

Notes for Relationship Reset #4

Setting of Mark 8:31-39

These events take place in [Caesarea Philippi](#), about a two-day journey north/northeast of the Sea of Galilee. This was primarily a gentile city which was known for its shrine to the Greek nature god, [Pan](#). To reveal his deity, Jesus chooses a Greek city known for its worship of a false god. The city was not far from Mount Hermon,¹ which is a strong candidate for the site of the Transfiguration,² the Mount Tabor and Mount Meiron³ have also been suggested.

In the parallel account in Matthew 16:18, Jesus tells Peter that the “gates of hell will not prevail” against the church. This may be a reference to the source to a large, subterranean spring in the region of Caesarea Philippi which was considered to be a “gate to Hades” by Greeks. It would have functioned as a visual metaphor for Jesus’s larger point about the endurance of his Church.

Narrative Foreshadowing and Peter’s Confession

Though the sermon points for RR#4 are rooted in Mark 8:31-39, it’s important to recognize the surrounding narrative context of this account—the confession of Christ’s messiahship and the Transfiguration (Mark 9:1-13) and Jesus’s mission to gentiles (7:24-8:26).

Mark 7:24-8:26 narrates the following stories: the healing of the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter; the healing of the deaf and mute man⁴; the feeding of the four thousand; the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod; the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida.⁵

¹ For references to mountains as places of revelation in scripture, see Ezekiel 40:2 and Revelation 21:10.

² “Both Jesus and Moses were transfigured by light; both were accompanied by a select group of three and both went up on the seventh day. In addition, both transfigurations were associated with a descending cloud; in both incidents a voice came forth from the that cloud and in both cases those who saw the radiant figure became afraid. Furthermore, Moses and Elijah, who appeared and conversed with the transfigured Jesus, are the only OT figures of whom it is related that they spoke with God on Sinai. Clearly the Gospel story was told in such a fashion as to call to mind the theophany on Sinai.” *DJG*, 563.

³ See *DJG*, 835.

⁴ This is likely a reference to Isaiah 35:5-6 (NIV): “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.”

DJG, 302 reads: “When Jesus heals a deaf-mute, Mark describes the man as one who could ‘hardly talk’ (Mk 7:32), an expression found in the LXX [the Septuagint] only in Isaiah 35:6, in which the prophet is describing the wonders of the age to come, including the fact that the ‘mute tongue’ will ‘shout for joy.’ ”

⁵ This is likely also a reference to Isaiah 35:5-6.

Peter's—and by extension the disciples' as a whole—understanding of Jesus's true identity is foreshadowed in the stories that lead up to it. In particular, the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida seems to be a reflection of the confession of Peter.

“The parallels between the story of the blind man healed at Bethsaida (8:22-26) and the Caesarea Philippi confession (8:27-30) are too striking to be missed: (1) setting: Bethsaida/Caesarea Philippi, verse 22 = 27; (2) partial sight: people like trees/Jesus only a prophet, verse 24 = 28; (3) sight restored: everything clearly/You are the Christ, verse 25 = 29; (4) secrecy motif: Don't go into the villages/not to tell anyone, verse 26 = 30.”⁶

Peter's confession transitions into the Transfiguration, so it is important to recognize this account as an intentional precursor to the Transfiguration rather than an incidentally-placed story⁷ just as the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida is a precursor to the confession story.⁸

“Get Behind Me, Satan”

The disciples misunderstand the nature of Jesus's messiahship not only in the gospels, but up through the beginning of Acts (Acts 1:6-7). This misunderstanding colors Peter's words to Jesus in 8:32 and Jesus's sharp rebuke in 8:33.

It is unlikely that Peter was literally Satan-possessed in Mark 8:32. More likely, Peter, in his lack of understanding, [was inadvertently speaking on behalf of Satan's interests](#), which, in the gospels, largely relate to minimizing Jesus's purpose in the world—temporal rulership over and above eternal salvation and the restoration of all things. In Mark 8 Peter says: “You're supposed to rule, not suffer!” During the temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:8-10), Satan said: “I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world if you'll bow to me.” Peter's statement here is an echo of the temptations Jesus already overcame. It was tied up in the idea that the Messiah was to rule as a king, not suffer as a servant (Daniel 7:13-14). This was a misunderstanding. As Jesus says: “You do not have in mind the things of God, *but the things of men*.”

John's gospel also alludes to this mentality in John 6:53-68 (see also John 2:23-25) where many disciples desert Jesus following some hard teaching. In this instance as well, Peter speaks on behalf of the Apostles, reaffirming their faith in Jesus despite the controversy he elicited in other sectors of society. Even during Jesus's earthly ministry, people had a habit of making

⁶ *Baker Commentary of the Bible*, 781.

⁷ The Old Testament parallels are significant. “After six days” (9:2) reflects the six days God's glory cloud covered Mount Sinai before he called to Moses (Exodus 24:15-16); and Moses and Elijah received visions of God's glory on his holy mountain (Exodus 24; 1 Kings 19). *Baker Commentary on the Bible*, 781.

⁸ “Each of the Synoptic Gospels has the following sequence: (1) Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah; (2) Jesus' charge not to divulge this to others; (3) Jesus' prediction of his coming suffering, death and resurrection; (4) his call to those who want to be his disciples to follow him in self-sacrifice; (5) the Transfiguration; (6) Jesus' command not to tell others about this until after his resurrection; (7) a discussion (except in Luke) on the coming of Elijah; (8) the healing of a boy; and (9) a second prediction of Jesus' passion.” *DJG*, 834.

surface-level commitments to Jesus that ultimately faltered when rubber met road. Jesus knew—and knows—what is in us.

The “Messianic Secret”

Present here is the concept of the “messianic secret.” In the gospels, Jesus often instructs people—particularly Jews⁹—not to talk about a miraculous healing, or he is cryptic about the suffering nature of his messianic role:

Where Jesus speaks in a veiled and parabolic manner of his death in [Mark] 2:20, here he speaks openly (“plainly,” v. 32) to his disciples about the nature of his messiahship, affording the key to the messianic secret that has been kept from the crowds who, in their clamor to understand him only as a wonder-working figure, actually threaten to subvert his intention of accomplishing the truly saving work, namely, going to the cross, dying, and rising again.¹⁰

In Mark 7:36; 8:26, 8:30, and 9:9-10 we see examples of this “messianic secret” at work.

The reason why Jesus operated this way is shown in John 6:14-15 (NIV):

After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet is to come into the world.” Jesus, knowing that they *intended to come and make him king by force*, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

General Comments

Peter’s response to Jesus’s identity is shortest in Mark’s account of the disciples’ confession: “You are the Christ.” This is unsurprising since Mark is the briefest of the [synoptic gospels](#). As with many issues relating to the [synoptic problem](#), this is a reflection of the human author’s and the Holy Spirit’s original intent in writing for the original audience.

Though John’s gospel does not narrate the Transfiguration, he seems to allude to it in John 1:14. Peter also alludes to it in 2 Peter 1:16-18.

⁹ There are notable counter-examples where Jesus freely divulges his mission and role to gentiles (John 4—the woman at the well and the Samaritan village as a whole) or where he instructs people to go and tell about him (Mark 5:18-20—the Gerasene Demoniac becomes an “apostle to the Decapolis”). Typically, these exceptions are for people who have demonstrated true, heartfelt faith in Jesus and are not attempting to submit his Messianic role to their shortsighted expectations of what that entailed.

¹⁰ *Baker Commentary on the Bible*, 782.