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It Really Is All About Jesus: A Defense of Christology as the Foundation of the Second Gospel

KEVIN W. LARSEN

For the past several decades discussion has ensued over the intended audience of the NT writings which we call Gospels. No one denies that one's reading of a Gospel will be greatly impacted by one's understanding of the intended audience. One position has proposed and defended that the Gospels were written to encourage Christians in their pursuit of discipleship. Another position has proposed and defended the belief that the Gospels were written with the intent of being more evangelistic, intending to tell the story of Jesus to elicit belief on the part of the reader. In recent decades the pendulum has swung quite far to the position that the Gospels were written to established Christian communities trying to live out a life of discipleship to Jesus.

While the Fourth Gospel was the ground used by scholars to argue for a community reception, Mark's Gospel has not been ignored. In discussing the miracle stories in Mark, Ernest Best states that one should not try to determine what Christology the miracles display; rather, the miracle stories can only properly be understood as pastoral. "His main aim was to show his readers [i.e., a Christian community] what God could do for them through Jesus and tell them what their response ought to be."¹ Nils Dahl concluded about the purpose of Mark, "The evangelist is not writing with a missionary aim but wants those who already believe to understand the proper significance of the Gospel."² Recently Brian Incigneri rejected the hypothesis that Mark was written with a missionary purpose, instead proposing that discipleship is key, as evidenced by the emphasizing of passages concerning persecution.³

Without questioning the validity with readings of Mark that highlight any number of themes (in broad categories the most common is discipleship), this essay will contend that the focus of Mark's Gospel is Jesus. Particularly, Mark's fundamental purpose for writing is grounded in two questions surrounding Jesus. Who was he? What did he come to do? Only after one has a grasp of the person and work of Christ may one begin to grapple with other themes. This essay will make five observations to demonstrate that Christology is the foundational thrust, the primary focal point, of the Second Gospel.

OBSERVATION #1: THE OPENING

The basic, fundamental purpose is revealed by the opening words of Mark's Gospel, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God" (Mark 1.1). In this opening line Mark expresses three truths. First, the events about to be recorded are just as momentous as the creation of the world (cf. Gen 1.1; John 1.1). Second, the message is one of "good news," the fulfillment of God's promise (Isa 52.7; 61.1); a "good news"

1. Ernest Best, "The Miracles in Mark," in *Disciples and Discipleship* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 178.

2. Nils Dahl, "The Purpose of Mark's Gospel," in *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 63.

3. Brian J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark's Gospel* (BIS 65; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 30–31.

about a person named Jesus. Third, Jesus is not only the “anointed one” (i.e., the Messiah), but he is divine, he is God’s Son.⁴

OBSERVATION #2: USE OF THE MIRACLE STORIES

Recognizing that space prohibits a full-blown treatment of the miracle stories in Mark’s Gospel, the following general observations may be made. First, the number of miracles, the variety of miracles and the distribution of miracles, all suggest that they are significant to the Gospel. Anderson figures that miracle stories occupy slightly over one-fifth of the whole Gospel, “about the same space as the passion story.”⁵ There are eighteen miracle stories in the Gospel, eight of healing (Mark 1.29–31; 1.40–45; 2.1–12; 3.1–6; 5.25–34; 7.31–37; 8.22–26; 10.46–52), four of exorcism (Mark 1.21–28; 5.1–20; 7.24–30; 9.14–29), one of resurrection (Mark 5.22–24, 35–43), five nature miracles (Mark 4.35–41; 6.30–44, 45–52; 8.1–10; 11.12–14, 20–21), and four generalized summaries of miracle-working activity (Mark 1.32–34, 39; 3.7–12; 6.53–56). The majority of these miracle stories occur prior to Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8.27–9.1). As we will see in a moment, the key issue at Caesarea Philippi is Jesus’ identity, thus the miracle stories may be seen as making a major contribution to understanding Jesus’ identity.

