

Title: Examine the Christology of Mark

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to examine how Mark presents 'a theological interpretation of the Person and work of Jesus of Nazareth'¹. The gospel of Mark is now considered the most ancient of the synoptic gospels and is much more highly regarded than it once was. Mark is no longer considered to be written as an abridged version of Matthew² or by a writer with limited writing skills generating a "primitive"³ story. It is seen as a carefully crafted story with the language kept dynamic and simple making it accessible to a wide audience of Gentiles and Jews⁴.

Approaches to the Christology of Mark

Extreme or novel views of Mark's Gospel deny that it contains any Christology. Horsley writes from what could be called a neo-Marxist viewpoint prefers to view the gospel as a provocative narrative containing the record of a class struggle between rich and poor and focussed in the spiritual man Jesus. He suggests, 'whatever theology is supposedly found in Mark...is the creation of theologians....[ignoring] the story itself in favour of ideas extracted

¹ *Contours of Christology in the New Testament*, Longnecker, R.N. (ed), pxii, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan, 2005.

² Longnecker, op. cit, p79.

³ *The Gospel According To Mark*, Taylor, V., p117, 2nd Edition, Macmillan, New York, 1966.

⁴ Taylor, op. cit., p119.

from it...⁵. However, few would argue that this is the focus of the Gospel preferring a purpose of a much more explicitly theological one and to firmly fix Jesus at a point in history within context as both Jewish Messiah and Son of God.

In support of this viewpoint, McGrath observes, "...to designate any 1st century Palestinian an 'annointed one' would be to make a powerful and deeply evocative affirmation of the importance of such a person"⁶ and Achtemeier et al on the gospel framework:

"Mark himself wraps his presentation of Jesus in the robe of Christological significance...in the opening line of the Gospel...his narrative is firstly concerned with Jesus' identity and with the meaning of his person and work against the backdrop of Israel [and] the prophet Isiah."⁷

Longnecker et al provide the compelling closing to the view that the Gospel is in fact about Jesus himself and his wider mission rather than the Jewish politics by observing, '...with the exception of 6:14-29 and 14:66-72 Jesus is the central figure. We have a gospel "about" and "by"⁸.

⁵ *Hearing the Whole Story (The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel)*, Horseley, R.A., p99, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2001.

⁶ *Christian Theology*, McGrath, A.M., pp351-5, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004.

⁷ *Introducing the New Testament (Its Literature and Theology)*, Achtemeier, P.J., Green B.G., Thompson, M.M., p123, William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan, 2001.

⁸ Longnecker et al, op. cit., p81.

Accepting such a view, the remainder of the essay will examine some distinctive and shared aspects of the Christology of the Gospel.

Features of the Christology of Mark

The Christology of Mark is sometimes considered only in terms of the titles ascribed to Jesus within the text. However, this can miss the concepts within the wider framework that help interpret these titles. Some of these concepts are considered below before examining the titles.

Painter⁹ argues that Mark is distinctive in his Christology because of the concentrated attention on the death of Jesus. Painter maintains the gospel has an apologetic tone with Mark endeavouring to show how the 'plausibility problem' of the death of Jesus as a final defeat was in fact a victory, 'powers of evil were broken and transformation of human consciousness made possible'¹⁰. When Mark describes Jesus' designation as the Son of God at his baptism (1:9-11) this is seen as distinct from the Pauline teaching that this occurred post-death and post-Resurrection¹¹.

Predictions regarding the necessity of the suffering and death of the Messiah (8:31; 9:9; 12:31; 10:33-34, 45) are peculiar to Mark. Mark establishes that the suffering and death are an expression of the will and purposes of God. His use of the messianic term 'Suffering Servant' is sometimes used to

⁹ *Mark's Gospel (New Testament Readings)*, Painter, J., p5, Routledge, London, 1997.

¹⁰ Painter, op. cit., p16

¹¹ Painter, op. cit., p168

illustrate that radical discipleship requires a death to self¹². Some interpreters emphasise that Mark is a manual for discipleship.

Many scholars are excited by the alleged 'Messianic secret' in Mark that focuses on Jesus apparently concealing His identity when identified in the exorcisms or Transfiguration until after Peter confesses Him as the Christ¹³. However, Taylor interprets Mark's presentation differently. He points out that the secret is in fact no secret at all to the reader as the Gospel announces it but rather that Jesus' Messiah-ship was to be seen 'not a matter of status but action' and that his Messiah-ship had its consummation at the trial.¹⁴ This is a defensible position in that there are many "corrective" stories told by Jesus that are designed to teach the true nature of His Messiah-ship to His disciples as opposed to the dominant concepts within late 2nd Temple Judaism¹⁵.

Mark's awareness of the Father-Son relationship is also displayed in a unique way. Rowe¹⁶ describes that the Greek word *μογιλαλον* is only found in Mark 7:32 and in Isaiah 35,5-6 (LXX). Similarly, the use of the phrase of God's self-identification to Moses, *εγω ειμι* (I AM), in 6:50. Mark's use of prophetic scripture and description of the miraculous in the ministry of Jesus to

¹² Painter, op. cit., p55

¹³ Painter, op.cit., p16.

