themselves. This is an important insight for any discussion of Markan Christology. What was defined by the council fathers and later dogmatized in the particular confessions is the result of a longer process of theological reflection and need not automatically be present in every biblical text. Or, put differently, there is not necessarily a direct line from Mark to the Nicene Creed, and the current debate about early, high Christology in Mark's Gospel might say more about current than ancient theological issues.[4] "To ask whether the Markan Jesus is 'divine' or not," Markan scholar M. Eugene Boring warns, "is to impose an alien schema on Markan thought."[5]

In his book *Gospel Writing*, Francis Watson makes what is at first glance a somewhat disturbing claim. He argues that had the early Christian discourses run just slightly different, we would not be reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as canonical Gospels today but possibly the Gospel according to Thomas or even the Gospel according to Peter instead.[6] "The distinction between the canonical and the noncanonical," Watson argues, "arises not from the differences between the texts but from their circulation and currency in wider or narrower spheres of the early Christian world."[7] In other words, canonical discussions are not unavoidable and remain contingent to a certain extent. Watson's observations allow a glimpse into the processes that took place both on the way to biblical canon and christological dogma:

> If Gaius of Rome had won the anti-Johannine argument, and if Serapion and others had aggressively promoted the cause of the *Gospel of Peter*, then that Gospel might have prevailed over both the Gospel of John and the only indirectly Petrine Gospel of Mark. John and Mark would then

3. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "'Reflected Christology': An Aspect of Narrative 'Christology' in the Gospel of Mark," *PRSt* 26 (1999): 127–145; cf. idem, *Mark's Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 1–19.

4. Michael Kok, "Marking a Difference: The Gospel of Mark and the 'Early High Christology' Paradigm," *JJMJS* 3 (2016): 102–24.

5. M. Eugene Boring, "Markan Christology: God-language for Jesus?," *NTS* 45.4 (1999): 456.

6. Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 307, 612–13.

7. Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 612.

> have disappeared from sight, their memory preserved only in disparaging remarks by Eusebius. At a later date, post-Enlightenment biblical scholarship would have initiated an intense debate over the genuineness of the canonical *Gospel of Peter*, conservative scholarship would have fiercely resisted critical arguments for its pseudonymity. If, later still, fragments of a noncanonical "Johannine" gospel emerged from the sands of Egypt, they would have been consigned without hesitation to the category of the apocryphal. Appeal would be made to gnosticizing tendencies in its opening and dependence on the canonical Peter in its conclusion; and such arguments would no doubt have carried the day, disputed only by a minority of willfully provocative critics.[8]

What seems to have the character of a "what if" game is at a second glance a depiction of typical patterns in social processes. Issues come up and are discussed, majorities are organized, and decisions are taken. There is no reason to believe that social negotiation in early Christianity was any different from what we experience today. German patristics scholar Christoph Markschies claims (for good reason) that the church, especially in the second century, seemed like a huge laboratory for trying different forms of theology, hierarchy, and ethics.[9] In hindsight and with the distance of only a few decades, decision-making often looks much more harmonious than it actually was—a lesson that can also be learned from a comparison of Acts 15 and Galatians 2. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, his dispute with Cephas (Peter) is paramount. But the issue that was burning for Paul had cooled down by the time Acts was written. As the author of Acts, Luke presents a cordial and united Christian community in a mostly gentile-Roman environment. Luke does not, therefore, revisit the problems of an earlier generation. It is not by accident that he does not mention the incident at Antioch but describes the Jerusalem meeting as a unanimous decision taken under the guidance of the Spirit. His question was no longer how Jewish and gentile Jesus-followers could live, eat, and worship together but how Christian communities could make their living within Roman urban society without being considered a threat to social stability.

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8. Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 613.

9. Christoph Markschies, *Das antike Christentum. Frömmigkeit, Lebensformen, Institutionen* (München: Beck, 2006), 42.

Similar negotiations can be observed in the ecumenical councils some hundred years later. They, too, are examples of social discourse and were influenced by their respective historical contexts. It is intriguing to consider for a moment the possibility Watson explores and apply it to the councils: What would our Creed look like if groups of Jesus-followers like the Adoptionists or Ebionites had prevailed in the discussion? The thought is particularly stimulating for reflections about Markan Christology because those groups based some of their arguments on Mark's baptism scene (1:9–11).[10]

The crucial question discussed in Nicaea was what "Son of God" (υἱὸς θεοῦ) means. Is Jesus the Son of God as Mark 1:11 implies? If so, how many gods exist? The idea of two gods, YHWH and Jesus, is not reconcilable with Jewish monotheism. Adoptionists solved the problem by assuming that God adopted Jesus as his son during or after the baptism. Ebionites, going down a slightly different route, defended the position that Jesus was God's messenger. What Adoptionists, Ebionites, Cerinthus, Marcion, Paul of Samosata, Photinus, and others share is the denial of the divine nature and preexistence of Christ. For them, Jesus was just a human being, even though a special one, and Mark's Gospel was their key witness. The Nicene Council, focusing more on John's Gospel, which, as we have just seen was highly disputed in the third century, gave a different answer: *Jesus Christ is begotten, not made, one being with the Father* (γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί).

This brief glance at history also shows that in the beginning there was not only one idea about Jesus but a variety of different impressions, ideas, and concepts that were mediated and reconciled over time. As the ecumenical councils show, this was not always an easy process and very often included definitions and drawing boundaries between what was considered orthodox and what was not. Over time, the different ideas about who Jesus is and how he is best understood were narrowed down to a few concepts that were defined and dogmatized. The textualization of particular perspectives on Jesus as we find it in the canonical Gospels is an important step on the way from the first impressions of early Jesus-followers to the formulas of the

10. Cf. Michael Goulder, "Jesus without Q," in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 2:1296–97; Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 48–57.

ecumenical councils. These texts did not aim at recording the history or the events themselves but at recording a particular theological perspective on them, which they contributed to the early Christian discourse.[11]

This chapter will discuss Mark's contribution to this discourse. Our journey through the Gospel will introduce us to a fascinating narrative that discusses different ideas about Jesus. In its conclusion it will suggest one particular perspective that the Gospel of Mark visibly treasures. As we will see, Mark's Gospel does not visualize Jesus as a divine or preexistent being but rather depicts him in Isaianic categories as a human messenger of God with an extraordinary experience and, as a result, extraordinary abilities.

Reading Mark's Gospel as a Story about Jesus and the Beginning of the Gospel

Before setting out on this journey, let us get our gear together and consult some travel guides. As we are embarking on a trip into a biblical text, our travel guides come from biblical scholars. Those books resemble the old Baedeker guides more than Lonely Planet, and thus they tend to be somewhat theoretical and difficult to read. To make things as convenient as possible, I will give a brief survey of exegetical insight that I found particularly helpful for this journey. They consist of a global insight in the mode of traveling (reading Mark as a narrative text), a hint how to look at the different places in order see the fascinating sights (worlds and perspectives in the text), and a brief glance at the topography of the entire country (structure of the text).

There is a growing consensus among Markan scholars that we are dealing with a narrative text that is much more than just the sum of its parts. It is clear that the text has a narrative character, and it is equally obvious that it is not just any narrative. Mark's Gospel is neither a novel nor a work of history. Its truth lies neither in a spotless preservation of the past nor a pious imagination of what Jesus might have been like. Regardless of whether we term it an ancient biography (a *bios*), it is a text that treasures experiences

11. Cf. Tom Thatcher, "Why John Wrote a Gospel: Memory and History in an Early Christian Community," in *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, ed. Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, Semeia 52 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 79–97.

people have had with Jesus and his message. These experiences have been verbalized in the form of episodes and integrated into an overall story about Jesus and his proclamation.[12] While historical-critical research for a long time was predominantly interested in how the particular episodes and units came about—and what they might have to say about the historical Jesus and the passing on of Jesus traditions—Markan scholarship of the past few decades has shifted attention to the entire text as a holistic composition. Even though the approaches might differ, Mark's Gospel is now commonly read and interpreted as a story.[13]

Approaching a text like Mark from a literary-studies perspective gives a different outlook (as compared to approaches that look for editorial layers with the text) and thus leads to different results. The underlying assumption is that the Gospel's text as we know it today is a final product that carries meaning in itself. Moreover, it can be meaningfully understood and interpreted without knowing its prior stages of composition. This does not say that a text like Mark's Gospel does not form part of a larger communication process. The narrative can nevertheless be understood independently of its original historical situation. Being a *text-oriented* approach, the task of a narratological analysis is not to describe the world from which the text has originated or which it seems to refer to but to depict the world of the text itself. The point is not to shed light on the historical author and the real world but on the narrator and the narrated world that comes alive while reading the text.[14]

This approach also changes the type of questions posed to the text. As regards Christology, the question is no longer what *Christos* (χριστός) means

12. Cf. Cilliers Breytenbach, "Das Markusevangelium als episodische Erzählung. Mit Überlegungen zum 'Aufbau' des zweiten Evangeliums," in *Der Erzähler des Evangeliums. Methodische Neuansätze in der Markusforschung*, ed. Ferdinand Hahn, SBS 118/119 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1985), 139–69. See also Sandra Huebenthal, *Reading Mark's Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), a translation of *Das Markusevangelium als kollektives Gedächtnis*, 2nd ed., FRLANT 253 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018], 179–84, 214–26.

13. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "New Literary Criticism and Jesus Research," in Holmén and Porter, *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 1:777–807.

14. Cf. Willem S. Vorster, "Markus—Sammler, Redaktor, Autor oder Erzähler?," in Hahn, *Der Erzähler des Evangeliums*, 30; Pheme Perkins, "The Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles Telling the Christian Story," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 244; David S. Du Toit, *Der abwesende Herr. Strategien im Markusevangelium zur Bewältigung der Abwesenheit des Auferstandenen*, WMANT 111 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neunkirchner, 2006), 9.

in general but rather what it means in the narrative world of Mark's Gospel. Researchers need to put their twenty-first century christological spectacles aside and read Mark's Gospel asking what it has to say about Jesus.[15] Who is he and what is he doing? What does he say about himself and what do the narrator and characters say about him?