A second observation about the miracle stories in Mark is that the overwhelming majority of them suggest that the issue of Jesus’ identity is a major factor in them being performed; for most of the miracles Jesus’ identity is explicitly the focal point. This is seen in the rhetorical questions that are asked (Mark 1.27; 2.7, 12; 4.41; 6.2–3), to which the reader knows the answer (Mark 1.1). This is also seen in the pronouncements (Mark 1.24, 34; 3.11; 5.7; 6.14; 10.47–48). Most dramatically, the issue of Jesus’ identity is addressed in the story of Jesus’ walking on the sea (Mark 6.47–52)—Jesus is not just God’s Son (Mark 1.24, 27), or acting for God (Mark 2.7), he is God. Watts argues that such powerful “self-manifestations” as reported in Mark 4.35–5.43; 6.34–44, 45–52; 7.32–37; 8.1–10 “are entirely in keeping with the proposal that Mark presents Jesus as the inaugurator of the Isaianic promises whereby Yahweh himself comes to deliver as he ‘makes bare his arm’ (cf. Isa 40.3,10; 51.9; 52.10; 53.1; 59.16ff.; 63.5).”⁶

Third, in the question of his identity, Jesus is exceptionally powerful. Touching his clothing was sufficient to be healed (Mark 5.28; 6.56). Speaking to the wind and waves was sufficient to calm a storm (Mark 4.39). He could walk on the sea (Mark 6.47–52) and cause the blind to see (Mark 8.22–26; 10.46–52). In these acts Jesus does what only God can do. Only God can save people from the storms of chaos (Pss 33.7; 65.8; 89.11; 104.7; Job 26.12; 38.8). Healing the blind was a sign that God was ushering in the last days (Isa 29.18; 35.5; cf. Matt 11.5).

The miracles of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel testify to his role as God’s agent, sharing in the divine power; and they offer examples of the struggle between the rule of God and the powers of Satan.

OBSERVATION #3: NATURE OF THE QUESTIONS THAT ARE ASKED

At key junctures in the story, questions of who and why (Mark 1.27; 2.7, 16, 24; 4.41; 6.2; 7.5) are asked. Mark 8.27–30 seems to answer the “who” question. Once the “who” question is answered, Jesus is able to reveal what his mission is. Mark 8.31–10.52 reveals what the mission is (Mark 8.31; 9.31; 10.32–34). The mission is accomplished in Mark 11–16. Ben Witherington concludes, “[This simple outline] supports the theory that we are dealing with a biography which has as its most basic question not ecclesiological struggles

4. “Son of God” is key to Mark’s Christology and appears at key junctures in the story (baptism, Mark 1.11; exorcisms, Mark 3.11; 5.7; transfiguration, Mark 9.7; trial, Mark 14.61; centurion’s confession, Mark 15.39).

5. Hugh Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 35–36.

6. Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* (WUNT 88; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1997; repr., Biblical Studies Library; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 138–9. A few of the remaining miracle stories may have a different emphasis (e.g., faith—Mark 5.34; 10.52); however, the issue of Jesus’ identity is still a significant factor (e.g., coming to faith).

in Mark's church, nor even matters of Christian discipleship (though that is indeed an important secondary theme in this Gospel), but rather the big question: who is Jesus?"⁷

OBSERVATION #4: VOICE FROM HEAVEN (MARK 1.11 AND 9.7)

On two occasions in Mark's Gospel the reader hears directly from God and thus benefits from knowing God's point of view. The Gospel began with Jesus starting his ministry. He submits to John's baptism, accepting the messianic task. Jesus is anointed with the Spirit. God makes his pronouncement that he is pleased with what Jesus has just done. About halfway through the Gospel, Peter makes a confession that Jesus is the Messiah. After a strong rebuke of Peter for not accepting Jesus' announcement of suffering and dying, Jesus takes his inner circle and goes up to a mountain where he is transfigured. God makes his pronouncement to Peter, James and John that they are to listen to him. Just as the Galilean ministry was initiated by a divine revelation, so in the final half of Mark's Gospel the way of the cross is prefaced with a similar divine revelation.

