

Why Does the Gospel of Mark Begin as It Does?

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Abstract

Mark's Gospel does not follow the rules of Hellenistic "lives," which usually began by praising the ancestry and education of the main character. This is due to the fact that the data available to Mark were inappropriate for that purpose. Nonetheless, the beginning of Mark's Gospel has the same purpose as the beginnings of other contemporary biographies: to show the ascribed honor of his character. According to Mark, Jesus' honor does not come from his human family; it is due to his being God's Son. Through a ritual process, centered upon a liminal stage of revelation and testing, the evangelist shows Jesus' true identity as a holy man, capable of brokering God's patronage on his people.

In recent years, research on the beginning of Mark's Gospel has explored the possibilities offered by different models of literary analysis (Rhoads, Dewey and Michie; Boring; Mell; Naluparayil; Struthers Malbon; Dormeyer; Sankey). Similarly, the use of social science models has led us to a deeper knowledge of its context (McVann; Van Eyck; DeMaris). In the path already opened by these studies, the present work starts by asking a basic question: Why did Mark begin his Gospel as he did? To answer this question it will be necessary to place the beginning of the Gospel within the framework of ancient rhetoric, within the context of the first-century Mediterranean culture, and within the narrower context of Jewish religion.

Mark 1:1–15 and the Beginning of the Hellenistic "Lives"

In the first verses of Mark, scholars recognize the presence of a couple of peculiar elements, absent from the rest of the Gospel. In these verses, indeed, we find that the relevance of John the Baptist is stressed and that events are told in a seemingly out-of-time atmosphere. Likewise, this passage contains a high concentration of strange phenomena: open skies, a voice from heaven, actions of the Spirit, Satan, and the angels—and a distinct symbolic character in geographical places: the desert, the Jordan (Marcus: 137–39). Yet, despite the general consensus on these observations, scholars disagree as to the length and nature of the "beginning" of the Gospel.

Regarding its length several hypotheses have been advanced; those with a wider acceptance place the end of this beginning either at Mark 1:13 or at Mark 1:15. The first theory, mainly based on narrative grounds, underlines the peculiar connotations of time and space, and the fact that Jesus appears in these verses as a passive character (Struthers Malbon: 306–10). The second, which will be adopted in this study, is grounded on the analysis of its literary structure, thus distinguishing a prologue (Mk 1:1–3) and a "diptych" where John (Mk 1:4–8) and Jesus (Mk 1:9–15) are introduced in a parallel way. The unity of this beginning is reinforced, from a literary viewpoint, by the use of the term *euaggelion* both at the beginning (Mk 1:1) and at the end (Mk 1:15) of the passage; as well as by the parallelisms found between the presentation of John and Jesus: *egeneto . . . baptizô . . . en tê eremo . . . keryssô* (Boring; Klauck:19–34).

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The second point of disagreement concerns the literary nature of the beginning. It has frequently received the title of "Gospel prologue," although the designation usually has no technical sense. Only D. Dormeyer (199–203) has suggested that it be used in its technical sense. According to him, Mark's "prologue" is similar to that of other "ideal biographies" of Roman and Hellenistic literature, in which the main topics of the narrative were spelled out at the beginning by way of oracles and announcements. Prologues of this kind, in epic biographies, were patterned after Homer's *Odyssey* (Od 1:1–21). However, both the identification of the Gospels with this literary genre and the alleged similarity between the beginnings of those works and the beginning of Mark's Gospel are far from convincing (Burridge: 99–100). On the other hand, H.-J. Klauck has compared the beginning of Mark with the "proemium" or "exordium" of literary speeches, whose main goal was to appeal to the benevolence of the reader and to introduce the topics to be covered in the discourse. At the end, nonetheless, Klauck (34–35) decides not to go all the way with his own argument and returns to the traditional designation as a "prologue."

These two proposals either neglect or pay little attention to Hellenistic biographies. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that they take the Gospels to be a separate genre, and, on the other hand, to the fact that there are very few similarities between the beginning of Mark and the beginnings of those biographies. Nonetheless, both presuppositions must be reconsidered in light of the close relationship between the Gospels and the Hellenistic lives from the viewpoint of literary genre.

After a detailed comparison between the Gospels and some of these biographies—from earlier, contemporary and later times—R. A. Burridge has concluded that the gospels belong to this genre, comprising in ancient times a wide repertoire of narratives about the life of concrete characters. Burridge's study shows that the "life" was a literary genre somewhere between history and praise (Burridge: 61–69). Yet, for the sake of precision and to apply the names given by ancient rhetoricians, we must say that the "life" is a narrative (*diégesis*) which describes the character of a person, usually with a praising touch (*enkomion*). This definition accords with what Luke says of his Gospel and other similar writings, as he calls them *diégesis* (Lk 1:1).

