

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 1:1-8

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Mark frames this story of John the Baptist as the beginning of this larger story, which he calls the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This opening has high energy. It is a proclamation of a new possibility for the world that has never been imagined before. The opening sentence is of great importance for storytelling. The story that is to follow is described as the gospel. That is, the gospel was and is a story. It was not a theology, a creed or a set of beliefs. There are, to be sure, profound “theological” implications in, for example, the titles used for Jesus. But the titles of Jesus are an introduction to a long story that was told by various storytellers who then were empowered by the composition of this gospel to tell the Gospel.

The associations of Christ (*messiah* in Hebrew) are the anointed ones of Israel. The most prominent messiahs in Israel’s history were Saul and David, both of whom were anointed by Samuel. They are both called *Xristos* in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures (I Sam. 12.3,5; 16.6; 24.7, 11; 26.16, 23; II Sam. 19.21; 22.51; 23.1,3)). This title was used for one who was anointed for the leadership of the armies of Israel. The hope for a Messiah (Christ) in the first century, almost a thousand years after Saul and David, was that one would come who was anointed and empowered by God to establish the government of Israel over against the gentiles who had ruled over Judea for nearly six hundred years. Thus, the hope for an anointed one who would reestablish the kingdom of David has a long history prior to Mark’s announcement. The other title Mark uses for Jesus is Son of God. There was a significant competition in the first century about who was legitimately called the Son of God because the emperors of Rome called themselves sons of god. Augustus was addressed as a son of God; so also was Nero. Diocletian (emperor from 81-96 CE), the second son of Vespasian and the successor of Titus, required people to address him as “my lord and my god.” The question of who was the true son of God was then a cultural question as well as a political and religious question. Jesus’ story is introduced by Mark as the story of the true Son of God, **not** the emperor.

Jesus’ kingdom and its character is foreshadowed by the coming of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was a prophet who announced the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God and offered baptism as a total cleansing from sin as preparation for its arrival. John the Baptist is the culmination of the prophetic tradition and appropriately so because after John the Baptist there

were no more prophets in Israel. John is portrayed in Mark's story as one who is like Elijah. His uniform, a coat of camel's hair, and his diet, locusts and wild honey, are identical to the clothing and diet of Elijah. One of the prophecies about the coming of the messiah was that Elijah would come back and lead the way for the Messiah. Thus when John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness and the telling of this story is a fulfillment of that prophecy. Baptism, John's sacrament, was an eschatological sacrament, a once and for all cleansing from sin, as a preparation for participation in the kingdom of God. The metaphor of this baptism ritual is preparation for participation in the sacrifices in the temple. In order to enter the temple and participate fully in the temple rituals, you had to be clean, that is, ritually pure. People went through elaborate ceremonies of preparation for entering the temple. Baptism is John's preparation for entry into and participation in God's kingdom and God's temple. It's how you get in. The message of John the Baptist and the spirit of this story is that John is a supporter and precursor of Jesus.

The dynamic of the story is the dynamic of major introductions. In contemporary television Ed McMahan used to introduce Johnny Carson every night: "Here's Johnny!" In this story John the Baptist is saying "Here's Jesus!" John introduces Jesus as a prophet, as one who comes after him. Jesus stands in the tradition of Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The books of the prophets provide the most important background for the stories of the gospel of Mark. There is a lot to it, so when you tell it, tell it with gravitas. Convey with your voice and attitude that this is a big deal. This is the one who will save the world from belief in violence as the way to establish peace in the world.