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Jesus in Relation to Elijah and Moses: The Public Revealing in Mark 9:14-29

Jordan Smith¹

¹⁴ When they came *back* to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and *some* scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ Immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed and *began* running up to greet Him. ¹⁶ And He asked [the disciples], “What are you discussing with them?” ¹⁷ And one of the crowd answered Him, “Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; ¹⁸ and whenever it seizes him, it slams him *to the ground* and he foams *at the mouth*, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out [or *withers away*]. I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not *do it*.” ¹⁹ And He *answered them and *said, “O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!” ²⁰ They brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he *began* rolling around and foaming *at the mouth*. ²¹ And He asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. ²² It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!” ²³ And Jesus said to him, “If You can? All things are possible to him who believes.” ²⁴ Immediately the boy’s father cried out and said, “I do believe; help my unbelief.” ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You deaf and mute spirit, I [Myself] command you, come out of him and do not enter him again.”²⁶ After crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and *the boy* became so much like a corpse that most *of them* said, “He is dead!” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up. ²⁸ When He came into *the house*, His disciples *began* questioning Him privately, “Why could we not drive it out?” ²⁹ And He said to them, “This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer.”² **Mark 9:14-29, NASB**

Throughout the Gospel of Mark there are many miracles and healings performed by Jesus, and Mark 9:14-29 is the final healing miracle in this Gospel. In many healing stories in Mark, the observers, or the person being healed, are told to keep the event secret. Jesus’ identity as the Messiah is supposed to be kept a secret by the characters, but we, as the audience of Mark, are aware from the opening verse that this is “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1, NASB). In this final healing miracle in Mark 9:14-29, the details of the healing and the unclean spirit which possesses the boy provide context for the scene, but they are of only secondary importance in the pericope. This passage immediately follows the story of the transfiguration and a discussion among Jesus, Peter, James, and John about the coming of Elijah. While the connection between Jesus and the Hebrew Bible figures of Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration is revealed to three disciples,

¹ MDiv – TH502A: Critical Analysis of Biblical Texts, Fall 2018.

² NASB. Verses 18 and 25 are variations suggested by the NASB footnotes whereas Verse 18 is my addition from other translations.

in this final healing story, this connection is repeated for a larger crowd, and the authority Jesus is declared to have on the mountaintop is demonstrated in the act of casting a spirit out from a boy.

Contextual Analysis

The Gospel of Mark is generally accepted to have been written around 70 CE, either just before or after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.³ John Mark, who could have an apostolic connection to Peter or Paul as detailed in Acts 12:12 and 25, is considered to be the author according to tradition, but this remains unclear.⁴ Mark Allan Powell suggests the original audience was Gentile since many Jewish customs are explained by the author and Aramaic phrases are translated for the audience, while Darrel Bock proposes Mark is influenced by an apocalyptic worldview present during the Second Temple period. It is a “worldview that says God will one day vindicate his people and restore righteousness.”⁵ While there is hope that this restoration will happen at some point in the future, Mark also writes with a sense of urgency, or as William Lane describes, “vividness and excitement,” that something will be happening soon.⁶

This pericope is placed at the mid-point of Mark’s text. It immediately follows the transfiguration and a discussion about Elijah. Prior to this, Jesus has been identified as the Christ by Peter (8:29) and as God’s son (9:7). In the passages immediately before and after Mark 9:14-29, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection.⁷ The references to Elijah that lead into this story are critical to how this passage is to be understood. The suffering of the boy and his appearance of being dead are also important juxtapositions to the surrounding passages.

Form, Structure, and Movement of the Text

At its base reading, Mark 9:14-29 presents a healing story where a father requests healing for his son from an unclean spirit. The disciples have been asked to cast this spirit out, but they could not do it. After the father expresses his faith to Jesus, the healing occurs, and the boy appears to be dead, but Jesus then helps him rise. While all of this has taken place in front of a crowd, the disciples wait until they are in private before asking why Jesus was able to do this and they could not.

