

# The Eagle and the Dove: Roman Imperial Sonship and the Baptism of Jesus (Mark 1.9–11)\*

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This essay argues that the common understanding of imperial divine sonship among biblical scholars can be reframed by emphasizing the importance of adoption in Roman society and imperial ideology. A case study from the Gospel of Mark—the portrayal of Jesus’ baptism—demonstrates some of the pay-off for reading the NT with a newly contextualized perspective on divine sonship. Through engagement with diverse sources from the Hellenistic and Roman eras, the dove will be interpreted as an omen and counter-symbol to the Roman eagle, which was a public portent of divine favor, election, and ascension to power.

**Keywords:** Son of God, *divi filius*, baptism, dove, emperor, adoption, mimicry

The new age has a savior figure, the greatest benefactor of all times,  
the *divi filius*...the victorious Augustus.

—Helmut Koester<sup>1</sup>

Some of the most stimulating recent scholarship in religious studies has been done on the interface between political and religious power, and NT scholarship is no exception. Through publications and conferences, the research on Roman political ideology, emperor worship, and early Christianity is proliferating—and much of it is excellent. To cite only a small sample of recent or representative types, one could note the text-specific studies on the Gospels,<sup>2</sup>

\* A version of this essay was presented at the 2006 New England SBL Meeting. Subsequently I received helpful suggestions from many colleagues, especially Adela Yarbro Collins and the anonymous reviewer for *NTS*.

1 H. Koester, *From Jesus to the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 208.

2 R. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); J. D. Crossan and J. L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

the epistles,<sup>3</sup> or Revelation,<sup>4</sup> which ask how particular texts have resisted or accommodated the demands of empire. Other scholars have addressed a certain topic or theme that spans different texts and centuries, such as the titles or narratives shared by Jesus Christ and the emperor,<sup>5</sup> the worship of the emperor and the worship of Jesus Christ,<sup>6</sup> conceptions of the imperial family and the Christian family,<sup>7</sup> and the relationship between imperial power structures and Christian communal self-understanding.<sup>8</sup> Some have tried to issue a general wake-up call to their colleagues about the importance of all these topics for historians of early Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

Yet despite this burgeoning field of scholarship, which brings the historical fact of imperial power to bear on diverse aspects of early Christianity, some of the

- 3 R. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997); J. D. Crossan and J. L. Reed, *In Search of Paul* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004); A. Yarbro Collins, 'Psalms, Phil. 2:6-11, and the Origins of Christology', *BibInt* 11 (2003) 361-72; P. Oakes, 'Re-mapping the Universe: Paul and the Emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philipppians', *JSNT* 27 (2005) 301-22.
- 4 S. J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001); cf. J. Frey, 'The Relevance of the Roman Imperial Cult for the Book of Revelation: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Reflections on the Relation between the Seven Letters and the Visionary Main Part of the Book', *The New Testament and Early Christian Literature in Greco-Roman Context: Studies in Honor of David E. Aune* (ed. J. Fotopoulos; NovTSup 122; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 231-55.
- 5 A. Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2nd and 3rd ed. 1909) 287-328; cf. D. Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament* (Fribourg: University, 1974); H. Koester, *From Jesus to the Gospels*, 204-17, emphasizes the narrative comparisons between Augustus and Jesus, especially the eschatological tenor of Augustus's principate.
- 6 E. Lohmeyer, *Christuskult und Kaiserkult* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1919); D. L. Jones, 'Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult', *ANRW* 2.23.2 (1980) 1023-54; A. Yarbro Collins, 'The Worship of Jesus and the Imperial Cult', *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism* (ed. C. C. Newman, J. R. Davila, and G. S. Lewis; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 234-57; G. Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice: Roman and Christian Discourses in Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2007).
- 7 M. R. D'Angelo, 'Abba and "Father": Imperial Theology and the Jesus Traditions', *JBL* 111 (1992) 611-30; J. S. Jeffers, 'The Influence of the Roman Family and Social Structures on Early Christianity in Rome', *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers 1988* (ed. D. J. Lull; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988) 370-84; E. M. Lassen, 'The Use of the Father Image in Imperial Propaganda and 1 Corinthians 4:14-21', *Tyndale Bulletin* 42 (1991) 127-36.
- 8 M. Dibelius, *Rom und die Christen im ersten Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1942); A. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California, 1991); A. Brent, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); C. Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000) esp. 42-8, 48 n. 148.
- 9 W. Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006); S. D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006); J. Meggitt, 'Taking the Emperor's Clothes Seriously: The New Testament and The Roman Emperor', *The Quest for Wisdom: Essays in Honour of Philip Budd* (ed. C. Joynes; Cambridge: Orchard Academic, 2002) 143-70.

most fascinating connections between the Roman emperor and Jesus Christ have yet to be treated in detail. My research explores the idea and practice of divine sonship in the Roman imperial context of early Christianity.<sup>10</sup> In this essay, I first discuss the origin and propagation of the imperial 'son of god' concept.<sup>11</sup> I argue that the common understanding of imperial divine sonship among biblical scholars can be reframed and broadened by emphasizing the importance of adoption in Roman society and imperial ideology. A case study from the Gospel of Mark—the portrayal of Jesus' baptism—demonstrates some of the pay-off for reading the NT with a newly contextualized perspective on divine sonship. Readers of Mark have long noted the allusions to Jewish scriptures in the baptism account, and those will not be rejected here. But how would a listener more attuned to Roman culture than the Jewish scriptures have understood this short narrative?<sup>12</sup> Better yet, how would a Roman Jewish listener have understood it? What connections and conclusions might that listener have made concerning the identity of Jesus? Reading the baptism of Jesus through the lens of Roman culture and imperial ideology encourages one to see the baptismal scene as an adoption, the beginning of Jesus' accession as a counter-emperor.<sup>13</sup> Through engagement with diverse primary sources from the Hellenistic and Roman eras, the dove will be interpreted as an omen and counter-symbol to the Roman eagle, which was a public portent of divine favor, election, and ascension to imperial power. Concomitantly the overall reading challenges the supposedly 'low' christological connotations of such an adoption to divine sonship.

10 This is the topic of my book, *The Christian Son of God in the Roman World* (New York: Oxford University, projected 2011–12). The analysis of how the concept 'divine' applies to the Roman emperors is important but cannot be undertaken here. Cf. I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), and M. Peppard, 'To Deify Him Even More: Shifting Perspectives on Divinity and Emperor Worship in the Roman World', *Early Christianity* (forthcoming, 2011).

11 Some specialized studies include T. H. Kim, 'The Anarthrous *huios theou* in Mark 15:39 and the Roman Imperial Cult', *Bib* 79 (1998) 221–41; and R. Mowery, 'Son of God in Roman Imperial Titles and Matthew', *Bib* 83 (2002) 100–110. But scholars are just beginning to interpret the 'son of God' connection between the emperor and Jesus Christ, e.g. A. Yarbro Collins, 'Mark and His Readers: The Son of God Among Greeks and Romans', *HTR* 93 (2000) 85–100; and A. Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (ed. H. W. Attridge; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 2007) 767–8. C. P. Thiede, *Jesus und Tiberius: Zwei Söhne Gottes* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2004) takes an iconoclastic approach to the issue.

