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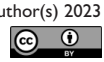

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The Genre of Mark's Gospel Is 'Gospel': Reconsidering Literary Innovation in the Markan Incipit

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Abstract

Classifying Gospels as ancient Graeco-Roman biographies addresses an array of scholarly questions about how these texts relate to their wider literary culture. That classification also requires considerable qualification since Gospels—particularly the Gospel of Mark—at times diverge from certain generic conventions. This study rearticulates the out-of-fashion claim that 'Mark' created a new literary genre, even if penned in a biographical structure. When this pioneer evangelist breaks the compositional silence, he reveals immediately that he is writing 'gospel'. As a recognizable communication type, 'gospel' was an oral proclamation of deliverance and rescue that this writer innovatively narrativizes and textualizes. If this work is a biography, it is so only secondarily, because primarily, Mark is a 'gospel' announcing an interruptive divine deliverance that is narratable and so scripturally evocative that it is worthy of textual rendering. In opening the scroll to Mark, εὐθύς there is εὐαγγέλιον (immediately, there is gospel), a designation beckoning the audience to receive what follows as if the skies have been split open and the soundscape burst apart with a new story-shaped word that disrupts reality as well as literary conventions. What is the genre of this early Christian text? It is just what Mark tells us: 'gospel'.

Keywords

biography, genre, Gospel, 'gospel', Gospel of Mark

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Introduction: (Over-)classification and (Over-) qualification in Gospel Genre Studies

Since the biographical hypothesis for the genre of early Christian Gospels is 'the current scholarly consensus' and 'now so widespread', Richard Burridge has raised the question if perhaps 'the qualifier "hypothesis"' can be dropped (2018: I.105). The question is debatable but not without justification. In his critical review of scholarship on 'Gospels and Biography' in the 25th anniversary edition of his landmark *What Are the Gospels?*, Burridge notes that only a handful of 'senior specialists' ('often relying on their own previous work') still defend the claim that the Gospels are 'unique' in their ancient literary milieu (2018: I.104).[1] Several other senior scholars have embraced the biographical argument, 'which the next generation of younger researchers then proceeded to use as a base for further investigation into various implications' (2018: I.104). Published after these reflections by Burridge, Craig Keener's award-winning *Christobiography* (2019) has reinforced the consensus, and Helen Bond's impressive study on Mark as author of *The First Biography of Jesus* (2020) assumes the Second Gospel is a βίος and explores the interpretative implications of reading it as such.[2] Additionally, the inclusion of early Christian Gospels in classicists' own discussions of Graeco-Roman biography serves to confirm that the question of Gospel genre is, for the most part, settled (e.g., Hägg 2012: 148–86; Johnson 2020: 72–83).[3]

Yet little else makes an idea in academic discourse more vulnerable to challenge than the achievement of consensus status (which Burridge acknowledges in a good-natured tone[4]). And a consensus status may be recognizably fragile if excessive qualifications are required to prop it up.

When it comes to the claim that Mark is a biography, *over-qualification* characterizes the scholarly discussion. Literary genre refers to recognizable textual patterns and signals that shape the expectations for an audience's engagement with a written work. But *over-classification* may occur if, for the purpose of rendering our subject of study more manageable, the haze of complexity is cut with lines too rigidly drawn or perhaps only sensible from a later vantage point. Classifying Mark as a biography seems to lead unavoidably to *over*-qualification because, even though the literary boundaries defining the Graeco-Roman βίος are widely acknowledged as blurred, this early Christian narrative is marked by

1. He specifically lists here Ulrich Luz, Joel Marcus, and Adela Yarbro Collins.
2. Bond writes, 'my purpose is not to prove that Mark wrote a biography, but to see how such a generic assumption might affect its interpretation' (2020: 12).
3. 'Die biographische Beschreibung ist meist ernsthaft und respektvoll gehalten' (Bayer 2008: 62; see 60–63 for the fuller discussion).
4. 'But such is the nature of academic debate, that just when it looks like a theory has swept all before it, and new and contrasting approach has a tendency to appear' (Burridge 2018: I.105).

a generic recalcitrance: 'Mark does not overtly present the expected literary conventions of Greco-Roman historiography or biography' (Shively 2021a: 376).[5] Once the label of βίος is affixed to this ancient text, scholars must devise artful explanations to justify why this Gospel remains a Graeco-Roman biography while it unsettles the generic boundaries, especially when those boundaries are so porous.[6]

Two brief examples should suffice in illustrating how classifying Mark as biography requires ongoing explanation and qualification. Addressing the longstanding observation that Mark—unlike Matthew, Luke, and the majority of ancient biographies—lacks the expected generic provision of details about his protagonist's birth, upbringing, education, and cultural pedigree, Helen Bond finds the incipit's phrase 'son of God' as a concise description of parentage conforming to biographical convention (2020: 125–35). Her judgment is not entirely implausible (assuming the phrase was original to Mark, which Bond grants as debatable). But is Mark's opening use of this Christological title intended to satisfy a generic expectation, or might this detail stand in service to another set of aims? In other words, has the determination to see Mark as a βίος despite its generic divergences forced this interpretation of 'son of God'?[7] Another example relates to the ignominious nature of Jesus's death, a longstanding point of debate problematizing the construal of Mark as a βίος. Addressing this concern, Robin Walsh and David Konstan qualify Mark as a 'subversive biography' (Konstan and Walsh 2016; Walsh 2021: 174)[8] that intentionally upends the audience's expectations by having the main character die shamefully without honor and power. The point in providing these two examples is that, when classifying Mark as biography, the generic strictures are so hard-pressed that we must explain why he deviates and qualify our reasoning.

5. Similarly, from Eugene Boring: 'While there are significant points of contact between Mark and Hellenistic biographies, it is important to see Mark as having written a distinctive narrative that fits only awkwardly (if at all) into the literary categories already available to him. Mark does not simply adopt an available pattern and compose a "life of Jesus" on this basis. Though Mark does not invent an absolutely new genre, the narrative he composes is so distinctive from existing genres as to be considered a quantum leap, a mutation rather than a Christian example of an existing genre or an evolution from preceding models' (Boring 2006: 6–7).
6. Genre is marked by what Sean Adams calls 'compositional plasticity' (2020: 10). Burridge (2018: 53–77) and Bond (2020: 7) both recognize the generic fluidity of biography.
7. It is important to note, however, how conscientious Bond is as an interpreter: 'my intention', she writes, 'is not to attempt to shoehorn the narrative into a predetermined biographical script'. Indeed, 'biography is too variable for any such attempt to be meaningful' (2020: 119).
8. They use this phrase in contradistinction to 'civic biography', which features prominent figures who held dominant positions in society. For Konstan and Walsh, 'subversive biography gives voice to those who are on the margins of power, and more or less subtly undermine or challenge the conventional ideology' (Konstan and Walsh 2016: 28).