Mark uses multiple intertextual references in this pericope, referring both to passages immediately surrounding the story of the boy’s healing and to stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. These references are guides provided by Mark for the reader to begin identifying Jesus as a continuation of the Hebrew prophetic lineage. The story of Moses coming down

³ Mark Allan Powell, “Mark, Gospel According to” in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, eds. Mark Allan Powell et al., 3rd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 601.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.; Darrell Bock, *Mark*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 25.

⁶ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 26.

⁷ Powell details this literary device which Mark uses as “intercalation,” or “wrapping one story around another in a way that begs comparison of the two accounts.” Powell, “Mark,” 603.

from the mountain in Exodus 34 and Elijah raising a dead child in 1 Kings 17 are alluded to in this narrative about Jesus' actions.

The repeated mention of the crowd within this passage is also of importance. The crowd serves to drive the narrative forward, first by noticing Jesus and being in awe, then by drawing closer and causing Jesus to rebuke the spirit, next, by declaring the boy appearing dead, and finally to demonstrate how Jesus must go into private to explain his teachings. Mark is appealing to his audience's emotions and their response to Jesus' actions, convincing them of the miracles through their explanation and how the characters in the stories respond to the miracles.⁸ Mark tries to persuade people hearing his gospel message to join in the movement of the crowd and the disciples who have come to recognize the importance of Jesus as the messianic figure.

Detailed Analysis

9:14 Jesus and the three disciples present at the transfiguration, Peter, James, and John, come down from the mountain and find the rest of the disciples in an argument with a crowd and some scribes. Of note, these three disciples are the same who were present at a similar healing story in Mark 5:37. This is Jesus' inner circle of confidence, and while they are privileged to witness certain events, in this verse we are reminded that the other disciples continue their ministry even when Jesus is absent. It is these other disciples who have been asked to cast out an unclean spirit and they have tried to do it, perhaps building on the authority of casting out demons granted to them in 3:13.

15 The crowd becomes aware of Jesus' presence and are "immediately overcome with awe." This is our first allusion to the Hebrew scriptures present in the pericope. The crowd is in awe either because they are in the presence of Jesus who has a reputation that precedes him, or perhaps he is still shining and radiant from the moment of the transfiguration in 9:3, an interpretation supported by Craig Evans.⁹ This radiance serves as a way to draw the crowd's attention but also provides an allusion for Mark's audience to Moses coming down from Mount Sinai in Exodus 34:30 where his face is shining and the Israelites "were afraid to come near him." The Hebrew word for "afraid," *yare'*, can also be translated as "awe."¹⁰ Mark makes a linguistic connection from Jesus to Moses, both of whom, in their respective stories, are descending from the mountaintop to a crowd in awe.

16-18¹¹ Jesus asks the disciples what the argument is about. While the majority of translations have Jesus directing his question to "them," the Good News Translation suggests

⁸ Mark is attempting to use the *pathos* form of rhetorical proof as outlined by John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 93.

⁹ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 34b (Columbia: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 50; Boring rejects this argument, stating "Mark does not typically expect this kind of narrative logic to carry over from one text to the next." Eugene Boring, *Mark*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 273; Stein provides a list of numerous commentators who suggest the effects of the transfiguration are lingering. Robert H Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 432.

¹⁰ Strong's # 3372, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Unabridged, Electronic Database, <https://biblehub.com/bdb/> (hereafter cited as *BDB*).

¹¹ There is a variant identified by Crook in verse 17, where in English the words "and said" would be added to make the phrase read: "one out of the crowd answered and said to-him," Zeba A. Crook, *Parallel Gospels: A Synopsis of Early Christian Writing* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 147-50. This variant is unlikely the

Jesus directs his question to the disciples. Other translations (Geneva, KJV, NIV) have Jesus directing his question to the scribes. Whether Mark intends for Jesus to address the disciples or the scribes, surprisingly it is someone else who answers: the man whose presence started the argument between the disciples and the scribes, namely the father of the boy with a spirit that makes him mute. The disciples have been unable to cast the spirit out, despite the authority granted to them in Mark 3:13-19 and 6:7-13. In these earlier verses the disciples are said to have successfully cast out unclean spirits and demons. What has changed since these successes happened? When the disciples are first given authority in 3:13-19, it is immediately after unclean spirits identify Jesus as the Son of God, while in 6:12 it is stated that the disciples “proclaimed that all should repent.” A suggestion, which will be explored later, is that perhaps the disciples had lost focus on God and Jesus’ identity as God’s son, along with the call for people to repent. Without this focus, their authority was useless.

