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CHAPTER 1

I. PROLOGUE TO THE GOSPEL. Ch. 1:1-13

The reason for designating as prologue Ch. 1:1-13 is that these verses supply the key to the entire Gospel by introducing the central figure of the account. In accordance with the prophetic word, Jesus appears in the wilderness of Judea, summoned by the call of John the Baptist. His baptism and sojourn there constitute his first public acts and provide the foundation for his subsequent ministry. The Gospel of Mark will be the account of Jesus' trial, throughout which he decisively encounters Satan and receives help from God. This is what it means for Jesus to go out to the wilderness.¹

The motif of the wilderness dominates the prologue. The prophetic note of the voice of one crying in the wilderness (Ch. 1:3) serves to introduce John the Baptist, whose ministry in the Jordan valley attracts Jesus of Nazareth (Ch. 1:4-8). The situating of John "in the wilderness" (Ch. 1:4) binds the account of his ministry to the prophetic announcement of Ch. 1:2-3. Mark relates the baptisms in the Jordan to the wilderness, for the lower Jordan valley is part of the wilderness scene and was called "desert" in both the Old and New Testament periods.² Subsequent to the baptism of Jesus the wilderness remains prominent as the arena where he was tempted (Ch. 1:12-13). Thus in Ch. 1:1-13 the wilderness is the location common to the several events related, and serves to underline the unity of the initial section.³ In Ch. 1:14 the locality changes: Jesus leaves the wilderness and returns to Galilee to begin his ministry following the imprisonment of John.

Theological and literary considerations confirm this analysis of Ch. 1:1-13. In the building of his Gospel Mark frequently groups together

¹ See especially U. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness* (Naperville, Ill., 1963), pp. 77-102; J. M. Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark*² (London, 1962), pp. 21-32. The argument that the prologue should be extended to Ch. 1:15 can be seen in O. J. F. Seitz, "Preparatio Evangelica in the Markan Prologue," *JBL* 82 (1963), pp. 201-206; *idem*, "Gospel Prologues: A Common Pattern?" *JBL* 83 (1964), pp. 262-268; L. E. Keck, "The Introduction to Mark's Gospel," *NTS* 12 (1966), pp. 352-370.

² Cf. C. C. McCown, "The Scene of John's Ministry," *JBL* 59 (1940), pp. 113-131; and especially R. W. Funk, "The Wilderness," *JBL* 78 (1959), pp. 205-214, where the biblical material is supplemented by the relevant texts from Qumran.

³ U. Mauser, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-79.

traditions by the use of key-word association.⁴ As a result, larger sections in Mark can be identified by the recurrence of basic words and phrases. In Ch. 1:1-13 the primary unifying term is "wilderness." But there is also repeated reference to the person of the Spirit within this section (Ch. 1:8, 10, 12). The allusion to the one who baptizes with the Spirit in the summary of John's message (Ch. 1:8) prepares for the reference to the Spirit at Jesus' baptism, and binds Ch. 1:4-8 to Ch. 1:9-11, while the role of the Spirit in the temptation (Ch. 1:12-13) associates this unit with the previous ones. The fact that the Spirit is introduced into the record only rarely beyond the prologue suggests that Mark has consciously unified his opening statement by a threefold reference to the Spirit.⁵

The most striking characteristics of the Marcan prologue are its abruptness and its silences. This is surprising because the one introduced is not an ordinary person but the Son of God, acknowledged by the heavenly voice, who in the initial phases of his public ministry provokes wonder and astonishment by the authority of his teaching and the power of his mighty acts. The evangelist makes no attempt to provide an historical explanation for John's presence in the wilderness or for Jesus' appearance before John. The prophetic voice and the Son of God appear, veiled in mystery from the very beginning. Yet their appearance in the wilderness is full of meaning for men precisely because the veil has been removed and the significance which it has in the divine plan of redemption has been disclosed. This Mark declares in the opening verse of his account. Accordingly, with a few broad strokes the prologue associates Jesus with the preaching and baptizing activity of John, and with trial in the wilderness. It indicates that the Messiah, who is divinely chosen and qualified for his ministry, has come. The accent falls upon the disclosure that Jesus is the Messiah, the very Son of God, whose mission is to affirm his sonship in the wilderness. His encounter with Satan provides the background for the delineation of the conflict between the Son of God and the forces of Satan which is so prominent an element in the Marcan narrative of Jesus' ministry.⁶

⁴ See especially J. Sundwall, *Die Zusammensetzung des Markus-Evangeliums* (Åbo, 1934).

⁵ Apart from the prologue "Spirit" occurs only in Chs. 3:29; 12:36; 13:11. See J. M. Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 28 f.; U. Mauser, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

⁶ So N. B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ* (Philadelphia, 1944), pp. 6-21; cf. R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (Oxford, 1950), pp. 15-20; T. A. Burkill, *Mysterious Revelation. An Examination of the Philosophy of St. Mark's Gospel* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1963), pp. 9-23.