In his analysis, Burridge begins with a theory on literary genre and mentions several parameters that enable him to compare those "lives" with the Gospels. Among them, two are especially relevant for our purpose: the existence of a title or an introductory formula, and the characteristic themes dealt with in the "lives"—especially those preceding the narrative of the character's actions and virtues:

namely, ancestry, birth and education.

Although Mark 1:1 may be taken as a kind of title, it is clear that the rest of Mark's beginning is not a preface or prologue like those found in some of these lives (Burridge: 193–95). In these prologues the author lays out the method used in composing the work, enhances the relevance of the character, and mentions the addressees (Luke 1:1–4; Philo, *VITA MOSIS* 1:1–4). And yet the most peculiar feature of the beginning of the Gospel of Mark is that nothing is said concerning Jesus' ancestry, birth, and education. This is a very significant fact, for the rest of his Gospel does contain numerous similarities both in form and content with the Hellenistic lives. The beginning of Mark differs markedly from the beginnings of the other synoptic Gospels (both Matthew and Luke do place an "infancy narrative," dealing with Jesus' ancestry and birth, at the beginning of their Gospels—see Burridge: 249).

This observation brings us back to our original question: Why did Mark begin his Gospel as he did, not following the pattern of the lives as he followed it in the rest of his Gospel? Before answering it, we will exemplify Burridge's statements by comparing the beginnings of some lives and trying to ascertain why their authors began theirs as they did.

As a sample we have gathered a brief but significant selection of six ancient biographies. All of them date back to a time between the first century BCE and the first century CE, although they were written by authors in various places and even in different languages: the life of Atticus by Cornelius Nepo, the biography of Agricola by Cornelius Tacitus, the autobiography of Flavius Josephus, the Life of Moses by Philo of Alexandria, the life of Demonax by Lucian of Samosata, and the biography of Cato the Younger by Plutarch. Let us briefly consider each of these in turn.

Cornelius Nepos, ATTICUS 1:1–4

Ancestry (1–2): He was born of the most ancient family in Rome. His father was a great administrator of his house, rich, and cultivated.

Birth: His birth is not mentioned.

Education (3–4): He was educated by his father and later on by other teachers. Cicero was his classmate.

Cornelius Tacitus, AGRICOLA 4–5

Ancestry (4a): Both his paternal and maternal ancestors were distinguished.

Birth: Nothing is said about it.

Education (4b–5): In his youth he devoted himself to

study, becoming especially interested in philosophy. Later on he received military training.

Flavius Josephus, VITA 1–12

Ancestry (1–7): He praises his family's noble origin, from a priestly family on his father's side, and from a king-ly family on his mother's side. He mentions his ancestors up to the fourth generation. He stresses the fact that he was born and lived in Jerusalem, the greatest Jewish city.

Birth: Nothing is said about it.

Education (8–12): He describes how he passed from group to group until he became a Pharisee.

Philo of Alexandria, VITA MOSIS, 1:5–31

Ancestry (5, 7–8): He draws material from Genesis about the migration to Egypt and synthesizes it. He adds his parents' noble origin and the fact that Moses was in the seventh generation since the Hebrews arrived in Egypt.

Birth: Nothing is said about it.

Education (9–31): He deals with this aspect at great length. The way he presents Moses' education agrees with the image he wants to offer: he was educated in Pharaoh's palace and knows the customs of his time.

Lucian of Samosata, DEMONAX 3–4

Ancestry (3a): Originally from Cyprus, his richness and his social level were outstanding. However, his dedication to philosophy was more important to him.

Birth: Nothing is said about it.

Education (4): He mentions both his teachers (Agatobulus, Epictetus) and the variety of his education (poetry, philosophy, gymnastics...)

Plutarch, CATO MINOR 1–4

Ancestry (1a): Distinguished ancestors.

Birth: Nothing is said about it.

Education (1b–4): His father had died. Educated in the house of his maternal uncle, a well-known man, Cato showed excellent qualities during his training.

* * *

After examining this short sample of "lives," we are struck by the fact that all of them lack a birth account. Actually, "lives" including this aspect are more of an exception (Burridge: 146, 178). Therefore, only the references to ancestry and education must be considered char-

acteristic elements in the beginning of the Hellenistic "lives." This first part comprises the narrative up to the moment when the character begins his adult public life.

To understand why the "lives" began this way, it is important to remember that "lives" were encomiastic narratives, a peculiar literary genre somewhere between the *diegesis* and the *enkomion*. Thanks to the information provided by ancient rhetoricians, the features of these two basic literary genres are quite well-known. Even the procedure followed to compose them is known to us, for both were part of the preparatory exercises—*progymnasmata*—which well-to-do young people learned during the second stage in their preparation for public life (Patillon & Bolognesi: xvi–xxiii).

Apparently agreeing with the ancient biographers, the rhetoricians of the time argue that the praise of a character must begin by telling of his ancestry and education. We can confirm this by briefly examining what three contemporary writings say concerning praise and narrative. These writings are the RHETORICA AD HERENIUM, an anonymous treatise on rhetoric from the first half of the first century BCE; the introduction to one of the lives written by Cornelius Nepo around 50 BCE; and Elius Theon's PROGYMNASMATA, composed toward the end of the first century CE.