19 Jesus seems to become upset at the inability of the disciples to cast out the demon. Jesus’ exasperation with the “unbelieving generation” (9:19) connects the reader to Jesus’ question in Mark 8:12 where he asks, “Why does this generation seek for a sign?” The word for “generation,” *genea*, is defined by Bauer as both “those born at the same time” and as a group sharing “specific characteristics.”¹² The characteristics of this generation as outlined by Mark appear to be a people who are seeking signs, sinful, and unbelieving.¹³ In a later discussion with Peter, James, John, and Andrew, they ask Jesus what signs will appear before the destruction of the temple (13:4). Jesus proceeds to teach about teachers who will lead them astray along with “false Christs and false prophets” (13:4, 22). The generations in 8:12 have asked for a sign and Jesus will provide one in this pericope, yet Jesus is required to continue teaching about signs and identifying the real Christ through the next four chapters, with the disciples continuing not to fully comprehend who Jesus is.

The *genea* Jesus addresses in 9:19 is a people defined very specifically, in contrast to the crowd, or *ochlos*, who are mentioned four times in the pericope (9:14, 15, 17, 25). Bauer describes an *ochlos* as a “casual gathering...without reference to classification,” which is a very different interpretation than *genea* is given¹⁴ Jesus has been surrounded by the *ochlos* throughout this pericope, but now he laments the unbelieving *genea* (generation), addressing a different party, a wider grouping, than those directly surrounding him.¹⁵ Perhaps he is lamenting the lack of faith of all of Israel, complaining about the people in a similar way to Moses lamenting the “perverse and crooked generation” (Deut. 32:5) or even God’s own lament in Psalm 95:10: “I loathed *that* generation.” The Hebrew for “generation” is *dor*, and the definition for the usage in these passages is of a “generation characterized by quality or condition.”¹⁶ In Mark’s text and in the alluded Hebrew texts, the lamenter who is speaking defines the specific group of people as having a deficiency of some kind, yet in all

original reading due to it coming from either later texts or translations and it only serving to clarify the meaning, suggesting its addition to the original.

¹² Walter Bauer and Frederick W. Danker, “*genea*,” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 191-2 (hereafter cited as *BDAG*).

¹³ Mark 8:12, 8:38, 9:19.

¹⁴ *BDAG*, “*ochlos*,” 745.

¹⁵ While he focuses more on the “unbelief” expressed in 9:24, Wegter-McNelly has similar thoughts about Jesus shifting his focus from the man to a wider group or “generation.” Kirk Wegter-McNelly, “‘I Believe; Help My Unbelief!’ Mark 9:14-29.” *Ex Auditu* 32 (2016): 200. EBSCOhost.

¹⁶ *BDB*, Strong’s #1755.

of these cases the lamenter also stays with the people to help them. Both Psalm 95 and the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 are reminders that God has stood alongside Israel throughout their desert journey. In Mark 9:19, while Jesus seems to be questioning the people, I suggest these words of Jesus recorded by Mark serve to remind the listener of this companionship, that Jesus is still present at this moment and, while he will leave, as foretold in 8:31-33, he will also return.

20-22 The boy is brought to Jesus and the spirit throws the boy into convulsions again. Jesus then asks the father how long this has been happening and is told by the father, “from childhood” (9:21). These three verses, while detailing the kind of spirit, are not significant to Mark’s connection of Jesus to Elijah and Moses. However, it does appear to be an allusion to the prophecies of Isaiah. Mark opens his Gospel by indirectly quoting Isaiah’s call for a messenger to come forward (Mark 1:2-3, Isaiah 40:3), and in Mark 9:22 there is an allusion to Isaiah 43:2 which reads, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you.” The fire and water are two ways the father in Mark 9:22 says the spirit is trying to destroy the child. Similar to the way that verse 19 reminds the reader of God and Jesus’ promise to walk alongside Israel, so too does this allusion to the fire and water from Isaiah promise divine accompaniment.

