

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 166—Mark's High Human Christology (Chapters 7-8)

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Introduction

I hope you are enjoying your Holy Week, culminating in Good Friday and the celebration of the resurrection on Sunday. Coincidentally, we will be talking about the death and resurrection of Jesus in this episode. In fact, the three texts we are going to explore this week are all healing stories, in a manner of speaking. It may come as a surprise to some, but Mark is able to tell us about his own Christology even within miraculous healing stories of Jesus.

Of course, as we have been doing as of late, we will go out of our way to try to find the highest Christology we can find in Mark, within probable reasons. In this week's episode, we will explore Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman, who offers an act of worship to him and even calls him Lord. Next, we will examine the healing of the blind man, which happens in a peculiar two-stage format. Lastly, we will look at Peter's confession of Jesus' messianic role and ask if this is saying enough or if Mark has more to reveal about his Christology.

How do these three miracle stories reveal the height of Mark's Christological understanding of Jesus? Let's find out on this week's episode of the BUP!

1. The Encounter with the Syrophenician Woman

Jesus got up and went away from there to the region of Tyre. And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know of it; yet He could not escape notice. But after hearing

of Him, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately came and fell at His feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of the Syrophoenician race. And she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And He was saying to her, "Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table feed on the children's crumbs." And He said to her, "Because of this answer go; the demon has gone out of your daughter." And going back to her home, she found the child lying on the bed, the demon having left. (Mark 7:24-30)

- Greek woman comes to Jesus and falls down at his feet, a sign of worship
- She calls him Lord, *kurios*
- Jesus himself says that the children should be satisfied first, that it is not fair to give the bread of the children to the little dogs.
 - a. Is Mark wanting us to read between the lines and conclude that Jesus, the one who is worshipped, is the Lord God whose children are the children of Israel?
- There are some other clues that suggest that Mark does not portray Jesus as God, but rather as a human being:
 - a. The story begins with Jesus entering a house in Tyre, not wanting anyone to know, but, as the Greek says, he was “not able to escape notice.” This presented Jesus as limited in the human condition, not able to do some things.
 - b. The story concludes with what appears on the surface to be a changing of Jesus’ mind. Jesus says that temporary priority should be given to the children, but the woman responds with a clever comeback, noting how the little dogs do in fact get to share in the food crumbs that were initially given to the children. Verse 29 makes it clear that because of this answer Jesus has exorcised the demon from the woman’s daughter. “Because of this answer” suggests to me, at least, that the woman’s response made Jesus change his mind, resulting in the miracle occurring.
- These two points seem to suggest that Jesus is human.
- Let’s return to the first 3 points: worship, declaration of lordship, and the reference to the children.
 - a. The Syrophoenician woman immediately heard about him and she came and bowed down at his feet.
 - She hasn’t heard him teach or seen him perform any miracles.
 - Perhaps the fame of Jesus was already spreading into Tyre. Mark has already told us in 3:8 that a great number of people from all around but including the vicinity of Tyre heard what Jesus was doing. Perhaps this woman heard the

scuttle bug and learned, to her surprise, that Jesus was here in town, here in Tyre.

- The act of falling down at Jesus' feet certainly regards Jesus as an object of worship. The Greek verb used here, *prospipto*, can refer to a gesture rightly given to human objects by the subjects.
 - The jailer fell down at the feet of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:29)
 - Esther fell down at the feet of the human king (Est 8:3 LXX)
 - Zipporah fell down at the feet of Moses (Exod. 4:25 LXX)
 - You know who is never the object of falling down at the feet, where the verb *prospipto* is used? God. Never in the LXX or NT.
 - So there would be no way that the original readers of Mark would conclude that the prostrating actions of the Syrophoenician woman were meant to regard Jesus as Yahweh.
- b. The response of the woman calls Jesus *kurios*, and it is the response of the woman that led to the healing.
- As you will recall, calling someone *kurios* did not automatically mean that that superior was the Lord God. *Kurios* had a regular use in everyday life in the Greco Roman world
 - Slaves called their masters Lord, these slaves didn't think their human master was Yahweh
 - Soldiers called their commanders Lord (see Luke 7:6-8). Surely these soldiers did not think their ranking officer was the Lord God
 - Commoners would call aristocrats Lord, surely these commoners did not regard these upper-class aristocrats as God in the flesh.
 - In fact, it is fair to say that when most people in the Greco-Roman world called someone else *kurios*, they did not have in mind that the *kurios* was the Lord God.
 - Mark is soon going to tell his readers explicitly what it means to call Jesus Lord, when Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1 in Mark 12:36. Jesus cites this Psalm to indicate that Yahweh, the Lord God, speaks to someone else and calls that person "my Lord". Yahweh speaks to my lord, and Jesus regards himself as the 2nd person here, distinct from Yahweh. So Mark calls Jesus Lord, yes, but in a way that distinguishes Jesus from Yahweh. The Lord Jesus is a high-ranking person empowered and authorized by Yahweh.