Reading *Mark as Story*[16] means being occupied with what happens in the text. The basic question is: How does Mark work as a narrative? One basic observation is that Mark—like any other narrative—operates on different levels. On the one hand, there is the narrated world, namely, the universe that the characters inhabit. It is the world in which they live, love, quarrel, and reconcile with one another, where they eat, sleep, and die. On the other hand, there is the world of the narrator in which the narrator lives, thinks, and develops the story. Both worlds are features of the text and can clearly be distinguished from the real world of the author and, admittedly with a bit more of an effort, from each other.[17]

In addition, stories do not only consist of different *levels* or *worlds* but also of different perspectives. They contain both the *characters' perspectives* and the *narrator's perspective*. The *narrator's perspective* is the narrator's idea or construct of reality.[18] The concept of the *narrator's perspective* introduces another helpful, new agent, for it allows us to clearly distinguish different perspectives and voices within a given story, for example, when you realize that Jesus and the narrator both use the word "gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον) but do so in different ways. While the narrator proclaims the "gospel of Jesus" (1:1), the character Jesus is said to be proclaiming the "gospel of God" (1:14), though in fact Jesus uses the term "gospel" without additional qualifiers (8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9). Jesus's proclamation concerns the "kingdom of God" (βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ), which he proclaims to be at hand (1:15)—an expression the narrator avoids as long as Jesus is alive.[19] Or, even more striking, while the narrator seems anxious not to pick up Jesus's use of the formula "Son

15. Von Bendemann, "Die Fülle der Gnade," 72.

16. David Rhoads and Donald Mitchie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

17. Cf. Huebenthal, *Reading Mark's Gospel*; see also Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*.

18. Carola Surkamp, *Die Perspektivenstruktur narrativer Texte: Zu ihrer Theorie und Geschichte im englischen Roman zwischen Viktorianismus und Moderne* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2003), 43.

19. Cf. Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, 173.

of Man," the character Jesus never vocally accepts the title "Son of God." Even when he is asked by the high priest whether he is the "Son of the Blessed One," he sticks to the formula "Son of Man," equipping it with an eschatological twist (14:61–62).[20] In the case of Mark's Gospel, observations of this type are particularly helpful, for they aid in solving a quite difficult problem, which goes to the core of the christological question: Who is Jesus?

In Mark's Gospel, the question about Jesus's identity is explicitly asked several times, and it remains an ongoing theme in the background. The quest for the right understanding of Jesus is a dynamic plot of the overall narrative. Reading the whole story, the following structure unfolds. The narrator opens the narrative universe with the words "beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God"[21] (1:1, all translations from the Greek text of the Gospel are mine). Taking seriously this first line, it also introduces the matter of the narrative: Mark's Gospel is more about *the beginning of the gospel* than about the character Jesus, even though Jesus is intrinsically tied to it. The story of the gospel, nonetheless, extends far beyond the life of the character Jesus.[22] This can easily be illustrated by a brief glance at the text's structure: the *inner story* (1:16–15:39) narrates the *story of experiences with Jesus and his proclamation*, and the outer parts (1:1–13 and 15:42–16:8) insinuate the further story of the gospel. Two narrative bridges (1:14–15 and 15:40–41) connect the inner story and the outer parts, forming an overall outer story. The outer story has an open end and bridges into the lives of the recipients (see the table below).

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20. Cf. Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, 238.

21. The text-critical question about the originality of υἱοῦ θεοῦ in 1:1 is still subject to scholarly debates. On the basis of the manuscripts, a clear decision cannot be made. C. C. Black, "Mark as Historian of God's Kingdom," *CBQ* 71 (2009): 65, notes laconically that "adjudicating the text-critical problem in Mark 1:1, the jury remains out. When it will return with a generally acceptable verdict is anyone's guess." In the latest contribution to the problem, T. Wasserman, "The 'Son of God' was in the Beginning (Mark 1:1)," *JTS* 62 (2011): 20–50, lists once more the arguments for both sides and opts on the basis of the manuscripts ("earliest and strongest support," 50), the inner logic, and the likelihood of omitting the title in the copying process for the longer reading. In the same way, D. B. Deppe, "Markan Christology and the Omission of υἱοῦ θεοῦ in Mark 1:1," *Filologia Neotestamentica* 21 (2008): 45–64, challenges the "new consensus . . . in textual-critical circles that favors the omission" and concludes after an evaluation of the arguments that "both external evidence and Markan Christology argue in favor of the inclusion of 'Son of God' in the first sentence of Mark's Gospel" (64). In the present article, I follow this argumentation.

22. Huebenthal, *Reading Mark's Gospel*, 189–94; David S. Du Toit, "'Es ist nichts Geheimes, das nicht ans Licht kommen soll': Verhüllung und Enthüllung als Erzählmotiv und als narrative Strategie im Markusevangelium," in *Christ of the Sacred Stories*, ed. Predrag Dragutinovic and Tobias Nicklas, WUNT 2/453 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 27–56, esp. 51–52.

Outer Story (1:1–16:18)
Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God

Opening (1:1–13)	**Narrative Bridge** (1:14–15)	**Inner story** (1:16–15:39)	**Narrative Bridge** (15:40–41)	**Open End** (15:42–16:8)
	Focus on Jesus who proclaims the gospel of God	*Experiences with Jesus and his proclamation*	Focus on those who should be the ones who proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God	Bridge into the lives of the recipients

This visualization shows that the beginning of the gospel is inseparably linked to the fate of the character Jesus. In 1:14–15 Jesus is presented as the one who proclaims and explains the gospel of God. This has implications for the structure of the narrative: the sequence of events told in Mark's Gospel is oriented toward the protagonist, Jesus. The story unfolds along the other characters' experiences with Jesus, his actions as well as his message, and it is these experiences that lead to the characters asking who this Jesus is and how he is best understood. As regards evaluation within the inner story, Jesus's message is dependent on how he is evaluated by others. Approval or refusal of the person implies approval or refusal of the content, and thus the story of experiences with Jesus becomes the beginning of the story of his gospel and the founding story of the Markan group.

As Mark's Gospel is a sandwich composition narrating two stories into each other with both stories operating on different levels, the question is not only how the characters evaluate their experiences with Jesus in their world but even more how the narrator evaluates their different perspectives in *his* world, that is, on the level of the narration. This evaluation is the perspective that Mark's Gospel contributes to the early Christian discussion about Jesus.

Mark's Gospel: Different Perspectives on Jesus and Their Evaluation

Now we are ready to begin our journey. Let us start by turning our attention to the different worlds and perspectives in Mark's stories. First, we will begin with the presentation of Jesus in the narrated world and see how characters

and readers perceive him. Second, we will move to the perspective of the narrator and see that a correct understanding of Jesus is not possible without reading him through the lens of the prophet Isaiah. Third, we will turn to the question of Jesus's own experience and how he sees himself in comparison to the other characters and the narrator. The fourth step will focus on the question as to how the different ideas and views are brought together and how the narrator ensures that characters and readers arrive at the right conclusion. Finally, it will turn out that when it comes to christological questions, Jesus's death on the cross is the elephant in the room with which the Gospel has to deal.

1. Jesus as Presented and Received in the Narrated World

How does Mark's Gospel present Jesus? In the inner story, the reader and the other characters meet Jesus for the first time as he walks along the Sea of Galilee and calls his first disciples Simon and Andrew, James and John, two pairs of brothers, all of them fishermen. In the following scenes, it becomes gradually clearer that, apart from calling the disciples, Jesus does not directly approach individual people but rather preaches to groups. It is, on the contrary, individual people who approach him. The word spreads quickly, and people seek out Jesus with the result that he rarely finds peace and space, let alone time to eat. Jesus's reaction is to withdraw and try to hide from the crowds. He is unlikely to take part in a public meal or symposium hosted by Pharisees or others. Although food, eating, and commensality are important issues, only a few meals are reported: the meal with sinners and tax collectors (2:15), the meal at Simon the leper's house (14:3), and the meal Jesus shares with his disciples on the night before his death (14:17–25). This adds to the overall picture; although he is teaching crowds, Jesus is rather a private person and frequently seeks solitude. At times even his disciples do not know where he is.

Jesus's attempt to keep a certain distance is a constant and reoccurring theme in the Gospel and achieves the opposite of the desired effect. The more Jesus withdraws, the more he attracts people and the more they search for him. When the disciples find him on the morning after the Sabbath, they tell him "everyone is looking for you" (1:37). This pattern of hide-and-seek is repeated several times. Whether he is in Capernaum or the region near Tyre and Sidon, in the first main part of the inner story (1:16–8:26), Jesus cannot

hide for long. People seeking for help seek Jesus. In reaction, he withdraws and tries to continue proclaiming in a different location that the kingdom of God has arrived (1:45; 2:2; 3:7–12). Again, he does not achieve the desired effect. People do not look for Jesus or follow him because they want to hear what he has to say, but rather they turn to him because they have heard he has healing abilities (3:8). Jesus is a rather unwilling healer and public person, as his answer to Peter indicates: "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby that I may proclaim there also; for that is what I came out for" (1:38). Sometimes Jesus is lucky and can teach for a while (2:1, 13; 4:1), but soon enough the next healing candidate shows. They appear unpredictably and everywhere. On one occasion one of them is even let down through the roof. In the end, Jesus gives up going into cities and stays in unpopulated areas.

There is no end to people seeking him for physical health rather than eternal salvation, which renders Jesus increasingly unhappy. His outburst, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (9:19) might reflect Jesus's frustration with people who approach him on the superficial *health* level instead of turning to him on the deeper *salvation* level. No matter where he turns or how well he tries to hide, the sick and possessed are already there or seek and find him (5:1–2; 7:24–25, 32; 8:22; 9:14–15). It is only in the second main part of the Gospel (8:27–10:52) that he finds some peace and quiet to teach his disciples. After leaving Galilee, Jesus generally ceases to speak in public until he turns back to teaching in the temple, where he is no longer approached by the sick and obsessed.

Taking a closer look, Jesus appears to be struggling with the fact that people he teaches make so little progress. He seems frustrated when he finds especially the inner circle of the disciples to be rather slow on the uptake. As we will see later in more detail, for Jesus himself it is clear after his baptism and his time in the desert that a direct relationship with God is possible not only for him but for everyone.

Apart from that, the content of Jesus's teaching remains rather unimpressive. One might even wonder how well versed in his own Jewish traditions he really is. The conversations in the temple could as well be seen as shrewdness; Jesus does not let his opponents trap him. When questioned about his authority he asks a counter question (11:27–33), when questioned about paying taxes he first wants to see the coin (12:13–17), and when

questioned about divorce—the reader might still remember from 6:17–29 that critical statements about marriage and divorce can be highly dangerous—he wants to know how they receive the Mosaic command (10:2–9). When asked about resurrection by the Sadducees (12:18–27), Jesus's argument is more narrative in character than one based on the teachings of the Torah; and in his word about whether or not the Anointed One (χριστός) is the son of David (12:35–37), there barely seems to be an argument at all. His discussions with scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees refer to the common cultural frame, and it seems that Jesus knows the Prophets and Psalms better than the Torah. When he teaches the crowds, there are no references to the Torah. The teaching in 7:14–23 is similarly based on common sense, as are the words about the scribes in 12:28–40, and the observations about the poor widow in 12:41–44.

