



CHRIST CHURCH NOTES
THE GOSPEL OF MARK

ROBERT S. KINNEY

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THE GOSPEL OF MARK

PART 1—INTRODUCTION AND IDENTITY IN MARK 1-8

Even though it is familiar at this point, it best to start with the background to the Gospel.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE GOSPEL AND A GOSPEL?

One is a theological concept, the other is a piece of literature. The *gospel* (note the small *g*) literally means *good news* and is a term used to refer to an idea. The idea is that Jesus Christ died and rose again for the forgiveness of sins and generally requires a response of belief (or faith) and repentance from sin. But the word *Gospel* (with the capitalized *G*), generally refers to one of the four canonized books in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. The four Gospels consists of numerous kinds of text, including poetry, discourses, wisdom literature, prophetic literature, and apocalyptic literature. The main text type found in the Gospels, however, is narrative (or stories). These varied text types and the rough structure of each Gospel (beginning with birth in two, ministry in two; ending with death) has suggested to some scholars that the Gospels might be modelled after Greco-Roman biography.

WHAT ARE THE RELATIONSHIPS OF THE GOSPELS TO EACH OTHER?

For a larger overview of the answer to this question, please look at the corresponding section in the notes on the Gospel of Matthew.

WHO WROTE THE GOSPEL OF MARK?

The Gospels are technically anonymous. While we have titles that are arguably fairly early in tradition, they are traditional and not canonical (and so not bound by any doctrines of Scripture). Tradition holds that the Gospel we call Mark was written by John Mark, the companion of Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys (Acts 12-15). At the same time, tradition holds that Mark is relaying the teaching and memories of Peter.

This view of Mark is built primarily on a tradition from Papias, with most of the other so-called evidence possibly stemming from this one account. One of the church fathers, Papias is thought to have served as Bishop of Hierapolis in the early second century and possibly the late first. According to Irenaeus, his credibility stems from having been a student of both the Apostle John and John's student Polycarp. His major written work, a five-part exposition of the sayings of the Lord (Λογίων Κυριακῶν Ἐξηγήσεις) is largely lost, apart from a series of fragments preserved in works by other church fathers (including Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Jerome).¹ One of Papias's fragments is particularly important:

This also the presbyter said: Mark, having become the interpreter [ἑρμηνευτής] of Peter, wrote down accurately [ἀκριβῶς ἔγραψε], though not in order [οὐ μέντοι τάξει], whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account [σύνταξιν] of the Lord's discourses [λογίων], so that Mark

¹ There are eight reliable fragments recognized by Enrico Norelli in his definitive volume on Papias. See Norelli, *Papia di Hierapolis*. MacDonald makes extensive use of Norelli in MacDonald, *Two Shipwrecked Gospels*.

committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.²

Note that the tradition here is that Mark's Gospel is disorderly, but accurate. This might describe what we call the Gospel of Mark, at least compared to the more orderly accounts in Matthew and Luke. However, there is no way of connecting what Papias calls the Gospel of Mark to the document that we call Mark. Additionally, the notion that Mark did not omit anything he heard is possibly problematic as what we call Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the Gospels and has the fewest stories. In other words, Papias's comments and their correspondence to what we call the Gospel of Mark are unreliable at best. We can follow tradition here, but we must recognize that it may not correspond to actual history at all.

WHERE WAS THE GOSPEL OF MARK WRITTEN? AND WHEN?

The location and date of Mark's Gospel are likewise unknowable. The apparent lack of knowledge of the Jewish-Roman wars in the mid-70s causes most scholars to place the composition of the Gospel in the late 60s or possibly early 70s. This, however, is inconclusive.

The location is even more difficult to pin down as scholars place it in numerous, disparate, and incompatible locations. The very most we can say is that it was likely written for a gentile audience and, therefore, possibly written in a gentile territory. The case for a gentile audience depends on recognizing that it 1) was written in Greek, 2) used Greek sources like the LXX, 3) explains or translates several Hebraisms (which a Jewish audience would be expected to know) and even incorporates Latin terms.³ While not completely conclusive, these details strongly indicate a gentile audience in a possibly cosmopolitan context.

WHAT IS MARK'S AGENDA IN 1:1-15?

With all of the introductory material behind us, the question we must consider is one of agenda. What is Mark's purpose in writing? What is he trying to accomplish?