At what point might these explanations and qualifications be recognized as evidence that a certain classification (i.e., the Gospels as ancient biographies) is in some way deficient (or even incorrect)?[9] As hinted by Burridge's remarks above, that line has been crossed for a number of scholars, leading to alternative proposals. Adela Yarbro Collins understands Mark as an 'apocalyptic historical monograph' (1992: 27; 2007: 33–36). Eve-Marie Becker prefers 'person-centered historiographical narrative' (2006: 410–18; 2017: 74). Joel Marcus has suggested that Mark is a script for a staged dramatization of the gospel story within a liturgical setting (2000: 64–69). Other proposals have emerged over the decades. Jewish martyrology, Hellenistic aretalogy (Smith 1971),[10] tragic comedy (Via 1975), the story-cycles of key figures the Hebrew Bible, the ancient (Jewish) novel (Vines 2002), and the (less sophisticated) literature of popular culture (Tolbert 1989: 48–79)—these have all been suggested as genres, subgenres, or at least styles of writing on which Mark is reliant.[11]

The application of categorical distinctions to texts that problematize established labels leads not only to over-qualification; the exercise of over-classification may also miss *innovation* within literary artefacts that shove so hard against the existing molds that later readers may acknowledge in retrospect the formation of a new genre. Creatively inventive literary works, by definition, exceed expectations and break convention. When genuine innovation occurs in literary cultures, interpretative strategies that by default squeeze all texts within established categories *risk dismissing such creativity as improbable, implausible, or anachronistic* and explainable by simply broadening or redefining the generic frame. Both Helen Bond and Robin Walsh appreciate Mark as a creative writer *within* the biography genre. But can those holding to the consensus that the Gospels are βίοι account for Markan innovation that operates in the overlap of multiple genres and, at the same time, beyond their definable borders?[12] Walsh ultimately appeals to 'subversive biography' because the 'first line of inquiry when approaching an ancient text should be to consider the ways in which it is engaging various literary conventions, precedents, and ongoing conversations . . .' (2021: 194).[13] I agree, and I will be drawing on precedent works in part of my argument below. Moreover, I find the idea of subversive biography a helpful recognition of

9. Noting the difficulty of placing the Gospels within an existing literary mold, Loveday Alexander suggests 'that it may be time to change the way we configure the question' (2021: 28).
10. Note that Smith only cautiously considers Mark related to this style of Hellenistic writing.
11. See the helpful overviews provided by Wes Olmstead (2019) and Judith Diehl (2011).
12. Guttenberger (2017: 18–19) reports that most scholars would acknowledge Mark as innovative, regardless of their identification of his genre: 'Konsens ist, dass das MkEv innovative Züge trägt, welcher Textgattung auch immer es zugeordnet wird'.
13. Robert Guelich identified this approach to Gospel genre as 'analogical', in which scholars locate the evangelists' compositions alongside other similar texts (Guelich 1991: 185–96).

Markan creativity (if Mark is indeed a biography, it is most certain worthy of the qualifier 'subversive'). But any contrasts found in comparative work can be reduced in their sharpness if the methodological aim is preset to minimize differences. Note that Walsh's appeal to subversive biography is made as part of '*a critique of the perceived exceptionalism of the gospels* . . .' (2021: 170, emphases added). Though rightly corrective of interpretations of the canonical Gospels as spiritual compositions excised from their vast literary context, the determination to locate Mark entirely within his contemporary analogues may be obscuring a significant event: an act of literary innovation that generates (at least eventually) a new genre.[14]

In this article, I am arguing for a renewed appreciation of the literary creativity of the canonically *second* Evangelist who was chronologically the *first* evangelist (or so I presume). I am not prepared here to argue that Mark is *not* a biography—I find helpful the language of 'genre participation' used by Sean Adams (2020) and acknowledge that Mark is certainly participating in the genre of ancient biography. But in our attempts to classify Mark's genre, I suggest—along with writers like C. H. Dodd (1970: 46–56); Martin Hengel (1997: 53–58; 2000: 91)[15]; and, more recently, Elizabeth Shively (2021a)—that we listen to the evangelist who tells us exactly what type of work he is writing. Though many have questioned that the reference to εὐαγγέλιον in Mk 1.1 is a 'literary claim' (Adams 2021: 263),[16] I make a renewed case below that Mark is consciously innovating, producing in effect a new literary genre by textualizing and narrativizing an established communication type of oral pronouncement: 'gospel'. The evangelist takes this spoken broadcast and consciously bends and expands its conventional expression and form *yet without changing the name of the communication type he so actively reworks*.[17] In other words, Mark retains the term 'gospel' and its purpose even while reconfiguring its established communicative mode. This initial gospel is not exactly *sui generis*—that is, Mark is not an entirely new literary creation independent of other literary works—as a former

14. Note this remark by Craig Keener (2019: 38): 'while the observation that the Gospels are unique is true in some sense, it is not very helpful for facilitating heuristic analogies'.
15. Hengel uses the phrase 'kerygmatic biography'.
16. For another important argument against Mark's use of εὐαγγέλιον as a declaration of his category of writing, see Stanton 2004: 57–58. Andreas Lindemann (2014: 345) acknowledges that εὐαγγέλιον may refer to the entire composition as a literary designation, thus warranting the retrospective generic application of 'gospel' in the second century.
17. Sean Adam's measured wisdom is important to note here. He writes that 'the subsequent influence of a work and its adoption and adaptation by later authors (e.g., other Gospels and so-called noncanonical gospels) do not automatically confer upon a work (e.g., Mark) genre-generative properties at the time of its creation. Such a position views the work through the lens of readers and subsequent literary history and risks imputing intentionality to the author that may or may not have existed based on future success that could not have been predicted' (2020: 263).