Jesus's conversations with the Pharisees in Galilee, too, have already been rather colloquial. The words about fasting (2:18–20) draw from everyday images. The dispute about picking grain on the Sabbath (vv. 23–28) is slightly strange. Markan scholars often assume that the narrator got the story in 1 Samuel 21:1–7 wrong.[23] It might, however, make more sense to assume that the narrator deliberately depicts Jesus as slightly insecure when it comes to factual knowledge, in order to present him as an ordinary Galilean who has a quick brain and is at home in his own religious tradition but is nevertheless not a learned person. Jesus appears to be someone perfectly ordinary who has had an extraordinary and life-changing experience with God and is now trying to convince others that they can have the same experience, too.

While his teaching remains rather unimpressive and mostly relies on seemingly easy-to-access parables, Jesus's deeds are more attractive to others. The advent of *God's kingdom* that Jesus proclaims begins to take shape and become visible in their world. The ability to work these signs impresses people much more than Jesus's words. Apart from that, Jesus seems to be a quite normal and everyday person, as can be guessed from the reaction of his family and the surprise on part of the people in his hometown (6:1–4). Jesus lining up with his Galilean fellows at the banks of the Jordan (1:9) speaks as much of an ordinary Jew from Galilee as his behavior when he first enters

23. This would not be the first instance of the narrator getting it wrong. He also falsely ascribes the initial quotation in 1:2–3—in fact a conflation of Isa 40:3, Exod 23:3, and Mal 3:1—exclusively to Isaiah.

the temple in Jerusalem. He "looked round about upon all things" (11:11), as the King James Version nicely puts it. Jesus does not stay in the city that night but goes back to Bethany, and the reader must wait until the next day for the story to be resumed. It seems, after all, that Jesus is not too impressed.

One can be sympathetic with this Jesus who sees the small and is not too impressed by the large. This is a Jesus who speaks in plain and simple language that ordinary people can relate to and yet is ambiguous enough to provoke those who have a say. What is most striking about Jesus is the amount of time he needs to digest all this, the time he needs in silence, in communion with God and in prayer. The Markan Jesus gradually learns both to understand how the encounter with God changed him and to deal with the crowds, but he does not seem to be a born charismatic. Mark 5:30–33 even presents a Jesus who is *surprised by God.* Compared to the later canonical Gospels, the Markan Jesus is far more rural in his travels. He avoids cities. He does not seek publicity. He is ineloquent almost to the point of terseness and is perceived to be a gifted healer rather than a teacher. In general, publicity seems to be an obstacle to a healthy relationship both with God and fellow human beings. Jesus takes people aside and addresses them away from the crowds. Those who have just undergone an intensive experience especially need time and quiet and are urged not to seek publicity. At the end of the narrative (16:1–8), the pattern of extraordinary experience and withdrawal into silence is repeated for one last time. The reader leaves the world of characters at the point when the women, those who should continue the proclamation, are in the initial phase of digesting their experience and—for the moment—remain silent.

The reason why Jesus is able to heal and perform exorcisms is directly addressed twice. In 3:22–30 his opponents assume his capability to perform exorcisms to be the result of possession by Beelzebul. In 11:27–33 he is finally asked directly from where his authority originates. This question is also posed in 2:1–12 and is implied in 6:2–3. The key term to consider is authority. What or who allows Jesus to do all these things? Jesus and the narrator both have the same answer: Jesus's healing ability is a result of his unique closeness to God. This explains why Jesus is occasionally accompanied by theophanic motifs (i.e., motifs that habitually occur when God appears in the Bible; see 4:35–41; 6:45–52; 9:2–8) and why he, in the same way as God in the Old Testament (cf. Ps 103:7 LXX), can *rebuke*

(ἐπιτιμάω) demons (1:25; 9:25) and natural forces (4:39). One could of course, like Jesus's opponents, assume that possession, that is, direct contact with Beelzebul, the highest of the demons, gives Jesus command over the subordinate ones (3:22). At a second thought, however, this explanation does not make sense. Why would the head of the demons weaken his own reign? It is only too obvious that the reason for Jesus's extraordinary abilities must be found elsewhere. Jesus special relation to God grants him a share of the divine power to heal, perform exorcisms, forgive sins, and clarify the purpose of the Sabbath.[24]

In general, the content of Jesus's proclamation is less discussed by the other characters than the question about who Jesus is and how he is best understood. The question "Who then is this?" (4:41) opens the floor to a general discussion. Everyone involved in the Gospel participates in the quest for the correct answer. Opponents come up with the idea that Jesus is possessed because they have no other explanation for his healing abilities and regard him as a heretical phenomenon. Ordinary people take him to be Elijah or another prophet of old. Herod Antipas—due to his encounter with John the Baptist and his feelings of guilt for having killed him—thinks that Jesus is the returned Baptist. Family and people from Jesus's hometown do not quite know what to make of him, and some assume he has lost his senses. The disciples, after several attempts to understand, have Peter say that Jesus is the Christ (χριστός), the Anointed One. Even the narrator participates in the general discussion; the initial statement in 1:1 that Jesus is the anointed Son of God sets the scene for the further discussion.

In Mark's Gospel, different characters have different ideas about Jesus and struggle to understand who he is or could be. With a distance of two thousand years and as people who read the story without being involved in it, we would say that they are discussing the christological question. A first set of observations and answers, briefly sketched in this section, does not point to Jesus being a divine or preexistent being but rather depicts him as a human being with an extraordinary experience and extraordinary abilities. Both experience and abilities remain in the realm of what the narrated world deems possible. The question debated among the characters is less

24. C. Drew Smith, "'This Is My Beloved Son; Listen to Him': Theology and Christology in the Gospel of Mark," *HBT* 24 (2002): 63–64.

about how Jesus's deeds are possible than where he got the potential and authority to work them. Opinions on that point differ greatly. The most remote explanation from the other characters is provided by the narrator, who introduces Jesus as God's anointed Son or, translated slightly differently, "the Messiah and Son of God."

2. The Narrator's Perspective: God's Anointed Son according to Isaiah the Prophet

When it comes to explaining who Jesus is, the narrator loses no time, opening with "beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God" (1:1). When we stick to the assumption that Mark's Gospel tells two stories at the same time and we are here concerned with *christological questions*, we can for the moment leave aside the expression "gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον) and focus on the narrator's perception of Jesus that is enunciated in the expressions "anointed [one]" (χριστός) and "son of God" (υἱὸς θεοῦ). Remembering Malbon's research question, the point is what these two expressions mean in the world of the narrator, not what they mean in general. As the scope of possible meanings of both expressions in Second Temple Judaism is rather broad and becomes even broader when possible gentile contexts are also considered, some hints as to how to understand those in the world of the Gospel are most welcome.

The narrator indeed provides such a hint in the following verses 2–3 beginning with "as it is written in Isaiah the prophet." Regardless what potential for understanding the three expressions "gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον), "anointed" (χριστός), and "son of God" (υἱὸς θεοῦ) might have outside Mark's Gospel, the way the beginning of the text is phrased indicates that in this narrative they are determined by a fourth: "Isaiah the prophet." It is obviously not enough to read only the first line. For Mark's Gospel, making sense of Jesus and the experience with him and his proclamation must take place within the broader cultural framework of Israel's Holy Scriptures and especially the prophet Isaiah.

Let us take a closer look. The word χριστός ("anointed [one]") occurs seven times in Mark's Gospel. A side glance to the Pauline letters clarifies that Mark is drawing from ideas that already existed. It seems that some people who had heard about Jesus already knew that he was called "the Anointed One." Biblical scholars would say that Mark

> is drawing from existent tradition. The use of the motif in the text is, however, interesting: the narrator and the other characters apply it to the earthly Jesus (1:1; 8:29 [Peter]; 14:61 [high priest]; 15:32 [mocking bystanders]) while the character Jesus uses it either in eschatological contexts (9:41; 13:21–22) or with reference to the concept of royal Davidic messianism (12:35; 13:21), which he clearly does not support.[25]

Messianism and messianic concepts have a long history, and it would be misleading to assume that there was one homogenous idea in Jesus's time. As Paolo Sacchi illustrates in his brief history of messianism, Jewish messianism has its origins in royal Davidic messianism, based on Isaiah 11 alongside a number of other texts, traditions, and expectations.[26] In later times, Davidic messianism is only one variation of messianism, and this particular version ties the advent of the golden age to a figure of Davidic origin. The title *Son of David*, which is also applied to Jesus in Mark's Gospel, makes use of this motif. The idea of a royal messiah reoccurs also, for example, in Zechariah 9:9–10, which is alluded to in the story of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. The Septuagint version of Zechariah illustrates the messianic reading of the passage by the use of the expression "saving" (σώζων) to substitute the original "victorious." "In the second century BCE, the book was certainly read within messianic categories."[27] When Bartimaeus calls Jesus "Son of David" (10:47–48) and the crowd that accompanies Jesus riding on a donkey into Jerusalem cry, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David" (11:10), it is difficult not to note Davidic-messianic overtones. Messianic expectations, however, do not necessarily have to be connected to a royal figure. Other variations might be expecting the messiah to be a priestly figure, or expecting two messiahs—one of royal, one of priestly origin.[28] Messianic features might also be ascribed or transferred to superhuman figures like the returning Elijah (Mal 4:5–6), Enoch (1 En. 72–82), Melchizedek (2 En. 71.29; 11QMelch), and the Son of Man (cf. Dan 7:13–14) or transferred to

25. Mattias Konradt, "Das MtEv als judenchristlicher Entwurf zum MkEv," in *Studien zum Matthäusevangelium*, ed. Matthias Konradt, WUNT 358 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 59–60.

26. Paolo Sacchi, "Messianism and Apocalyptic," in *Jewish Apocalyptic and Its History*," trans. William J. Short, LSTS (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 149–67.

27. Sacchi, "Jewish Apocalyptic," 155.

28. Cf. Zech 4:14; 6:11–15 as well as texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls collection: 1QS 9.11; 1QSa 2.11–22; and CD 7.19b–21; 12.23–13.1; 14.19; 19.10–11; 20.1.

the people as a whole, as in Isaiah's Servant Songs. These traditions were all to a greater or lesser extent current in the first century. The question is thus what *christos* (χριστός) means in Mark's world.

