EVALUATION OF THE RESULTS

THE MESSAGE OF MARK’S GOSPEL AS A REACTION TO
THE SITUATION OF THE MARKAN CHRISTIANS

The aim of the preceding chapters, chapters 4-6, was to show that Mark’s Gospel contains evidence in support of the hypothesis that the reason for the persecution of the Markan Christians was believed by Mark to be the fact that they might be seen by the authorities as a threat to public order, because of their adherence to someone who was called Christ and had died by crucifixion. This hypothesis now seems to have gained in plausibility, since the above analyses of Mark’s portrayal of Jesus have made it clear that the evangelist is keen to play down the political connotations both of the title ‘Christ’ and of Jesus’ crucifixion. The way he treats these connotations reveals that he intends to defend the Christians against the suspicion of subversiveness that could arise against them as a result of the fact that they confessed the crucified Jesus as Christ. Mark stresses that Jesus was not an anti-Roman rebel, and thus proclaims that there is no reason to consider the Christian community a subversive movement. Therefore, the situation in which Mark and his readers were living can now be characterized as follows.

The Markan Christian community lived in Galilee, shortly after the end of the Jewish revolt. Especially in this period, just after the revolt, the Romans must have been anxious to maintain strict public order. Any suspicion of social unrest could have caused them to intervene violently. The leading Jews in the area usually tried to prevent Roman intervention by arresting Jewish individuals or groups whose behaviour might arouse the suspicion of the Roman authorities; when the Jewish leaders considered it beyond their power to prevent or quell the unrest, they delivered the troublemakers up to the Romans. The leading Jews had good reason to expect the Romans to regard and treat the Markan Christian community as a subversive

1 See Part One, Evaluation of the Results, pp. 139-142.
Jewish subgroup. Some of the Christians were of Jewish origin, but together with non-Jewish Christians they formed communities independent of the Jewish synagogues. Their claim to be the followers of someone whom they called Christ and who had died by crucifixion might indicate that they were the followers of an anti-Roman rebel. In order to avert Roman intervention, then, the Jewish leaders persecuted the Markan Christians and, when necessary, delivered them up to the Roman authorities.

This is the situation of the Markan community as it becomes perceptible from Mark's Gospel. Two further remarks need to be made.

First, strictly speaking it is uncertain whether, at the time Mark's Gospel was written, Christians were actually being persecuted, or were only expected by the evangelist to be persecuted. The most we can say is that the evangelist was of the opinion that such persecutions might afflict his readers. He may have thought so either because he knew that some members of his community had already been arrested, or because for some reason he expected the leading Jews to react to the Christians as they usually reacted to Jewish groups demonstrating rebellious features. In any case, in the eyes of the evangelist the threat must have been a serious one, since he deals with the issue extensively.  

Secondly, as was argued above, Mark's depiction of Jesus seems to be a reaction to the threat of persecution that hangs over the Markan Christians. Mark's image of Jesus is meant to show that neither Jesus' crucifixion nor the fact that he is called Christ indicates that he was an insurrectionist; by implication, Mark's message is that there is no reason to consider the Christian community a subversive movement. However, the fact that Mark claims that the Christians are not rebels does not exclude the possibility that some Christians may have been involved in rebellious activities. Mark suggests that the Christians are unjustly persecuted by the Jewish leaders, but in fact we do not know for certain whether or not Galilean Christians were indeed a cause of social unrest.

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2 See also, e.g., J. Marcus, *Mark 1-8. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27), New York/London, 2000, pp. 28-29. According to Marcus the hypothesis of an actual persecution is more likely than that of potential persecution. First, Mk 4:37-40 and 6:48-50 make more sense if directed to a persecuted readership. Moreover the sectarian division between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in Mk 4:10-12, as well as the Markan 'prophecies' of persecution are, according to Marcus, more compatible with the hypothesis of actual persecution.