AD HERENIUM 3, 10 (general) and 3, 13 (on descent and education)

"To the external circumstances belong such as can happen by chance, or by fortune, favourable or adverse: descent (*genus*), education (*educatio*), wealth, kinds of power, titles of fame, citizenship, friendships, and the like, and their contraries."

"External circumstances: Descent—in praise: the ancestors from whom he is sprung; if he is of illustrious descent, he has been their peer or superior; if of humble descent, he has had his support, not in the virtues of his ancestors, but in his own. Education—in praise: that he was well and honorably trained in worthy studies throughout his boyhood."

C. Nepos, DE VIR ILL. XV, Epam. 1, 4

"Therefore I shall speak first of his family (*genus*), then of the subjects which he studied (*disciplinae*) and his teachers, next of his character, his natural qualities, and anything else that is worthy of record. Finally, I will give an account of his exploits, which many writers consider more important than mental excellences."

Theo, *PROGYMNASMATA* 78, 26 (on the diegesis) and 110, 2-5 (on the enkomion)

“Inseparably connected with the ‘character’ are: race (*genos*), gender, training (*agogê*), disposition, age, fortune, motive, action, speech, death, what is after death”

“Among the external qualities, the first good quality is good breeding (*eugeneia*), and that in two senses: the good breeding of city, race, and good government, and the good breeding of parents and other relatives; then, education (*paideia*), friendship, reputation, public office, wealth, the blessing of children, an easy death”

	Ad Herenium	C. Nepos	Theon (diegesis)	Theon (encomion)
Ancestry	Genus	Genus	Genos	Eugenia a) Polis, Ethnos, Politeia b) Geneis, Oi alloi oikeioi
Education	Educatio	Disciplinae	Agoge	Paideia

This brief survey, summarized in the accompanying table, confirms that biographies (“lives”) were supposed to begin by telling the subject’s ancestry and education. This is exactly what Matthew and Luke do at the beginning of their Gospels (Neyrey: 90–105). Despite the brevity of these references, their agreement indicates that this pattern was well accepted and soon became widespread. It was, therefore, likely to be known by Mark. Now, if Mark knew the customary way to begin a biography, the question of why he did not follow it becomes all the more intriguing. Was it perhaps due to a lack of data? It seems not. Mark knew Jesus came from a Galilean town called Nazareth (Mark 1:9) and considered him a Galilean (Mark 14:70). He was familiar with his mother’s name as well as his brothers’ and sisters’, although he did not know his father’s name (Mark 6:3). He might know something about his education, since we are told that Jesus was a *tektôn*, that is, a craftsman who worked with wood, stone and similar materials (Meier: 278–85) and in that culture fathers were supposed to teach their trade to their children (MacMullen: 97–98).

With all this information, Mark could have begun his work dealing with Jesus’ ancestry and education, as rhetoricians taught. Yet, he did not do so, and we may suppose why by closely analyzing the information he was acquainted with. Mark knew that Jesus’ origins were a source of puzzlement and even criticism among his contemporaries. Nazareth was an insignificant town from which nothing good could come (Jn 1:46), and Jewish people had a negative view of Galileans (Jn 7:52). Had Mark introduced Jesus as a townsman of Galilee, nobody would have

guessed his honor or status (Neyrey: 56–57). On the other hand, it is surprising that Mark calls Jesus “the son of Mary” (Mk 6:3) and not “the son of Joseph,” as the other two Synoptic Gospels do (Matt 1:16; Lk 4:22). The mention of Mary’s name has led many to think that the name of Jesus’ father was unknown to Mark. Some authors have suggested that by referring only to his mother, Mark could harbor some doubts concerning Jesus’

legitimacy; however, this is not necessarily so (Ilan: 23–45). Lastly, we know that the trade of a non-specialized craftsman was unsuitable for a noble person. Cicero, who can be taken as a representative of the views of most learned people at his time, mentions in his treatise *DE OFFICIIS* (1, 150) a long list of crafts, and places among the most dishonorable ones those in which people work for others with their own hands: “*illiberales autem et sordidi quaestus mercenariorum omnium, quorum operae, non quorum artes emuntur*”). This is the same mentality evident in some pejorative comments in the Gospels: “Is this not the son of the carpenter?” (Matt 13:55).

The humble origin of Jesus, born from a marginal family in an unknown village, was the great obstacle Mark found in writing his “life” of Jesus, for this kind of narrative aims at praising its main character, and noble origins and fine education were of great significance in this praise. Most characters in the contemporary “lives” were distinguished people, belonging to noble families, who could boast of a reputable pedigree regarding their ancestry and education. But Mark could do nothing similar using the available data he had concerning Jesus’ origin.

