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Chris Keith  
ckeith@LincolnChristian.edu

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# The Markan Portrayal of Jesus' Identity

CHRIS KEITH

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In the 50s CE, Paul described the idea of a crucified Messiah as “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1.23).<sup>1</sup> If Paul’s description is at all indicative of thoughts in the broader Greco-Roman world, it is safe to say that the author of Mark’s Gospel wrote from a context where Jesus’ true identity was a matter of considerable debate—some people accepted Jesus as Christ; some found this identification confusing; others found it laughable. With this first-century debate over Jesus’ identity as background, this essay presents the Markan portrayal of Jesus’ identity as Christ and Son of God. Particular attention will be paid to how Mark crafts his narrative, using his own position as narrator as well as the characters in the narrative. For, Mark is very careful in telling *and* showing his readers who Jesus is, who he is not, and how best to gain knowledge of his identity. I will focus on five passages where Mark leads his readers to make conclusions about Jesus’ identity (sometimes even by showing the characters’ failures): the opening of the Gospel (Mark 1.1), Peter’s confession in Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8.27–33), the crucifixion narrative (Mark 15.16–32), the centurion (Mark 15.39) and the ending of the Gospel (Mark 16.8).

## JESUS AS CHRIST AND SON OF GOD—THE NARRATOR IN MARK 1.1

In his capacity as narrator, Mark opens his Gospel by speaking directly to readers. Similar to instances in television or cinema when a character stops and looks right at the camera, Mark faces his audience and issues a resounding proclamation of Jesus’ identity: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1.1).<sup>2</sup> Seemingly insignificant, this short sentence is packed with important information concerning Jesus. It identifies Jesus as the long-awaited Christ (*christos*, “Messiah”) and Son of God. With both these titles, Mark taps into Jewish expectations of a kingly deliverer who would rid Jews of foreign domination and reestablish Israel by reestablishing God’s reign in Jerusalem. The Greek word for Christ, *christos*, translates the Hebrew word for Messiah, *māšīah*), and both literally mean “anointed one,” referring primarily (though not exclusively) to Israel’s kings in the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> “Son of God” also could refer to Israel’s king, as indicated by one of the most prominent Old Testament texts that created messianic expectations for the Christ and/or Son of God—2 Samuel 7.

In 2 Samuel 7, God promises David that one of his descendants will build the temple in Jerusalem and that he will establish this king’s—this anointed one’s—throne as eternal: “Your house and your kingdom

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from the NRSV. This essay is adapted from Chris Keith, “Jesus Outside and Inside the Gospels,” in *Jesus among Friends and Enemies: A Historical and Literary Introduction to Jesus in the Gospels*, ed. Chris Keith and Larry W. Hurtado (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming 2011).

2. Since some important ancient manuscripts omit “Son of God” in Mark 1.1, whether it is part of the original text is unclear. See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 49.

3. For example, Israel’s first three kings were all anointed—Saul (1 Sam 15.1), David (1 Sam 16.13) and Solomon (1 Kings 1.39). Note also that “Christ” and “King of Israel” are synonymous in Mark 15.32 (cf. Luke 13.2).



shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7.16). In addition, God identifies this son of David as his own son, that is, “Son of God”: “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me” (2 Sam 7.14).

As the story continues, Solomon builds God’s temple. Solomon does not, however, establish an eternal Davidic kingdom. Far from it, David’s kingdom subsequently falls into disarray and splits into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Eventually, both kingdoms are carried into exile away from Jerusalem and the promised land—Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BCE, Judah by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Even worse, the Babylonians raze to the ground Solomon’s temple, the physical locus of God’s promises in 2 Samuel 7 (see 2 Chron 36.18–19). Since Solomon was therefore not the promised Christ, Son of God, or Son of David from 2 Samuel 7, later Jews experiencing foreign oppression continued to look for such an individual as a deliverer from their current circumstances and as the one who would establish David’s eternal throne.