As the expression occurs already in the first verse and is connected to Isaiah, it makes sense to assume that it is be best understood as denoting an eschatological messenger according to Isaiah 42:1; 52:7; and 61:1. David du Toit has made a convincing case for this interpretation. He writes:

> The references to Isa 42:1 and 52:7 in Mark 1:9–15 similarly contain an implicit yet clear allusion to Isa 61:1—the references give reason for the biblically informed reader to regard Isa 61:1 at this point as a most relevant intertext. If the reader recognizes the allusion and follows its trail, he/she recognizes that Jesus is presented in Mark 1:9–15 as the prophesied eschatological messenger of Isa 61:1 who (in the LXX version) is the bearer of God's spirit because God anointed him—as narrated in Mark 1:9–11—in order to proclaim the good news to the poor—as narrated in Mark 1:14–15! The implication should be apparent: The episodic deployment of the summary of Jesus's ministry as proclamation of the gospel (1:14–15) described in the previous section should be seen as narrative deployment of Isa 61:1a–c.[29]

Read this way, Mark 1:9–15 makes a strong case for identifying Jesus with the eschatological messenger, anointed with God's spirit, and thus the Son of God according to the prophecy of Isaiah. This implies two things: (1) after listening to or reading the prologue of Mark's Gospel, the recipients already have all the information they need to understand Jesus and his fate, and (2) it will be difficult to arrive at the right conclusion without a thorough knowledge of Isaiah and his prophecy.

When *christos* (χριστός) is not read as "Christ" but as "Anointed One," it is easy to see how non-Jewish audiences, who were neither familiar with the Jewish concepts nor subscribed to them, are able to connect to the idea. *Christos* was not an expression reserved to a Jewish encyclopaedia; non-Jews would have understood the expression in the context of antique rites of

29. David S. Du Toit, "Treasuring Memory: Narrative Christology in and beyond Mark's Gospel: Miracle-Traditions as Test Case," *EC* 6 (2015): 334–53 (340); see also idem, "Es ist nichts Geheimes," 28–33.

anointment that were fairly common in the Mediterranean region. The language used in different sources indicates that whatever was anointed was regarded as sacred, consigned to the deity or at least near to the deity. Used for Jesus, the title *christos* would thus have been understood both by Jews and non-Jews as denoting a unique closeness to the God of Israel.[30]

The same holds true for "Son of God" (υἱὸς θεοῦ), the other expression used in 1:1. In Jewish use, the word "son" expresses general affiliation that is not necessarily based on physical procreation. "Son" could denote both bodily lineage and affiliation with a particular group, profession, or people. Even an affiliation with God could be expressed by the word. For example, the expression "sons of God" is used for the angels as members of the heavenly royal household (Gen 6:2–4; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; cf. Ps 89:7). God calls Israel his "firstborn son" (Exod 4:22; see also Hos 11:1), and the king or the (suffering and just) sage, too, could be called "son of God" (2 Sam 7:12–14; Ps 2:7; Wis 2:13–18; Sir 4:10; Jos. Asen. 6.2–6; 13.10). In some of the Qumran texts, the royal messiah could be referred to as "son of God" (4Q174 1.10–13; 4Q246). In Mark's Gospel, the expression "Son of God" might simply reflect the tradition of understanding Jesus as closely affiliated with the Father and the idea that he plays a special role mediating salvation between God and humanity.

The motif of Jesus as God's Son appears seven times in the text, four times directly (1:1; 3:11; 5:7; 15:39), and three times in variations: the voice from heaven speaks twice of "my beloved Son" (1:11; 9:7), and the high priest asks about the "son of the Blessed One" (14:61). Calling Jesus "Son of God" is also not a Markan innovation but derives from previous tradition. The motif already occurs in the Pauline letters, which were written prior to Mark' Gospel, for example, in Romans 1:3–4, where Davidic lineage and the Son-of-God motif are connected, and with a slightly different connotation in Galatians 4:4 and Romans 8:3–4. Galatians is particularly interesting, for the following verses indicate that sonship of God is not reserved to Jesus but open to everyone (Gal 4:5–7; cf. Rom 8:15). Here, too, the motif expresses closeness and affiliation with God, and the concept is connected with being gifted by the Spirit.

30. Cf. Udo Schnelle, "Paulinische und markinische Christologie im Vergleich," in *Paul and Mark: Comparative Essays. Part I: Two Authors at the Beginnings of Christianity*, ed. Oda Wischmeyer and David C. Sim, BZNW 198 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 283–311 (296).

Once more, Isaiah is the key to unlock the idea. In Mark 1:9–15, the idea of Jesus as the one who is gifted with God's Spirit and who is called "Son" by God are brought together in the moment of Jesus's baptism.[31] Read with Isaiah 61:1, Jesus becomes the *anointed son of God* who is the eschatological messenger of God's kingdom and thus able to heal the sick and cast out demons. The second time that both ideas appear together is the question of the high priest in 14:61: "Are you the Anointed One, the son of the Blessed One?" Coming from an Isaianic background, the question would be whether Jesus is *God's eschatological messenger.*[32] Read this way, Jesus's reference to the Son of Man as an eschatological category makes as much sense as the high priest's reaction to someone who—in his perception—falsely assumes a prophetic role.[33]

Both expressions, "Anointed One" and "Son of God," have in common that they can be accessed both from a Jewish and a non-Jewish background. Non-Jewish Roman readers might have also connected sonship to *divi filius.* This was a concept initially used for Julius Caesar and Augustus, which understands the emperor to be the son of a deified emperor.[34] The Romans had a clear distinction between deified (*divus*) and divine (*deus*), which cannot be expressed in Greek. Already the Greek version of the *Res gestae divi Augusti* uses "divine Augustus" (Σεβαστοῦ θεοῦ) for the Latin "deified Augustus" (*divi Augusti*). It is thus no surprise that the imperial cult had a quite different face in the Greek-speaking eastern part of the Roman Empire, where the idea of a *sacred kingship* was known since the time of Alexander, and subjects had a long history of deified rulers who carried names like *Theos* ("god," cf. Antiochus II Theos, 261–246 BCE) or *Soter* ("savior," cf. Antiochus I Soter 281–261 BCE; Demetrius I Soter, 162–150 BCE). Understanding kings as sons of gods had greater currency in the eastern part of the empire, where kings introduced themselves as divine incarnations or

31. Cf. Michael Theobald, "Gottessohn und Menschensohn: Zur polaren Struktur der Christologie im Markusevangelium," SNTSU A/13 (Linz, 1988): 37–79 (57).

32. David S. Du Toit, "'Gesalbter Gottessohn'—Jesus als letzter Bote Gottes: Zur Christologie des Markusevangeliums," in *". . . was ihr auf dem Weg verhandelt habt": Beiträge zur Exegese und Theologie des Neuen Testaments. Festschrift für Ferdinand Hahn zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Peter Müller and Christine Gerber (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neunkirchner, 2001), 49.

33. Theobald, "Gottessohn und Menschensohn," 47–49.

34. Babett Edelmann-Singer, *Das Römische Reich von Tiberius bis Nero* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2017), 16–19, 159–162; Lukas Bormann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: UTB, 2017), 2235–36.

of divine origin and thus as guarantors of the gods' attention or mediators between the divine and human sphere.[35] When the title "Son of God" is applied to Jesus by a Roman centurion (15:39), non-Jewish readers might find it easier to tune in than when it is used by the narrator (1:1), by characters from the numinous sphere (3:11; 5:7) or by God himself (1:11; 9:7).

Non-Jewish audiences might indeed have picked up the notion of the *good news of the emperor* and understood "son of God" (υἱὸς θεοῦ) to be referring to the emperor as the "son of a deified emperor" (*divi filius*) and the idea of an "anointed one" close to a deity. It is, however, much more convincing that the "good news" (εὐαγγέλιον) is alluding to the good tidings proclaimed in Isaiah 40–55.[36] Given the use of Isaiah in the whole of Mark's Gospel, and particularly the reading instruction in 1:2, it is more likely that the expression is derived from the Greek version of Isaiah 40:9; 52:7; and 61:1, which uses a verb form of the same root.[37] The reference in 40:9–11 is particularly interesting, as it follows the passage that is quoted in Mark 1:3.[38] It expresses that there will be a time when the announcements of Isaiah 35:5–6 are fulfilled, provided that people change their ways. The call to return to God is another feature that Mark and Isaiah 40–55 share, and it will be the content of Jesus's first words in Mark 1:14–15.

The narrator presents Jesus to be the *anointed Son of God*, God's eschatological messenger. This is the one who proclaims the arrival of God's reign as it was already prophesied in Isaiah and accompanied by circumstances anticipated there—the eyes of the blind are opened, the ears of the deaf are first stopped, then unstopped, the lame walk, and there is shouting for joy,

35. Thomas Witulski, *Kaiserkult in Kleinasien: Die Entwicklung der kultisch-religiösen Kaiserverehrung in der römischen Provinz Asia von Augustus bis Antoninus Pius*, 2nd ed., NTOA/SUNT 63 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 32–36.

36. Cf. Morna D. Hooker, "Isaiah in Mark's Gospel," in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, ed. Stephen Moyise and Marten J. J. Menken (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 36–37. Not every recipient will have instantly understood the term εὐαγγέλιον this way. As the noun is not used in the Septuagint, there have been speculations that the term could rather be derived from the imperial cult where it denotes "good news" about the emperor. Especially non-Jewish audiences in the Roman Empire are likely to have made this connection, and even Jewish audiences might have heard an echo of this use. The connection to Isaiah is, however, too strong to be excluded completely; cf. Sandra Huebenthal, "Anti-Gospel Revisited," in *Reading the "Political" in Jewish and Christian Texts*, ed. Julia Synder and Korinna Zamfir, BTS 38 (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), 137–58.

37. The Septuagint uses a participle of the Greek verb "proclaiming the good news" (εὐαγγελίζω) in Isa 40:9; 52:7, while an infinitive of it is used in 61:1. The "good news" (εὐαγγέλιον) of Mark 1:1 is thus readily understood as a noun related to this verb.