OBSERVATION #5: PIVOT POINT OF MARK 8.22—9.13

The previous two observations hint that Mark's Gospel may best be outlined in two broad sections, with the Caesarea Philippi episode occupying the pivot point.⁸ The Caesarea Philippi episode does not stand alone though. A case can be made that the episodes on either side of Mark 8.27—9.1 (i.e., 8.22–26 and 9.2–13) are all working together and can only be fully appreciated when read together and not in isolation.⁹ Within this transition section of three episodes (blind man at Bethsaida, Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi and Jesus' transfiguration) we can see the foundation of Christology at work.

Mark 8.22–26

The first episode (Mark 8.22–26) recounts Jesus healing the blind man at Bethsaida. The christological emphasis is seen first in the act of the miracle itself, i.e., giving sight to the blind provides a climactic demonstration for Jesus' identity. Elijah and Elisha raised the dead and healed the sick and those acts don't prove either of them to be the Messiah.¹⁰ There are even numerous Hellenistic stories of giving sight to the blind. Healing the blind was not unprecedented. However, perhaps, the key lies in recognizing that Jesus' actions would have been interpreted in light of the OT, particularly Isaiah 29.18; 35.5; 42.7. It is not unreasonable to suggest that a reader of the Gospel having messianic expectations would have been aware of Isaiah. "This transformation is not ascribed to any Old Testament prophet; thus, if Jesus did heal the blind, it would have raised messianic questions."¹¹ Not even Elijah performed such an act. While blindness may be a metaphor for the lack of knowledge and understanding, the physical act of giving sight should probably take priority in understanding how such an episode is understood.

In light of the act of giving sight to the blind and the general overall thrust of miracle stories as outlined above, a reason for "again" may be offered, which is the second observation for the christological aim of Mark 8.22–26. The delay puts into even sharper focus how immediate and complete Jesus' healing is. He does not do things by halves; he heals completely. As Anderson says, "The gradual cure suggests no more than the intractable nature of the malady and so in the end magnifies the healer's miraculous power."¹² Or as Achtemeier concludes, unadorned miracle stories (Mark 1.30–31; 7.32–35; 8.22–26) "simply point to the

7. Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 38.

8. Kevin Larsen, "The Structure of Mark's Gospel: Current Proposals," *CBR* 3 (2004): 140–60.

9. Kevin Larsen, *Seeing and Understanding Jesus: A Literary and Theological Commentary on Mark 8:22–9:13* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005).

10. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 156.

11. *Ibid.*, 171.

12. Anderson, *Mark*, 204.

power Jesus exercised in his earthly ministry.”¹³

Mark’s narrative prior to Mark 8.22 has been concerned with asking the “who” question. The disciples, having been challenged about their lack of understanding, “Having eyes, do you not see?” (Mark 8.18), witness Jesus heal a blind man in a way that requires two separate actions. Now they are taken to the north, to Caesarea Philippi, where Jesus will examine their beliefs about him. When Jesus asks the disciples about his identity he will do it in two stages. The two stages will require the disciples to form and express their own judgments about Jesus. The disciples have witnessed many great events in their journeying with Jesus, now if they are to continue “on the way” they must become participants.

Mark 8.27—9.1

The second episode of this transition section (Mark 8.27—9.1) recounts Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi. In the attempt to become a participant, Peter proclaims Jesus to be Messiah (Mark 8.29). Peter’s confession is a significant advancement from the opinions of others (i.e., he is not Elijah, nor John the Baptist, nor one of the prophets). But his understanding is inadequate as well, necessitating Jesus to command the group to stay silent. With Peter so close, yet so far, Jesus will proceed to teach just what it means to be Messiah. The explanation results in confusion and disbelief, for Jesus’ identity is wrapped up in his God ordained (Mark 8.31) mission to suffer and die. The implications for messiahship are unfathomable, and equally then are the implications for discipleship. A wrong view of messiahship leads to a wrong view of discipleship.