generation of form critics contended.[18] But this author is nonetheless innovating, assuming the writerly vocation of presenting to his audience a (divine) figure who, in his view, was foreshadowed yet unprecedented.[19] This Gospel demonstrates that early Christian Christology does indeed compel literary creativity. Helmut Koester was and is not alone in bluntly stating that 'Mark himself does not designate his own work as a "gospel"' and 'there is no indication whatsoever that either Mark or any of the authors of the Gospels of the New Testament thought that "gospel" would be an appropriate title for the literature they produce' (1990: 13–14; see also Koester 2007: 60–62; and Kelhoffer 2014: 70–75).[20] My aim is to make a plausible case to the contrary. I think Mark would be disappointed to discover how later readers are missing his cues. He surely writes with biography looming large as a generic influence,[21] but when this pioneer evangelist breaks the compositional silence, first etching ink into the blankness of an empty scroll, he reveals immediately (to use a Markan term) and with decisive clarity the communication type on which he is most reliant: 'gospel'. His textualizing and narrativizing that which is normally understood as an orally proclaimed

18. In German scholarship, resistance to the biography hypothesis drew on the form-critical conviction of the 'literarischen Isolierung der Evangelien' (John 2019: 28)—as *Kleinliteratur* arising *sui generis* from amalgamated oral tradition, they were unworthily or at least unhelpfully compared with the *Hochliteratur* of the Graeco-Roman world. Resistance has also been attributed to the modernist convention of writing Lives of Jesus. For brief overviews, see Walton (2015) and John (2019). For major studies on the Gospels as *sui generis*, see, e.g., Schmidt (1923: 2:50–135) and Rudolf Bultmann (1994: 371–74). More recently, Frankemölle concludes his extensive study on Mark's genre with the claim that 'Diese Einwirkung hat Markus in schöpferischer Eigeninitiative aufgenommen und in der Verbindung mit den vorgegebenen synoptischen Stoffen ein kerygmatisches Erzählwerk sui generis geschaffen' (Dormeyer and Frankemölle 1984: 1693). On the reaction against this idea of gospels as *sui generis* over the past few decades, see Richard Burridge (2018: 211 n. 73), who lists as supporting such a view Kee (1977: 139), Schweizer (1970: 23), Browning (1972: 17–18), and Guelich (1991: 202).
19. 'To the extent that Mark first put the "gospel" in *written* form, he created a new *literary* genre, the gospel. But Mark did not create this genre *de novo*. The necessary formal and material components lay at hand in the tradition. In other words, the literary gospel ultimately represents the Church's gospel in narrative form' (Guelich 1991: 213).
20. Also, from Francis Watson: 'Designating these four texts as "gospels", or collectively as "gospel", has no basis within the texts themselves. No evangelist claims to be writing a "gospel"' (2022: 5); similarly, 'none of the canonical evangelists thought they were writing "a gospel". While there is some overlap between these texts and the Pauline gospel, it is inevitable that there are also major differences since writing the gospel was not what their authors intended' (2022: 22). Watson's comments in a prior publication seem more supportive of the view I am taking in this essay, however (see 1997: 105–6).
21. H. N. Roskam (2004: 236) contends that the evangelist wrote in the form of a βίος, but that genre is unhelpful in determining *why* he wrote. 'Mark's Gospel is best characterized not as a biography of Jesus, but as an apologetic writing in biographical form.'

event or state are innovations warranting the claim that Mark creates a new genre, or at least a subgenre, under the malleable meta-genre of ancient narrative. For Mark, biography is in service to the broader label 'gospel'. In other words, if Mark is a βίος, it is so only secondarily, because primarily—as he tells us in his opening line—Mark's Gospel is a 'gospel'.

From here, I will provide a brief overview of how 'gospel' was understood before Mark penned his incipit, then provide grounds for why Mark would both textualize and narrativize a proclaimed broadcast, and close suggesting implications for how to read Mark as narrativized and textualized εὐαγγέλιον.

The Background of Gospel as Oral Proclamation

As already stated, εὐαγγέλιον was an ancient communication form of oral pronouncement in Mark's surrounding media culture.[22] 'Gospel' was the succinct oral report of a specific type of news. In ancient Hellenistic use the term referred to the proclamation of relief from political instability and/or militaristic threat. It was the concise—and astoundingly good—news of the defeat of an invading army or the routing of a personal assailant. It could also report the accession of a new emperor, or perhaps his recovery from illness, both of which would signal a return to, or the preservation of, civil peace and political stability.[23]

Crucially, the Hellenistic literary corpus having the most bearing on Mark's Gospel writing is the Septuagint. In keeping with Graeco-Roman uses, the words εὐαγγέλιον (appearing only once in the LXX, and in the plural—2 Sam. 4.10), the feminine form εὐαγγελία, and the verbal form εὐαγγελίζω refer to the proclamation of deliverance from some form of threat, usually political or militaristic. The death of King Saul was the subject of gospel proclamation among the Philistines who rejoiced at the demise of their great antagonist (1 Sam. 31.9; 2 Sam. 1.20; 1 Chr. 10.9). Some assumed (wrongly) that reporting Saul's own demise would also be received as good news by David, whom the king repeatedly harassed and hunted (2 Sam. 4.10). Biblical instances of these terms recall the media practice in ancient warfare in which a runner was dispatched to bear the tidings of a battle's positive outcome (2 Sam. 18.19–31; 2 Kgs 1.42;

22. See also the more detailed survey of the associated terms and their use (which includes a discussion on the gospel word group in the imperial cult) in Lindemann (2014: 314–22). For a detailed treatment of the word group in its early Jewish context, see Horbury (2005).

23. For Hellenistic uses of the term, see Lucian, [*Asin*.], 26, in which a donkey and a young woman are rescued from a grim death by soldiers. For military victories, see Plutarch, *Ages*., 33; idem, *Demetr*., 18; Pomp. 66.3; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll*., 5.8; and in Appian's accounts of Roman battles in *Bell. civ*.—3.93, 4.20 (here, the 'good news' is the demise of Antony's enemy Cicero by the hand of Laena and his soldiers), and 4.113. See also Byers (2013: 160–63).

Isa. 52.7).[24] The proclamation of 'gospel' was the heralding of victory and release. 'Gospel' is 'news cried out through the heaving breaths, pounding heart, and trembling lips of the runner that "our king has triumphed" and "our enemies have been defeated!"' (Byers 2013: 161).[25]

In short, before 'gospel' designated a literary account of Jesus's ministry, death, and resurrection, it was an urgent, interruptive, and effective oral broadcast of rescue, often dramatic in its import, a communication type of immediacy amenable to a word like εὐθύς ('immediately'). Accelerating the narrative action and inciting urgency, εὐθύς appears twice in the Markan prologue, 11 times altogether in chapter 1, and around 40 times in Mark as a whole. Since ancient authors used their prologues or prefaces to establish lines of thematic trajectories and foundational claims about the ensuing material (Burridge 2018: 109; Earl 1972; Matera 1995), as well as 'textual cues' (Shively 2021a: 384–86) for how to read their works, it behooves readers ancient and contemporary to heed the authorial signals and receive what follows as if the skies have been split open and the soundscape burst apart with a new word that disrupts perceived reality.