In sum, the eulogizing goal of the lives, especially of their beginnings, is the reason why Mark did not follow the established pattern of the genre at the beginning of his “life” of Jesus. Nonetheless, this is only a partial answer to our question. We have ascertained why the beginning of Mark’s Gospel does not fit the pattern of the “lives.” Now we must find out why he chose to begin it as he did.

R. Burrige (149–52) has identified seven possible goals in ancient “lives:” encomiastic, exemplary, informative, entertaining, preserving memory, didactic, and apologetic–polemic. Some of these goals are explicit in the above mentioned “lives”: to praise the character (Tacitus, *AGRICOLA* 4; Philo, *VITA MOSIS* 1, 3); to defend him from accusations (Josephus, *VITA* 11, 6); to present him as a model (Lucian, *DEMONAX* 2); to preserve his memory (Lucian, *DEMONAX* 2; Philo, *VITA MOSIS* 1, 3); and to give

some information (Philo, VITA MOSIS 1, 1). Mark is likely to have pursued some of these goals in writing the beginning of his Gospel; but the most important ones were, no doubt, the first two.

Pokorn" (117–20) has observed that the purpose of the temptation narratives is to defend the authority of Jesus. According to him, these accounts were designed to respond to two accusations: expelling demons by Beelzebul's power (Mk 3:28–30), and coming from a low-status family (Mk 6:2–3). The former intention is clearer in the temptation account, while the latter is more obvious in the baptism narrative. However, this defense of Jesus is actually an affirmation of his honor. The introduction of Jesus at the beginning of the "life" written by Mark combines these two purposes, praise and apology, and both work toward the same goal: to show that Jesus was an honorable person.

Mark carried out this task in the frame of a concrete culture. He did not praise Jesus' descent and education, but pointed to his virtues, according to the pattern of the rhetorical praising discourse in those cases in which the person was of humble descent (AD HERENIUM 13, 3: "if of humble descent, he has had his support, not in the virtues of his ancestors, but in his own). To understand adequately how Mark accomplished this and the connotations of his presentation of Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel, we must read these verses in light of the social values shared by him and his readers. We will do this by presenting three reading scenarios, which will help us find the answer to our original question.

Revelation and Defense of Jesus' Honor

Honor was, and still is, the core value in Mediterranean culture. This is something sufficiently verified by anthropological studies (Peristiany; Gilmore), which have contributed in recent years to a better understanding of the Second Testament (Malina 1995: 45–83; Malina & Neyrey 1991: 25–65). On the other hand, B. J. Malina and J. J. Neyrey have shown how rhetorical works on praise are a native source of information about the importance and value given to honor in Greco-Roman culture (1996: 18–63). Neyrey (1998: 83–88), in a more explicit way, has related the *enkomiaston* to modern anthropological studies about honor in the Mediterranean world, thus illustrating the strong agreement between ancient rhetoricians and today's anthropologists. The primary purpose of eulogies was, precisely, to show and praise a person's honor; in that sense, Hellenistic "lives" share the same goal. Therefore, an adequate understanding of the concept of honor in Mediterranean culture may throw light on the way Mark has car-

ried out his task of showing and defending Jesus' honor.

Honor may be defined as an individual's awareness of his own worth, as well as its public claim and the recognition of this claim by others. Of these three elements (awareness, claim, and recognition), the third is the most important, since, in the end, it is public recognition that determines a person's honor. Others say who is honorable and up to what point (Bordieu: 211).

One of the most distinctive features of the first-century Mediterranean world is its constant search for honor, recognition, and praise. Some philosophers even considered *philotimia* (love/desire/search for honor) as the quality distinguishing human beings from animals:

For indeed it seems to me, Hiero, that in this man differs from other animals—I mean, in this craving for honour [*philotimia*]. In meat and drink and sleep and sex all creatures alike seem to take pleasure; but love of honour is rooted neither in the brute beasts nor in every human being. But they in whom is implanted a passion for honour (*timē*) and praise (*epainos*), these are they who differ most from the beasts of the field, these are accounted men (*andres*) and not mere human beings (*anthropoi*). [Xenophon, HIERO 7, 3]

Honor was the most precious good, and the quest for it greatly conditioned all social interactions. Like all goods, however, whether material or immaterial, honor was limited. Therefore, if an individual or a family increased their honor, they did so at the expense of someone else's honor. Consequently, the search for public recognition and praise took place in a highly competitive atmosphere, a fact that helps explain the agonistic nature of traditional Mediterranean cultures.

In Jesus' world there were two ways to obtain honor: to receive it from those who could bestow it or to earn it by one's own actions. Honor received from others is ascribed honor, while acquired honor is earned by one's own efforts. The former was by far the more important. As a rule it came by virtue of the family one was born into, for family was the store of shared honor (Guijarro 1998: 117–25). It could, nonetheless, be bestowed by those invested with authority. On the other hand, acquired honor was earned by an individual's own actions, either by competition among equals or as a response to benefits received (Malina & Neyrey 1996: 27–29; Malina & Neyrey 1991: 27–32).