38. Heike Omerzu, "Geschichte durch Geschichten: Zur Bedeutung jüdischer Traditionen für die Jesusdarstellung des Markusevangeliums," *EC* 2 (2011): 77–99 (91).

because the tongue of the mute is loosened. "Anointed [One]" (χριστός) and "Son of God" (υἱὸς θεοῦ) might be the two ideas about Jesus that offer the most connectivity for non-Jewish audiences; the narrator leaves no doubt, however, that they must be read in the light of and through the prophecy of Isaiah. Mark's proclamation of Jesus is framed in categories of Isaiah.[39]

This way of reading Mark, of course, requires an audience familiar with Isaiah or willing to make themselves familiar when they realize the significance of the prophet and the book assigned to him.[40] If the initial quote is the indicator that the whole story should be understood in the light of Isaiah's prophecy, it explains why such an emphasis is put on Isaiah in Mark 1:1–3, and it is no surprise that this is the only authorial quote in the whole text. This does not exclude the possibility of a *different* perception of Jesus, for example, as a returned Moses or Elijah. It is indeed possible to understand Jesus as a prophet, Son of David, or royal aspirant, but the narrator clearly promotes a different perception. At this time, in this place, and in this text Jesus is understood to be *the anointed Son of God according to Isaiah's prophecy.*

3. Jesus's Perspective: The Eschatological Prophet of God's Kingdom

The opening of Mark's Gospel (1:1–13) is not only the key to understanding the narrator's perspective but also the perspective of the protagonist, Jesus. This becomes clear from the first narrative bridge (1:14–15) when Jesus begins the proclamation of the gospel of God: "The time [καιρός] has been fulfilled and the kingdom of God has arrived. Change your ways and believe this gospel." Whatever was necessary for Jesus to arrive at this insight must have happened prior to these verses, which means that if it is narrated, we will find it in 1:9–13.

In 1:9 Jesus appears without further introduction as one of the Galileans who line up at the banks of the Jordan to be baptized by John. Nothing seems special about him, and John proceeds with his work. The baptism scene turns out to be the key moment for understanding Jesus's perspective.

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39. Sandra Huebenthal, "Framing Jesus and Understanding Ourselves: Isaiah in Mark's Gospel and Beyond," in *Creative Fidelity, Faithful Creativity: The Reception of Jewish Scripture in Early Judaism & Christianity*, ed. Michael A. Daise and Dorota Hartmann, JSJSup (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

40. Cf. Omerzu, "Geschichte durch Geschichten," 79–81.

What happens in this and the following scene is essential for the further course of events. It is thus necessary to take a closer look at what happens and how it is narrated.

The moment Jesus ascends out of the water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the spirit like a dove descending upon him (1:10), and he hears a voice from heaven saying, "You are my beloved son, in you I am well pleased" (v. 11). Several features make this scene remarkable. The most intriguing point is that for two verses, the narrative changes perspective. It is no longer the narrator who gives an overall view; rather, the reader is allowed to share Jesus's point of view. This is especially striking as only Jesus and the reader share this moment. All the other characters, including John the Baptist, neither see the heavens torn apart nor the spirit descending nor hear the voice from heaven.

The reader is granted the opportunity to share the intimate moment of Jesus's extraordinary experience, which constitutes or at least makes obvious the special bond connecting Jesus with God. The words from heaven assure Jesus of a unique relationship with God that is expressed in terms of sonship, recalling Psalm 2:7. The "spirit" Jesus sees descending upon him like a dove recalls Isaiah 61:1, "The spirit of God is upon me because God has anointed me." As we have just seen, the reader could gather from this scene that Jesus's special relationship with God is that Jesus is *God's anointed son*, while Jesus will use the idea of sonship differently.[41]

In 1:12, the narrative situation returns to being properly authorial, and the Spirit puts Jesus instantly in motion. He throws him into the wilderness or desert, an abandoned place (ἔρημος). The forty days Jesus spends there brings to mind the motif of the people of Israel in the desert and their being put to the test. Again, this is an additional piece of information for the reader to make sense of the event. The character's own experience is that in the desert Jesus comes to realize how close and special his relationship to God is. Put to the test, Jesus experiences being drawn into the cosmic battle between God and Satan. Being with the wild animals and with the angels serving him, he realizes that God is on his side and Satan cannot harm him. Jesus's conclusion can only be that Satan has already lost the

41. Cf. Du Toit, "Es ist nichts Geheimes," 35–36; idem, "Treasuring Memory," 339–43; idem, "'Gesalbter Gottessohn,'" 39–40.

cosmic battle and will thus lose the battles on earth as well.[42] All is possible, because God reigns.

When we consider the first part of Isaiah 61:1, "the spirit of God is upon me because God has anointed me," as forming the interpretative background for Jesus's experience and assume that he might have seen it similarly, it is necessary to add the second part of the verse to the scheme: "He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners." The entire verse, used as an interpretative lens, would provide Jesus not only with an explanation for what has happened but also with a clear idea what follows from it. He could see his assignment as the eschatological messenger of God's kingdom who is supposed to proclaim people the good news that will change their lives and heal and liberate them. Jesus's experiences in the river and in the desert provide him with a particular insight and equip him with a deep trust (πίστις) in God who is capable of all things (Mark 9:23; 10:27; 11:22–25). This is how Jesus realizes that he can do things others cannot. The anointment with God's Spirit changes him, and in the course of the narrative it also changes the way he is perceived by others. This helps to understand why he is perceived as an authoritative preacher and healer.

One last point that requires attention in the context is the point in time when Jesus starts to proclaim his message about the kingdom of God. It is not directly after he has returned from the forty days in the desert where he has been part of the cosmic battle between God and Satan—and experienced that God has won. Intriguingly enough, it is only after John the Baptist, who has opened the way to his special experience, is handed over and arrested (1:14) that Jesus begins to proclaim the gospel of God. The catalyst for the beginning of his public proclamation is not the overwhelming experience of God's closeness and its confirmation during the forty days in the desert but the traumatic experience of John's imprisonment. What might seem strange at this point will eventually become comprehensible at a later point in the reading process.

In the narrative bridge in 1:15, Jesus's voice is finally heard for the first time: "The time [καιρός] has been fulfilled and the kingdom of God has

42. Cf. Malbon, "Reflected Christology."

arrived. Change your ways and believe this gospel." Jesus has, it seems, coined his own formula for this experience of God's closeness and his victory over Satan: *the kingdom of God has arrived.* Once more, we note peculiarities. The first is that as long as Jesus is alive, he is the only one to use the expression "kingdom of God." The second is that Jesus never goes beyond this expression or explains it in greater detail. The readers learn several times that the audiences are astonished (ἐκπλήσσω, 1:22; 6:2; 7:37; 11:18), amazed (θαμβέω/ἐκθαμβέω, 1:27; 9:15), and astounded (ἐξίστημι, 2:12; 3:21; 5:42; 6:51) by Jesus's teaching or marvel at it (θαυμάζω, 5:20), but they do not learn what Jesus actually said. The pattern is repeated several times when Jesus is depicted to be teaching without the narrator giving away what he says (1:21, 27, 39; 2:2, 13; 6:2, 6, 34; 10:1; 11:18).

Taken together, the experience Jesus had and that he passes on through the expression "kingdom of God" is that the special relationship to God he has been introduced to and that he happily embraced is open to everyone.[43] The only thing people have to do is to be open to it and be willing to put away every obstacle that might get between themselves and God—regardless of whether it is an obsession, sickness, ritual or cultic regulations, misguided ideas about God and his commandments, or simply money. Jesus is willing to offer every help necessary in this process, and his own example shows that for those who live in this new reality of the kingdom of God, it is not disease or impurity that is infectious but purity and health. The message is very simple: put first things first. Or, phrased differently, "Love God with all you heart, soul, mind, and strength," and "love your neighbor as yourself" (12:28–34). This love and trust is what Jesus calls πίστις and is usually translated "faith," but it means a lot more. However, as simple as the message is, it proves to be a great challenge not only to scribes and elders or the rich young man but also to the disciples.

How does Jesus see himself? As we have seen in the first part of the story (1:16–8:26), the other characters come up with all types of different assumptions ranging from Elijah, John the Baptist, and a prophet like the prophets of old, as well as rabbi, teacher, Lord, son of David, king of Israel, and someone who is possessed. Jesus is very interested in what others think

43. Cf. Sandra Huebenthal, "A Possible New World: How the Possible Worlds Theory Can Enhance Understanding of Mark," *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 32 (2015): 393–414.

but likewise reluctant about sharing his own ideas. He never introduces himself to anyone, especially not by a particular expression or title, and he would never call himself "Son of God." The furthest Jesus goes is making use of the *sonship* metaphor in the expression "Son of Man" that he first uses in 2:10, 28 to explain where his authority (ἐξουσία) comes from. As Jesus has been revealed, his unique relationship to God in terms of sonship, using this expression, seems to be a good choice. The title makes clear, however, that he is neither God nor a divine being, only someone who is granted a share in God's power because he is granted insight into God's will. On the other hand, "Son of Man" is an expression prone to misunderstanding and results in the plot to kill Jesus (3:6). It is thus not surprising that Jesus ceases to use the expression for the rest of the first part of the story. He will eventually return to it after Peter's confession in 8:29. For the moment the reader cannot help thinking that there is something dangerous about the expression "Son of Man."

The closest we get to a self-introduction is 6:4 when Jesus complains that "a prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house." Seeing himself as the messenger of the kingdom of God, Jesus seems to be happy with the label "prophet."[44] He never directly contradicts anyone when the title is applied to him, and he even uses it himself in the third main part of the story (11:1–15:39) in the parable of the wicked tenants (12:1–12). On this occasion, Jesus allegorically puts the *son* in line with the *prophets*, thereby marking the *son* as a *special prophet*: the *son* will be the *final, eschatological prophet*.[45] Mark 13:22 and 14:65 might just echo this idea.

For the moment, we could conclude that Jesus's own perspective on his experience describes his relationship in terms of *sonship* but that he is also much more comfortable with the term *prophet*, for it expresses his task as a messenger. After his experience in the river and the desert, Jesus sees himself mainly as a prophet—an eschatological messenger of what he has experienced of God's closeness and what he calls the "kingdom of God" in line with Second Temple Judaism and its traditions.

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44. Cf. Goulder, "Jesus without Q," 1295–307.

45. David S. Du Toit, "Prolepsis als Prophetie: Zur christologischen Funktion narrativer Anachronie im Markusevangelium," *Wort und Dienst* 26 (2001): 165–89 (esp. 141–43).

4. Negotiating the Different Perspectives

Our reflections started with the observation that the Markan Jesus and the Markan narrator do not speak with the same voice and that their perspectives on the events differ. In addition, the ideas of the other characters as to how Jesus is best understood neither match Jesus's nor the narrator's ideas. That leads to the question as to how all these different ideas and perspectives are negotiated and what the Gospel's final statement about "Christology" is.