Most interpreters are aware of the media background of the word 'gospel', which *is precisely why it holds so little bearing on the discussion on Mark's genre*. As the logic goes, Mark's narrative cannot be 'gospel' because 'gospel' is oral in form and announcement in content, neither text nor story.[26] This reasoning works *if* we predetermine that Mark is not innovating. We now turn to see how and why he may be bending and distorting this communication type into the *form of a text* bearing the *content of a story*.

'The Beginning of the Gospel': The Gospel Textualized and Narrativized as Markan Innovation

Not only is Mark's 'gospel' textually inscribed rather than orally proclaimed, it has a 'beginning' and thus launches a *sequence*. With his opening words— Ἀρχὴ

24. For other biblical instances of εὐαγγελίζω as the announcement of military victory or the deliverance from violent threat, see Pss. 40.9 [39.10, LXX], 68.11 [67.12, LXX], 96.2 [95.2, LXX]; Joel 3.5 [LXX]; and Nah 1.15 [2.1, LXX]. For early Jewish texts, see *Pss. Sol.* 11.1; Josephus, *J.W*. 4.10.6 §618; 4.11.5 §§656–57.
25. For the Jewish use of the term (drawing from Isaiah 40–66), see Bauckham (2008: 34).
26. Contra this distinction offered by Morna Hooker (1991: 33): 'The book is not in itself "a gospel"; rather, it contains the gospel . . .' Collins argues that Mark is neither a biography nor a gospel but rather history. Her understanding of 'gospel', however, is largely tied to earlier form-critical approaches and to an unwelcome relegation of Mark to a 'holy' text that has little to say beyond the insular confines of the church (1992: 2).

τοῦ εὐαγγελίου[27] (‘[the[28]] beginning of the Gospel’)[29]—the audience is informed that what follows is the *narration* of ‘gospel’ because a ‘beginning’ sets into motion an unfolding development.[30] Texts that present events in sequential fashion are narratives, *stories*. To *write* the oral gospel (textualization) is an innovation. To write a *sequential gospel* (narrativization) is also an innovation. Beginning with narrativization, I will explore each in turn, addressing reservations and hopefully strengthening the case for the plausibility that Mark is indeed consciously creating something generically new, even while drawing on existing traditions besides (and/or in addition to) ancient biographies.

‘Beginning’? The Gospel Narrativized

Despite the widely acknowledged titular function of opening lines in ancient texts,[31] many interpreters believe that the term ‘gospel’ does not refer to Mark’s entire composition. Presuming that Mark is behaving and working within the existing communicative constraints of the term εὐαγγέλιον, the reference must be limited to the proclamation ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus in the following lines since ‘gospel’ is an oral pronouncement. Admittedly, this reading is strengthened by Mark’s clear use of εὐαγγέλιον to refer to oral proclamation elsewhere, including in 1:14–15, seen by many as the final bookend of an *inclusio* demarcating the end of the preface or prologue.[32] So, in Mark’s phrase ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, ‘beginning’ is often understood as the initial preaching of John the Baptist then Jesus, and ‘gospel’ is understood as their homiletical content.

27. With Hengel (2000: 3), I take the genitive of εὐαγγέλιον here as having both an objective and a subjective meaning (the Gospel *about* and *of* Jesus Christ). In an earlier work, Hengel only mentions the objective use (1997: 53).
28. The brackets here gesture toward the anarthrous ἀρχή. Though the article is absent, this need not demand an indefinite translation (‘A beginning’) since titular openings were often anarthrous (Marcus 2000: 141).
29. Though I am taking Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίοῦ as original to the Gospel, it has been argued that this phrase is a later scribal addition (Moule 1982: 131–32 n. 1; Schmithals 1986: 73–75; Koester 1989: 370; Elliott 2000: 584–88). Contra this line of thinking, see Burridge (2018: 188–89).
30. Dormeyer (2019: 119) is aware of this: ‘Dem Leser wird deutlich mitgeteilt, dass eine längere Erzählzeit beginnt. Die griechische Prosa wählte dafür ebenfalls das Signal “*arche*,” die Märchen haben das bekannte “Es war einmal.”
31. See the now classic treatment in Loveday Alexander (1993) and more recently, Bond (2020: 115–20).
32. See the brief survey of views in Martin (1972: 27–28). Though he argues that Mark’s innovative use of εὐαγγέλιον leads to a new literary genre, Guelich (1991: 195–96) reads the phrase the ‘beginning of the gospel’ as referring solely to the ministry of John the Baptist. Hengel (1997: 53 n. 81) views the contents of the ‘gospel’ in 1.1 to include the ministry of John the Baptist up to the Parousia (Mark 13).

If εὐαγγέλιον, however, designates all of Mark, ἀρχή in 1.1 may refer to the prologue, may also include the early stages of Jesus's ministry that launch from the end of 1.15 onwards, and may even entail the full composition. What is so critical about this term ἀρχή is not its precise textual range but its literary function in actualizing a series of narratable events. I offer below four points in favor of viewing Mark's phrase 'the beginning of the gospel' as an intentional cue to receiving the entire work as an innovative sequentializing—a narrativizing—of gospel.[33]

Mark intentionally correlates the conventional meaning of gospel as oral proclamation with his unique narratival use of the same term. In both his initial and final references to εὐαγγέλιον, Mark directly links *proclamation* to *narration*. The prologue's pairing of a narrative function (the 'beginning of the gospel', implying sequence) alongside the oral proclamation in the other bookend of the *inclusio* (Jesus's preaching of 'gospel', indicating oral pronouncement) forces the enrichment and expansion of εὐαγγέλιον's semantic range, a strategy of coordination and juxtaposition (*synkrisis*[34]) not unlike the instances of Markan intercalation that will soon follow throughout the narrative.