12 I do not mean to reinforce an artificial divide between 'Jewish' and 'Roman' listeners. I think the audience of Mark is diverse, and many of its members were culturally variegated in themselves. But imagining a listener attuned to Roman culture, even first as a heuristic device, allows us to imagine the reception of the text differently.

13 By counter-emperor, I do not mean simply that Jesus is depicted as *against* the emperor. I use 'counter' in the sense of musical *counterpoint*, which is a musical figure or theme that is independent but also interdependent with another musical line. The counterpoint is constantly interacting with the other line and in some sense drawing its motif from the pervasive melody.

### 1. Roman Emperor as ‘Son of God’: Origin and Propagation of the Title

To the Emperor Caesar, God, Son of God, Augustus  
—inscription from Macedonia<sup>14</sup>

According to standard introductions, the origin of the ‘son of god’ title in the Roman Empire is simply explained. Julius Caesar was considered divine during his lifetime by some and was, in any case, declared a god of the Roman state—*divus Iulius*—after his assassination.<sup>15</sup> During the ensuing battle for power with Mark Antony, Octavian (later ‘Augustus’) used his status as Caesar’s son to bolster his legitimacy—a status that Antony had desired for himself.<sup>16</sup> Octavian was therefore able to call himself, and was called, *divi filius* or ‘son of god’. This claim of continuity with Caesar was sufficient to rouse troops and public support for the defeat of his rivals and consolidation of imperial powers. So goes the handbook version, and it is correct, as far as it goes.

But there is much more to say, a series of questions to be explored. Why did Octavian choose this particular claim to portray his legitimacy? To what social mores was he appealing? Did it matter that he was not a biological son of Caesar, but an adopted son? Within what matrix of cultural practices was that intelligible? After Augustus, how did divine sonship propagate through later emperors?

The adoption of Octavian by Julius Caesar is described by several ancient sources, some of which date from the Augustan age.<sup>17</sup> Although Caesar had a

14 [ἀντοκράτορι Καίσαρι θεῶι θεοῦ [υἱῶι] Σεβαστῶ. V. Ehrenberg and A. H. M. Jones, *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus & Tiberius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2nd ed. 1955) no. 108; cf. no. 115 and esp. no. 88: ‘Tiberius Caesar Augustus, God, son of the August Gods, Emperor of land and sea, Benefactor and Savior of the whole world’. There are many regional studies for relevant data, e.g. for the Roman province of Greece, see M. Kantiréa, *Les dieux et les dieux augustes: Le culte impérial en Grèce sous les Julio-claudiens et les Flaviens: Etudes épigraphiques et archéologiques* (ΜΕΛΕΤΗΜΑΤΑ 50; Athens: Κέντρον Ἑλληνικῆς καὶ Ρωμαιοῦς Ἀρχαιότητος τοῦ Ἑθνικοῦ Ἰδρύματος Ἑρευνῶν; Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 2007).

15 1 Jan. 42 BCE, after which Octavian was *divi filius*. Expert and distinctive assessments of Caesar’s divinity can be found in L. R. Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* (Middletown: American Philological Association, 1931) 58–99; S. Weinstock, *Divus Julius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971); and Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 54–72. The topic cannot be treated here, except as it relates to the issue of divine sonship. On the translation of *divus* as ‘god’, see Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 65–7.

16 Cf. Nicolaus of Damascus *Life of Augustus* 21, where Antony was thought to have overly exalted Caesar during the Lupercalia in the hopes of being adopted as his son. *Nicolaus of Damascus’ Life of Augustus* (Smith College Classical Studies 4; Northampton, 1923). Cf. Appian *Civil Wars* 3.16–19.

17 The adoption of Octavian is described in: Nicolaus of Damascus *Life* 8, 11, 13, 17–18, 29–30; Livy *Periochae* 116.5; Appian *Civil Wars* 3.11–14; Suetonius *Jul.* 83.2; *Aug.* 7.2; 94.11.

biological son, Caesarion, by Cleopatra, he had long showed favor for Octavian, his great-nephew. Before he died, he had adopted Octavian in his will—a quasi-legal practice usually called ‘testamentary adoption’—but kept this fact secret from Octavian.<sup>18</sup> While alive, however, Caesar’s special fondness for Octavian, and even his treatment of him as a son, was clear to those who spent time with them together.<sup>19</sup> His decision to make Octavian his heir was further strengthened by favorable omens.<sup>20</sup> It was also said that Octavian’s mother, Atia, had been visited and impregnated by Apollo.<sup>21</sup> Just as Caesar’s own divinity was supported by divine ancestry, traced to Venus through Aeneas, so would Octavian’s be secured as a ‘son of Apollo’. If anyone was to carry on the charismatic leadership of Caesar, it was this young man.

Octavian, for his part, preferred to be ‘son of god’ (that is, the son of *divus Iulius*) rather than ‘son of Apollo’, though both lineages helped establish his augustness. Surprisingly, after his divine adoptive father had been assassinated, he seems to have been only briefly vexed by the burden of inheriting the name, property, *genius*, and status of *divus Iulius*. Some relatives encouraged him to refuse the adoption out of fear for his safety amid political turmoil. But he decided that now, as Caesar’s son, he must avenge his father’s murder and carry on the noble Julian *gens*.<sup>22</sup> He called himself, ‘Caesar, son of Caesar’, and most famously, *divi filius*. His filial connection to Caesar won him great public support,<sup>23</sup> not to mention a vast entourage of clients, so the *divi filius* title was disseminated in coins, inscriptions, and monuments as part of official titulature.<sup>24</sup> Aside from the name ‘Caesar’ itself, the ‘son of god’ title was what most enabled the transition to Octavian’s rule to be interpreted in the terms of Roman dynastic ideology.

And yet a paradox lies at the core of this ideology: after Octavian secured sole rule over the Empire, the so-called Julio-Claudian ‘dynasty’ had no small amount of trouble propagating itself through natural, begotten sons. The emperor was actually made ‘son of god’ through the act of adoption, and this fact caused tension between ideologies of natural (begotten) sons and adopted (made) sons

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Cf. M. E. Deutsch, ‘Caesar’s Son and Heir’, *California Publications in Classical Philology* 9.6 (1928) 149–200.

18 Cf. W. Schmitthenner, *Oktavian und das Testament Cäsars* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1952). I call it ‘quasi-legal’ because it was not present in the law codes but was enacted through a legally binding document.

19 Nicolaus of Damascus *Life* 8, 11.

20 Suetonius *Aug.* 94.11, discussed below.

21 Suetonius *Aug.* 94.4. Cf. Dio 45.2.

22 Appian *Civil Wars* 3.11; Nicolaus of Damascus *Life* 18.

23 Nicolaus of Damascus *Life* 30.

24 Examples abound, but for the beginning of the title, see Taylor, *Divinity*, 106.

throughout the first century of the principate. Moreover, the fact that subsequent emperors (after Augustus) used and were called by the title might lead one to ask whether it denoted anything at all about sonship (either natural or adoptive). Perhaps the ‘son of god’ title was just honorific. Or, to re-frame the issue: in the mid-first century, as the ‘son of god’ title was also starting to be used for Jesus Christ, did it refer to an actual process of imperial sonship, whether begetting or adoption, or was it merely one of the emperor’s titles of exaltation?