1. THE HERALD IN THE WILDERNESS. Ch. 1:1-8

- 1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.⁷
- 2 Even as it is written in Isaiah the prophet,⁸
Behold, I send my messenger before thy face,
Who shall prepare thy way;
- 3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
Make ye ready the way of the Lord,
Make his paths straight;
- 4 John came, who baptized in the wilderness⁹ and preached the
baptism of repentance unto remission of sins.¹⁰
- 5 And there went out unto him all the country of Judea, and all
they of Jerusalem; and they were baptized of him in the river
Jordan, confessing their sins.
- 6 And John was clothed with camel's hair, and *had* a leathern
girdle about his loins, and did eat locusts and wild honey.
- 7 And he preached, saying, There cometh after me he that is

⁷ While the words "the Son of God" are included by most modern translations (ASV, RSV, NEB, Jerus. Bible) they are reduced to the apparatus of the critical editions of the Greek text [Westcott and Hort, Nestle, S. C. E. Legg, *Novum Testamentum Graece: Evangelium secundum Marcum* (Oxford, 1935), K. Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Stuttgart, 1964)]. The reading υἱοῦ θεοῦ is supported by B D W *pc* (latt), υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ by ⱼ A λ φ *pm* (latt) *sy*^p sa bo, together constituting the vast majority of manuscripts. The words are missing from κ Θ 28 255 1555* *sy*^{al} geo¹ arm^{pt} Iren^{pt} Or. N. B. Stonehouse well remarks: "if these words are a gloss, they represent the action of a scribe who enjoyed a measure of real insight into the distinctiveness of Mark's portrayal of Christ" (*op. cit.*, p. 12). In six other instances in Mark Jesus is designated Son of God. There is good presumptive reason for judging that "Son of God" in Ch. 1:1 is an integral part of the text since Mark's superscription affords an indication of the general plan of his work: Peter's acknowledgment of the messiahship of Jesus in Ch. 8:29 has its Gentile counterpart in Ch. 15:39, where the centurion confesses that Jesus is the Son of God. Moreover, since the text of Codex Sinaiticus may be based upon that of papyri which Origen took with him from Alexandria to Palestine, the two chief witnesses for the omission (κ and Origen) are, perhaps, reduced to one. It is better, accordingly, to suppose that "Son of God" was omitted unintentionally in manuscript transmission.

⁸ The reading of the AV, "as it is written in the prophets," supported by ⱼ A W φ *pm*, represents an alteration of the earlier reading (ⱼ D *pc*) in recognition that only Ch. 1:3 is a citation from Isaiah.

⁹ RSV "John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness."

¹⁰ RSV "for the forgiveness of sins"; NEB "a baptism in token of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins."

mightier than I, the latchet of whose shoes¹¹ I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.

- 8 I baptized you in water; but he shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit.

1 The opening words of Mark's Gospel form a superscription which indicates the character of that which follows in Ch. 1:1-13.¹² They emphasize that the good news concerning Jesus the Christ was inseparably bound up with the preparation provided by John the Baptist, whose ministry served to summon Jesus to the wilderness. Mark's intention is grasped by reading verses 1-4 as a single sentence: the good news concerns Jesus the Christ, but it begins with the wilderness prophet John. The word "beginning" has biblical overtones which lend an awesome ring to the opening phrase, and serves to recall that it is God who initiates redemption on behalf of men.¹³ What Mark celebrates is not merely the prophetic activity of John the Baptist but the redemptive activity of God in providing salvation for men. The prophetic testimony cited in Ch. 1:2-3 finds its fulfilment both in the ministry of John and in the coming of Jesus into the wilderness. The emphasis thus falls upon the unity of God's action in its historical unfolding; the whole complex of events from the appearance of John to the beginning of Jesus' ministry is a single movement, the beginning of the gospel.

The term "gospel" or "evangel" was not a word first coined among the Christians. On the contrary, the concept was significant both in pagan and Jewish culture.¹⁴ Among the Romans it meant "joyful tidings" and was associated with the cult of the emperor, whose birthday, attainment to majority and accession to power were celebrated as festival occasions for the whole world. The reports of such festivals were called "evangels" in the inscriptions and papyri of the Imperial

¹¹ RSV "the thong of whose sandals."

¹² Cf. N. B. Stonehouse, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-10. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*² (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 34 f. surveys ten different interpretations of verse 1, which indicates the complexity of the question, but lends his support to the position adopted here.

¹³ Cf. E. Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus*¹⁶ (Göttingen, 1963), p. 10 who recalls not only Gen. 1:1 and John 1:1 but Hos. 1:2 LXX, ἀρχὴ λόγου κυρίου πρὸς Ὠσηε; Prov. 1:1; Eccl. 1:1; Cant. 1:1.

¹⁴ On the concept "gospel" see J. Schniewind, *Euangelion. Ursprung und erste Gestalt des Begriffs Evangelium* (Gütersloh, 1927-31); G. Friedrich, *TWNT II* (Eng. Tr. 1964), pp. 707-737; R. Asting, *Die Verkündigung des Wortes im Urchristentum* (Stuttgart, 1939), pp. 300-457.