The Gospel writers often refer to Jesus' honor. Most of his actions, especially his teaching and miracles, are understood as acts of beneficence by the people, who in turn respond by giving him praise and recognition (people are astounded; his fame spreads out, etc.). We can glimpse

Jesus' increasing honor by looking at the response of the Pharisees and other religious or political groups (Saducees, Herodians), who perceive Jesus' increasing honor as a threat to their own honor, and therefore call his actions into question. The controversies, so prevalent in the Gospels, are actually honor contests in which Jesus is victorious. But Jesus' actions and underlying claims would not have been possible if he did not previously enjoy some kind of ascribed honor. In Mark's view, this honor does not come from Jesus' natural family; it derives from his intimate relationship to God. Therefore, the main goal of the beginning of his account is to reveal the origin of Jesus' ascribed honor.

Already in Mark's opening statement (1:1–3) there are several elements pointing to Jesus' honor. In Mark 1:1, leaving aside the expression *huios theou*, which might be a later addition (Head: 621–29), Jesus is given the title Messiah; that is, he is introduced as (God's) Anointed. It is also affirmed that the beginning of his ministry agreed with what Isaiah foretold, an announcement referring to God himself in the words of the prophet: "Prepare the way of the Lord." With sober but accurate strokes, Mark depicts Jesus as God's Anointed, who fulfills what God promised through the prophets. Among the Jews, of course, God and the Scriptures had the highest authority, and they both bestow on Jesus a high degree of ascribed honor.

John the Baptist's introduction (Mk 1:4–8) is also meant to stress Jesus' honor. Basically everything said about John is intended to highlight his status as a true prophet, and, therefore, his honor. His actions take place in the desert, by the Jordan. Both places are related to Exodus events (Struthers Malbon: 72–75). John's ministry in this area supports his claim of being sent by God to prepare his way, as Mark's reference to Isaiah (1:2–3) affirms. Both his garments and his diet point in the same direction, thus revealing him to be a prophet. This honor is confirmed by the response of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Judea, who come to him in great numbers to receive his baptism of repentance. John's introduction as a prophet with honor is meant to present Jesus as the "Stronger One," who will baptize, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit (Marcus: 153–58). John cannot confer any honor upon Jesus, but he can acknowledge and proclaim the greatness of the honor God will bestow on him.

Jesus' presentation (Mk 1:9–15) is, from a literary point of view, parallel to John's. Regarding its content, however, this presentation is the confirmation of all that has been previously said. The key moment is the vision after his baptism, where Jesus' ascribed honor is finally revealed. Mark is able to say that Jesus is (God's)

Anointed, the Lord whose way is prepared by John the Baptist, and the Stronger One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit has come down upon him and God himself has declared him his Son. In Mark's view, it is the baptism that reveals Jesus' true identity. The main character of his work is not just a man named Jesus, who comes from Nazareth in Galilee (Mk 1:9), but rather God's Son who is filled with his Spirit (Mk 1:10–11). In Jewish society, God was the supreme source of all things, and so, the source of all honor. Therefore, the words pronounced by the heavenly voice confer upon Jesus the highest conceivable ascribed honor. These words are the culmination of all previous statements, and with them the revelation of Jesus' identity reaches its climax.

This way of presenting Jesus is called for by the cultural values of the society where the author of the Gospel and his audience lived. In a society based on honor, only those born in an honorable family are eligible to become public figures. If an individual born in a lowly family claims this kind of leadership, his authority and his actions are easily ascribed to an evil spirit, unless an extraordinary event empowers him to do so. Jesus, born in a low-status family of artisans, has no legitimacy as a public figure. If he is God's Son, however, his legitimacy is unquestionable (Malina & Rohrbaugh: 177).

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In the next two scenes, the temptation narrative (Mk 1:12–13) and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee (Mk 1:14–15), there is nothing new about Jesus' honor. The scenes are intended to prove the soundness and truth of what has been previously said. That is precisely the function of the temptation account, where Jesus is tested in the wilderness for forty days—a period recalling the experience of Israel during forty years. In contrast to Israel, Jesus is now victorious, thus confirming his status as God's Son. That this is the purpose of the temptation narrative is even more evident in the Q version of this passage, used both by Matthew and Luke. There, the temptations are introduced by a conditional statement, "If you are God's Son . . ." indicating as it were a sonship test—an aspect already implicitly present in Mark's story (Rohrbaugh: 188–93). Similarly, at the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, Jesus is introduced as the herald of the "good news of God" announcing the coming of the "reign of God" and asking for repentance and faith on the part of those who listen to him (Mk

1:14–15). Only a person endowed by God himself with such a power could do these things.