It is tempting at first to see the title as just one among many honorific expressions. However, the evidence suggests that the begetting and making of imperial sons was charted quite carefully by residents of the Empire, especially during the Julio-Claudian ‘dynasty’. People took note of who was born and adopted in the imperial family. Furthermore, a helpful inscription noting Nero’s divine sonship comes from the time *after* his adoption by Claudius but *before* his accession to imperial power (between 50–54 CE), thus showing that the ‘son of god’ title was connected more to his adoption than to his rule.<sup>25</sup> At the end of the Julio-Claudian ‘dynasty’, the fictive lineage of sons experienced a rupture—the ‘Year of Four Emperors’ (69 CE). When Vespasian and the Flavians rose to power, the ‘son of god’ title still drew on images of divine lineage, but the new era necessitated a shift in understanding. That is to say, the fact that Vespasian could be called ‘Caesar’ and ‘son of god’, although he had neither divine begetting nor imperial adoption to justify the titles, demonstrates how the terms could sometimes stand as honorifics that could be divorced from their origins.<sup>26</sup>

### 1.1. *Begotten or Made?*

The tension between begotten and made divine sonship began with Julius Caesar and Augustus. During his ascendancy to divine status, Julius Caesar relied upon and propagated the image of his divine ancestry. He traced his genealogy to Aeneas, son of Venus, and her importance in Rome was starkly augmented by Caesar’s new temple to *Venus Genetrix* (dedicated 46 BCE) in his *Forum Iulium*.<sup>27</sup> In this grand building project, he honored Venus as a divine ancestor and invoked her patronage on the whole city. Such claims of divine ancestry were common among nobility from republican times, even if they were not

25 O. Kern, *Die Inschriften von Magnesia am Mäander* (Berlin, 1900) no. 157b, housed in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Cf. a ‘son of god’ inscription to Drusus the Younger, who was in line to be emperor but never acceded to power (*IG II<sup>2</sup>* 3257).

26 He took ‘Caesar’ in his official titulature, and ‘son of god’ is found, for example, in a plaque from Achaia (*IG II<sup>2</sup>* 3281); cf. *RIC* 2.127 n. 93. His deathbed utterance is well known: *Vae, puto deus fio* (‘Oh dear, I think I’m becoming a god’), Suetonius *Vesp.* 23.

27 On his connection to Aeneas, cf. Dio 41.34.1. On the temple of Venus Genetrix, cf. Weinstock, *Divus Julius*, 80–90.

always believed.<sup>28</sup> But Caesar's *own* achievement of divine status changed the tenor of subsequent claims. When Octavian trumpeted himself as 'son of god', he needed only to appeal to his divine adoptive father, not a distant figure from hoary antiquity. Divine ancestry shifted to divine sonship.

In fact, Octavian wanted to have it both ways—he was a 'son of god' by Caesar's adoption and a 'son of Apollo' by divine begetting. (Add in his divine ancestry from Mars and the claims that he was a 'new Romulus' re-founding Rome, and one can see how his divine connections were diverse and powerful.)<sup>29</sup> In his competition with Antony for sole possession of Roman *imperium*, he used both aspects of his divine sonship: the filial connection to Caesar swayed the troops and much of the public, while the patronage of Apollo served to rival Antony's self-presentation as Dionysus or Hercules.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, though, the connection to Caesar proved most powerful, and it was this particular divine relationship—*divi filius*—that was propagated by adoption through the Julio-Claudian 'dynasty'.

As the divinity of the emperors—and of the whole imperial house as *domus divina*<sup>31</sup>—became a central aspect of imperial ideology over time, claims to divine ancestry diminished in number and power. Olivier Hekster has persuasively argued that the Augustan preference for sonship to a divine emperor, rather than a distant divine genealogy, continued and intensified for subsequent emperors.<sup>32</sup> He concludes, 'The impact of empire, through the centrality and divinity of the Roman emperor, had made emphasis on divine genealogies a practice of the remote past'.<sup>33</sup> To be 'son of god' in the Roman Empire, in the time period under consideration, meant primarily to be the son of the emperor—whether begotten or made. For the divine sonship of the Roman emperor, both begetting and adoption functioned to grant legitimacy, though in different modes. Both have resonance in a Roman understanding of father-son relations.

For Augustus, the different expressions of divine sonship were mutually beneficial, as stated above. For the other famous 'son of God', the situation was surprisingly similar. In the first century, before the philosophically rooted, Nicene

28 Cf. T. P. Wiseman, 'Domi Nobiles and the Roman Cultural Elite', *Les 'Bourgeoisies' municipales italiennes aux IIe et Ier siècles av. J.-C.* (ed. M. Cébeillac-Gervasoni; Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique; Naples: Bibliothèque de l'Institut français de Naples, 1983) 298–306. Cf. the skepticism of Seneca toward such genealogies (*De Beneficiis* 3.28.2).

29 Augustus crowned his new forum with the temple of Mars Ultor, dedicated to Mars in 2 BCE for aid in avenging the murder of Caesar (*ultor*, 'avenger').

30 Taylor, *Divinity*, 138–41.

31 D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1987–92) 2.423–35.

32 O. Hekster, 'Descendants of Gods: Legendary Genealogies in the Roman Empire', *The Impact of Imperial Rome on Religions, Ritual, and Religious Life in the Roman Empire* (ed. L. de Blois, P. Funke, and J. Hahn; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 24–35.

33 Hekster, 'Descendants', 35.

understanding of divine sonship became the standard, Jesus' status as 'son of God' was grounded in multiple claims: there were dynastic considerations in depicting him as a son of David, who himself was a royal son of God; his miraculous infancy and childhood narratives suggested a divine begottenness from birth; and his baptismal experience suggested an adult divine election or adoption.<sup>34</sup> Yet it is not surprising that a concept as challenging to grasp as divine sonship should be expressed in diverse, and even mutually exclusive, ways. One ancient scholar, well known for grappling with the concept of divine sonship, expressed the tension of the begotten/made distinction in these words: 'concerning subjects that are obscure, and which require advancement toward understanding, often not only different but even contradictory demonstrations can become clarifications of the things sought for'. The source of this quotation is Athanasius, who favorably excerpted these words while defending a colleague's beliefs about the divine sonship of Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup> Even Athanasius himself, champion of Nicene orthodoxy *par excellence*, acknowledged the complexity of portraying divine sonship. Imagine then the difficulty set before the evangelist Mark: if it is challenging to contemplate divine sonship, how much more to narrate it? Where would one begin?

## 2. Baptism as Adoption

Calling him 'son', Galba led Piso into the praetorian camp,  
and before the assembly, he adopted him.

—Suetonius *Galba* 17

‘σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα’.<sup>36</sup> This divine voice at Jesus' baptism has usually been regarded by commentators as a composite allusion to

34 On the different inflections of 'son of God' in Christology, see A. Yarbro Collins and J. J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). My essay focuses on the baptism in Mark (as opposed to Matthew or Luke) because of its possible Roman provenance and the absence of a birth narrative.

35 During his Nicene-era christological debate, he was defending the pre-Nicene position of Dionysius of Alexandria. Greek: τῶν ἀγνωσμένων, καὶ προσαγωγῆς εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν δεομένων, οὐ μόνον ἀλλοῖα πολλάκις, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὑπεναντία τεκμήρια γίνεται τῶν ἐπιζητουμένων δηλώματα. Athanasius, *De Sententia Dionysii* 18 [79]; *PG* 25b.508; critical edition in H.-G. Opitz, ed., *Athanasius Werke* 2.1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1935) 46–67.

