

## 'The Beginning of the Gospel' in the First Century

**Peter Oakes**

*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, son of God: as it is written in Isaiah the Prophet, 'Behold I send my messenger...' (Mark 1.1).*

What do you think about the colon that I have put in after 'son of God'? Do you think it would be better as a full stop? Or a paragraph break? Or maybe just a comma, so Mark would be saying that this is 'the beginning of the Gospel...as it is written in Isaiah...'? We don't have early Greek manuscripts of Mark with punctuation marks that would help us decide this. But it makes a bit of a difference: for example in what one might take the word 'beginning' to refer to.

Just asking the question about the punctuation also makes us realise how closely Mark is linking the start of his account with Isaiah. This is of particular significance if we are thinking about what Mark might be meaning by use of the word 'gospel' in verse one. Mark goes on to quote from the Old Testament:

<sup>2</sup>*Behold, I send my messenger before you,  
who will prepare your way.*

<sup>3</sup>*A voice crying out in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way of the Lord!  
Make his paths straight!'*

The most obviously Isaianic part of this is verse three. This is an almost verbatim quote of Isaiah 40.3 in the Septuagint Greek translation of the second century B.C. (The only change is that 'his paths' in the last line replaces 'the paths of our God' – a change which may say something interesting about the way in which Mark is presenting Jesus.) The word 'gospel' does not appear in this verse in Isaiah, but it does effectively crop up twice a few verses later, in Isaiah 40.9:

*Go up on a high mountain, Zion, announcer of gospel!  
Lift your voice strongly, Jerusalem, announcer of gospel!  
Lift it up! Do not fear!  
Say to the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God!'*

Of course, I have done something unusual in using the word 'gospel' in my translation, but the term in Isaiah is the same as is used in the NT. To be precise, the passage uses the verb *euangelizomai*, which means, 'I announce good news', 'I announce gospel'. The related noun, meaning 'good news' or 'gospel', is *euangelion*.

*Euangelion* is the kind of message that a herald might bring. First- or early second-century examples outside the NT tend to be announcements of politically significant events such as victories in battle. For example, Josephus uses the word to refer to the news brought to Agrippa that Tiberius was dead (*Antiquities* 18.229). The 'good news' in question might not always be good in a moral sense. Appian uses the word to describe the message sent to Mark Antony telling him that Cicero had had his head cut off (*Civil Wars* 4.4). The 'good news' might not be true. Appian records a tribune running through the town of Picenum proclaiming the false good news of the defection of two legions from Octavian to the republican side (*Civil Wars* 3.13). Even in the NT, *euangelizomai* can be used of announcing good news other than 'the gospel'. Paul uses the word to write of Timothy bringing him the good news of the Thessalonians continuing in the faith (1 Thess. 3.6).

Isaiah casts Jerusalem as the herald of the good news that God is arriving to act on behalf of his people. This is astonishing, given that Jerusalem was at that time in ruins, with its people in exile in Babylon (see Isaiah 40.1-2; 43.14-21; 44.24-28; 47.1-48.22). The voice crying out in the wilderness is related to this announcement of good news. The voice is commanding that the desert be turned into a clear highway so that God can arrive and then the exiles in Babylon can walk freely back to Israel to rebuild it (see Isaiah 42.14-17; 49.8-12).

But what has this to do with Mark's Gospel, or with John the Baptist or Jesus, who are about to appear on the scene? Oddly enough, a clue lies in the fact that verse two is not actually quoting Isaiah. The quote seems to be a combination of Malachi 3.1 ('Behold, I send out my messenger and he will prepare the way before me') and Exodus 23.20 ('And behold, I send my messenger before you, to guard you on the way'). An important point here is that the Hebrew name Malachi actually means 'my messenger'. Malachi's whole identity seems to be evoking the idea of God sending his messenger – his angel (the same word as messenger in both Hebrew and Greek) – in front of the Israelites as they travelled through the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. Malachi re-uses the exodus tradition to bring God's word to the people of his own day.

Isaiah does the same. He calls out to God:

*Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago!  
Was it not you who cut Rahab [i.e., Egypt] in pieces, who pierced the dragon?  
Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep;  
who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?  
So the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing  
(Isaiah 51: 9b-11a NRSV).*

Isaiah foretells a return from Babylon that will be like a new exodus. Like Malachi, he evokes incidents that we know of from the book of Exodus. Mark picks up this Isaianic new exodus idea and sees its ultimate fulfilment in the events he is about to narrate. In Jesus, the ultimate redemption of God's people comes about. The gospel at the beginning of Mark is the announcement that God is now acting, through Jesus, to redeem his people.

There is a possible complication – again, you will need to weigh up for yourself whether it is significant or not. Among the political uses of *euangelion* were some connected with the Roman Emperor. A prominent public inscription from the city of Priene, dating from just before Christ's birth, makes the Emperor the source of all the 'good news' of the present age:

*providence...created... the most perfect good for our lives...filling him [Augustus] with virtue for the benefit of mankind, sending us and those after us a saviour who put an end to war and established all things...and whereas the birthday of the god marked for the world the beginning of good tidings (*euangelia*) through his coming... (trans. N. Lewis and M. Reinhold, *Roman Civilization II*, Harper &Row, 1955, p.64).*

Also, a key part of Augustus' presentation of himself was that he was 'son of the divine one', i.e., of Julius Caesar. For example, Augustus used this title on coins as part of his propaganda campaign to show his superiority over Mark Antony. A climactic point of Mark's Gospel is the testimony of a Roman centurion (of all people!) that Jesus, who had just died on the cross, was 'son of a god' (Mark 15.39). Does

Mark's 'good news of Jesus Christ, son of God' in some sense challenge the 'good news' of the Emperor? This is, of course, part of a much bigger question, which I reflected on in my article in December last year ('The New Testament, the Roman Empire and Shopping'). It is currently hotly debated among NT scholars and they take sharply differing positions.

Whatever we think about that question, what we can say is that, in the first century, *euangelion* was generally a word used to denote the 'good news' of a major event that had recently taken place or was now taking place. For Mark, that good news was the news of God's decisive, redeeming intervention in the world that had taken place in the arrival of Jesus. For Mark, it was an event that echoed, and brought to fulfilment, the long string of tradition in the Old Testament that saw God acting again and again, to redeem his people, in a way that was reminiscent of the exodus. To proclaim the gospel, in the first-century sense of the word, means to proclaim this world-changing event that came about in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

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