This reading of Mark 1:1–15 as a narrative revealing Jesus' ascribed honor shows that the climax of the whole passage is the second part of the above mentioned diptych, made up of three scenes: baptism (Mk 1:9–11), testing (Mk 1:12–13), and inaugural mission (Mk 1:14–15). Now, these three episodes are interrelated and describe a process known by anthropologists as a "status transformation ritual." In these scenes Mark depicts Jesus' transformation and shows how a Galilean villager has become the herald of God's kingship. We can therefore use the model of status transformation rituals to better understand Mark's presentation of Jesus at the beginning of his Gospel.

Status Transformation Ritual

Status transformation rituals are meant to stage and to confirm in a socially significant way the passing of a person from one status to another. Like all rituals, they have to do with crossing those boundaries used by society to classify individuals, things, time, and space. All cultures possess this kind of social map, which shapes their purity system. In Jesus' world the main referent in the map was God's holiness, determining what was pure and impure. This holiness was symbolized in the Temple and in Jerusalem. The city and its Temple, where God dwelled, were the basis and the measure to classify people and objects (Neyrey 1996: 91–93). In this social map, an artisan born of a family living in an unknown Galilean village was far from what was expected for God's Anointed One. Mark's presentation of Jesus is therefore intended to show how Jesus, the Galilean artisan, has become the Son of God. Mark does so by showing the ritual process by which his status is transformed.

M. MacVann and E. van Eyck have used V. Turner's typology to better grasp the ritual process described by Mark in his presentation of Jesus. According to V. Turner, the ritual process has three steps: separation, liminality, and aggregation. Separation involves being detached from the normal course of life by being distanced from those people with whom a person lives and going to a place and time different from the normal ones. Liminality is the threshold state of those being initiated, who have been separated from the normal course of life. In this intermediate state the initiand is dispossessed of his former status and somehow must die to achieve his new status. During this ambiguous period, the common attributes of initiands are stressed, originating a peculiar social bond that Turner calls *communitas*. Finally, aggregation involves the incorporation of the initiand to society with the new status he has

achieved through the ritual process. In this ritual process, along with the initiands, there are an elder, who plays the role of mystagogue, and a number of ritual symbols, which play an important role at different points in the process (Turner 1969:94–130; McVann 1991:335–341).

In Mark 1:9–15 we find all the elements of the ritual process. Jesus plays the role of initiand; the mystagogues are John the Baptist and, above all, God's Spirit; and there are ritual symbols: baptism, the Jordan River, the voice from heaven, and the desert. There are two basic movements in the narrative, corresponding to the beginning and the end of the process of initiation. The first is related to the moment of separation: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan" (Mk 1:9). And the second refers to the moment of aggregation: "After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee preaching the good news of God's reign" (Mk 1:14). Between the two movements we find an intermediate period, when Jesus' status is transformed (vision, temptations). Let us closely consider the three moments of Jesus' status transformation process.

The first stage—separation—is very briefly depicted; yet it contains all the characteristic elements of this stage. Jesus moves from Galilee to Judea, from his village to a desert place by the Jordan shore, where John is baptizing. There is, therefore, a detachment from people (his family and fellow villagers). Likewise, we move to a different place with great symbolism (the desert, the Jordan) and a time very different from the normal course of life. On the other hand, the reference to Jesus' origin is an allusion to his status. Jesus goes to Judea to undergo John's baptism, a status transformation ritual (from sinner to pure) based on the confession of sins and a rite of immersion (Mk 1:4–5). In this first stage John acts as the elder, and the baptism is the ritual symbol. In Mark's view, however, the rite of baptism is just the beginning of the upcoming liminal period.

Mark describes in greater detail the intermediate stage, characterized by liminality and *communitas*. It begins with the moment of the vision and continues with the extended stay in the wilderness (Mk 1:10–13). Both the space and the time of these events are highly symbolized: Jesus comes out of the Jordan, the heavens are opened, he is led by the Spirit to the desert, and he stays there for forty days. The account recalls the forty years spent by the people of Israel in the desert and Elijah's stay in Mount Horeb for forty days (Trevijano: 176–78). The desert is indeed one of the most common places where status transformation rituals take place (Turner: 95). It is a space and a time of a religious, not a profane, character, where Jesus loses his previous status and acquires a new one. Therefore, by means of this process Mark has revealed Jesus' true identi-

ty, the source of his ascribed honor, and has established him as the herald of God's reign.

The liminality of this stage may be perceived in the ambiguity of Jesus' status and in the new relationships he establishes. Although the voice from heaven declares he is God's Son, his identity will not be totally clear until his testing period ends; therefore, ambiguity is a mark of this entire period. As in other ritual processes, along with this ambiguity, there is a *communitas*, namely, a new set of relationships based on fundamental common characteristics. Whereas during this period Jesus has no relationships with other human beings, he interacts with beings belonging to another realm of existence. The Spirit comes upon him and becomes his guide (elder), for he is the one who leads Jesus into the desert. The voice that comes from heaven declaring Jesus as God's Son also belongs to this supernatural realm, where both Satan and the angels—with whom Jesus relates in the wilderness—live. Usually, the *communitas* is intended to create new relationships among the initiands, thus cancelling all differences among them. In Mark's narrative, however, Jesus establishes these relationships with beings belonging to a kind of *mesocosmos*, showing that this is Jesus' true place, for he is not a human being like others. This is what is meant by the statement, "You are my beloved child," which reveals Jesus' true identity.