23-24 Jesus turns around the father’s cry for help and tells him that “all things are possible for him who believes” (9:23), to which the father replies that he does believe, but asks for help with his “unbelief” (9:24). There are two significant lessons from this exchange. First, that belief is part of what leads to miracles and healings happening, and second, that even those with belief can have an obstacle in their way, namely unbelief, or *apistia*. It is important to recognize that *apistia* is a noun defined as a “lack of belief.”¹⁷ Within Mark, *apistia* is twice used when Jesus identifies the lack of belief in others, being amazed at the lack of belief among the people of Nazareth after his teachings in the synagogue (6:6) or among the disciples, prior to their commissioning, who have not believed the resurrection news (16:14).¹⁸ It is unique that in Mark 9:24 the man identifies his own *apistia*, rather than Jesus identifying it for him. After identifying his unbelief, the man has opened himself up to Jesus’ assistance.

25-27. Jesus proceeds to cast out the demon as he notices the crowd was “rapidly gathering,” or *episuntrechō*.¹⁹ This sense of urgency within Mark appears to be intentional and used often within the pericope and the Gospel as a whole. The word translated as “immediately,” *euthus*, is found three times within this passage and used forty-one times by Mark, with Matthew having the next highest gospel usage at only five times. This urgency appears to drive the crowd, the spirit, the father, and Jesus himself during this story of healing.

It is in this verse where Jesus’ authority that is made clear to the three disciples on the mountaintop during the transfiguration is again reiterated in front of the crowd. Jesus commands the spirit to come out, the Greek *epitassō* meaning “to command with

¹⁷ *BDAG*, “apistia,” 103.

¹⁸ Note that most scholars agree the earliest versions of Mark ended at 16:8 and the extended ending of verses 9-20 was added to later manuscripts; Powell, “Mark, Gospel According to,” 603.

¹⁹ Translated by Bauer as “run together.” *BDAG*, “episuntrechō,” 382.

authority.”²⁰ This word is used four times by Mark and three of those uses refer to the authority of Jesus.²¹ While Jesus has been compared to Elijah and Moses in the nearby passages of Mark, it is this authority which sets Jesus apart from Elijah or Moses. As the spirit is cast out, the boy is thrown into convulsions and appears dead to the crowd before Jesus helps him rise. This order of events alludes to a very similar story of Elijah in 1 Kings 17:17-24, where Elijah helps revive a woman’s dead son. While the stories share similarities, one distinct difference is that Elijah “called to the Lord” (1 Kings 17:20 and 21), whereas Jesus does not. Jesus is able to heal and revive the child on the basis of his own authority, an ability which had not been granted to Elijah.

This miracle and healing is also significant as it is both the last miracle contained in Mark and one of the only ones where witnesses are not restricted from telling others.²² Peter identifying Jesus as the Messiah in 8:29 and the event of the transfiguration (9:2-8) have marked a turning point in Mark, where Jesus’ identity no longer needs to be kept a secret, but is revealed publicly and in front of crowds.²³

28-29 Jesus and the disciples retreat into a private space and then the disciples ask Jesus why they could not cast the demon out. Jesus answers, “This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer” (9:29). As Jesus reminds the disciples of the need for prayer, he is also reminding the disciples to remember Elijah calling to the Lord in 1 Kings or Moses interceding on behalf of Israel to God in Exodus 32:11-23. Prayer is an important part of intercession, but faith must be part of this act (Mark 11: 23– 24).²⁴ Faith is not about how strongly a person believes but is revealed in simply remembering to approach God and remembering who they are supposed to be faithful to. Perhaps the disciples had forgotten this amidst their earlier healing successes (Mark 6:13) and that is why they were unable to drive the spirit out themselves.

Theological Interpretation

There are two main lessons I draw from this pericope which might be helpful to my faith community. First, there is a reminder to come to God in prayer, remembering we are to pray for one another while also keeping in mind that Jesus is our intercessor before God. Jesus teaches at the end of the lesson that some spirits can only be cast out through prayer, especially prayer on behalf of another person. The boy in this story has a spirit which makes him mute, meaning he is unable to express his faith by himself. His father must intercede for him in seeking healing, to pray on behalf of another, a practice that all members of the Christian community should be reminded of. With that said, it is important to remember to whom our prayers are directed. Following in the pattern of Elijah, and Moses, we direct our prayers to God, or to God through God’s son, Jesus.