The prologue's coordination of proclamation and narration is reinforced by its repetition in Mark's final reference to εὐαγγέλιον:

> Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is *proclaimed* [κηρυχθῇ] in the whole world, *what she has done* [the anointing of Jesus's head with nard] *will be told* [ὅ ἐποίησεν αὕτη λαληθήσεται] in remembrance of her'. (14.9, emphases added)

Again, oral announcement coincides with story. As Martin Hengel writes, 'it is striking that Mark presupposes that such a story [that is, the anointing scene] is not an unimportant episode but is an essential part of the Gospel which is preached and therefore also narrated "in all the world" . . . ' (2000: 93–94). Mark's initial and concluding references to εὐαγγέλιον thus wed proclamation to narration in its conceptual frame; the 'gospel of Jesus Christ' entails some form of narrative reporting. Gospel proclaimed requires stories told. This evangelist does not want to lose the idea of εὐαγγέλιον as a public announcement of rescue. His εὐαγγέλιον, however, is storied in its essence, entirely empty of salvific content apart from a narratable sequence of events centered on the person of Jesus.

In summary, Mark is fully aware that 'gospel' is a media term referring to oral proclamation rather than inscribed story, but this does not negate the claim that

33. This is not to say, however, that the gospel is contained within or circumscribed by the Markan narrative. As Focant points out (2012: 29), 'the narrative does not absorb the good news; it is rather absorbed in the good news that precedes it and that will continue after it in the mission of the disciples. On all sides, the gospel goes beyond, transcends the narrative written by Mark'.

34. See Bond's (2020: 171–78) discussion.

he is creatively textualizing and narrativizing. This first point in defense that Mark is innovating is not that he is replacing oral proclamation with written story, just semantically expanding the term 'gospel' to include the latter as well as the former. Adela Yarbro Collins (2007: 130–31) writes,

> On the one hand, the author took up the familiar meaning of the term εὐαγγέλιον ('good news') as the oral announcement and explanation of the salvific significance of the life and work of Jesus, especially his death and resurrection. On the other, he used the word in a new way, to refer to the content of a written work, in particular a narrative closely related to historical events of an eschatological nature.[35]

Mark's inconclusive ending may demonstrate the scope of the phrase 'the beginning of the gospel'. Mark's abrupt conclusion is a conscious literary strategy of audience entrapment. Charged by the mysterious νεανίσκος to announce Jesus's resurrection, the women flee the empty tomb in terror and 'said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid [ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ]' (16.8). The evangelist's early (and certainly later) readers and hearers would have surely found themselves astonished, disappointed, and in demand of a better ending. That is indeed Mark's intended response for his audience because the ending is not the end (Thompson 2005). His narrative is left as open-ended as the opened tomb; his story of Jesus cannot close any more than the powers of darkness could close back that grave. The engaged audience is ensnared by this disappointing denouement and thus beckoned into the ongoing narrative to speak what is left unsaid in 16.8 (Blount 2005; Bond 2020: 158). Eugene Boring observes that, for Mark, the story of the gospel does not end Easter morning but ensues into Mark's own day (2006: 31–32). What ends at the empty tomb may simply be the 'beginning' of the gospel, which the evangelist has taken upon himself to narrate.[36] The jarring ending in 16.8 on

35. The innovative expansion of the term εὐαγγέλιον is not unamenable to viewing Mark as a βίος. Helen Bond (2020: 114) notes that Mark 'firmly declares' that the events and teachings of Jesus—his story—belong within 'gospel'. Earlier in her study she writes that 'Although he can sometimes use the word in a similar way, Mark's great innovation was to include the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus within his understanding of "gospel" (1.1, 14, 15; 8.35; 10.29; 13.10; 14.9). Still, for him, as for Paul, the term referred primarily to *oral proclamation*' (2020: 16; emphasis original). Bond is close to what I am saying here, but I take a further step, claiming that in 1.1, 'gospel' refers to the narrative and textual modifications leading to a new genre.
36. This suggests that Mark is not so much 'gospel' as I am claiming, but 'the beginning of the gospel', a sort of prolegomenon to the broader contours of this expanded message (which is how Marcus, for instance, reads this phrase [2000: 145]). Since Mark includes the core elements of the early Christian kerygma as recorded in 1 Cor. 15.3–5 and Acts 10.34–43 (though the post-resurrection appearances to the disciples are implied rather than recounted), I would still argue that the entire composition fits within the designation 'gospel'. For the narration of the early Christian kerygma as a distinctive feature of the canonical Gospels, see Gathercole (2022). Brendan Byrne (2008: 22–25) argues that, since the Pauline 'gospel' entails the death

the preposition γαρ indicates an ongoing sequence in which his audience now participates.

Since such a strategic conclusion demonstrates how alert Mark is to the dynamics of *closing* a literary work, we should not be surprised in finding the same intentionality and creativity in his means of *opening* this literary work. As the open-ended nature of his conclusion in Mk 16.1–8 makes clear, Mark intended his readers to find themselves within the story of this storied Gospel and to continue within the urgent plotline initiated in the incipit yet nonetheless unresolved in his own day and beyond. My point here is simply this: the narrative sequencing of 'gospel' does not end with the close of the Markan prologue at which point a proper narrative more akin to an ancient βίος begins. The entire work is gospel narrativized (see also Marxsen 1969: 125).

Additional sources external to Mark point to an implied correlation between oral proclamation and narrative sequence encompassed within the term εὐαγγέλιον. Though I have pointed out that the demand for comparable precedents can be used to obscure genuine literary innovation, there is a piece of inscriptional evidence linking 'gospel' and 'beginning' that renders Mark's narrativization of this established communications type more plausible. In what is known as the Priene Calendar Inscription, dating to 9 B.C., reference is made to Caesar Augustus's birthday, which is the 'beginning of the gospel':

> since the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning of the good news for the world that came by reason of him
>
> ἤρξεν δὲ τῶι κόσμωι τῶν δι'αὐτὸν εὐαγγελίων ἡ γενέθλιος τοῦ θεοῦ[37]

In this inscription, the birthday of Augustus begins the good tidings—that is, the gospel (here in the standard plural usage). Surely the idea is that the stability and peace of Augustus's contemporary reign can be traced back to its origins (his own birthday), the significance of which could only be evaluated as the story of his life would evolve over time.[38] A sequential (and thus narratival) dynamic

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and resurrection of Jesus (cf. Rom. 1:3–4 and 1 Cor. 15:3–5), Mark includes the narration of the events leading up to the empty tomb (and thus his entire composition) as 'the beginning of the gospel'.

37. Translation (slightly modified here) and text are from Evans (2000: 69). Stanton points out that fragments of this inscription have been found in other ancient cities, those of Apamea, Maeonia, Eumenia, and Dorylaeum (2004: 29–32).