36 I translate the baptismal voice as 'You are my beloved son, whom I am pleased to choose', which will sound unfamiliar to most readers of English Bibles because the translation of the κεν ('well pleased') has influenced almost every subsequent English translation. But that translation, which implies static approval of a pre-existing condition, does not adequately portray the verb's dynamic agency. Most uses of the verb connote both 'pleasement/delight' and 'choice/selection' (e.g., 1 Macc 10.47; Ps 151.5//11QPs<sup>a</sup> XXVIII). Cf. G. Schrenk, 'εὐδοκέω,



Jewish scriptures.<sup>37</sup> The argument goes: a listener attuned to the scriptures probably had a category in his or her mind into which to assimilate the voice as a characterization of Jesus; this new ‘anointed one’ was construed in terms of messianic expectations, which perhaps combined Davidic kingship with Isaianic restoration. My argument does not flatly reject such suggested allusions. Instead this essay offers a different reading of the scene, an interpretation that conjectures how a Roman listener might have understood the overall event—an adult male being declared a son with the accompanying descent of a bird. What category would a listener attuned to Roman culture have had in his or her mind? And what might Mark have had in his mind, when he attempted to depict Jesus’ divine sonship in a Roman milieu?<sup>38</sup>

It will now come as no surprise that my argument favors the ancient practice of adoption.<sup>39</sup> But when this essay suggests that the baptismal scene would have been interpreted as an adoption, the implications of adoption should be understood differently than they have been by previous scholarship.<sup>40</sup> The very mention of the word ‘adoption’ in the same sentence as ‘Jesus’ can stymie a conversation and kindle the ire of typically placid scholars. Furthermore, since Harnack’s *History of Dogma* popularized the term, ‘adoptionism’ has become

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εὐδοκία’, *TDNT* 2.738–51. The rendering ‘pleased to choose’ resembles the French translation in *La Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible* (the ‘TOB’, 1975–76): ‘il m’a plu de te choisir’.

37 This general picture is supported by: V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: MacMillan, 1959); C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1963); W. L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (Word Biblical Commentary 34A; Dallas: Word Books, 1989); R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000); F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002); and R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

38 Mark’s association with Rome is well known from ancient testimonia and defended by many modern scholars. Especially germane to my topic is Craig A. Evans, ‘Mark’s Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel’, *Journal for the Study of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000) 67–81, which argues for a ‘Roman reading’ of part of Mark’s prologue. I will not here take up the issue of Mark’s provenance, although I think Rome is the most likely candidate. In any case, the spread of Roman imperial ideology went far beyond the *pomerium* of the city: it was similarly propagated—and just as vital—at the distant frontier.

39 The full version of this argument is forthcoming in Peppard, *Christian Son of God in the Roman World*. Some scholars have been open to this reading, e.g., John Donahue and Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Sacra Pagina 2; Collegeville: Liturgical, 2002) 67–9; and Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 150.

40 For an example of the standard dogmatic rejection of an adoptionist reading, cf. J. R. Edwards, ‘The Baptism of Jesus According to the Gospel of Mark’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991) esp. 55–7.

one of heresiology's black holes, a center of gravity which collects into itself multifarious constellations of 'low' Christology, obscuring any nuanced perspective on them.<sup>41</sup>

But adoption has been misconstrued, and an analogy might help to explain how. Not long ago, most biblical scholars thought they had an adequate understanding of slavery in the Roman Empire. They maintained an unstated assumption that slaves were destitute, without hope, at the bottom of the social system. But research has shown that this picture of Roman slavery looks more like the popular American visualization of slavery—gleaned unconsciously from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Civil War movies—than the ancient Roman economy of status. In his book *Slavery as Salvation*, for example, Dale Martin demonstrated that most biblical scholars carried around an image of ancient Roman slavery that ignored a key aspect—the use of slavery as upward mobility in the Roman Empire.<sup>42</sup> Through an examination of the classical sources and material culture, Martin illuminated a new way of understanding the motifs of slavery, manumission, and freedom in Pauline soteriology.

I contend that there is an analogous misconception among biblical scholars about adoption in Roman culture.<sup>43</sup> The crucial unstated modern assumption is that adopted sons carried a lower status than biological sons in the Roman conception of the family. In some cases this was true. But the creation of fictive kinship was common in the Roman world, and it was binding. Far from carrying a stigma, adoption could be a vehicle for prestige.<sup>44</sup> What is more, the most important and visible Roman family in the first century, the imperial family, executed many high-profile adoptions which contributed to a burgeoning imperial ideology. By applying our understanding of how adopted sons were viewed in

41 A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* (7 vols.; Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976) uses the term to discuss earliest Christology (1.183–204), the later Roman monarchian adoptionists (3.14–51), and the adoptionism of eighth-century Spain (5.278–92). M. F. Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism Through the Centuries* (Oxford/New York: Clarendon, 1996), argues that Arianism has served the archetypal function I here ascribe to adoptionism. Marcionism also performed a similar function in ancient heresiography.

42 D. B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990).

43 The best treatment of adoption in Roman society is C. Kunst, *Römische Adoption: Zur Strategie einer Familienorganisation* (Hennef: Marthe Clauss, 2005). Cf. S. Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992); M. Corbier, 'Divorce and Adoption as Roman Familial Strategies (*Le Divorce et l'adoption 'en plus'*), *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome* (ed. B. Rawson; Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 47–78; J. F. Gardner, *Family and Familia in Roman Law and Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) 114–208; H. S. Nielsen, 'Quasi-Kin, Quasi-Adoption and the Roman Family', *Adoption et Fosterage* (ed. M. Corbier; Paris: De Boccard, 1999) 249–62. On the political aspects, in addition to Kunst, cf. M.-H. Prévost, *Les Adoptions politiques à Rome sous la République et le Principat* (Paris: Sirey, 1949).

44 Cf. Kunst, *Römische Adoption*, esp. 59–62.

Roman culture and the imperial family, we can better understand how Mark and others depicted the relationship of Jesus and God as son and father.

This is not to say that Mark was ‘adoptionist’ in the usual sense of the term, which tends to be an imprecise catch-all for ‘low’ Christologies, as noted above. Mark’s Christology was not connected to the second- and third-century Roman ‘adoptionists’ (Theodotus and followers) nor somehow related to the so-called ‘adoptionism’ of eighth-century Spain.<sup>45</sup> But Mark’s Christology can be interpreted as ‘adoptionist’, if by that term one means that Mark narratively characterizes Jesus in comparison with the adopted Roman emperor, the most powerful man-god in the universe. If readers of Mark consider the resonance of the concept of adoption in the Roman ideology of Mark’s era, it does not appear to be a ‘low’ Christology at all. To the contrary, adoption is how the most powerful man in the world gained his power.

### 3. Dove as Omen

Διατί δὲ ἐν εἴδει περιστερᾶς; Ἡμερον τὸ ζῶον καὶ καθαρὸν.

But why in the form of a dove? Gentle is that animal, and pure.

—John Chrysostom *Hom. in Matt.* 12.3

*...neque imbellem feroces progenerant aquilae columbam.*

...and courageous eagles do not beget unwarlike doves.