Jesus' relation to the Spirit and his confrontation with Satan in this early stage of the Gospel prefigure his later confrontations with evil spirits. Mark gives his readers a key to understand the meaning of the exorcisms, which Jesus himself will explain in the controversy begun by the Pharisees who had come from Jerusalem (Mk 3:22–30). When confronting demons, Jesus acts with the power of God's Spirit, and his exorcisms are therefore a sign of a deeper confrontation (Guijarro 1999: 125–27). As we have previously seen, the account of Jesus' baptism and temptations may have been influenced by the accusations raised against him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul. In presenting Jesus as he does, Mark would be answering these accusations and vindicating Jesus' honor as God's Son, endowed with power over the spirits.

The ritual process ends with Jesus' aggregation, that is, with his return with a new status to the society he left (Mark 1:14–15). The one who had left Nazareth to undergo a baptism of repentance now comes back to Galilee as the herald of God's reign. There is a movement from a sacred space and time to a secular space and time, from the wilderness and the Jordan to Galilee, and from a mythical period of time to the precise moment of John's arrest. After the ritual process, Jesus' newly acquired status enables him to preach with authority the imminent arrival of God's reign and to ask for faith and repentance. This new

authority of Jesus, flowing from his ascribed honor as God's Son, will appear soon in his actions. Mark summarizes these actions in the next episodes of his narrative: the call to the first disciples (Mk 1:16–20), the day at Capernaum (Mk 1:21–39), his activity in all Galilee (Mk 1:40–45), and his controversies (Mk 2:1–3:6). Jesus' ascribed honor is thus shown in his acts of beneficence, leading the people to awe, and grows in his confrontations with those who question him.

This ritual process responds to Mark's two intended goals at the beginning of his narrative: to reveal the origin of Jesus' ascribed honor and to defend him against the accusations of being an impostor (exorcisms) and coming from a lowly origin (a family of artisans in Nazareth). Jesus' ascribed honor—which has been already foretold in the preceding verses and will be made known in his later activity—is revealed and tested in the narrative of his baptism and temptations. Now, Jesus' status transformation ritual has a distinctive aspect, for Mark wants to present Jesus as a holy man (*hasid*). The ascribed honor Mark claims for Jesus is the one typical of holy men. Therefore, Mark's way of presenting Jesus' process of achieving the status of a holy man is similar to the rituals of initiation of holy men in other cultures. The model of these rituals will help us as we determine more precisely why Mark began his Gospel as he did.

Jesus' Initiation as a Holy Man

The figure of the holy man is common to many preindustrial societies. This figure has its own distinct features in each culture, due to different social patterns; yet it is possible to identify a number of common elements that allow us to characterize this figure from a social viewpoint. Anthropologists have studied especially the figure of the shaman as the prototype of a holy man. A shaman is defined by his ability to reach and control the spiritual or divine realm in favor of the community he belongs to.

A few years ago, M. Borg suggested (43) that "the initiation sequence in the spiritual world (baptism), followed by the temptation or testing in the desert has surprising similarities with the information we possess about charismatic figures in different cultures." In his corresponding footnote, Borg points out several works dealing with shamanism (53, n 17). His suggestion has been recently assumed in an explicit way by P. Craffert and J. J. Pilch. Taking into account the various ways a shaman is presented in different cultures, Craffert uses the expression "shamanic complex" to refer to the general typology of this social figure. According to him, this typology "is made up of a configuration and some features (e.g., experience of altered states of consciousness) and some social functions

(such as healing, mediation, prophecy, exorcism and possession of spirits) flowing from such experiences" (324). Pilch considers of the greatest importance the fact that the shaman is able to enter into an altered state of consciousness (106).

The moment of his call and initiation is of great significance in a holy man's life. Given the social relevance of this character, the process by which a person reaches the condition of holy man is highly ritualized and is performed by means of a status transformation ritual. Now, this status transformation ritual shows remarkable similarities with what we find at the beginning of Mark's Gospel. Therefore, by comparing Mark 1:1–15 with the holy man's call and initiation we may throw further light upon our inquiry.

Pilch (107) identifies six distinct features in the call of a shaman: (1) contact with the spirit (through possession or adoption); (2) identification of the possessing or adopting spirit; (3) acquisition of the necessary ritual skills; (4) guidance by the spirit and a real life teacher; (5) growing acquaintance with the possessing or adopting spirit; and (6) all this within the frame of ongoing experiences of altered states of consciousness. These features appear mainly in the baptism narrative, which may be taken as the moment of Jesus' call. The vision after his baptism and his temptation in the desert after a long period of fasting are typical forms of altered states of consciousness. This is the appropriate environment for the initiation of a holy man (Craffert: 334). Moreover, Jesus' testing in the desert is the confirmation of his successful initiation (Pilch: 108–09).