- In short, it is likely that the Syrophonecian woman called Jesus Lord to address him as a human superior, someone worthy to be the object of worship with her act of falling down at his feet.
- c. Jesus regards the children of Israel as “children.” Should we read this as Jesus is regarding them as his children, making himself out to be God?
 - I find this reading really strained. Jesus doesn’t say that they are his children or his sons and daughters.
 - Mark opens the Gospel by clearly identifying Jesus as the Son of God, the messianic agent of God. Jesus himself is one of God’s children.
 - Moreover, Mark has depicted Jesus as the giver of the bread to the children in the miraculous feeding of the 5,000.
- d. The story of the healing of the daughter of the Syrophoenician woman is an interesting story, but it is not a story, it seems, where Mark is suddenly doing to drop a bomb on his readers to suggest that Jesus is actually Yahweh.

2. The Two-Stage Restoration of the Blind Man’s Sight

And they came to Bethsaida. And they brought a blind man to Jesus and implored Him to touch him. Taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes and laying His hands on him, He asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see men, for I see them like trees, walking around." Then again He laid His hands on his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly. And He sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village." (Mark 8:22-26)

- Depending on when Mark was written, there was another person who was hailed for his ability to heal blind men with his spittle, and that was the emperor Vespasian. If Mark was written in the late 60s, then Vespasian was a general. If it was the year 70, then Vespasian had ascended to the throne as emperor.
 - Suetonius, *Vesp* 7.2-3; Tacitus, *Histories* 4.81
- Mark would be portraying Jesus in a manner that rivaled the miraculous claims of the Roman emperor.
- As I entitled this point, this is a two-stage restoration. All commentaries on the Gospel of Mark rightly note that this two-stage healing is followed with a two-stage Christology involving the confession of Peter the Apostle.
 - Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ

- Then Jesus reveals that he is to be betrayed, killed, and that he would rise on the 3rd day, resulting in Peter rebuking Jesus for this second stage of Christological development.
- Typically, Jesus is able to heal with a single statement, or with a single action. Sometimes there is a combination, but it only takes one attempt. In this story, it takes Jesus two tries
 - Limitations,
 - Hearts of the Pharisees are lacking in faith (8:11-13)
 - His followers too are lacking in faith (8:14-21)
 - Anticipating Peter himself, who lacks in understanding
- So the question can be posed: if only one stage of the two-stage healing is not enough, and if the two-stage healing of the blind man is related in the narrative to the two-stage Christology, then is the first stage of Christology, as confessed by Peter, insufficient?
 - It would seem that simply regarding Jesus as the Christ, as the Messiah, is not enough. There was not a universal expectation regarding the Messiah, as there were a variety of messianic expectations in 2nd temple Judaism. It is true that Jesus, according to Mark, is the Christ, but Mark's narrative requires a second stage that elaborates on what sort of Christ Jesus saw himself as.
 - Readers cannot simply cite Mark 8:29 (or the popular parallel in Matt 16:16) as if that is the be-all and end-all. It isn't, it is only the first of a two-stage healing, and Peter needed the healing just as much as the blind man needed healing. Let's look at how Jesus, who just opened the eyes of the blind man, opens the eyes of Peter:

3. Jesus Rebukes Peter's Christology

Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" They told Him, saying, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets." And He continued by questioning them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." And He warned them to tell no one about Him. And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." (Mark 8:27-33)