38. Gerd Theissen (1991: 262–81; 2012: 55–58) has argued that Mark is a biographical 'Anti-Gospel/Anti-Evangelium' opposed to the political ideology of the Flavian rulers. Dormeyer (2019) has followed his line of argument and reinforced the idea that Mark is a politically charged biography written in opposition to imperial power (see also Evans 2000).

is therefore assumed in the plural term εὐαγγελία in this inscription. After all, every removal of threat against the Empire that the media term 'gospel' might announce is an event preceded by a series of preliminary events that might be chronicled in story form (Gaius Octavius's birth and subsequent rise to power, for instance). Though the pagan idea of εὐαγγελία having a 'beginning' only appears in this inscription, it demonstrates the compatibility of 'gospel' with a biographical form of writing and exhibits an ancient recognition that the conventional use of 'gospel' as an abrupt, oral pronouncement *implies a backstory.*

Additionally, there are two early Christian writers besides Mark who write of the 'beginning of the gospel': Paul (Phil. 4.15) and Clement of Rome (1 Clem. 47.2).[39] Paul expresses gratitude to the Philippians for their singular devotion to him 'in the beginning of the gospel [ἐν ἀρχῇ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου]', referring, it seems, to the early days of the church's proclamation of Jesus. Clement uses the phrase '[the] beginning of the gospel [ἀρχῇ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου]' to refer back to the inaugural writings of Paul that helped instigate the Christian movement (at least in Corinth). The effective nature of the Christian gospel is such that it sets off an ongoing series of events in the life of the church and in the urban centers of the ancient world. This gospel of Jesus generated a movement the description of which necessitated a narrative mode of giving account.[40]

Moreover, as many interpreters have noted, Paul's shorthand rendering of the gospel in 1 Cor. 15:3–5 has a narrative shape that may well inform the evangelists' use of 'gospel' (Gathercole 2022). This is not to claim that Mark is simply narrativizing the Pauline Gospel but to recognize that the content of the early Christian kerygma entailed a sequence of (Christological) events. In his opening to Romans, Paul details the contents of the 'gospel of God': (1) the promise that was under prior development in Israel's story; (2) the Davidic genealogy of Jesus (which implies his birth); (3) the declaration that Jesus is 'son of God' (Rom. 1.4, cf. Mk 1.1) through his resurrection from the dead; 4) and the later apostolic commissioning.[41] Narrative sequence is also found in the speeches in Acts (especially Acts 10.34–43). Though they retain differences from Paul's articulations of the kerygma, the point here is that a succession of events associated with Jesus lie at the heart of the early Christian proclamation,[42] thus rendering a more elaborate narrativization of gospel not only plausible (as I am arguing here for Mark) but possibly even inevitable.

39. Cf. Lk 1.2, Jn 1.1, and 1 Jn 1.1.
40. As Joel Marcus puts it in his discussion on Mark's genre, 'Mark is more the biography of a movement, or at least that movement's beginnings' (2000: 66).
41. Dodd (1970: 14) saw this formulaic outline of the kerygma as already well-established and predating Paul.
42. Luke, as most scholars suppose, is surely writing after Mark, so the narrative shape in the speeches of Acts cannot be viewed as a source for the Markan narrativization of 'gospel' (the reverse may actually be true), unless, as many scholars also suppose, those speeches draw on earlier material (Guelich 1991: 209–13).

Mark is consciously locating 'gospel' within the broader cosmic and apocalyptic narrative of God's redemptive activity. A fourth reason that the phrase 'beginning of the gospel' launches a program of narrativizing early Christian proclamation about Jesus is that Mark is consciously naming a sequence of salvific events that are new but grounded in the ongoing story of Israel's saving God. Mark's use of 'beginning' hearkens back to a much earlier literary work, a sequence of narratable divine activity preceding the inaugural events of the early Christian movement and in the stream of which they hermeneutically belong. By opening his entire work with a word that opens the Scriptures, 'beginning' is freighted with more than standard notions of chronology. In Gen. 1.1 (cf. Hos. 1.2, LXX), God's creative activity is epochal on a cosmic scale. For Mark, another epochal moment is at hand. Drawing on Genesis, the phrase 'the beginning of the gospel' signals apocalyptic writing, the work of an author who discerns a definitive incursion of God into the earthly sphere that permanently alters reality as previously understood. Joel Marcus notes that 'in apocalyptic literature the "beginning-time" of Genesis becomes the prototype for the "end-time"' (2000: 139). Though the nature and extent of Markan apocalypticism can only be appreciated by reading the entire story, there is a conscious move to place his composition's opening in parallel with the opening of Genesis, indicating that Israel's God is once again creating and bringing into the cosmos a newsworthy sequence of events suitably designated 'gospel'.[43] As in Genesis, these cosmic events and their consequences are narratable and sourced in a 'beginning'.[44] The deliverance announcement by the Markan 'gospel' has a cosmic backstory and indeed an ongoing story in which discerning and compliant readers belong. It is with justification that Elizabeth Shively identifies Mark's composition as 'a scriptural, apocalyptic-eschatological (hi)story which he summarizes as the εὐαγγέλιον' (2021a: 387).

To summarize, Mark manifestly knows that 'gospel' is an oral proclamation rather than an inscribed story. His phrase 'the beginning of the gospel' is a work of conscious innovation that 'bends' (Attridge 2010) the proclamatory nature of εὐαγγέλιον into narrative form. Though his compositional vocation required that he draw on—or participate in (to use Sean Adams's language cited previously)—existing literary genres like biography, historiography, and others, his message about Jesus demanded the use and *reconfiguration of* the communication type most conducive for inspiring the striking, bracing urgency of his content. Recognizing its narratival (and textual) potential, he took the existing idea of 'gospel' and broadened it to accommodate his prophetic and pastoral task of presenting Jesus. As an evangelist, Mark has news to bring that is a story to tell.

43. The Markan Prologue is dense with apocalyptic ideas and events. Again, see Marcus (2000: 140).

44. Though ἀρχή can mean 'fundamental principal', the term recurs elsewhere in 10.6, 13.8, 19, all of which have a temporal beginning in view (see Gundry 1993: 32). For James Edwards (2002: 23), ἀρχή in Mk 1.1 primarily means 'origin' or 'source'.