¹⁴ Taylor, op. cit., pp123,234.

¹⁵ Painter, op. cit., p168

¹⁶ *God's Kingdom and God's Son (The Background to Mark's Christology from concepts of Kingship in the Psalms)*, Rowe, R.D., p233, Brill, 2002.

emphasise both Messianic credentials and divine Son-ship is notable. His astute awareness of how to write for both Jew and Gentile is displayed.

Christological Titles used in Mark

“Nazarene”¹⁷

The use of this title is significant in that it identifies a real, flesh and blood, historical Jesus. The early followers were sometimes known as ‘Nazarenes’.

“Prophet”

Painter describes how Jesus considered Himself to be within the tradition of the Prophets (6:1-6)¹⁸. Taylor describes this as a necessarily ‘fundamental element in Mark’s christology’¹⁹ as it was one of the few terms that Jesus used of Himself.

“Son of David”

Painter describes this is clearly a Jewish messianic title of the saving King²⁰. Works of kingly mercy were expressed through the ministry of healing and deliverance. Mark interprets these events as fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah and Zechariah. Longnecker adds that the concept of kingship and ownership is reinforced by the way Jesus called His disciple to Him and how he rode into Jerusalem²¹. The cry of the crowd, ‘Hosanna in the Highest’ is

¹⁷ Painter, op. cit., pp43-44.

¹⁸ Painter, op. cit., p97.

¹⁹ Taylor, op.cit., pp119-120.

²⁰ Painter, op. cit., pp151-153.

²¹ Longnecker et al, op. cit., pp84;93.

reserved for the King of Israel. Painter emphasises this kingship by highlighting that Jesus was executed as 'King of the Jews'²². Mark 4:10 describes Jesus as the way to enter into the Kingdom of God. Longnecker et al describe this as a King administering His Kingdom²³.

“Son of God”

This is seen by many scholars as the dominant Christological theme running through Mark and points directly to Jesus claiming divine sonship. Painter makes the point that this is not a term used in Mark by Jesus of Himself save at His trial and is only used by third parties be they demons, God Himself or the centurion at the crucifixion²⁴. Some would degrade it to a non-divine term or contest that Jesus used it.

However, Longnecker et al make a strong case for it as a divine term by tracing its usage beginning at the prologue, ‘..we have an unambiguous identification of Jesus by the highest authority.’²⁵ Further evidence is deduced from the witness of John the Baptist at the baptism of Jesus as of seeing the Holy Spirit come upon Him. Longnecker et al view this in the following terms, “...future actions and words would be guided in the [Holy] Spirit, not by Satan [the Spirit of this world]”²⁶. Painter describes how other phrases such as ‘Most High’ or ‘Of the Blessed’ were typically Jewish ways of

²² Painter, op. cit, p204.

²³ Longnecker et al, op. cit., p84.

²⁴ Painter, op.cit, pp14;17;32.

²⁵ Longnecker et al, op. cit., p84

²⁶ Longnecker et al, op. cit., pp82-83

referring to God and refer to Christ's divinity²⁷. All works of power such as healing diseases, ceremonial cleansing, forgiving sins, calling of sinners, authority over the Sabbath are evidence of divine Sonship.

Both Longnecker and Painter view Sonship as demonstrated by Jesus coming with authority and power. This authority and power is the ultimate expression of his sonship. Painter describes that in 3:11 and 5:7 the demonic spirits recognise Him as the Son of God and that their successful exorcism means that the Son of God has come in power²⁸.

It is possible to view a primitive Trinitarian concept within Mark. The Son baptised in the Spirit and commended by the Father's direct command.

Longnecker et al comment on the baptism of Jesus:

“...The statement of one whom has ultimate authority, the beloved Son, obedient to God's will, the One in whom God is well pleased, Jesus embodying the Kingdom of God – both in Person and Teaching..”²⁹

“Son of Man”

This is a title that Jesus frequently uses about Himself. Painter, in line with many scholars, understands that Jesus is identifying Himself with the ‘Son of

²⁷ Taylor, op. cit., p195

²⁸ Painter, op. cit., pp32; 44; 90

²⁹ Longnecker et al, op. cit., p84

Man'³⁰ found in the prophecies of Daniel. This is arguably a universal Messiah figure for both Jew and Gentile.

Painter also connects this title with his divinity. The 'power to forgive sins'³¹ illustrates that Mark is clearly assigning a divine attribute to the Son of Man. This title is also bound up with the concept of Kingship and the prophecy of Daniel reinforces this. A King is delivering the Kingdom to the 'Ancient of Days'.

Conclusion

Far from being "primitive" the Christological content of the Gospel is seen to be complex and involved. Mark is presenting Jesus as both a Messianic Jewish figure and a redemptive figure for the Gentiles. He includes details that would be important to both Jews and Gentiles. His emphasis in the teaching in Mark 4 suggests a Kingdom of God consciousness. Mark presents a coherent view that embraces the Jewish tradition, the gospel to the Gentiles and the ultimate fulfilment of history by his eschatological passages.

1551 Words.

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³⁰ Painter, op. cit., pp9; 18; 53-55; 131; 195-196

³¹ Painter, op. cit, p53.

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