Mark 1:1-15

It is commonly argued that Mark introduces his agenda in the first verse: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." In a fashion not uncommon of first-century literature, Mark introduces his genre (gospel = good news) and thesis that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. This is taken as a thesis concerning identity that then needs to be demonstrated.

In order to make this argument in the first place, Mark calls on several witnesses in verses 2-15 to identify and affirm the identity of Jesus Christ.

² This particular fragment of Papias is recorded in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.39.15–16 (NPNF² 1:172–173). τοῦθ' ὁ πρεσβύτερος ἔλεγεν: Μάρκος μὲν ἐρμηνευτὴς Πέτρου γενόμενος, ὅσα ἐμνημόνευσεν, ἀκριβῶς ἔγραψεν, οὐ μέντοι τάξει, τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ κυρίου ἢ λεχθέντα ἢ πραχθέντα. οὔτε γὰρ ἤκουσεν τοῦ κυρίου οὔτε παρηκολούθησεν αὐτῷ, ὕστερον δέ, ὡς ἔφην, Πέτρω: ὃς πρὸς τὰς χρείας ἐποιεῖτο τὰς διδασκαλίας, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὥσπερ σύνταξιν τῶν κυριακῶν ποιούμενος λογίων, ὥστε οὐδὲν ἤμαρτεν Μάρκος οὕτως ἔνια γράψας ὡς ἀπεμνημόνευσεν. ἐνὸς γὰρ ἐποιήσατο πρόνοιαν, τοῦ μηδὲν ὠνήκουσεν παραλιπεῖν ἢ ψεύσασθαι τι ἐν αὐτοῖς...Ματθαῖος μὲν οὖν Ἑβραϊδι διαλέκτῳ τὰ λόγια συνετάξατο, ἡρμήνευσεν δ' αὐτὰ ὡς ἦν δυνατὸς ἕκαστος.

³ See Mark 4:21; 5:9, 15; 6:27; 7:4; 12:14; 12:42, 15:15; and 15:39, 44, 45.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’ ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. ¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

Mark 1:2-3

The first argument concerns John the Baptist, but begins by quoting from the prophets. Here, Mark quotes both the prophet Isaiah (the first in the canonical listing and longest of the prophets) and Malachi (the canonically last and one of the shortest of the prophets).⁴ And by quoting the first and the last prophets, the implication is that the whole of the prophetic corpus bears witness to the coming Messiah and the one who prepares the way for him.

Mark 1:4-8

Mark’s second witness is that of John the Baptist himself. Here, we have an immensely influential and popular figure from the first century (note in verse 5 that people from the Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem were traveling to see him). He is described as wearing camel’s hair and a leather belt, and eating locusts and honey. This description indicates that he was to be associated with the great prophet Elijah.⁵ And what is the point of this elaborate description of John and his activities? In verse 8, it becomes clear that John’s whole function is to prepare the way for one more powerful than him, one who will be more powerful and worthy than even John. Mark then immediately transitions to this one in verses 9-11.

⁴ Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 are quoted here.

⁵ See 2 Kings 1:8 (cf., Zechariah 13:4).

Mark 1:9-11

Mark then describes the baptism of Jesus. Note that God the Father and the Holy Spirit bear witness to this event and, in particular, God makes a thunderous proclamation from heaven: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” God literally bears witness to the identity of Jesus as the literal ‘Son of God.’

Mark 1:12-13

While it is tempting to read in the account of the temptation from the other Gospels here, we must pay attention to Mark’s distinctive focus—or what he omits. Note that he is unconcerned to communicate how Jesus withstood the temptations or even the mere fact that he withstood the temptations. His focus is on the simple fact that Jesus was opposed by Satan. In other words, Mark briefly mentions this episode to indicate that Satan recognized the identity of Jesus Christ which is confirmed in his opposition to him (as well as Jesus’s apparent command of the angels who ministered to him). This notion of confirming identity by opposition is further explored later (see below).

Mark 1:14-15

Finally, Jesus’s mission to proclaim a gospel of the kingdom of God affirms the thesis statement in 1:1. Notice the linguistic connections of the mention of Jesus and the mention of a gospel message in 1:1 and 1:14-15. There is one more connection that is, perhaps, harder to see. Remember that the title *Christ*, literally means *Messiah* or *anointed one*, and is primarily a royal term referring to a king. Throughout 1 Samuel, for example, David is referred to as “the Lord’s Anointed” as he was chosen to serve as the rightful king. In Mark’s Gospel, that Jesus comes to initiate a kingdom (of God) indicates that he is the Christ and (Son) of God. That is, his mission confirms his identity.