²⁰ *BDAG*, “epitassō,” 383.

²¹ Mark 1:27, 6:39, 9:25. Luke uses the verb in a similar way, with three of four uses referring to the authority of Jesus: Luke 4:36, 8:25, 8:31.

²² Jesus restricts sharing the news of his identity and works in Mark 1:21-28, 40-45, 5:21-42, 7:31-37, and 8:22-25. The three disciples are also told to be silent about the transfiguration, but only until after he rose from the dead. Heikki Räisänen, *The ‘Messianic Secret’ in Mark*, trans. Christopher Tuckett (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 184.

²³ Mona Tokarek LaFosse, “Week 4: Textual Analysis,” (lecture, Martin Luther University College, Waterloo, ON, October 1, 2018).

²⁴ Arland J. Hultgren, “Prayer,” in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, eds. Mark Allan Powell et al., 3rd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 825.

Second, there is recognition that even the best of us do not practice or express our faith perfectly, yet there is hope in God who continues to reach out to us and gives us comfort. Jesus' despair over the unbelieving *genea* calls both Mark's original audience and people hearing the reading today into a time of reflection. Even after hearing about the signs that Jesus provided and hearing the gospel message proclaimed, those around Jesus, those around Mark, and those in the world today still have difficulty with belief. The father expresses that he believes, but when faced with no control over a spirit that is possessing his son, there is unbelief holding him back. In a different way, but one which eases concerns for the faith community, even Jesus' disciples seem to forget that prayer and expressing faith in God is an important part of their life and ministry. When the community forgets these parts of expressing their faith, it is Jesus who reaches out, rebukes the spirits that stand in the way of living life, and teaches his followers about how to return to the roots of their faith. Jesus' words and actions speak to us again today, reminding us he is the Christ, and demonstrating for all the generations that he is the Son identified on the mountaintop at the transfiguration in Mark 9:7.

Synthesis

In this analysis the pericope of Mark 9:14-29 serves to both build on the transfiguration story by restating Jesus' connection to Moses and Elijah and to demonstrate the authority granted to Jesus while on the mountaintop. Mark accomplishes this through various literary allusions to Moses and Elijah, and by demonstrating Jesus' authority as God's son by casting out an unclean spirit. The identity and authority first presented to Peter, James, and John on the top of the mountain is now shared publicly through this story of healing in front of an attentive crowd.

The discovery of allusions to Moses comes from the recognition of the Greek word for "awe" in Mark 9:15 being a possible equivalent to the Hebrew word frequently translated as "afraid" in Exodus 34:30. This word choice, connecting Jesus' radiance after the transfiguration to Moses' face shining after he comes down from Mount Sinai, demonstrates to Mark's audience that the mountaintop event from Jesus' life has just as much, if not more, significance than Moses renewing the covenant on his mountaintop. Second, the story of Jesus healing a boy who appears to be dead before rising again is an explicit allusion to a similar story in 1 Kings 17 with Elijah being the one who helps a dead child rise. A key difference is that, unlike Elijah who calls to God for help, Jesus casts out the spirit and heals the boy based on his own authority, making Jesus' healing story have more significance than Elijah's.

Finally, unlike the transfiguration, which was only witnessed by three disciples, this event was witnessed by a crowd. Mark is demonstrating to his readers that Jesus' messianic secret is no longer being hidden away but is open to being witnessed by others. While the prophets Moses and Elijah are not physically present in Mark 9:14-19, Mark has alluded to their actions and attitudes which the reader then connects with Jesus' ministry on his way to his death and resurrection. As readers of Mark, we are asked to see Jesus as part of the Hebrew prophetic lineage, be aware of and recognize our unbelief, and appreciate the need for prayers of healing within our lives. In times of unbelief it will be Jesus who reaches out and assures us that he intercedes for us and for all generations as the Son.

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