—Horace *Odes* 4.4.32

The long history of NT exegesis never fails to provide abundant interpretations—from the skeptical to the whimsical to the brilliant—of the smallest words and phrases. The words used by Mark to describe the spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism, ‘as a dove’ (ὡς περιστερόν), certainly do not disappoint in this respect. The poet Wallace Stevens penned ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’, but one recent NT commentary offers *sixteen* ways of interpreting the dove.<sup>46</sup> Other studies describe even more interpretations, many of which

45 On Theodotus and followers, see B. D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1993) 47–54; and W. A. Löhr, ‘Theodotus der Lederarbeiter und Theodotus der Bankier—ein Beitrag zur römischen Theologiegeschichte des zweiten und dritten Jahrhunderts’, *ZNW* 87 (1996) 101–25. On the so-called ‘adoptionism’ of eighth-century Spain, see J. C. Cavadini, *The Last Christology of the West: Adoptionism in Spain and Gaul, 785–820* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1993).

46 W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997) 1.330–4. To these we now add E. P. Dixon, ‘Descending Spirit and Descending Gods: A “Greek” Interpretation of the Spirit’s “Descent as a Dove” in Mark 1:10’, *JBL* 128 (2009) 759–80, which interprets the dove in connection with the common Greek mythological topos of gods descending in human form.

stretch the boundaries of plausibility.<sup>47</sup> Despite these many options, there seems to be a consensus view, namely that the spirit which descends as a dove alludes to the spirit that hovered over the face of the waters at creation (Gen 1.2).<sup>48</sup> The allusion rests on the connection between water and spirit in the two images. This consensus view is far from perfect, since the spirit in Genesis is only linked to a bird through an interpretation of the verb (תַּרְחַף/ἐπεφέρετο). Was the spirit ‘hovering’ over the waters *like a bird*? Genesis is not explicit.<sup>49</sup> R. T. France adopts the consensus view but chooses not to speculate about the dove *per se*: ‘we are not aware of any ready-made dove symbolism at the time of Mark, and it seems futile to try to provide one. More probably the species of bird is not at issue, any more than it was in Gen 1.2; the dove is mentioned simply as one of the commonest and most familiar birds’.<sup>50</sup> Notice how, even as he affirms the connection with Gen 1.2, this author reveals its tenuousness. He proposes that ‘the species of bird is not at issue, any more than it was in Gen 1.2’, which would be a fine argument, except that there is no bird in Gen 1.2!

This essay cannot address the many options for interpreting the dove. Some of the proposed allusions are tenable, but many of them are fanciful and most are only attested from sources centuries later than Mark. Furthermore, this essay tries to imagine how a listener attuned to Roman culture might understand the dove, but most of the interpretations offered in commentaries are based squarely in the Palestinian or Babylonian Jewish traditions. The few exceptions are suggested allusions to Persian or other Near Eastern motifs. Again, let me reiterate that the connections to Jewish motifs are not rejected by my argument; rather, it presumes that Mark was written for a diverse audience.

### 3.1. Bird Omens in Roman Culture

In many ancient Mediterranean cultures, the flight of birds was pregnant with meaning. Individual birds helped seafarers navigate, while flocks of birds marked the seasons. Birds were ‘messengers’ of other meanings in diverse ways

47 Discussed in S. Gero, ‘The Spirit as a Dove at the Baptism of Jesus’, *NovT* 18 (1976) 17–35.

48 E.g., Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 164–7. Some have also proposed an allusion to Noah’s messenger bird (Gen 8.8–12), since the bird brings a sort of good news of salvation (see, e.g., Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 332, for details and discussion of problems).

49 The verb is used in Deut 32.11 to describe a bird, but in Jer 23.9 it portrays the shaking of bones. Another important passage is 4Q521, where the Lord’s spirit ‘will hover upon the poor [ועל עניים רווח תרחף]’ (2.2). The anointed one is also mentioned in this fragment, but the connection between the Lord and the anointed one is unclear. Furthermore, the spirit hovers here just as in Gen 1.2, but the issue for my essay is to what degree that invokes a bird. 4Q521 gives no reason, apart from the verb, to interpret the spirit as a bird. Finally, the spirit here hovers on the poor, not the anointed one.

50 France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 79.

throughout the Near East.<sup>51</sup> Romans took special concern for augury, a precise practice that observed the flight of birds in the quadrants of the sky. But they were also attuned to the omens borne by individual birds in flight, omens which were not authorized by a college of augurs but rather by common opinion. One could say that *Romans used omens* to interpret and explain their experience of the world in analogous ways to how *Jews used scriptures* to interpret and explain their experience of the world. If scholars have had trouble interpreting the baptismal dove, perhaps that is because they have been using too limited a set of cultural symbols. So what might the alighting of a bird on a person have meant in a Roman context?

Suetonius, the Roman historian and collector of tales, reports many bird omens from the lives of the emperors. For instance, he describes how an eagle was an omen of Domitian's victory over Lucius Antonius. 'Even before news of this success arrived, Domitian had wind of it from portents: on the very day of battle, a huge eagle embraced his statue at Rome with its wings, screeching triumphantly'.<sup>52</sup> In all his accounts, Suetonius is a rich source of common Roman assessment of omens such as birds, weather, dreams, oracles, soothsayers, and unusual spectacles. Unlike other Roman historians, he prefers to record these kinds of omens instead of the official public portents and divinations common since republican Rome. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill notes that 'Suetonius' signs are of the types that best reveal the destinies of individuals'.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, he argues that 'all Suetonius' lists of signs revolve round two issues, and two only: the rise to imperial power and the fall from it'.<sup>54</sup>

For example, the accession of Claudius was predicted by a bird omen as he began public life: 'Claudius entered on his belated public career as Gaius' colleague in a two-months' consulship; and when he first entered the Forum with the consular rods, an eagle swooped down and perched on his shoulder'.<sup>55</sup> Augustus had personal eagle omens early<sup>56</sup> and late<sup>57</sup> in life but also at a key moment in his rise to power: 'At Bononia, where the army of the Triumvirs Augustus, Antony, and Lepidus was stationed, an eagle perched on Augustus' tent and defended itself vigorously against the converging attack of two ravens, bringing both of them down. This augury was noted and understood by the

51 O. Keel, *Vögel als Boten* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 14; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg, 1977).

52 Suetonius *Dom.* 6. For other eagle omens not covered in this essay, see *Galba* 4; *Vit.* 9. Trans. of Suetonius adapted from *The Twelve Caesars* (trans. R. Graves; London: Penguin, 1957).

53 A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius: The Scholar and his Caesars* (New Haven: Yale University, 1984) 192.

54 Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius*, 191.

55 Suetonius *Claud.* 7.

56 Suetonius *Aug.* 94.

57 Suetonius *Aug.* 97.

troops as portending a rupture between their three leaders, which later took place'.<sup>58</sup>

Signs illuminating the rise to imperial power are especially important to this essay because, in the years preceding the Gospel of Mark, imperial power was transmitted through adoption. The most crucial imperial adoption in this period was Augustus's adoption of Tiberius, primarily because it was the first peaceful transfer of imperial power. If Augustus had ruled because of his personal or 'charismatic authority', then it could not have been clear whether or how such rule could be passed on.<sup>59</sup> The final omens that Suetonius records before the accession of Tiberius are revealing for our purposes: 'Finally, a few days before the letter arrived recalling him from Rhodes [where he was exiled], an eagle—a bird never previously seen in the island—perched upon the roof of his house; and on the very eve of this welcome news the tunic into which he was changing seemed to be ablaze'.<sup>60</sup> The two final omens indicating the ensuing accession of Tiberius are a bird, as at the baptism of Jesus, and a transfiguration of his tunic, as happened to Jesus above Caesarea Philippi—itself the site of an imperial temple.