IDENTITY THEME CONFIRMED IN CHAPTERS 1-8

After Mark’s list of witnesses in the first 15 verses, he continues to introduce the theme of Jesus’s identity throughout the Gospel in interesting ways.

Mark 2:1-12

The next place in which the identity theme rises to the surface is an ironic statement by the scribes and Pharisees in Mark 2:7. Here, Jesus has surprisingly claimed to forgive the sins of a paralyzed man, only later healing him from paralysis to confirm his authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10). But before Jesus proves his authority, the scribes and Pharisees question: “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” They demonstrate that their theology is correct—only God can forgive sins. However, ironically, they have misidentified Jesus. They fail to recognize him as (Son of) God. The miracle in the story, then, becomes a proof of Jesus’s identity as well as his authority and priority to forgive sins.⁶ The question remains in the minds of the audience, is Jesus God?

⁶ Jesus’s focus throughout the Gospel is on proclaiming his message and forgiving sins, not on doing miracles. See Mark 1:38.

Mark 5

The three stories in Mark 5 are interwoven in a complicated fashion, yet reveal a striking similarity when taken on their own terms. In each, Jesus has an encounter with someone suffering. In each, it is Jesus's encounter with the person that causes them to be healed. What's peculiar here is that, taken together, the three stories become representative. As we already saw with reference to the prophets in the first few verses of chapter 1, Mark uses representative parts to approximate the whole (a literary figure called *synecdoche*). In these stories, we have three people who are suffering: a man, a woman, and a child. Together, they represent all of humanity. They suffer from three very different ailments: one is possessed by a demon, one has a bleeding disease, and one has simply died. Together, they represent all of the difficulties of this life. Yet, Jesus is able to reverse each of them, even death! The unmistakable conclusion then is that Jesus is the one who can heal all of humanity from every earthly and natural impairment. All that is required is a real encounter with him. It seems already like an identity argument. But the theme of identity is confirmed in the exploration of the context. The previous chapter ends on a question that chapter 5 seems to be answering.

And they [the disciples] were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"⁷

Having just experienced a miracle of Jesus, the disciples are left wondering who Jesus is. It's the identity question that drives the narrative of the whole book. And chapter 5 gives the readers something of an answer.

Mark 8:27-30

The first half of the book concludes with a major transitional moment, a moment of profound revelation. Peter famously pronounces Jesus to be *the Christ*.

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸ And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹ He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Notice again that the whole interchange is launched on the question of identity. This time, Jesus brings the question to the foreground. The disciples offer several answers, but only Peter arrives at an acceptable conclusion. Jesus is *the Christ* (half of Mark's thesis from 1:1). Yet, Peter is not commended here in Mark's Gospel the way he is in Matthew's version.⁸ Mark's focus is on something else. Jesus immediately warns the disciples to keep this conclusion to themselves. Why?

The context shows a complicated by brilliantly argued literary point. In the immediately previous miracle (Mark 8:22-26), Jesus takes makes two attempts to heal the same man from blindness. The first attempt was not a failure and does not indicate some weakness on the part of Jesus. Rather, Jesus healed the man in two stages on purpose. Prior to this, Jesus had been

⁷ Mark 4:41.

⁸ See Matthew 16:17-19.

discussing perception with his disciples, chastising them for their sight, yet lack of understanding.

Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?⁹

Jesus had already connected sight and understanding. Then, in the miracle, he heals a man, giving him sight in two stages. We might then expect to see a playing out of this idea with regard to understanding. Peter recognizes Jesus to be *the Christ*, yet Jesus tells the disciple to keep it quiet because they do not yet have the second stage of understanding. They are only partially sighted. This much is confirmed in the very next conversation Jesus has with Peter in Mark 8:31 - 9:1. Here, Peter demonstrates that his perception is still deficient as he rebukes Jesus for saying that he, Jesus, the Son of Man, must suffer and die and be raised again. Peter expects the Christ (or Messiah) to be a conqueror, not a sufferer. His understanding is limited. And Jesus, in turn, must rebuke Peter until Peter understands later (after the resurrection).