One strategy that Mark's Gospel uses is that it assigns different concepts and ideas about Jesus that were known in Mark's times to different characters in the narrative and has them discuss these ideas. The strategy includes evaluating the ideas, which is mostly achieved by evaluations of the characters themselves. When the narrative ends, the reader has little doubt as to how Jesus is best understood, because the characters holding the wrong opinion are evaluated negatively. It is clear to the reader that the images of Jesus that the crowds, the people in Jesus's hometown, the Pharisees and scribes, Herod, the high council, and Pilate have are wrong, because they are unreliable characters or have other issues. In addition, the disciples' ideas can be premature at times and often need correction. It seems that the only reliable interpreters of Jesus are Jesus himself and the characters of the numinous and divine sphere. The explicit and implicit evaluations of different characters and their ideas guide the reader safely through the text. The most obvious technique is the narrator's comments about the characters in the moment (e.g., Herod Antipas in 6:26; Joseph of Arimathea in 15:43), or before (e.g., the scribes in 1:22), or after they act (e.g., the disciples in 6:52, the chief priests in 15:10). Another obvious technique is the "priming" of the reader in the prologue (1:1–15) that provides all the necessary information for understanding Jesus. Although often only noticed at second glance, the author never leaves the readers to themselves nor allows them to develop their own ideas, and thus the negotiation on the part of the characters is not without a predetermined conclusion. As we have seen, the author has a clear understanding of who Jesus is and uses several literary techniques to get the message across.

This also applies to the protagonist himself. The evaluation of Jesus's perspective, too, is neither left to him nor the reader but to those who rank higher than Jesus in the hierarchy of the narrated world. In Mark's Gospel it is not only the narrator who stands above the human characters but also

the characters from the numinous and divine sphere. These characters also make use of the *sonship* metaphor, and they drive home the narrator's point: the demons address Jesus as Son of God (3:11; 5:7) or God's holy one (1:24), and God himself calls him "my beloved Son" (1:11; 9:7). There can be no doubt that Jesus himself has little say when God and the narrator agree that he is the Son of God, and even the demons support that view. Though Jesus might be allowed his proclamation of the kingdom of God and the use of the expression "Son of Man," it is nevertheless clear that in the end he will be seen as the Son of God.[46] Almost as if to explicitly make the point that not only the opponents are wrong about who Jesus is but also the protagonist himself, the moment Jesus dies, the realization that he really was the Son of God is finally introduced to the world of characters by a character from the human sphere (15:39). The reader cannot but agree to this statement.

This leaves us to the question how the narrator wants the characters and the reader to arrive at his conclusions. As we have already seen, the expression "Anointed One" (Χριστός) does not occur very often. A closer look at its second occurrence is sufficient to understand the underlying scheme. Peter's confession of Jesus as the Anointed One (8:29), usually referred to as Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, is sometimes understood to be a fracture of both Mark's messianic secret (*Messiasgeheimnis*) and the disciples' lack of comprehension (*Jüngerunverständnis*).[47] Both the messianic secret and the disciples' lack of comprehension are, however, modern interpretative categories, not features of the text. Paired with the historical-critical tendency of reading smaller portions or cutouts (what biblical scholars would call "pericopae" instead of longer passages), they might in fact be less enlightening and confusing. Read according to later christological categories, Peter's statement is indeed somewhat surprising. When "Markan Christology" is about the suffering Messiah who can only be adequately understood as Christ and Son of God through cross and resurrection, Peter's testimony can only be seen as

46. Cf. Jack Dean Kingsbury, "The Christology of Mark and the Son of Man," in *Unity and Diversity in the Gospels and Paul: Essays in Honor of Frank J. Matera*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner and Kelly R. Iverson, ECL 7 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 62–63; Du Toit, "Es ist nichts Geheimes," 32.

47. William Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901); Du Toit, "Es ist nichts Geheimes"; Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, 129–94.

oddly premature. Peter seems to say something that—according to the logic of the narrative—he cannot know at this point in time. Matthew seemingly "solves" this problem in his Gospel by crediting to him a divine revelation: "Jesus said to him in reply, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father'" (16:17). Matthew's reading is comprehensible, for it allows retaining christological categories that were formed and accepted much later than the Gospels and only decided upon in the ecumenical councils. In Mark's Gospel, however, later christological categories are not at stake; rather, Isaiah's anointed-son-of-God concept is at work.

Read this way, the scene exhibits how characters (and readers) can arrive at the narrator's conclusions about Jesus. The beginning of the Gospel's middle section turns out to be the perfect example of how the narrator negotiates different ideas about Jesus. It all begins with a déjà vu: Mark 8:27–29 repeats a theme that was already discussed in 6:1–16, namely, different approaches to understanding Jesus. Following the logic of the narrative, the question is not whether Peter's insight is slightly premature but is rather, *What has Peter seen up to this point, and which experience does he verbalize by his impression?* In this moment, a rather production-oriented, diachronic reader of Mark's Gospel who is predominantly interested in the shape and origin of the smaller pre-Markan units might be lost, but a synchronic reader who is following the narrative arc will have little trouble answering that Peter has last seen that Jesus made a blind man to see. This not only releases the man from darkness but also from poverty, for with his sight restored he will be able to work and lead a normal life.[48] Peter has also seen that Jesus refuses to give signs, suggesting that Jesus shouldn't be thought of as a "signs prophet." Examples of signs prophets would include a man called Theudas, whom we know through Flavius Josephus, a Rome-based Jewish historian of the late first century (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 20.97–98). Peter's experience also suggests that Jesus should not be identified with a "political messiah" like Jude the Galilean, whom we also encounter in Josephus's writings (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.118; *Ant.* 18.4–10). Peter has seen Jesus

48. Bernd Kollmann, "Krankheitsbilder und soziale Folgen: Blindheit, Lähmung, Aussatz, Taubheit oder Taubstummheit," in *Kompendium der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen I: Die Wunder Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2013), 87–93.

feeding hungry people and healing a deaf man who spoke with difficulties.[49] In 7:37, presumably non-Jewish characters even praise God in the words of Isaiah 35:5: "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped."

Peter could have seen and understood all of that. Read though the Isaianic lens as the narrator instructs, Peter's assessment that Jesus is the *Christos* (Χριστός) means that he is *the anointed Son of God*, Isaiah's eschatological messenger of the kingdom of God.[50] Peter's evaluation would thus not only be correct but almost compelling. He simply verbalizes what everybody familiar with Isaiah's prophecy could have seen and understood. This does not only apply to Peter's testimony but also to the following transfiguration scene, which is equally crucial for properly understanding Jesus. In this scene, not only the character Jesus is transformed but Jesus's perceptions, too, are taken to another level.[51]

We could thus summarize that Mark's Gospel addresses the question about Jesus in different stages. In the *first part* (1:16–8:26), which is located in and around Galilee, the characters want to know who Jesus is and how his words and deeds can be best understood. Jesus is first allowed to introduce himself in words and deeds (until 3:6), followed by a first round of "evaluations" by other characters. This first part introduces most of the images of Jesus that the text deals with, and the more political titles "Son of David" (υἱὸς Δαυίδ), "king of the Jews" (βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων), and "king of Israel" (βασλεὺς Ἰσραήλ) are only introduced later, closer to the passion narrative. The second part (8:27–10:52), narrating Jesus's way to Jerusalem, begins as we have just seen with Jesus's question about the different ways people understand him. They mention John the Baptist, Elijah, or another prophet as reception categories suggested so far. Jesus then asks the disciples how they themselves perceive him. Peter repeats the narrator's answer as it was introduced in the first line of the text: he believes Jesus to be "the Anointed One" (8:29). Although he is correct according to the narrator, the character Jesus commands Peter to keep silent about it.

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49. Assuming, of course, that the disciples are present in 7:24–37, which the text does not explicitly say. In this case the synchronic reader of the story has an advantage.

50. Cf. Du Toit, "Prolepsis als Prophetie," 183–84.

51. Cf. Du Toit, "Es ist nichts Geheimes," 35–36; "Treasuring Memory," 348–53.

The scene is a reminder of the fitting, adequate perception of Jesus and indicates that the disciples have caught up in understanding. This reading is supported by the following verses. Here, Jesus returns to the expression "Son of Man" (8:31; cf. 2:10, 28), now with the extension of the prediction of the Son's suffering that will be tied to the expression from now on whenever Jesus speaks about the future way of the Son of Man. A few verses later, Jesus will return to his original message, namely, the proclamation about the kingdom of God (9:1; cf. 1:14–15). Even more striking, the subsequent transfiguration scene of 9:1–8 reminds the reader of the voice from heaven that the reader and Jesus have already heard in 1:11 (see 9:7). Other than in the baptism scene, where only Jesus and the reader hear the voice from above, the voice is now also audible to Peter, James, and John, who are introduced to the idea that Jesus is the beloved Son of the Most High (9:7). After this experience, Jesus commands them to keep silent until the Son of Man is raised from the dead (v. 9). Besides Isaiah, it seems, the second important lens for understanding Jesus is his death; otherwise the command to keep silent up to this point makes no sense.

On the way back, the disciples discuss Jesus's words, and they are concerned with the question as to what resurrection from the dead means (v. 10). This passage serves as a bridge for the reader and evaluates other ideas about Jesus. It clarifies that Jesus is neither John the Baptist nor Elijah (vv. 11–13). After the beheading of the Baptist, the multiplication of the loaves has already implicitly communicated that there is more here in Jesus than Elijah. Jesus now makes it explicit. When applying eschatological schemes, the disciples have to get it right. Indeed, Elijah must come first, although John the Baptist is the returning prophet, not Jesus. The rationale is simply that Jesus is connected to the Son of Man, and Elijah has just been seen talking to him.