The most common suggestion today is that the relationship between Mark 8.22–26 and 8.27—9.1 is based upon a mutual theme of discipleship, that the healing of sight is symbolic for the healing that must take place in the lives of the disciples. The argument is made that the progression of sight in the Bethsaida episode is paradigmatic of the progression of sight in the disciples. If this is the case, then the Caesarea Philippi episode reveals the partial nature of understanding (e.g., Peter’s confession is seen as correct but inadequate), which corresponds to the first stage of the healing of the blind man. The difficulty arises in trying to identify when the second stage of the healing is completed, if at all. Every indication that Mark gives suggests that the disciples remain in the dark to the end. What follows are three reasons for questioning a relationship between Mark 8.22–26 and 8.27—9.1 that is expressed solely in terms of the disciples’ pilgrimage to faith and neglects the christological elements that connect Mark 8.22–26 and 8.27—9.1.

First, we have just suggested that one of the Bethsaida episode’s functions is a revelatory act to affirm Jesus’ messiahship. Second, it is not clear that Peter’s confession can be understood as “correct.” After Peter’s bold confession (v. 29) that Jesus is the Christ, Mark records that Jesus rebuked them to tell no one about him. Why? Either Jesus wants Peter not to reveal who Jesus is for a while longer so that he can remain incognito, or he rebukes Peter to remain silent because his understanding of “Messiah” needs correction and he did not want false ideas being spread about him.¹⁴ Given the popular beliefs about the Messiah as a royal Messiah with nationalistic political objectives, Jesus may want privacy to attempt to correct the disciples’ understanding of Messiah and thus predict his passion and resurrection.¹⁵ The crowds have been dangerous enough with their view of him as John the Baptist, Elijah, etc. (Mark 1.35–37, 45; 2.1–2; 3.20; 4.1; 6.31–33;

13. Paul Achtemeier, *Mark* (Proclamation Commentary; 2d ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 88.

14. Seán Freyne observes that since Jesus’ stern warning to Peter is couched in the language with which demons were addressed earlier, it could scarcely leave any doubt in the reader’s mind that not merely was the confession of Peter inadequate, it could possibly share something of the sinister power of the enemy, and so Peter had to be silenced (“At Cross-Purposes—Jesus and the Disciples in Mark,” *Furrow* 33 [1982]: 335).

15. I say attempt because of passages like Acts 1.6. Even within Mark’s Gospel there is evidence that the disciples are thinking in terms of a royal Messiah. The question of rank (Mark 10.35–40) only becomes an issue if Jesus is viewed in royal terms.

7.24; 9.9, 25, 30). What would they do if they believed him to be Messiah (i.e., a military conqueror)?

A final reason for questioning the alleged tie between Mark 8.22–26 and 8.27—9.1 as only an expression of the disciples' continuing pilgrimage of faith is the nature of the discipleship instructions in Mark 8.34–9.1. The nature of Mark's material is best understood when contrasted to parallel passages in Matthew and Luke.¹⁶ Mark's voluntary call, "if anyone wishes" (Mark 8.34), is suitable for a crowd of non-followers, compared to "whoever" in Luke 14.27. Mark's choice of "take up" (Mark 8.34) also hints of initial decision rather than Luke's "carry" (Luke 14.27). Matthew 10.39 and Luke 17.33, when compared with Mark 8.35, also show signs of a difference between continuance in discipleship and deciding whether or not to become a disciple. Mark and Luke both read "whoever" to Matthew's "one who has found." Mark also reads "to save" rather than Matthew's "found" and Luke's "keeps." These observations appear to suggest that Mark's concern is not with disciples who need to confess Jesus before nondisciples, but with nondisciples being ashamed of becoming disciples.

The one question that has not been posed yet is perhaps a *key factor* in speculating about the relationship of Mark 8.27—9.1 to 8.22–26, concerns the motivation behind verse 32. Why does Jesus speak openly about the coming passion and resurrection? Up to this point the focus of the gospel has been the struggle to understand Jesus. Now in stark opposition to what is said in Mark 4.10–12, 33–34, Jesus is said to speak "plainly."¹⁷ If the disciples are going to understand Jesus, who he is and what he has come to do, Jesus must give them this additional information and they must grasp it (cf. Mark 9.7). They have seen his miracles, they have heard him teach, but their understanding will be blurry and incomplete until Jesus gives the final piece. Even if the disciples know who Jesus is, they cannot speak properly of him, unless they speak of his cross and resurrection. It is in this conceptual link of Jesus "speaking plainly" (v. 32a) and the disciples "seeing everything clearly" (v. 25c) that the two episodes are tied together literarily and theologically.