Suetonius's references to eagles in the life of Vespasian bear more than analogical relevance to our topic, since Vespasian's quelling of the incipient Jewish revolt catalyzed his accession to imperial power. Suetonius recounts the conditions of Vespasian's accession in the following way:

An ancient superstition was current in the East, that out of Judaea at this time would come the rulers of the world. This prediction, as the event later proved, referred to a Roman emperor, but the rebellious Jews, who read it as referring to themselves, murdered their Governor, routed the Governor of Syria when he came down to restore order, and captured an Eagle. To crush this uprising the Romans needed a strong army under an energetic commander, who could be trusted not to abuse his considerable powers. The choice fell on Vespasian.<sup>61</sup>

The fact that the Judeans 'captured an Eagle' (*rapta aquila*) was the last straw in Suetonius's account.<sup>62</sup> This symbolic action indicated the magnitude of the revolt and the necessity for a sweeping Roman military response. Later, when Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian were 'disputing the purple', an omen appeared just before the battle of Betriacum between the armies of Otho and Vitellius (69 CE): 'two eagles fought in full view of both armies, but a third appeared from the

<sup>58</sup> Suetonius *Aug.* 96.

<sup>59</sup> On the difficulties of transferring charismatic authority, see M. Weber, *Economy and Society* (2 vols.; Berkeley: University of California, 1978), 1.212–301; 2.1111–57.

<sup>60</sup> Suetonius *Tib.* 14.

<sup>61</sup> Suetonius *Vesp.* 4.

<sup>62</sup> This almost certainly alludes to the capturing of a legionary eagle from the *XII Fulminata*, a Roman legion whose remnant was later assigned to Titus for the assault on Jerusalem (cf. Josephus *BJ* 5.41).

rising sun and drove off the victor'.<sup>63</sup> This final bird omen indicated that the military leader from the East would eventually accede to imperial power over both Otho and Vitellius.

All these bird omens involve the rise to power, but Suetonius provides one omen associated explicitly with adoption—the adoption of Octavian by Caesar.

As Julius Caesar was felling a wood near Munda in Spain to clear a site for his camp, he noticed a palm-tree and ordered it to be spared, as a presage of victory. The tree then suddenly put out a new shoot which, a few days later, had grown so tall as to over-shadow it. What was more, a flock of doves began to nest in the fronds, although doves notoriously dislike hard, spiny foliage. This prodigy was the immediate reason, they say, for Caesar's desire that his grand-nephew, and no one else, should succeed him.<sup>64</sup>

This omen does not accompany the exact moment of adoption, a procedure scarcely attested in Roman historical sources, but it does relate to the moment when Caesar *knew* he would adopt Octavian. What about this omen inspired Caesar's choice? Suetonius does not interpret it. It seems clear that the 'new shoot' that sprouted from and outgrew Caesar's victory tree was understood to represent Octavian's succession of Caesar, since sprouting shoots are common in Roman folklore as symbols of successful children.<sup>65</sup> The flock of doves is open to multiple interpretations—Suetonius does not cite doves as symbols anywhere else. One likely option is that the doves, often symbolic of peacefulness in ancient Mediterranean culture (see next section), portend the *pax Romana* inaugurated with the victory of Octavian at the battle of Actium. The 'hard, spiny foliage' of the civil wars would soon be occupied by the 'doves' of imperial peace. According to the scholar of Roman omens and divination, Annie Vigourt, the doves might also have called to mind Caesar's special relationship to Venus Genetrix.<sup>66</sup>

As tempting as this final omen is for the argument of this essay, its bird imagery is ambiguous, and it seems that the sprouting tree constitutes the primary symbol. The doves add a sort of bonus to the omen. On the other hand, the frequent eagle omens exemplified above do depict a common Roman point of view: they thought that birds, especially eagles, indicated providential favor for the accession to power of the person on or near whom they alighted.<sup>67</sup>

63 Suetonius *Vesp.* 5.

64 Suetonius *Aug.* 94.

65 This is a common trope; elsewhere in Suetonius, see *Vesp.* 5.

66 A. Vigourt, *Les presages impériaux d'Auguste à Domitien* (Paris: De Boccard, 2001) 217. Cf. an anonymous *quadran*s with a bust of Venus and a dove on the reverse (*RIC* 2.218 nos. 24–25).

67 I have not documented here the use of eagles on Roman imperial coins and portraiture, but many examples could be offered. E.g., the *PROVIDENTIA DEORUM* coin of Trajan, which depicts an eagle descending toward him. In imperial ideology, *providentia* was the virtue

### 3.2 *Eagles and Doves*

Roman authors refer to doves often enough that one can get a sense of their usual symbolism. First, Roman authors occasionally associate doves with the geographical region of Syria-Palestine. For example, the Roman elegist Tibullus (c. 55 BCE—c. 19 BCE), when describing the peaceful aftermath of a military victory, writes: ‘Why should I tell how the white dove, sacred in Syria-Palestine, flies safely through the crowded cities?’<sup>68</sup> In addition to the sense that the dove was sacred to those in Syria-Palestine, there may also have been knowledge of the dove and pigeon industry in the area, which provided many birds for sacrificial offerings (e.g., Mark 11.15).<sup>69</sup>

But the most prevalent employment of the dove as a symbol occurs in relation to that most famous bird, the eagle. These two comprise a contrasting pair of birds, a recognizable juxtaposition of natural enemies (like the wolf and the lamb), in which one is the mighty predator and the other the timorous victim. Ovid portrays the pair in his *Metamorphoses*: ‘O nymph, I beg, daughter of Peneus, stay! I who pursue you am not an enemy. O nymph, stay! So lambs flee the wolf, so deer flee the lion, so doves with trembling wings flee the eagle, all things flee their enemies: but the cause of my pursuit is love’.<sup>70</sup>

Another example of the traditional contrast between eagle and dove occurs in Horace’s *Odes*. He devotes *Ode* 4.4 to praise of Drusus’s military might on the northern frontier (c. 13 BCE). After noting how the Claudians were nurtured in youth by the ‘fatherly disposition of Augustus’ (*Augusti paternus animus*), he continues by describing how strength begets strength in the animal kingdom: ‘strong men are created (only) by strong and good men; in both steers and horses appears the *virtus* of their fathers, and courageous eagles do not beget unwarlike doves’.<sup>71</sup> The fatherly Augustus is thus imagined as an eagle that produced a succession of warlike eagles in the Julio-Claudian ‘dynasty’. The final two lines of the stanza epitomize Horace’s style of antithetic juxtaposition. The qualities of the two birds are set side-by-side (*imbellem feroces*) to prepare for the juxtaposition of the two nouns to complete the stanza (*aquilae columbam*). Other examples could be brought to confirm the contrast of eagle and dove in the

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often associated with an emperor’s provision of sons/heirs to ensure a stable succession of power. *RIC* 2.415 no. 589 (= pl. XV.304); cf. *RIC* 2.418 no. 602.

