CHAPTER 5

Mark 1:1: “The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”—In Search of the Jewish Literary Backdrop to Mark 1:1–11: Between The Rule of the Community and Rabbinic Sources

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The programmatic opening of the Gospel of Mark (1:1–11) appears also in a slightly reworked and expanded form in Matthew (3:1–17) and Luke (3:2–22); whatever overall model for development of the Synoptic tradition is favored,\(^1\) in the case of this particular pericope priority of the Markan version may be plausibly assumed.\(^2\) The passage in question may be approached from different angles. It stands to reason that an earlier (oral?) tradition had been in existence—possibly relying on an account by eyewitnesses who would later join Jesus’ entourage—of Jesus’ immersion in the waters of the Jordan River under the guidance of John the Baptist.\(^3\) A more general awareness of John’s enterprise, as recorded by Josephus Flavius (Ant. 18.118–119), may be seen as providing a broader backdrop to the said tradition. It is therefore possible to try to reconstruct its outline and even the exact historical circumstances of the event itself in its 1st century Palestinian Jewish setting.\(^4\) Alternatively, one may focus on the author of Mark himself, who at some point in the 60’s—a

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2 See, for example, discussion in W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1988), 286, 323–43, where, for a large part of the pericope version, the assumption is promoted that for Matt Mark was here the “primary, even exclusive source” (with some degree of Markan/Q overlap possible). The possibility that Mark 1:9–11 is dependent on Matt 3:13–17 is considered but rejected. For Lukan dependence here on Mark, see J. Fitzmyer, The Gospel according to Luke: Introduction, Translation and Notes (AB 28; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), 479–87. See also Marcus, Mark 1–8, 138–40.
3 On the sources, oral and/or written, of Mark, see, for example, C.S. Mann, Mark (AB 26; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1986), 16–19. For this pericope, see Markus, Mark 1–8, 138–9.
4 See, for example, D. Flusser, “Baptism,” in idem, Jesus (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001), 37–55.
possible dating of his composition—gave the inherited traditions their final literary form and incorporated them into the Gospel narrative while aspiring to demonstrate Jesus' messiahship.

Even if the Gospel writer's intended audience was already of a mixed character—i.e., including a significant non-Jewish element—and even if the author's exact *Sitz im Leben* cannot be established with certainty, it is clear that the messianic idea, constituting the composition's true focus, was emphatically a Jewish one—one, moreover, of Land of Israel provenance. It stands to reason, then, that aspiring to put together a convincing messianic biography, the author would relate to at least some core messianic expectations current among Second Temple Jewry. It is this latter angle that the present study is going to pursue: to discuss the messianic anticipations of the author's intended audience—whether Jewish or Jewish-minded—to which the opening section of his composition was tailored to provide a satisfactory and definitive response.

That Mark's work was designed first and foremost as Jesus' messianic biography is clear from what constitutes its opening line, or maybe rather its title (Mark 1:1): "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah (Christ)." Mark 1:1–11 should thus be viewed as a programmatic introduction to Jesus' messianic biography, and it is therefore appropriate to ask to what Jewish messianic beliefs of broader circulation it possibly relates. Let me quote in full the passage in question:

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5 One notes that the messianic idea is non-existent in a Hellenistic Jewish treatise as representative as *The Letter of Aristeas*. It seems, moreover, to have been peripheral at best to the thinking of Philo, with only few "messianic passages" to be found in the vast Philonic corpus. It is telling that in the large volume dedicated to the messianic theme, *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (ed. J. Charlesworth; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) there is only one contribution dealing with Jewish Hellenistic thought: P. Borgen's "‘There Shall Come Forth a Man:’ Reflections on Messianic Ideas in Philo," 341–61. (Doron Mendels discusses in that volume Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*; but this text was in all probability originally composed in Hebrew.) Though Borgen's conclusion is that "the concept of a future messianic emperor is not an alien element in his (Philo's) exegesis and in his expectations for the future" ("‘There Shall Come Forth a Man’", 361), his analysis clearly demonstrates that in Philo the concept in question is of a clearly restorative, Bible-centered nature, one devoid of the distinctively Second Temple elements that characterized ideas current in Palestinian Jewry.