Other Indicators

Finally, there are a few other places in Mark 1-8 that bring this question of identity to the foreground. In particular, the demons periodically assert that Jesus is the Son or Holy One of God.¹⁰ Indeed, no human recognizes Jesus as Son of God in the Gospel after the thesis statement in 1:1 until the end of chapter 15. Only supernatural beings (demons, God) recognize him as Son of God before the crucifixion.

CONCLUSION

From the opening thesis statement in 1:1 through the various passages we have explored in the first half of the Gospel of Mark, to the hinge passage at the centre of the book, Mark demonstrates that the driving theme of the Gospel is the question of Jesus's identity. But, not only is the identity of Jesus the driving theme, the answer to that identity question is far more complicated than we might assume. Indeed, the identity of Jesus is confirmed in his death and resurrection (for the forgiveness of sins) and is only truly recognizable in those events.

⁹ Mark 8:18.

¹⁰ Mark 1:24, 3:11, and 5:7.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

PART 2—IDENTITY AND MISSION IN MARK 9-16

Having reviewed some of the basics of the Gospels, some of the background information about the Gospel of Mark, and what appears to be a major theme—*identity*—in the first half, we can now see how that theme is developed and modified in the second half of the Gospel.

MARK 9:2-13

Following immediately on from the major transitional scene in Mark 8:27-9:1, it is as if the Gospel restarts. The imagery, language, and action of the Transfiguration scene strongly echoes that of 1:9-11. God, for the second and final time, opens heaven and speaks down.

⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

The identity theme comes to the surface once again. We have another divine identification of Jesus as the Son of God. But, this time, God says something slightly different. Given the numerous comparisons to the scene in 1:9-11, the contrast of statement is quite conspicuous. Here, God speaks to the onlookers (Peter, James, and John) and tells them to 'listen to Jesus.'

Mark has purposefully paired this new revelation with the previous passage because the new thing that Jesus has been saying—and which Peter failed to fully comprehend—concerns his mission. Jesus is now revealing that the nature of the Messiah is to suffer, die, and rise again. This is made clear in the preceding statement in Mark 8:31:

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

The new teaching must be heeded. Mark affirms this notion by showing Jesus repeating the teaching in almost the exact same word two more times in the section bookended by the healing of two different blind men (Mark 8:22-26 and 10:46-52). Note the statements in 9:31:

...for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

And 10:33:

...saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles."

From the transition passage, Jesus consistently teaches that the nature of the Son of Man (a title for the Messiah) is to die and rise again. And just as consistently, the disciples fail to

understand. Mark states this explicitly in 9:32 and demonstrates the implications of it in three different passages. Part of Jesus's teaching about his own suffering and death is that his followers will follow in this same way. Jesus makes it clear in his teaching in Mark 8:34-35:

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

But the disciples demonstrate a complete inability to *listen* to (or at least understand) Jesus's teaching. In the Mark 8 passage, Peter immediately rebukes Jesus for this teaching, showing that he simply does not understand the nature of the Messiah. After the chapter 9 teaching, the disciples are caught arguing about who among them is the greatest (see 9:33-37). After the teaching in chapter 10, James and John approach Jesus to request sitting at his right and left hand in glory. In the second and third examples, the disciples are concerned with precisely the opposite of what Jesus is teaching—they are looking out for their own advantage and comfort, not their calling to a sacrificial following of Jesus that will include suffering. They fail to heed God's command to them: 'Listen to Jesus.'

MARK 10:17-22

Before the third death and resurrection prediction, Mark records the story of Jesus encountering a rich man.¹ Again connecting this passage to an earlier story, Mark continues to mirror the first half of the Gospel in the Second half with Mark 10:17-22:

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.'" ²⁰ He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Mark draws on the story of Jesus healing a paralytic in Mark 2:1-12 in portraying this encounter. Once again, the primary connection points to the *identity* theme in Mark's use of irony. As with Mark 2:7—where the Pharisees correctly understand that only God can forgive sins, but fail to identify Jesus as God (or God's Son) with their ironic question—so Jesus points to his identity as God with another ironic question. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Jesus points the man to a fundamental truth: only God is good. Jesus prepares the man for a conclusion he never reaches: Jesus is God. It was right and good that he called him *Good Teacher*, even given Jesus's provocative response. Jesus puts the identity question at the centre of the conversation before the conversation even starts.