68 Tibullus *Elegiae* 1.7.18, c. 27 BCE. Latin: *Quid referam, ut volitet crebras intacta per urbes / Alba Palaestino sancta columba Syro?*

69 On doves and pigeons in this area, cf. ‘Doves and Pigeons’, *ABD* 6.1144-5.

70 Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1.504-7. Relevant Latin: *sic aquilam penna fugiunt trepidante columbae, / hostes quaeque suos.*

71 Horace *Odes* 4.4.29-32. Latin: *fortes creantur fortibus et bonis; / est in iuencis, est in equis patrum / virtus, neque imbellem feroces / progenerant aquilae columbam.*



Roman worldview.<sup>72</sup> But we have enough here to establish that the bellicose eagle was the primary symbol of Roman military might and concomitantly of Roman imperial ideology, while the dove was a contrasting symbol of fear or nonviolence.

Several examples of extra-biblical Jewish literature also utilize these symbolic roles of eagles and doves. Josephus expresses a Jewish attitude toward the Roman eagle in the build-up to the Jewish War with Rome. For example, he recounts the famous tearing down of the golden eagle, which constituted the apex of disgust with Herod, especially his collaboration with Rome. After outlining the pay-offs that Herod had made to various members of the imperial family and his own kin (*AJ* 17.146-8), Josephus narrates how Judas and Matthias, two men ‘well beloved by the people’, instigated many young men ‘to pull down all those works which the king had erected contrary to the law of their fathers’ (*AJ* 17.149). He provides the example that Herod had erected a large golden eagle over the great gate of the Temple; although Herod claimed this eagle was dedicated to God, it was a not-so-subtle honoring of Rome that overlooked the Jerusalem Temple. Monuments such as these were common among all the client kingdoms of the Roman Empire, but the Judeans would not endure it because of their stance against idolatry. Therefore, ‘in the very middle of the day, they got upon the place, they pulled down the eagle, and cut it into pieces with axes, while a great number of the people were in the temple’ (*AJ* 17.155).

Josephus also provides a clear analysis of the military symbolism which the legionary eagle bore for the Romans and their enemies. As mentioned above, the Judeans had stolen a legionary eagle from the *XII Fulminata* legion in 66 CE. Josephus portrays the position of such an eagle in the military procession of Vespasian’s army in Galilee:

After these came the commanders of the cohorts and tribunes, having around them selected soldiers. Then came the standards surrounding the eagle, which is at the head of every *Roman* legion, both the king and the most warlike of all birds, which seems to them a sure sign of empire, and an omen that they shall conquer all against whom they march. These sacred things are followed by the trumpeters...<sup>73</sup>

The eagle leads every Roman legion; it is the ‘king’ (βασιλεύς) and ‘most warlike’ (ἀλκιμώτατος) of all birds, a ‘sure sign of empire’ (τῆς ἡγεμονίας τεκμήριον), and an ‘omen’ of victory (κληδών). From the Roman perspective, the eagle was

72 In a letter to Marcus Aurelius, Fronto refers to ‘sheep and doves with wolves and eagles’ (*oves et columbae cum lupis et aquilis*, *Ep.* 4.1) as part of a legend of Orpheus. The sheep-wolf and eagle-dove pairs symbolize archetypal enemies, which Fronto claims Marcus Aurelius has brought together in harmony. For a quite different use, see Pliny *Ep.* 9.25, in which he calls his little letters ‘doves’ as a contrast to his recipient’s military standards (‘eagles’).

73 Josephus *BJ* 3.122-4. Trans. adapted from LCL.

the legion's 'very own *numen*', or divine power.<sup>74</sup> With this symbolism, it is not surprising that the *XII Fulminata* was terrified after having its legionary eagle stolen or that the golden eagle over the Temple incited a minor sedition.

The apocalypse called 4 Ezra employs the symbol of an eagle in the seer's fifth vision (4 Ezra 11–12). 'I saw rising from the sea an eagle that had twelve feathered wings and three heads ... [I]t reigned over the earth and over those who inhabit it. And I saw how all things under heaven were subjected to it, and no one spoke against it' (11.1, 5–6). The eagle is 'the fourth kingdom that appeared in a vision to your brother Daniel. But it was not explained to him as I now explain to you or have explained it' (12.11–12). The author explicitly interacts with the four kingdoms vision of Dan 7 and reinterprets the fourth kingdom as Rome (whereas it originally symbolized the Greek or Macedonian Empire in Daniel). The vision concludes with a lion, which chastises the eagle for unrighteousness and represents 'the Messiah whom the Most High has kept until the end of days' (12.32). Although 4 Ezra chooses to symbolize Rome as a bellicose eagle, it does not symbolize Israel's salvation with a contrasting bird of peace. Rather, the author chooses the king of the land (a lion) to overpower the king of the air (an eagle). But elsewhere the author acknowledges that, among the species of birds, God has selected the dove for Israel: in the second vision, Ezra says, 'O sovereign Lord,...from all the birds that have been created you have named for yourself one dove, and from all the flocks that have been made you have provided for yourself one sheep' (5.26).<sup>75</sup>

Two other extra-biblical works provide Jewish perspectives on the dove that illuminate the matter at hand.<sup>76</sup> Like Josephus and 4 Ezra, the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo probably emerged from Palestinian Judaism in the first century CE. Among several different uses of the dove as a symbol in this work, one scene imagines the dove as a long-suffering or even forgiving bird. In his targumic interpretation of the Jephthah story, the author expands at length on Judg 11.7. Jephthah protests to the elders of Gilead because they had

74 There are myriad examples of how the eagle symbolized Roman military might. In a pivotal battle against the Cherusci at the entrance to a forest, 'the finest of auguries' appeared: eight eagles entering the forest. Tiberius, the commander, said, 'Go and follow the Roman birds, the legions' very own divine powers!' (*sequerentur Romanas avis, propria legionum numina*; Tacitus *Ann.* 2.17).

75 The author probably draws on the animal symbolism of a text like Ps 74: 'Remember this, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs, and an impious people reviles your name. Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals' (Ps 74.18–19). It is true that the animal here is a תור (turtle-dove), not a יונה (dove, pigeon), but the terminology oscillates, especially in translations of the Hebrew.

76 There are, of course, other references to Israel as a dove in the Bible and Jewish literature that do not directly inform my understanding of the eagle/dove trope. Nor have I incorporated the aphoristic simile in Matt 10.16, portraying doves as 'pure/innocent' (ἀκέραιος) or 'most simple' (ἀπλοῦς/ἁπλοῦς, Codex D).

previously rejected him but now they begged his help in their time of distress; in short, he sternly rebukes them as hypocrites. But they respond thus: 'Let the dove to which Israel has been compared teach you, because when her young are taken from her, still she does not depart from her place, but she puts away the injury done her and forgets it as if it were in the depth of the abyss' (Ps-Philo 39.5).<sup>77</sup> As opposed to the aggressive eagle, the dove here depicts clemency and a spirit of forgiveness.