These elements, shared by different cultures in relation to the initiation of holy men, receive in Jesus' case culturally specific connotations. As we have seen, these connotations come from those symbols evoking the founding history of the people (the desert, the Jordan) and, above all, from the prophets, holy men par excellence in Israel's history. Even more precisely, Jesus' presentation as a holy man in the Gospel of Mark depends on the social and cultural conditions of first-century Palestine. It is within this framework that Jesus' new status may be finally grasped.

While the voice heard after his baptism defines Jesus in kinship terms (Son), all other references describe him in political terms. Both Messiah (Mk 1:1) and Lord (Mk 1:3) are clearly political designations. We must also see as a political reference the expression "the Stronger One" (Mk 1:7), used in Mark 3:27 to depict the situation of a ruler suffering the attack of a pretender to the throne (Oakman: 114–17). The beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee also has political connotations, since his preaching refers to the coming of a "kingdom," and should therefore be seen as political religion. As B. J. Malina has shown on several occasions, in Jesus' world there was no independent reli-

gious system—only domestic and political religion. Jesus' preaching clearly belongs to the latter category, for it is addressed to all Israel and announces God's coming as a king for his people (Malina 2001: 16–24).

The apparent contradiction between these two ways of understanding Jesus' relation to God vanishes when we realize that kinship expressions were commonplace in patronage relationships. In first-century Mediterranean society, as well as in other agrarian societies, patronage relationships were the basis of those social relations taking place outside the family, that is, in the political area. In this sense, they could be used by the evangelists as an analogy, easily understandable by their addressees.

Although patron–client relationships were the basis of the patronage system, these relationships were often indirect, maintained by means of a broker. They were characterized by the exchange of favors and benefits between people belonging to different social levels. Usually the patron offered his clients material help or some other kind of benefit in return for faithfulness, information, and above all, for the public recognition of his honor.

Jesus' relationship to his disciples and to the crowd, as described in the Gospels, shares many features with this type of relationship. Jesus grants them the benefits of his teaching and healing. In return, they give him their support and faith and publicly proclaim his honor (admiration, fame). However, Jesus cannot be seen as the patron from whom these benefits come, for God was the only patron in Jewish political religion. Jesus plays the role of broker between God/patron and his people/clients (Malina 1998: 11–18). This understanding of Jesus' relationship to God agrees with the expression declaring Jesus the Son of God, often translated as "in you I am well pleased" (Mk 1:11). The verb *eudokeō* used here often refers to the confidence of a patron, who grants his favor to a client or a broker (Neyrey 1998: 38). This statement about Jesus is related, therefore, to his condition as a divine intermediary, enabling him to announce and to bring about God's patronage by his actions (Malina 1988: 9–18; Van Eyck: 201–10; Malina 2001: 31–35).

Conclusion

The comparison between the beginning of Mark's Gospel and the beginning of the Hellenistic lives led us to ask why the lives begin by dealing with the origin and education of the main character. This question allowed us to see that Mark did not begin his Gospel talking about Jesus' origin and education because the available data were not suited to reveal his ascribed honor. Mark, nonetheless, did not abandon this goal, so important in Hellenistic lives; he

tried to reach it through another route.

Mark used several traditions related to the beginnings of Jesus' ministry to reveal the origin of his ascribed honor. This is the main goal of the prologue, containing an announcement attributed to Isaiah (Mk 1:1–3); and the presentation of John the Baptist, pointing toward the revelation of the Stronger One (Mk 1:4–8). It is present, above all, in the introduction of Jesus as the Son of God, endowed with the Spirit and made herald of God's reign (Mk 1:9–15). Jesus' honor derives, not from his human ancestry, but from his intimate relationship to God.

Mark's presentation of Jesus (Mk 1:9–15) follows the pattern of a status transformation ritual, and we may clearly distinguish the three typical moments of this kind of ritual: the separation from his birthplace and his usual social connections (departure from Nazareth); the period of initiation in the Jordan and the desert, with the help of John the Baptist and under the guidance of the Spirit; and the aggregation, namely, his return to Galilee as God's herald, announcing the imminent arrival of God's reign.

This status transformation ritual presents some characteristic elements of holy-man initiation processes in other cultures. According to them, the holy man receives the divine call and through various experiences of altered states of consciousness (the vision after baptism and the testing in the desert) is led to a familiarity with the divine world which enables him to act in favor of his community. Mark describes the initiation process by which Jesus becomes aware of his being "Son of God" and thus broker through whom God will act as a patron for his people.

Indirectly, then, Mark reaches the goal of the Hellenistic lives, showing that Jesus' true ancestry goes back to God, and that through this initiation process he has received an intense education under the guidance of the Spirit. Therefore, the beginning of Mark's Gospel cannot be seen as an obstacle to its being classified within the literary genre of the Hellenistic lives.

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