In the transfiguration, Elijah and Moses appear in person (v. 4). Once more the transfiguration has the function of a turning point. Jesus, it becomes obvious, is neither the revenant of Moses nor of Elijah but the eschatological messenger of God's kingdom whom Isaiah announces. This has immediate consequences: the idea about Jesus as Elijah no longer appears after 9:13.[52] When Jesus and the disciples descend from the mountain, allusions to Jesus

52. Cf. Omerzu, "Geschichte durch Geschichten," 88–91.

as the new Moses change and become less prominent. Unquestioned by all the characters in Mark's Gospel, Moses is the authoritative giver of the law. The Moses-tradition is, however, not completely without prophetic and eschatological twists, and here pre-Markan traditions come in that Mark's Gospel happily embraces on the structural level. They provide another explanation for Jesus's miraculous deeds up to the transfiguration scene. Jesus's authority can also be seen in terms of Jesus being the eschatological prophet like Moses, announced in Deuteronomy 18:15–22 and 34:10–11.[53] The two stories of feeding the crowds and walking on the sea (Mark 6:30–52) can be read in the light of the Moses (and Joshua) traditions, as du Toit has convincingly worked out. Du Toit suggests that the idea of a "a prophet like Moses" based on Deut 18 and 34, in connection with other traditions about Moses and Joshua, provides a stable frame to structure and organize Jesus memories and Jesus traditions.[54] Though more subtle, the idea that Jesus is a prophet like Moses is much stronger than the allusions to Elijah. When this tradition is connected to Isaiah 61:1, the eschatological messenger of God becomes the dominant perception. Isaiah's anointed son of God exhibits all the features of the "prophet like Moses." In a similar way, the assignment of eschatological roles is clarified, for neither Elijah nor Moses is God's eschatological and final messenger: Jesus is the "prophet" announced by God in Deuteronomy 18:15–22.[55] This way, the *prophet* is completely absorbed by the *anointed son of God.* The same applies to Jesus's idea about himself: it is also fully absorbed by the narrator's perspective.

The section 8:27–9:13 is most intriguing regarding the proper understanding of Jesus. Unnoticed by the characters, it evaluates different possible perceptions of Jesus to the point that only three suggestions are left: Anointed One, Son of Man, and Son of God. Two of them were already established as correct by the narrator in the first line of the Gospel: Anointed One and Son of God. What about "Son of Man"? Initially Jesus uses the expression "Son of Man." As the narrative continues, however, this concept is successively linked more closely to the "Anointed One" until at Jesus's mention of the eschatological parousia both concepts apply to the same person (14:61–62).

53. Cf. Du Toit, "Treasuring Memory," 348–49; "Es ist nichts Geheimes," 37–38.

54. Du Toit, "Treasuring Memory," 348.

55. Du Toit, "Prolepsis als Prophetie," 186; "'Gesalbter Gottessohn,'" 42; Omerzu, "Geschichte durch Geschichten," 98.

Once more, the narrator absorbs the ideas of the characters. Jesus's perception has no chance; in the end, it will become apparent that he is indeed God's anointed Son. The historical Peter might not have been able to see this, but due to Mark's presentation the character Peter cannot but recognize in Jesus God's anointed Son and the eschatological messenger of God's kingdom, *as it is written in the prophet Isaiah.*

Jesus's words about the Son of Man who must suffer initiate the process of bringing the different perspectives together. Mark 9 is indeed the turning point, for the disciples have now caught up in understanding who Jesus is. Their next challenge is the more difficult step of accepting that God's anointed Son and eschatological prophet of God's kingdom will suffer and die a most disgraceful death.[56] The final answer as to whether Jesus really was, or if he really is, the Messiah, the Son of the Most High, it seems, can only be answered at the parousia of the Son of Man, the exalted Christ.[57] This answer will be given outside Mark's Gospel. The story about "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus the anointed Son of God" has a more urgent task. It must provide a satisfactory explanation for the shock of Jesus's violent death. The Son of Man title is used to address the elephant in the room—the suffering and death of the anointed Son of God.

5. Addressing the Suffering and Death of the Anointed Son of God

Mark's stories about Jesus and the beginning of the gospel are not a historical report but a theological reflection of experience narrated from a particular point of view. As Jesus's death on the cross is the most difficult and traumatizing experience, it is no surprise that learning to deal with Jesus's passion and death takes a lot of space in the narrative. This process starts early and becomes gradually more perceptible. Jesus is not remembered to have had it easy with religious leaders and authorities, and he is more or less in constant conflict with Pharisees, scribes, Herodians, and, later in the course of the narrative, elders and high priests, until the council hands him over to Pontius Pilate. The reader soon learns that there will be no happy

56. Cf. Robert C. Tannehill, "The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," *Semeia* 16 (1979): 57–95; Du Toit, "Es ist nichts Geheimes," 43; "Prolepsis als Prophetie," 185–87.

57. Cilliers Breytenbach, "Grundzüge markinischer Gottessohn-Christologie," in *Anfänge der Christologie: Festschrift für Ferdinand Hahn zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Cilliers Breytenbach and Henning Paulsen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 183; cf. Kingsbury, "Christology of Mark," 66–69.

ending: the first plot to kill Jesus is narrated as early as 3:6, and the fate of John the Baptist signals that Jesus, who began his proclamation when the Baptist was handed over, might soon be in trouble as well (1:14; 6:17–29). On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus predicts his passion three times (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34), and in the parable of the wicked tenants (12:1–12) he speaks about his fate allegorically, but no less clearly.

The title "Son of Man" is a lens for understanding what happens. Although Jesus's first use in 2:10, 28 does not seem to evoke anything dangerous, looking backward, the plot to kill Jesus (3:6) can be seen as a reaction to Jesus's claim about what the "Son of Man" is entitled to be and do. That is to say, stating that sins are forgiven and being Lord of the Sabbath, indicating that he claims to share in God's power (no matter how it is termed), will eventually lead to trouble. The title "Son of Man" occurs fourteen times in the Gospel of Mark: twice in the first part of the inner story (2:10, 28), seven times in the second part, six of which are connected with passion predictions (8:31; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45) and one with an eschatological time frame (8:38), and finally five times in the third part, thrice with reference to the passion (14:21 [2x], 41) and twice with an eschatological time frame (13:26; 14:62). From 9:31 on, the "Son of Man" sayings are at times additionally constructed with forms of the verb "to hand over," indicating that the moment of betrayal plays a key role for the fate of the Son of Man (see, e.g., 9:31; 10:33 [2x]; 14:21, 41). "Handing over" already occurs much earlier in the text. The Greek verb *paradidōmi* (παραδίδωμι), which literally means "to give over from one's hand," is used for passing on tradition as well as for authoritative commitment or passing someone along in a juridical process. It is used for the first time in 1:14 to make it clear that Jesus begins his own proclamation the very moment John the Baptist is arrested.

It becomes clear in the process of reading that this is not a coincidence. Quite the contrary, the narrator makes deliberate use of the verb's range of meaning and uses it several times to allude to Jesus's fate. It is interesting to see how the particular scenes where the expression is used connect the beginning of Jesus's proclamation with the fate of the Baptist (1:14), his own fate (3:19; 14:10–11; 15:1, 10, 15), the behavior of the disciples (14:18–21), and the enigmatic predictions about the Son of Man (9:31; 10:33), which can finally be seen as referring to himself in the moment of his arrest (14:41–44). There are numerous connections of word and motif between these sequences.

Perhaps the most intriguing connection is the link between 1:14–15 and 14:41–42, which brings together a couple of themes: the fulfillment of a certain time (καιρός in 1:15; ὥρα in 14:41), which denotes the arrival of something to be expected, and the "handing over" of someone. Read in the context of the overall narrative, the "handing over" of the Son of Man to the "hands of men" (9:31), the need to proclaim the gospel to all nations (13:10, also 14:9), and the fulfilment of all the predictions about the fate of the Son of Man (9:31; 10:31; 14:18–21) during the passion (14:10–11, 41–44; 15:1–10, 15) make the connection all the stronger and depict Jesus once more as the reliable prophet. Whatever he prophesied about the Son of Man did not only come true but also came true in his person.[58]

1:14–15	**14:41–42**
After John was **handed over**, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God: **The time** [καιρός] has been fulfilled, and **the kingdom of God has arrived**. Change your ways and believe this **gospel**.	And he comes a third time and says to them: Continue to sleep and take your rest. It is enough. **The hour** [ὥρα] has come: see, **the Son of Man is handed over** into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us go; see, **the one who hands me over has arrived**.

It is intriguing to see how "handing over" and the need to get up and do something—in Jesus's case, proclamation—are connected, and that the experience of handing over, even by loved ones, must not stop the process of passing on the message. The network of verbal connections is quite dense in these passages, and the only loose end, so to say, seems to be the kingdom of God. When Jesus speaks about the necessity to proclaim to the nations, it is not the kingdom of God that is to be proclaimed, but the gospel. It is further left open, whether it is the gospel of God (1:14) or the gospel of Jesus (1:1) that is to be proclaimed. The more important message seems to be that death and betrayal will not stop the gospel and its proclamation—a signal also for the reader.

58. Du Toit, "Prolepsis als Prophetie," passim.

The last verses of the inner story are crucial in this regard. The key moment immediately after Jesus's death is told in enigmatic, symbolic language: the veil in the temple is torn in two parts from top to bottom (15:38). Like the darkness that had come over the whole land from the sixth to the ninth hour and darkened the scene of the abandoned Jesus to the moment of his last cry (v. 33), the reillumination and the tearing in two of the temple's veil underline the tremendousness of the moment: Jesus's death has cosmic dimensions. It is not just any insurrectionist who dies at the cross, as immediately confirmed by the Roman centurion (v. 39). Mark 15:37–39 narrates two different reactions to Jesus's death, both highly symbolic. This becomes even clearer when we compare them to the moment after Jesus's baptism, which also prepared him for the cosmic conflict in the desert (1:10–11).

15:37–39	**1:10–11**
And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last/the **spirit**, and the veil in the temple was **torn** in two **from top to bottom**. And when the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last/the **spirit**, he said, "Truly, this man was **Son of God**!"	And immediately, ascending out of the water, he saw the heavens **torn** apart and the **spirit** like a dove **descending** upon him. And a voice came from the heavens: "You are my **beloved Son**, in you I am well pleased."