The *Letter of Aristeas* contains an ethical interpretation of doves in terms of Jewish halakha. The text is well known for its allegorical and ethical interpretations of various commandments and prohibitions of the Torah. The author desires to demonstrate that the laws are not primitive or arbitrary but 'in each particular everything has a profound reason for it, both the things from which we abstain in use and those of which we partake' (143).<sup>78</sup> As one example of this rational basis, Aristeas explains why some birds are permitted and others forbidden.

The birds which we use are all gentle and of exceptional cleanliness, their food consisting of wheat and pulse—such birds as doves (περιστερράι), turtledoves, [etc.] ... As to the birds which are forbidden, you will find wild and carnivorous kinds, and the rest which dominate by their own strength, and who find their food at the expense of the aforementioned domesticated birds—which is an injustice ... By calling them impure, he has thereby indicated that it is the solemn binding duty of those for whom the legislation has been established to practice righteousness and not to lord it over anyone in reliance upon their own strength, ...in the manner of the gentle creatures among the aforementioned birds ... By means of creatures like this the legislator has handed down (the lesson) to be noted by men of wisdom, that they should be righteous, and not achieve anything by brute force, nor lord it over others in reliance upon their own strength.<sup>79</sup>

For Aristeas, the salient feature of these permitted birds is gentleness, which is also construed as righteousness. The vocabulary corresponds exactly to the quotation from John Chrysostom that preceded this section of the essay: the dove is ἡμερος and καθαρός. On the contrary, the forbidden birds 'dominate by their own strength' and prey on other birds—this domination is plainly called injustice (ἀδικία). We should not forget that the first bird listed among the forbidden birds in the Levitical law is the eagle. 'And these you shall regard as abominable among the birds, and they shall not be eaten, it is an abomination—the eagle and the

77 Trans. adapted from J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1985) 2.352. A more negative interpretation of such behavior is that the doves are timorous prey, as stated in *b. B. Qam.* 93a: 'there is none among the birds more persecuted than doves'.

78 Trans. adapted from *OTP* 2.22.

79 *Let. Arist.* 144–8. Trans. adapted from *OTP* 2.22.

vulture and [etc.]' (Lev 11.13 LXX).<sup>80</sup> In the Torah, the eagle further symbolizes how a foreign nation can powerfully overtake Israel, such as Rome had done in the first century: 'The Lord will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand' (Deut 28.49). Aristeeas envisions the dove as the primary symbol of gentleness, purity, and even righteousness among the birds of the air, as opposed to the eagle, which is the abomination among birds in the Torah. Israelites are called to 'practice righteousness', like the dove, and not 'achieve anything by brute force', like the eagle.

The eagle/dove trope can even be found centuries later—in Christian discourse. In his oration on 'Holy Baptism' before baptismal candidates, Gregory of Nazianzus encourages them to protect themselves from the temptations of urban life: 'As much as possible, flee also from the marketplace along with the good company, putting on yourself the wings of an eagle—or, to speak more appropriately, of a dove. For what do you have to do with Caesar or the things of Caesar?'<sup>81</sup> It is a playful turn of phrase, of which there are many in Gregory's corpus, but as such it attests to the recognizable symbolism of the eagle/dove pair in the Roman world. The imagery was stable enough that the imperial eagle and the baptismal dove could be conjured in a quick, almost parenthetical remark. At this feast-day sermon *on baptism* in fourth-century Constantinople, Gregory knew he could play on his audience's 'common sense' interpretation of doves—a Christian counterpoint to the eagle omens and imagery of imperial lore.

#### 4. A Different Kind of Power

This foray into Roman, Jewish, and early Christian literature has wandered from the target text for our exegesis, the baptism of Jesus in Mark. With this analysis of the eagle and the dove, we can now step back to assess our original topic: when Mark depicts the dove at Jesus' baptism, what is he up to? And how might this affect a listener attuned to Roman culture? This essay has tried to show that, with the baptism, Mark begins a narrative characterization of Jesus as a counter-emperor. This Jesus of Nazareth is an adopted heir to power. The dove is a bird omen of the transmission of power from father to son. This counter-emperor will rule not in the spirit of the bellicose eagle, but in the spirit of the pure, gentle, peaceful, and even sacrificial dove.

80 The LXX states: βδέλυγμα ἐστίν—τὸν ἄετὸν...[etc.]. The proximity of these two words suggests a possible interpretation of Mark 13.14. The βδέλυγμα to which Mark refers could be the golden eagle set up over the temple by Herod. It would be difficult to argue definitively for this reading, but the historical event (combined with Mark's text) resonates with this passage of the Levitical law.

81 Gregory of Nazianzus *Or. 40.19* (*In sanctum baptisma*, PG 36.384).

Furthermore, this characterization of Jesus can be construed in terms of colonial mimicry.<sup>82</sup> In postcolonial theory, the concept of mimicry has been described as ‘a reinscription or duplication of colonial ideology by the colonized’.<sup>83</sup> It describes instances in which the colonized produces discourse that simultaneously and necessarily mimics the domination of the colonizer even as it differentiates itself and disavows the other. In the theory of Homi Bhabha, ‘colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite* ... [M]imicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal’ (italics original).<sup>84</sup> Therefore, the colonized subject is not an autonomous agent that cleanly and in its own terms renounces the colonizer. The very process and signification of disavowal is necessarily intertwined with the powerful discourse of the authoritative other. Stated another way, the act of disavowing the colonizer depends on the forms through which the colonizer enacted its domination. Bhabha again: ‘It is as if the very emergence of the “colonial” is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition *within* the authoritative discourse itself’.<sup>85</sup>

Hence the eagle and the dove: a bird descends and absolute power comes upon a son of God—almost the same, but not quite. Read in the light of Roman imperial ideology, the narrative characterization of Jesus’ baptism mimics the accession of imperial power even as it disavows the authority and methods of imperial power. It mimics Roman imperial adoption but disavows the militaristic type of power transmitted through adoption. It mimics the bird omens of Roman warfare and imperial lore but disavows the dominating war-symbol of the Roman eagle. The bird omen of the dove instead portends the accession of a different son of God, whose rise to power, though it would be mocked and suspended by the colonial authority, would ultimately be vindicated by his adoptive father.

82 The interpretation of the dove as colonial mimicry builds on—or rather, provides a theoretical foundation for—many of the astute observations about Mark and Roman power made by scholars such as D. Senior, ‘With Swords and Clubs: The Setting of Mark’s Community and His Critique of Abusive Power’, *BTB* 17 (1987) 10–20; and J. Donahue, ‘Windows and Mirrors: The Setting of Mark’s Gospel’, *CBQ* 57 (1995) 1–26. An intriguing parallel to this example of narrative mimicry is the report of the emperor Titus’s death in rabbinic literature (*Lev. Rab.* 22.3), which ends with God’s killing of Titus by means of a mosquito that transforms into a dove at the autopsy. For interpretation of this account as colonial mimicry, in part based on an eagle/dove trope, see J. Levinson, ‘“Tragedies Naturally Performed”: Fatal Charades, *Parodia Sacra*, and the Death of Titus’, *Jewish Culture and Society Under the Christian Roman Empire* (ed. R. Kalmin and S. Schwartz; Leuven: Peeters, 2003) 349–82.

83 T.-S. B. Liew, ‘Tyranny, Boundary and Might: Colonial Mimicry in Mark’s Gospel’, *JSNT* 73 (1999) 13.

84 H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 86.

85 Bhabha, *Location*, 86.