Mark 9.2–13

The final episode (Mark 9.2–13) recounts Jesus' transfiguration. Just as we have argued for a christological focus of Mark 8.22–26 and 8.27—9.1, so should the transfiguration be interpreted in light of the person who was transfigured. That Jesus is the key to the meaning of the transfiguration may be defended on the ground that the point of view is God's. Jesus was the one who underwent a divine transformation. When Elijah and Moses appear, nothing is stated about their appearance. The voice that spoke from the cloud directs all attention to Jesus and identifies Jesus in familial terms ("son"). God commanded that Jesus is the one who must be listened to. These observations suggest that any proposal for the transfiguration's meaning that downplays or ignores Mark 9.7 must be judged as suspect.

In some regards, the transfiguration may be viewed as a reconfirmation of Jesus' identity and mission. Mark began his Gospel speaking of witnesses to Jesus: the scriptures, John the Baptist and the heavenly voice. Here in Mark 9.2–13, the same witnesses are spoken of in reverse order: the heavenly voice (which repeats what it said at the baptism) and the witnesses of the scriptures and John the Baptist in the person of Elijah. Prior to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus' task has been to teach and heal. Now Jesus has revealed that there is a way of suffering and death that he must follow. Just as the divine voice affirmed the goodness of Jesus accepting the messianic task, so the voice at the transfiguration affirmed the necessity of the road of suffering and death. In the words of Liefeld, "The transfiguration is to be understood, therefore, as an affirmation by God of the messiahship and unique sonship of Jesus, who would indeed fulfill his mission as the suffering servant in accordance with the declarations in the preceding narrative in Mk 8:27—9:1 and parallels."¹⁸

16. The following is indebted to the observations of Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 433–39.

17. This is the only occurrence of this word in the Synoptics.

18. W. Liefeld, "Transfigure, Transfiguration, Transform," *NIDNTT* 3:864.

How then does all this tie together? As argued in the discussion of Mark 8.27—9.1, the essential and final component to having a proper understanding of Jesus' person is grasping his mission, a mission of suffering, death and ultimately resurrection. The importance of that prediction (for it is the first of three recorded by Mark) is emphasized by nothing less than a divine voice speaking from a cloud on a mountaintop. The voice declares Jesus to be the Son (of God). He is not Elijah. He is not John the Baptist. He is not Moses. He is not a prophet like Moses. He has been affirmed as God's Son, on a mission, on the "way," that will lead to suffering and death. Only at the beginning of Jesus' ministry has a divine voice been heard before. There it served to affirm Jesus in his call. Now it serves to affirm for the disciples his mission. Other passion predictions will follow, but none of them will be divinely affirmed as the first.

We learned from the blind man in Bethsaida that seeing is a process. For the blind man that process involved the hands of Jesus. Likewise, for the disciples, their coming to understand Jesus is a process. And for the disciples that process involved the hands of Jesus. Jesus' hands worked miracles and that brought suspicions and judgments. But those suspicions and judgments are inadequate until they grasp that Jesus must suffer. Any understanding of Jesus is incomplete without understanding the mission.

The foundational focal point of Mark's Gospel is revealed by the opening words, "the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This focal point is revealed by the words of John the Baptist, "One is coming who is mightier than I" (Mark 1.7), and no less than by the words of God, "You are my beloved Son" (Mark 1.11). Even unclean spirits testify about Jesus' personhood by calling him "the Holy One of God," and they too give a hint as to his mission by asking, "Have you come to destroy us?" (Mark 1.24; cf. 3.23–27; Heb 2.14). Mark continues to tell of many of Jesus' mighty acts. The focus and importance of Jesus for Mark's Gospel is further highlighted by the numerous questions posed throughout the Gospel, most of which ask the question about who Jesus is and what he has come do. Finally, the opening declaration of the Gospel comes full circle in the words of the centurion, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15.39).

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