A Jewish text dated to the first century BCE, *Psalms of Solomon*, testifies to the expected fulfillment of God’s promises in 2 Samuel 7. Its author eagerly anticipates the Messiah-king who will “destroy unrighteous rulers” and “purge Jerusalem from gentiles” (*Pss Sol* 17.22).<sup>4</sup> That is, *Psalms of Solomon* expects the coming Messiah to establish his kingdom by banishing non-Jews from Jerusalem. These messianic expectations were still alive and well in Jesus’ time, as the promised land was part of the Roman Empire and thus under the thumb of Gentiles. By telling his reader in the first sentence of the narrative that Jesus is the Christ/Messiah and Son of God, then, Mark is claiming that a lengthy history of Jewish messianic expectations has come to fulfillment in the figure of Jesus of Nazareth—Jesus is the promised Son of David who will sit on David’s eternal throne, ruling over an eternal kingdom.

Mark’s presentation of Jesus’ identity as the Christ/Messiah and Son of God, however, is more complex than Mark 1.1 initially indicates. For Mark, readers must understand exactly *what type* of Christ and Son of God Jesus is, because he was not the type that Jews like the author(s) of *Psalms of Solomon* expected. One way in which Mark offers precision to Jesus’ identity is through the appearance of “Christ” and “Son of God” on the lips of the characters in the course of the story, and a prime example of the former is Peter’s confession of Jesus in Caesarea Philippi.

### **JESUS AS CHRIST—PETER’S CONFESSION IN CAESAREA PHILIPPI (MARK 8.27–33)**

Echoing the words of the narrator from Mark 1.1, Peter identifies Jesus as Christ/Messiah in his famous confession of Jesus in Mark 8.29: “You are the Messiah.”<sup>5</sup> Mark informs his readers that Jesus then ordered the disciples not to reveal his identity to anyone (Mark 8.30), implying that he accepted the identification. Immediately after accepting Peter’s designation of him as Christ, however, Jesus clarifies that his messianic mission is very different from the Christ in *Psalms of Solomon* 17. For, he tells the disciples that he must suffer and die at the hands of fellow Jews (!) and be raised (Mark 8.31). If there was one thing the expected Messiah was not supposed to do, it was die, and certainly not at the hands of his own people. Reflecting this conviction and seemingly ignoring the reference to Jesus’ resurrection, Peter cannot accept suffering and death—and the defeat they indicate—as tasks for the anticipated Messiah-king. Peter rebukes Jesus for his words and, in turn, receives a rebuke from Jesus (Mark 8.32–33).

4. Wright, in James Charlesworth’s *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

5. In Matthew’s version of Peter’s confession, he confesses Jesus as Christ and Son of God (Matt 16.16).



The rebuke Peter receives from Jesus brings a certain sense of irony to modern usages of this passage in baptismal liturgy. For, as readers watch this scenario unfold, they realize that Peter's confession of Jesus as Christ is correct in one sense—Mark has already said as much in Mark 1.1. Critically, however, it is drastically incorrect in another sense because Peter misunderstands what type of Christ Jesus is. Mark narrates Peter's misunderstanding in order to lead readers into a correct interpretation of Jesus as the Christ. Like Ebenezer Scrooge revisiting his life with the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future, readers have a privileged perspective from outside the events that allow them to grasp realities that even those in the narrative, particularly Peter, cannot grasp. In this sense, readers see Jesus accept the title "Christ" *only when he can define it in light of his messianic mission of death and resurrection*. Jesus accepts that he is the Christ; he rejects Peter's understanding of his messianic resume. As we have already seen, the idea of a crucified Messiah was ludicrous to Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures. Contradictorily, the narrative of Mark asserts that, far from disqualifying Jesus as a legitimate Christ/Messiah, his death and resurrection are where his identity as Christ, the Messiah-king, is displayed most clearly. Through the character Peter, Mark shows that this identity of Jesus was next to impossible for Jesus' contemporaries to accept.