Adding a little topographical knowledge, it is obvious that no one could have possibly seen Jesus's death and the rupture of the veil taking place in close temporal sequence. Its meaning must thus be purely symbolic, which is confirmed by the structure of the material and its analogy to 1:10–11: event, rupture, comment. The phrasing of Mark 15:38 is important because it uses the same verb—σχίζω—for the rupture that had been used in the baptism scene in 1:10 to describe what Jesus saw. According to Josephus, the temple veil depicted the entire visible firmament (*J.W.* 5.241), which makes the connection even more striking. In both cases, the rupture resolves

the separation between God and man, between the divine and the human sphere. What Jesus has experienced immediately after his baptism is finally open to everyone—a direct connection to God. The words of the centurion echo what Jesus has heard in 1:10; this man is special, a son of God. What has made him visibly and recognizably special was his affiliation with the Spirit. In 1:10 Jesus saw the Spirit descend on him, and as the reader knows, it remained on him up to his last moment. The verb describing Jesus's death (*exepneusen*; ἐξέπνευσεν, vv. 37, 39) does not accidently contain the Greek word for "spirit" (*pneuma*; πνεῦμα) and recalls this moment.[59]

A Roman, and thus gentile, centurion, being the one who calls Jesus "Son of God," is also significant for the narrative structure, as it introduces this idea to the world of (human) characters. Up to this point, Jesus as Son of God has only been mentioned by the Markan narrator (1:1), the voice from heaven (1:11; 9:7 ["my Son"]), and some agents from the numinous sphere who have recognized him (cf. 1:24; 3:11; 5:7). The narrative develops the right perception of Jesus in several steps. In 1:1 the narrator gives the full formula for the proper understanding of Jesus: "Anointed One" and "Son of God." Both elements of the formula are subsequently confirmed and introduced to Jesus (and the reader) by a sign (1:10) and a word from heaven (v. 11). The characters begin their way to understanding only in 1:16, when the inner story begins, and it takes a while before they get there. Instantly after Peter arrives at the right conclusion in 8:29, combining what he has hitherto experienced of Isaiah's prophecy coming to fulfillment in Jesus's ministry, Jesus changes gear and (re-)introduces the enigmatic figure of the Son of Man, who must suffer. The second and third parts of the inner narrative are dominated by this theme until the climax in 15:39.

Whether Peter and the other disciples are to blame for not understanding at that point in the narrative what could only be understood from the perspective of the narrator, namely, that the Anointed One must suffer, is an ongoing and still unresolved debate in biblical scholarship. From a narratological point of view, one cannot blame Peter. The character of Peter understands in 8:29 what he can understand at this point according to the rules of the story. If it is true that Mark's text itself is an attempt to come to terms with Jesus's suffering and death, asking that a character understands

59. Cf. Breytenbach, "Grundzüge markinischer Gottessohn-Christologie," 178.

what the narrator is presenting as the outcome of a longer process of theological reflection is asking a bit too much.

What remains is that Peter, the Jewish disciple, introduces the expression "Anointed One" to the world of characters, and after Jesus's death the gentile centurion introduces the expression "Son of God" to the world of the characters. The complete formula is now accessible. Characters and readers share the same level of knowledge: Jesus is the *anointed Son of God.* After Jesus's death, the full confession is possible—both titles have arrived in the world of characters, and Jesus's expression "Son of Man" has finally been connected to Jesus himself, showing that full awareness and full understanding are only possible after Jesus's passion and death.

After the question about Jesus is finally answered, one last issue remains open: What will happen to the message once the messenger is gone? Before the narrative is finally closed, the fate of the message about the kingdom of God comes into focus one last time. Hitherto, the concept "kingdom of God" has only been used by Jesus. Looking back to 1:14–15, Jesus started his proclamation only after John the Baptist was handed over, and he only then introduced the kingdom of God as a formula for his experience of God's closeness and unique relationship with God. The last time that the reader has heard about the kingdom of God was in 12:34 when Jesus said to a scribe that he was not far from it, and in 14:26 when Jesus indicated that he would only then have wine again. The question is what will happen to this message after Jesus is gone, as the opponent's strategy clearly was to do away with the message by doing away with the messenger.

It turns out that the seed of Jesus's message has already started to grow. A few hours after Jesus has died, just before the Sabbath begins, Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate and asks for Jesus's body in order to bury him (15:43). This Joseph is not only characterized as a respected member of the council but also as someone receiving and welcoming the kingdom of God. The narrator is reluctant about sharing the future destiny of the message. The words about Joseph, however, indicate that Jesus's idea has finally arrived at the level of the characters and, even more striking, becomes visible on this level in a moment of crisis. The theme has come around full circle: Jesus began to proclaim the message of the kingdom after John had been handed over, and the moment Jesus is buried, the stage is set for characters and readers to start their own proclamation of that message.

At this point, the story of the "beginning of the gospel of Jesus, the anointed son of God" (1:1) comes to an end, and it is up to the recipient whether 16:8 is the last word or whether there will be another ending, as it might be alluded to in 1:35–39. This passage in the first chapter shares surprisingly much vocabulary and ideas with 16:1–8, the very unsatisfactory open end of Mark's Gospel. Both scenes take place at the same time of day, very early in the morning on the day after the Sabbath, and they have a similar theme—people are searching for Jesus. Simon is the only one mentioned by name in both scenes, and in both cases the message is to leave and proclaim and that Jesus will eventually be found in Galilee. Taking up the summary in 1:39 and the prediction in 14:9, a conciliatory closing of Mark's Gospel would be: "And they went out and told the disciples. And they went back to Galilee where they saw Jesus. And after having seen him, they went out and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus, the Anointed Son of God, to the whole world."

Conclusions

The narrator would be fairly content with this ending. The continuation of Mark's Gospel in the lives of the early Jesus-followers, for whom this story was indeed only the *beginning*, has proven this assumption to be right: death and betrayal must not and could not stop the gospel and its proclamation. What was and is proclaimed, however, was subject to change. As said in the introduction, though the first narrative account in written form, Mark's Gospel was only one contribution to the greater early Christian discourse and had to be negotiated with other contributions in other times and places. Part of this process is preserved in the New Testament, though the larger part followed after the New Testament documents were written.

From what we have seen above in the Gospel of Mark, a group of Jesus-followers seeks to make sense of their experiences with Jesus and his proclamation. The socioreligious and cultural frames used in this text are both Second Temple Judaism, Israel's holy Scriptures, and the Roman imperial culture in which the text was written. In accordance with other Jewish groups, their most important frame of reference is the book of Isaiah, and in line with Isaiah's prophecy they understand Jesus as God's anointed Son, the eschatological messenger of the kingdom of God. This messenger suffers the

fate of the prophet and the righteous: although he has done nothing wrong, he is persecuted by those in power because of his liberating message for the sick, the marginalized, and the suffering. The text works on two different levels and narrates different ideas, but in the end it invites the reader to adopt the narrator's perspective on Jesus and his message.

In the narrated world, there is no place for a divine Jesus, not even for a concept similar to what ranks today as "Christology." Jesus is granted the insight into a special relationship with God before the actual story starts. This special relationship is phrased in the language of anointing (1:1, 10) and sonship (v. 1, 11). Jesus processes his baptism in the desert (vv. 12–13), and afterward, in a moment of crisis caused by the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus takes up his own teaching and healing activity (vv. 14–15). Its focus is on God and his reign and the implementation of God's kingdom in the world, not on Jesus himself: "The Markan Jesus consistently deflects honor away from himself and toward God."[60] When it comes to his message, Mark's Jesus is a one-hit wonder: the claim that God's kingdom is at hand seems to be his only message. This message, however, is unfolded in teaching and healing throughout the text. What does it mean that the *kingdom of God* is at hand? How does the implementation of God's principle in the world become manifest? Jesus's program is simple: whatever hinders the direct and undisturbed relationship with God must be done away with, be it hardness of heart, misunderstanding, sickness, possession, or excesses of a misunderstood religiosity.

This program leaves little space for a divine or semidivine being besides God. Only one thing can be the center of all things. Nevertheless, Jesus is the founding figure of a new religious movement, and besides telling its founding story, Mark's Gospel has to answer in which terms Jesus is best understood: teacher, prophet, heretic, or Son of Man—as Jesus seems to suggest—or anointed Son of God—as the narrator suggests?

Jesus's words about the fate of the Son of Man and what will happen at the end-time support the inference that Jesus and the narrator could agree on *Christos* (χριστός), even though it might only be applicable to Jesus after

60. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "The Christology of Mark's Gospel: Narrative Christology and the Markan Jesus," in *Who Do You Say That I Am? Essays on Christology (Essays in Honor of Jack Dean Kingsbury)*, ed. Mark Allan Powell and David R. Bauer, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 41; cf. idem, *Mark's Jesus*, 135–36.

his death. Jesus himself suspends it until the return at the end of time, the parousia. Only then will the Son of Man be recognized as the Christ. The narrator only suspends it until after the resurrection and already hints at Jesus being the Christ during his lifetime. What they both leave open, however, is the nature of this figure. Is the Christ human, divine, or both? With *Christos* (χριστός) being "something of a generic umbrella term for Mark,"[61] the text is ambiguous about this question and thus open to different understandings. Both Adoptionist and Trinitarian Christologies have used it to make their case. Jesus's healing ability and his claim to divine authority suggest that there is some kind of divinity, at least a share in divine power, about him, but on the other hand his need to rest, withdraw, sleep, and eat depict him as a human among humans. He exhibits human fear, pain, and a sense of isolation during the passion.

In Mark's Gospel, calling Jesus "Son of God" expresses a unique closeness to God, a particular relationship that is not necessarily based on kinship. God's Anointed One is special to him and perceived to be special by others, even without crossing the boundaries between the human, numinous, and divine spheres. The Roman concepts of divine (*deus*) and deified (*divus*) indicate that Roman culture had a clear awareness of the distinction, and when the boundaries between god and man are transgressed, it is rather the gods who take human shape for a while rather than vice versa. It is difficult to express these differences in Greek. From the Greek expression used in Mark 1:1 alone, it is impossible to say whether it means a divine or a deified son. Mark's Gospel allows for both understandings and does not provide the reader with an easy solution. The text's ambiguity permits different interpretations and at one point explicitly states that there are other ways to follow Jesus (9:38–39).

A further development shows that the title "Son of God" took the road to the understanding of a Jesus not only as a divine agent but as a divine being, as God. Roman imperial propaganda might have added to this development. Reception history—the other canonical Gospels and the decisions of the first ecumenical councils—show where the journey went. The development of a Trinitarian faith at last solved one of the core ambiguities of Mark's Gospel. When Jesus is God and both human and divine, he himself provides access

61. Boring, "Markan Christology," 454; see also Kingsbury, "Christology of Mark," 58.

to the direct and undisturbed relationship with God. It is a relationship that sees God at the center of all things—or to phrase it with Mark's Jesus, that the kingdom of God is at hand.

At the end of our journey, let us wrap up the initial question: Does Mark assign Jesus a divine role? After a lengthy excursion into the worlds of Mark's Gospel, the brief answer is "not explicitly." In the world of the characters, Jesus is perceived as a human being and messenger of God who is granted the authority to perform exorcisms, healings, and other signs due to his special relationship with God. The Markan narrator, by carefully structuring the story and mediating different perspectives, opens a door to the possibility of seeing Jesus as a divine being. The moment the text is written, however, the jury is still out. In this respect, too, Mark's Gospel has an open ending. Its Christology is suspended until further notice. Later readers were only too keen on closing that gap.