



[Mark 10:42-45](#)

Jesus contrasts the rule of the Gentiles with the Son of Man

Date: 1st CE

Place: Rome

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: The Gospel According to Mark

Reference:

10:42-45

Commentary:

In this passage, Jesus explains to his disciples that unlike the Gentile authorities (i.e. the Roman imperial system), the Son of Man does not rule over his people with force and tyranny, or with the expectation of a one-way service relationship from the subject to the master, but rather he comes to serve his people, and ultimately to die for their liberation. The followers of Jesus, therefore, must also be prepared to become servants for each other, and indeed everyone (???, verse 44). The passage comes at the end of a textual unit (8:22-10:52) which contains three predictions about Jesus's passion, and is enclosed at each end by two healings of blind people (see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, p. 391, 397-398). The entire section sets out the theme of Jesus's suffering, as well as the cost of discipleship for his followers (see M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, p. 302-304). Various interpreters have looked to Hellenistic models of kingship and rulership in order to understand the ideology behind this piece of text (see, for example, Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, p. 449), including the notion of the Hellenistic king as a servant (see David Seeley, "Rulership and Service in Mark 10:41-45"). However, the question begs as to whether Mark's author, writing most likely for a Christian audience in Rome, might have something more socio-political in mind, namely, a specific condemnation of Roman rule, which is vastly inferior to that of the Son of Man (whom the Gospel makes clear is Jesus; see Mark 13:26, 14:62), God's chosen representative on earth, who has rightful dominion over all peoples (see Daniel 7:14).

For Adam Winn ("Tyrant or Servant?" p. 325), who follows the likes of Ched Myers (*Binding the Strong Man*) and Richard Horsley (*Hearing the Whole Story*) in viewing the entire Gospel of Mark as politically charged with underlying messages about Roman rule, this passage presents a clear "political contrast between the rulers of the Roman world and Jesus and his disciples." He argues that Jesus's statement should be read in the light of ideology of Roman rule, and in particular the notion of *recusatio*, which was employed by the emperors (to varying degrees), and advocated the resisting or protesting of anything that explicitly conveyed that the emperor had absolute power, yet still enabling this power to be maintained (on this issue, see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "Civilis Princeps: Between Citizen and King"). The employment of *recusatio* is one distinctive feature of Rome's literary understanding of its emperors, and there are numerous examples of rulers either successfully utilising this, or failing to do so, and as a result, becoming unpopular with the Roman people. For example, Augustus did not want to be given the dictatorship for life, would not be addressed as "Lord" ([Suetonius, Augustus 53.1](#)), and was also reluctant to take the title of "*pater patriae*" ("Father of the Country") ([Suetonius, Augustus 52.1](#); [Res Gestae 5.1](#)). He also rejected temples in his honour ([Suetonius, Augustus 52.1](#), Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 52.35), and Tiberius similarly refused statues ([Suetonius, Tiberius 26.1](#); Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 57.9). We are told that these two emperors also showed respect to the senate – Augustus addressed them each by name and Tiberius described himself as their servant ([Suetonius, Augustus 53](#); [Res Gestae 34](#); [Suetonius, Tiberius 27-31](#)). Augustus also presented himself as a champion of free speech and Roman liberty, which was supposedly protected by Roman *lex* ("law") (coins from 28-27 BCE represent him in this way, and see also the opening of the *Res Gestae*). [Pliny's Panegyric in Praise of Trajan 65.1](#) also argues that Trajan was an emperor valued for the fact that he saw himself essentially as the same as his subjects, despite his superior status. Suetonius, *On Benefits* 4.32.2, also describes Augustus and those similar to him as sacrificing themselves (not literally, of course) to the state, which is mirrored in the characterisation of the Son of Man as a servant. At the other end of the scale, however, [Josephus, Jewish Antiquities XIX.1-2](#), suggests that Gaius's assassination was associated with the fact that he failed to listen to the requests of the *populus*. Roman ideology, therefore, certainly wanted to maintain an *image* of rulers behaving with an appropriate amount of modesty when it came to the way they allowed themselves to be praised



and remembered. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is not the impression that we get from Jesus's words, however!

Jesus commands his disciples that their power must not be exercised in the same way as the Gentile rulers. Scholars are divided over whether the two verbs used in verse 42, [ἐκταράω](#) ("lord over/ rule over") and [ἐξουσιάζω](#) ("exercise authority over"), both of which are compound verbs containing the preposition [κατά](#) ("down"), should be taken in a general sense (so, M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, p. 302), or to express something much more forceful and domineering (so, Walter Grunderman, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, p. 219, and Richard France, *A Commentary on Mark*, p. 418-419, Adam Winn, "Tyrant or Servant?", p. 342). Adam Winn argues that the notion of domineering power was incompatible with the Roman ideological notion of what rulers should be, and so Mark's audience would either take Jesus's words as a sharp critique of Roman political ideals, or as a contrast between Jesus and those emperors who were not viewed positively in this regard (such as Gaius and Nero) (see Adam Winn, "Tyrant or Servant?" p. 343-344). If the latter, then this passage might not be an outright denouncement of Roman rule, but rather a condemnation of a certain form of it, which Roman literature itself was critical of.

Keywords in the original language:

- [ἐκταράω](#)
- [ἐξουσιάζω](#)
- [κατά](#)
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Thematic keywords in English:

- [authority](#)
- [Gentiles](#)
- [imperial ideology](#)
- [Jesus](#)
- [ransom](#)
- [righteousness](#)
- [ruler](#)
- [servant](#)
- [slave](#)
- [Son of Man](#)
- [tyranny](#)

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