### **JESUS AS KING OF THE JEWS—THE CRUCIFIXION NARRATIVE (MARK 15.16–32)**

The intertwined nature of Jesus' crucifixion and his identity as the promised Davidic Messiah-king reach a breaking point in Mark's narration of the events just prior to Jesus' expiration on the cross. Pilate asks Jesus explicitly, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Mark 15.2). Jesus' response, which the NIV translates inadequately as "Yes, it is as you say," literally reads in Greek, "You say" (*su legeis*); that is, there is no "Yes" in the original language. Of course, Mark has already told his readers that Jesus is, in fact, the "anointed one" in Mark 1.1. Mark has also, however, shown that Jesus has his own understanding of his identity as such and does not accept others' understandings of it, as revealed by the narrative of Peter's confession. Knowing that Jesus accepts his "anointed" status only when he can define its meaning, readers notice that Jesus neither affirms nor denies Pilate's question. He simply says, as the NRSV translates, "You say so," implying that the question needs more specificity before he can give a proper answer.

Since Jesus does not offer a straight answer to Pilate's question regarding his status as King of the Jews, Mark uses the rest of the chapter to show the reader possible answers to the question. After Pilate presents Jesus as "King of the Jews" twice to the crowd (Mark 15.9, 12) and they instruct him to crucify Jesus, the soldiers lead Jesus out and demonstrate that they consider the idea of Jesus being a king worthy of scorn. They mockingly robe Jesus in royal purple and derogatorily place a crown of thorns on his head (Mark 15.17), hailing him with disdain as "King of the Jews" (Mark 15.18). They affix him to the cross and strike fear in passersby by hanging a faux identification above Jesus' head in the form of a *titulus*—"King of the Jews" (Mark 15.26)—just in case any other would-be Messiahs and/or insurrectionists get the idea to claim kingship. "This," the entire procession pronounces, "is what Rome thinks of Jewish kings." The crowd understands, shaking their heads at him while taunting him to come down off the cross and save himself (Mark 15.30), as do the co-crucifieds on either side of him (Mark 15.32). The Jewish section of the audience treats Jesus similarly. They instruct Jesus to save himself by coming down off the cross (Mark 15.30), citing his inability to get off the cross as the reason why they do not believe he truly is the Messiah-king: "Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe" (Mark 15.32). As Mark narrates, readers watch and see that the idea of a crucified "anointed one" truly is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

### **JESUS AS A/THE SON OF GOD—THE CENTURION (MARK 15.39)**

Before one leaves Mark 15, however, and, indeed, before Jesus even comes off the cross, an otherwise unknown character makes an important identification of Jesus—"Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'" In Greek, it is



not entirely clear whether the centurion identifies Jesus as *a* son of God or *the* Son of God; either reading is possible. Likely, Mark fails to resolve the ambiguity on purpose, and is thus showing the centurion as confessing more than he even knows. Supporting this interpretation is Mark's overall usage of the title "Son of God" for Jesus. After Mark identifies Jesus as Son of God in Mark 1.1,<sup>6</sup> the title is restricted to usage by supernatural characters: God (Mark 1.11; 9.7) and demons (Mark 3.11; 5.7). Significantly, then, the first and only occurrence of a human character recognizing Jesus as "Son of God" is the centurion who watches Jesus breathe his last from the cross and responds, "Truly this was a/the Son of God" (Mark 15.39).

Mark's portrayal of various characters' recognition of Jesus as Son of God provides a powerful statement on Jesus' identity to readers. According to Mark, human characters apprehend Jesus *as* Son of God only by viewing the cross. That is, although Mark informs his reader that Jesus is the Son of God at the beginning of his Gospel, he *shows* the reader what this means through his narration of the centurion's statement. Just as Jesus defines his status as Messiah in reference to his rejection and death at Caesarea Philippi, the centurion identifies Jesus as Son of God on the same grounds while he stands at the foot of the cross. "This," the Markan narrator pronounces, "is how you know that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God."