¹ This story is often called "The Rich Young Ruler" or the "Rich Young Man." There is nothing in Mark's version of the story which indicates that the man was either a ruler of any kind or even young. In fact, Mark avoids using a noun for man, including the noun which Mark later uses to refer to a *young* man (see Mark 14:51 and 16:5).

Notice, once again, Jesus also pushes the identity question to the question of what it means to follow Jesus. Just as the nature of the Messiah is to suffer and die and rise again, so the followers of the Messiah must make sacrifice. In this case, the man is compelled not only to give up his many possessions, but to make this sacrifice so that he can *follow* Jesus (10:22). As a result, the passage shows the reader that if one really believes that Jesus is who he says he is, one should be willing to sacrifice in significant ways in order to follow him.

MARK 14:53-65

The trial scene of Jesus before the High Priest is the dramatic climax of the entire Gospel of Mark. It begins somewhat slowly, described in even comical terms. Twice the accusers fail. They look for some to give testimony against Jesus and cannot find anyone. Then they solicit people to lie and give false testimony. But even here, the stories disagree with each other and a conviction slips away. The accusers bungle the proceedings.

It is only when the High Priest questions Jesus that a conviction becomes possible. Note the High Priest's question in Mark 14:60-61:

⁶⁰Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" ⁶¹But he was silent and did not answer. Again, the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

Here, we have the confluence of several ideas that have been uncovered throughout the Gospel. At this most climactic moment, this turning point, Mark's themes and thesis converge in Jesus's succinct, elegant, and perfect response and the High Priests reaction:

⁶²Jesus said, 'I am; and "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power", and "coming with the clouds of heaven."' ⁶³Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'Why do we still need witnesses? ⁶⁴You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?' All of them condemned him as deserving death.

Identity

In the question of the High Priest, we have the author's thesis statement from Mark 1:1. Is Jesus the Christ? Is he the Son of God (or as the High Priest is Jewish, he uses a euphemism in order to avoid saying the name of God—the Blessed One)? The priest asks the question that the author has been building into the book since the beginning. And Jesus's response is incredible. First, he answers by stating "I am." He not only answers affirmatively, but he does so in the language that God uses of himself back in Exodus.² In Jesus's first response, he boldly claims the identity of God. His second response is also a biblical reference, this time to Daniel 7:13-14. Jesus calls himself as the *Son of Man* (the Messianic term used in Daniel 7:13) as one who will come or go (the Greek verb is ambiguous) with a cloud to be in the presence of God at his right hand. The Daniel passage continues to talk about how this Son of Man will be a king (Messiah, anointed one, Christ) with an everlasting kingdom. That is, Jesus clearly identifies himself as the Christ, and a victorious Christ at that.

² See Exodus 3:14. This concept of God referring to himself as "I am" continues into both late antique Judaism and early Christianity in a variety of ways.

Blasphemy and Death (and Resurrection)

The second theme that comes to the surface here is that of *blasphemy*. This idea only enters into the Gospel of Mark a few times, but it does so at surprisingly important moments. The first time was back in Mark 2:7. Here, the scribes and Pharisees accuse Jesus of blasphemy because he claims to forgive sins and (they rightly understand that) only God can forgive sins. They do not yet recognize Jesus as God and they fail to believe even after he offers miraculous proof (in healing the paralyzed man). Here, Jesus once again claims the divine status of God. And he is about to perform the greatest miracle of proof of his divinity (in the resurrection). In other words, there is a sustained argument from chapter 2 around this notion of blasphemy. The idea itself is intertwined with the *identity* theme, as Jesus's identity as God is what is at the heart of blasphemy accusation. And here, at the breaking point of the tension between Jesus and his accusers, it is the charge of blasphemy that finally results in a conviction. *That is, the question of Jesus's identity is the reason, in Mark's Gospel, that Jesus gets convicted.* And the conviction of blasphemy is a capital offense. In Mark's greatest use of irony, Jesus ultimately goes to his death (and resurrection—the proof of his identity) because of the claim of his identity.

MARK 15:21-39

Three things rise to the surface in this challenging passage that plays out the suffering and death that Jesus has been predicting for himself. The mission comes to something of a definitive point here.

First, the *blasphemy* idea that sits at the centre of the last passage and has been in the trajectory of the Gospel since chapter 2—this theme that is tied to the *identity* theme—makes its final appearance in Mark 15:29. It is slightly concealed by most English translations:

²⁹Those who passed by derided [*blasphemed*, βλασφημέω] him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰save yourself, and come down from the cross!'