'Just as It Is Written': The Gospel Textualized

The means of Mark's telling is through *writing*. Chris Keith has argued that 'Mark's Gospel introduces "textual self-consciousness" to the Jesus tradition' (2020: 98), and this act of textualizing the tradition is 'a media innovation' (2020: 74).[45] Similarly, Nicholas Elder writes, 'this is Mark's innovation: the gospel textualizes antecedent oral Jesus traditions and is self-conscious about this from its outset' (2024: forthcoming). I am arguing that this evangelist's textualization and narrativization is applied not only to the Jesus tradition but to the specific meaning and form of εὐαγγέλιον. I have anchored the arguments in the Markan incipit, focusing thus far on the narrativization of εὐαγγέλιον launched by the phrase 'beginning of the gospel'. Attention now turns to Mark's textualization of εὐαγγέλιον, drawing on the phrase in 1.2 'just as it is written' (καθὼς γέγραπται). I briefly offer three points, each linked to points already argued, in support of the claim that gospel textualization is a purposeful act of Markan creativity.[46]

Mark's reference to εὐαγγέλιον in 14.9 may be a self-reference to his own written text. In addition to a narrative dimension discussed above, Mark's final use of 'gospel' in 14.9 may also have a textual dimension. Collins believes 'wherever the εὐαγγέλιον is proclaimed' refers to Mark's composition:

> It seems likely, however, that the author of Mark . . . was referring here to the work he was composing in terms of the oral proclamation of the gospel. Such a reference would make sense in a social context of reoralization. It would also make the claim more intelligible that 'wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her'.
>
> It seems likely, then, that here the author of Mark refers to his own work as a 'gospel' (2007: 644).

Collins does not believe Mark is necessarily 'using the term [εὐαγγέλιον] as a designation of a (new) literary type or kind of literature' (2007: 644). In her view, 'the usage simply shows that no great distinction was made by this author, and probably his audiences, between an oral summary of the gospel and a written Gospel' (2007: 644). Even so, the point remains that Mark may be consciously textualizing εὐαγγέλιον, a point reinforced by his reference to 'the reader'

45. Helen Bond is also vividly alert to what Keith calls Mark's 'textual self-consciousness': 'Along with the letters of Paul, selections from the Jewish Scriptures, and perhaps other written collections of sayings and brief reports, Mark's written work helped to create a Christ-following identity around texts, rather as the Jewish synagogue similarly focused on revered writings' (2021: 253).
46. Nicholas Elder's forthcoming study (2024) on Markan textualization demonstrates the fluidity between orality and textuality.

(ὁ ἀναγινώσκων) in 13.14. In the craft of the Markan pen, gospel can be both a *story* and a *text*.

There is a correlation between 'gospel' and textuality in Clement's reference to the 'beginning of the gospel'. Not only is narrative sequence linked to 'gospel' in 1 Clem. 47, discussed previously. Clement also envisions 'gospel' as having a textual dimension: 'Take up the *epistle* of the blessed Paul the apostle. What did he first *write* to you in the beginning of the gospel? Truly he *wrote* to you in the Spirit' (1 Clem. 47.1–3, emphases added).[47] Writing and the oral Christian gospel seem axiomatically paired, rather than set at odds, as many scholars have tended to suggest (see the helpful discussion in Keith 2020: 78–85; also Watson 2013: 608–9).

If 'gospel' refers to a sequence of divine activity, then its textualization is anticipated within—and pressured by—scriptural tradition. It should not be missed that as soon as he writes his incipit—'the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God'—Mark then refers to scriptural writing, '*just as it is written* in Isaiah the prophet' (1.2, emphases added). As a Gospel writer, Mark adduces at the earliest opportunity scriptural license for the conviction that the oral 'gospel' can indeed be written. Significantly, Mark directly foregrounds his use of 'gospel' not in Paul, often regarded as the primary source for understanding early Christian proclamation, but in the literary figure we call Second Isaiah.[48] Though also recognized as oral pronouncement, 'prophecy' is a communication type that is as conducive to being penned as it is spoken in biblical tradition. The 'beginning' accounted for in Genesis and referred to in Mark 1.1 is *written*, so also is the gospel proclaiming God's imminent rescue of his people in Second Isaiah, a point Mark 1.2 accents—'just as it is written in Isaiah the prophet'.[49] Mark is narrating the divine deliverance of God's people as envisioned in Second Isaiah,[50] and such activity is not only reportable by speech but narratable by script. To begin writing a text echoing Genesis, immediately followed by referencing Second Isaiah's idea of 'gospel', is to write *scripturally*, an act Mark draws attention to in his citation

47. Translation from Holmes (2009: 109).
48. Though a composite citation (of Isa. 40.3, Mal. 3.1, and Exod. 23.20), Mark names Isaiah as his primary hermeneutical frame for understanding God's divine deliverance of God's people through Jesus. See the discussion in Moyise (2018: 17–25).
49. Again, Mark could not have anticipated the eventual canonization of his work as Christian 'Scripture,' yet his textualization of gospel is to be understood *as a scriptural act*. Paralleling his opening with the opening of all Scripture is highly suggestive, and by verse 3 Mark (in his composite citation) has referred to the Law (Gen. 1.1; Exod. 23.20) and the Prophets (Isa. 40.3; Mal. 3.1). The Gospel he writes is grounded in, and to be regarded as a very real continuation of, the sacred texts of Israel.
50. For a detailed treatment of God's Isaianic deliverance themes in Mark, see Watts (2000).

formula: καθὼς γέγραπται.[51] Nathanel Vette (2022) has recently argued that Mark plies a *compositional* as well as an expositional use of Scripture. Mark's opening may well indicate that he is 'scripturalizing' his entire narrative (not just certain episodes) and anchoring its plotline to the Isaianic gospel (with a prehistory dating back to Genesis 1).

Though Mark surely envisions that his work will be read aloud (and thus orally delivered) within early Christian liturgical contexts, the evangelist has bound a narrativized gospel to a written artefact (Watson 2013: 609; Keith 2020: 98–99, 163–200). In using the term 'gospel' at the beginning of his work, this writer has assumed for himself a textualized (and scriptural) vocation of the dispatched runner who brings from the site of cosmic conflict exhilarating (and story-shaped) news of divine rescue (1.14–15).