- Before we look at the two-stage Christology, let's consider how Jesus was perceived by outsiders:
 - John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets--all prophetic figure
 - No one thought that he was a heavenly angel, and archangel, or even the 2nd member of the trinity
 - It is true that Jesus was a prophet, even Jesus himself openly admitted that he was a prophet (Mark 6:4). But Mark began his gospel by identifying Jesus as the Son of God, so we know that Jesus is not a mere prophet.
- Peter offers the first of a two-stage Christology: Jesus is the Christ (8:29)
 - Jesus is the anointed king, the authorized agent of God's kingdom. We've known that Jesus was anointed as the Christ ever since his baptism where the voice from heaven hailed Jesus as the Son of God, just as Mark told us from the opening verse of the gospel.
 - But, as we know from the two-stage healing story that preceded this confession, the first stage is not enough.
- The second stage reveals the sort of Messiah that Mark has in mind for Jesus, namely that Jesus will function as the anointed king by being rejected, killed, and raised from the dead.
 - Jesus won't be a warrior messiah that violently revolts against Rome
 - Jesus won't be a priestly messiah as expected by the Qumran Jews
 - Jesus will defeat evil by paradoxically dying. He will win by losing. He will conquer by being conquered. It is this definition of "Christ" that Mark wishes to impress upon his readers.
- The second stage of the two-stage Christology involves the death of Jesus, whom he specifically calls the Son of Man, that is, the authorized human being. In doing so, Mark regards the anointed king--the Christ--as the authorized human son of man. In other words, the Christ is an authorized member of the human race. The Christ is not a heavenly angel, an archangel, or Yahweh himself. The Christ is a human being.
- Now, once Jesus reveals this second stage of the two-stage healing that Peter needed, Peter rebukes Jesus, using the same verb used throughout Mark to indicate the rebuking of the demons. Peter is harsh towards Jesus, which is why this second stage is part of the healing that Peter needs.
 - When Jesus replies, he states that Peter is setting his mind on the interests of man, not on the interests of God. Is Jesus here claiming to be God, since he is the one who revealed these things to Peter? In other words, is Mark subtly saying that Peter should be setting his interests on God's interests, i.e., Jesus' interests?
 - I think this is a stretch. The things of God refer to the divine necessity for the Christ to die, while the things of men refer to

expectations of the Messiah where he would conquer by shedding the blood of his enemies.

- Jesus could hardly be inferring that the things of God prove that Jesus is that very God since Jesus just called himself the Son of man, a human being, who is to die. God, as we all know, cannot die because God is immortal. Jesus had to die, meaning he was mortal, like all humans who are susceptible to death. So it seems highly unlikely that Jesus is subtly claiming to be God by saying that he is on the side of the things of God while Peter is on the side of the things of man.

Conclusion

The Gospel of Mark is filled with many interesting stories that show how it is that God's reign is breaking into this age in and through the ministry of Jesus. Within the healing stories, where the restoration of the kingdom is previewed on a very personal level, we can come to better understand Mark's own Christology.

We first noted that Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman revealed that Jesus is a high-ranking person who received worship and was addressed in a way that acknowledges him as a superior, the narrative depicted Jesus with very human qualities. Jesus was unable to escape the notice of the locals in Tyre and he seemingly had his mind changed by the faithful petition of the woman.

Second, we observed that Mark placed two stories side by side, each involving a two-stage interaction between Jesus and his dialogue partner. Within these two-stage interactions, it is clear that the first stage, which principally involves an answer sought by Jesus, is not a complete answer. Only the second part of the two-stage interaction gives the complete picture. The first of these two stories involve the healing of a blind man, which Mark seems to describe in ways that subvert a remarkably similar healing story involving Vespasian, the Roman emperor.

Lastly, we looked at the confession of Peter, which Mark frames as another two-stage miracle story. Peter is correct in his confession that Jesus is the Christ, that is, God's anointed king. However, this is only the first of a two-stage story, and Jesus seeks to unpack what sort of Messiah he regards himself. Instead of being a conquering warrior messiah or a priestly messiah, he defines his role as one who is to be rejected, killed, and later risen from the dead. Peter strongly disagrees, resulting in a rebuke from Jesus that acts as further healing in the two-stage healing. Mark wants to stress upon his readers that merely claiming Jesus to be the Christ is not far enough, for the way in which Jesus inaugurates God's rule is by suffering and dying.

The two parts to Mark's Christology involve anointed kingship and a shameful death, not full divinity and full humanity. Therefore, the Gospel of Mark continues to exhibit a high Christology, but it is a high human Christology, portraying Jesus as the highly authorized agent of the one true God.

Thanks for tuning into this week's episode of the BUP! There is more Christology in the Gospel of Mark to come in future episodes.

If you have enjoyed the podcast, please consider supporting us as we aim to promote the sound truths about the oneness and unity of God and the humanity of Jesus!

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