It, once again, shows Mark's use of irony. Having been convicted of blasphemy (the attribution of divinity to something that isn't divine or the denial of divinity to something that is), the scoffers literally blaspheme Jesus. They mock him, rather than recognize that he is God. And as such, Mark correctly asserts that they are blaspheming Jesus, even though the scoffers at that moment would disagree with it. In simply using this term, Mark puts the *identity* notion back at the centre. Is Jesus really God? Then to mock him is to blaspheme.

Second, Mark records the confusion of those who heard Jesus's exclamation. Hearing Jesus call for God in Aramaic, the observers assume he is calling Elijah—that Old Testament prophet who has already appeared at several critical moments, particularly in Mark 1:1-8 where John the Baptist is described as Elijah and in Mark 8:27-9:13 where Jesus is confused for Elijah, Elijah appears at the Transfiguration, and Jesus asserts that John the Baptist was the predicted return of Elijah. In other words, Elijah has been referenced at major dramatic points in conjunction with divine assertions of Jesus's *identity* as God's Son (i.e., the two moments when God himself speaks to the observers and declares him as much). In this case, the reference to

Elijah might be a clue that we should expect a pronouncement of Jesus's *identity* as the Son of God. And in fact, that is exactly what happens.

Third, Mark records the conclusion of the Roman centurion in Mark 15:39:

³⁹Now 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!'

How much the Roman centurion understood and how precisely he came to the conclusion that he did is unclear from the passage. However, it is clear that he recognized Jesus as the Son of God. He is the first human being (apart from Jesus) to come to the conclusion. Only God and other supernatural entities (such as demons) have understood this. And it is clear that he recognized Jesus as the Son of God on the basis of how Jesus died. Mark notes that it was the way Jesus breathed his last that compels the centurion to draw his conclusion. The *identity* theme and the realization of the mission (or death) come together in this important moment. Mark's thesis finally reaches its conclusion. Jesus has been proclaimed that he is the Christ (Mark 8:29) and the Son of God (15:39) and has proven as much in that he kept to his mission of suffering and dying. The only question remaining is whether Jesus will complete his mission and rise again. Mark concludes on an enigmatic testimony that, in some ways, builds suspense, in 16:6:

But he [the young man at the tomb] said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here."

The testimony is clear, but the proof and accounts of a resurrected Jesus are absent. It leaves the reader wondering, though with good reason on the proof that has been present, whether Jesus was truly raised. The eyewitnesses to the empty tomb are quite suggestive.

CONCLUSION

While there are certainly many other themes in the Gospel of Mark that can be studied profitably (e.g., kingdom, discipleship, faith vs. faithlessness), central to his literary agenda is the question of Jesus's *identity*. From his thesis-like statement in Mark 1:1 ("*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*") to Peter's great recognition of Jesus as the Christ (Mark 8:29) to the centurion's recognition that Jesus is the Son of God (Mark 15:39), the question of identity is pieced together throughout the Gospel.

But, importantly, this is no mere question of getting Christological titles right (e.g., Son of Man, Son of God, Christ, Messiah). For Mark, the question of Jesus's identity is intimately tied to the question of what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah and the Son of God. From Jesus three predictions of his death and resurrection (in chapters 8-10), to the great trial scene, to the centurion again, Jesus's *identity* is declared, demonstrated, and proven in the way he died and in the promise of his resurrection. It's not just the person, but the work. It's not just the Messiah, but the mission. Jesus's death and resurrection are his greatest miracle, his greatest evidence that he forgives sins (cf., Mark 2:1-12).

Finally, throughout the Gospel, the question of Jesus's identity and death and resurrection always spell out particular implications for those who would follow him. Indeed, following

him is part of the expected response. Whether it is leaving family (Mark 3:31-35), worldly possessions (Mark 10:17-22), or picking up a cross and joining in the way of suffering (Mark 8:34-9:1, cf., Mark 15:21), the followers are called to a difficult life which likely does not bring glory or success in this life (Mark 9:33-37, 10:35-40). But it is how a true disciple of Jesus lives.

So, as you read through the Gospel of Mark, keep in mind these three questions:

- How is Mark raising the question of or showing some aspect of Jesus's identity?
- What is the nature of Jesus's mission?
- According to Mark, what does it look like to follow Jesus?

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