Far from disqualifying Jesus' status as Christ and Son of God, then, and in direct contrast to the characters' assumptions in the Gospel—from the apostle Peter to the soldiers and the crucifixion crowds—Mark narrates the story in such a way as to suggest that Jesus' death (and subsequent resurrection) is precisely where his identity as the anointed Messiah-king is most revealed. If readers adopt the narrator's perspective, they return to the previous scenes, noting deep and tragic irony. Readers watch Peter, in his ambition to acknowledge Jesus as Christ, reveal his complete lack of understanding about what this identity means for Jesus. The preeminent apostle's understanding of Jesus as "Christ" is devoid of the very events that reveal that he is. Readers gain a new appreciation for Pilate's question—"Are you the King of the Jews?"—and Jesus' lack of a straight answer. Readers watch, painstakingly, as Mark shows us with deep, deep irony that, while mocking Jesus, the soldiers were unwittingly recognizing his true identity. They crown him, robe him, and bow to him; all proper things to do to Jesus, though they did not know it. With further irony, readers see the *titulus*, hung over Jesus' head as an instrument of fear, in light of its essential accuracy—Jesus *is* "King of the Jews." Sadly, readers listen to the crowd bid Jesus to come off the cross in order to save himself and prove that he is the king of Israel, in complete ignorance that Jesus' unwillingness to save himself and come off the cross is what demonstrates that he is the true anointed one.

If/Once readers take Mark's perspective, they watch these things happen, in the company of the narrator, astounded that the Christ and Son of God was before his contemporaries' eyes and they never even knew it, or at least knew it inadequately, in the case of Peter. To those who, like the people in Paul's mind when he penned 1 Corinthians 1.23, say the idea of a crucified Messiah is foolishness and a stumbling block, the narrator Mark says, "Look closer."

### **JESUS ACCORDING TO MARK, AND JESUS ACCORDING TO THE READER (MARK 16.8)**

Before ending his Gospel, Mark turns to face his audience directly once more. Most scholars agree that the earliest version of Mark's Gospel ended at Mark 16.8.<sup>7</sup> The ending, however, is quite curious. Instructed to tell Jesus' disciples about the empty tomb, the women "went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16.8). Most scholars understand this to mean the women said nothing to anyone *at all*, but a more recent contingent has

6. On the text-critical issue, see footnote 2 above.

7. France, *Gospel*, 685, refers to this position as "the virtually unanimous verdict of modern textual scholarship."

8. See discussion in Larry W. Hurtado, "The Women, the Tomb, and the Climax of Mark," in *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Seán Freyne*, ed. Zuleika Rodgers, Margaret Daly-Denton and Anne Fitzpatrick McKinley, JSJSup 132 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 427–51.

argued that the Greek can also mean that the women said nothing to no one *other than those to whom they had been instructed to speak* (that is, the disciples).<sup>8</sup> Although this issue will undoubtedly see more debate, the former interpretation still seems most likely, as the text highlights their fear as a paralyzing effect. This interpretation, however, is not necessarily a dark one. Mark may assume the reader already knows that the women eventually overcome their fear and report the empty tomb, thus making the very writing of his Gospel possible; although he does not say this. Perhaps most important, however, is that the women are not alone in the scene. Accompanying them and overhearing the conversation is the reader, for Mark the narrator has brought him or her along. In this light, it is crucial that Mark ends his Gospel in the same manner as he begins it, by turning to face the reader to whom he narrates Jesus' story. His narration of the women's silence puts the task of proclamation of Jesus to the reader, drawing him or her into the story. Mark's ending addresses the reader as such: "I have told you that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God; and I have shown you what that means. Will you accomplish what the women do not in the story? Will you tell others who Jesus is?" If the reader accepts the challenge, he or she returns to the start, perhaps understanding for the first time that Mark's story is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus *Christ*, the *Son of God*" (Mark 1.1).

**CHRIS KEITH** IS ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT AND CHRISTIAN ORIGINS AT LINCOLN CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY IN LINCOLN, ILLINOIS. HIS PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE *THE PERICOPE ADULTERAE, THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, AND THE LITERACY OF JESUS* (NEW TESTAMENT TOOLS, STUDIES, AND DOCUMENTS 38; LEIDEN: BRILL, 2009), *JESUS AMONG FRIENDS AND ENEMIES: A HISTORICAL AND LITERARY INTRODUCTION TO JESUS IN THE GOSPELS* (CO-EDITED WITH LARRY W. HURTADO, FORTHCOMING FROM BAKER ACADEMIC, 2011) AND *JESUS' LITERACY: SCRIBAL CULTURE AND THE TEACHER FROM GALILEE* (FORTHCOMING FROM T&T CLARK).