Conclusion: Reading Mark's Gospel as (an Innovative Literary) 'Gospel'

As stated in the introduction to this article, I am not arguing that Mark is *not* a biography but that Mark is, as its author informs readers and auditors in the opening line, chiefly and self-consciously a 'gospel'. This oral broadcast sounding the news that God has come to rescue his people through Jesus Christ should feature more centrally in the debates of Mark's genre. Not only does Mark evade certain generic expectations of the βίος, he also twists and expands the communication type of 'gospel', substantiating the claim that Mark is willing to creatively adapt the available literary and oral forms. Though scholars in prior years have made claims about the uniqueness of the Gospels (Guelich, Hengel, Frankemölle, et al.), I have rearticulated a similar argument now for Mark because the 'biography *hypothesis*' is, as Richard Burridge has wondered, possibly maturing into the 'biography *theory*,', surely due in part to an inclination to minimize the uniqueness traditionally ascribed to the Gospels by locating them too forcibly within their broader literary milieus. I acknowledge fully that Mark's textualized narrative takes on a biographical shape, even if unconventionally so; but however we coordinate literary Gospels to the genre of biography, Mark's incipit calls readers to situate his work primarily within the Isaianic proclamation of God's divine rescue of his people, activity that is summarized in the term 'gospel' while both sequenced (and thus narratable) and scriptural (and thus worthy of being textualized).

Helen Bond has produced a valuable and important study on how to read Mark as a βίος. What would it mean to read Mark as a εὐαγγέλιον, on which I

51. Though I have rested most of my study in the incipit, I am following Guelich's (1982) argument that Mark's citation formula here epexegetically clarifies 'gospel' in 1.1, forcing the reading of 1.1 together with verses 2–3.

have placed the generic accent throughout this study?[52] Arriving now at the end of the article, I merely put forward four suggestions that require further elaboration in ongoing discussion. First, to follow Mark's cues in the incipit and thus read the story as an Isaianic gospel is *to recapture the profoundly Jewish context of this story of Jesus*, a context sometimes diminished in the treatment of Mark as a Graeco-Roman biography.[53] Though ancient biographers certainly wrote within broad streams of tradition, Mark explicitly and instantly grounds his work in the testimonies of Israel's sacred writ.

Secondly, though the biography hypothesis/theory emphatically focuses on the centrality of Jesus in Mark's narrative, the recognition of a textualized and narrativized εὐαγγέλιον will remind readers that *this story is not solely about Jesus but also about God*. For Mark the εὐαγγέλιον is both Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ('of/about Christ'—1.1) and τοῦ θεοῦ ('of/from God'—1.14). To write of the Isaianic gospel is to write about Israel's God arriving on the scene to rescue and redeem, even if he does so through the figure of Jesus. As Mark Strauss (2014: 27) puts it, Mark's correlation of Jesus to Isaiah's promise of divine rescue indicates that 'the Creator is intervening in human history to claim back his creation. No Greco-Roman biography makes such audacious claims. This is much more than the exploits of an exceptional man. It is the arrival of God's end-time salvation.' Mark is not just a biographer; he is a *theologian*.

That leads to a third point: reading Mark as 'gospel' *prompts an alertness to Mark's apocalyptic features*. What God is doing in and through Jesus requires the cosmic tearing of the sky and the ripping apart of the temple veil. In the rise of Jesus from the baptismal waters, the prayer in Isaiah 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down' (64:1, NRSV) is answered, situating this story that unfolds along the earthy grit of ancient Galilean roads and Jerusalem streets on a cosmic plane. And if sky and veil are punctured and torn, generic boundaries are surely unsafe; if standard perceptions of reality are too constrictive for the Markan vision, surely also are the literary conventions of his day.

Fourthly and finally, reading Mark primarily as εὐαγγέλιον and only secondarily as βίος recognizes that this text *seeks the formation of the eschatological people of God*. As such, it is a work of ecclesiology, not in that it seeks to address particulars in the so-called Markan community (as in the historical-critical mirror-readings), and neither in that it merely provides in Jesus an example to emulate (as in the proponents of biography). Mark 1.1–3 launches an 'ecclesial

52. To be clear, Helen Bond does not divorce βίος from εὐαγγέλιον but repeatedly acknowledges a connection—for example, she writes that Mark 'used the genre of biography to extend Christ-following proclamation (the "gospel") from an earlier narrow focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus so that it now included the way of life of its founding figure' (2020: 253).

53. For example, though references to Jewish contexts appear throughout Bond's study (2020), Elizabeth Shively (2021b) has noted that her discussion of Mark's relationship to its wider Jewish literary milieu is at times limited.

narrative script' (Byers 2017: 82–102; idem 2021: 70–74) that limns the identity of those rescued and redeemed by God's cosmic deliverance through Christ. The Isaianic gospel is concerned not only with the deliverer but with the delivered. Narrating the saving activity of God through a new king (namely, 'Christ') involves a kingdom (i.e., the 'kingdom of God' mentioned in 1.15), and a kingdom implies a constituency, a people. Eric Eve is attuned to this ecclesial dynamic of the canonical Gospels:

> None of [the Gospels] is as self-contained as a typical Graeco-Roman *bios*. Rather, each of them presents itself as an especially climactic part of a larger story of God's dealings with his people. Each of the Gospels opens with some kind of link back to the story of God and Israel (or God and humanity), and each in a different way looks forward to the culmination of that story. Moreover . . . each is concerned with community identity—or the identity of the people of God—in ways that go far beyond the role of a typical *bios*. (2016: 23)

This ecclesial emphasis does not diminish the exemplary nature of Jesus. The *imitatio Christi* is an important corollary of the claim that the Gospels are βίοι/*vitae* since ancient biographers presented their protagonists as worthy exemplars (Bond 2020: 156–61; Burridge 2007: 19–32). Reading Mark as εὐαγγέλιον does not negate this approach but facilitates an awareness that this ancient writer is not only presenting a narrative Christology (i.e., a sequential unfolding of Jesus's identity) but also a *narrative ecclesiology* (i.e., a sequential presentation of the identity of the rescued people of God configured around this Christ).

In conclusion, the early Christian appropriation of Jesus's life and ministry compelled innovation. New wine burst prior literary and oral wineskins. Though Mark certainly drew on existing conventions, he creatively generated a new category of writing: the literary Christian Gospel, an urgent, interruptive, immediate, and effective message of rescue that is proclaimed but also textualized and narrativized. The transposition of 'gospel' into a written story is a monumental literary event in the ancient world prompted by the uniqueness of Jesus that necessitated creativity for faithful communication. As Mark himself informs us in his incipit, he wants us to think of him not primarily as a biographer or an historian. He is a scriptural εὐαγγελιστής; he is Mark the evangelist.

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