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JESUS' TRUE IDENTITY AS A FUNCTION OF FAITH

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TWO LEVELS OF EXPERIENCING MARK'S GOSPEL

The writer of the Gospel according to Mark states the identity of Jesus in Mark 1:1 when he writes "the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Immediately, the writer identifies Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God to the reader. The rest of the book, however, shows the disciples' lack of comprehension of Jesus' identity. On the one hand, the reader is exposed to a large set of references, both Jewish and Hellenistic, that prove that Jesus is the Son of God. On the other hand, the disciples go through a set of experiences that point to Jesus' identity but they do not understand the seemingly obvious events and references as the reader would expect or desire. This misunderstanding continues all the way to Jesus' crucifixion where the disciples abandon him.

The Gospel according to Mark includes a series of events that involve both the disciples in the story who do not understand the revelation of Jesus' identity and the reader outside the story who can interpret the events as proving Mark's initial claim. The goal of this paper is to show that the disciples' ability, as portrayed in Mark, to know Jesus' true identity through experiences and the reader's capacity to know God in Jesus through interpreting Scripture are both a function of faith. The examples provided will give a window into the disciples' experiences as well as a window into the references available

to the reader for interpretation. We will consider the disciples' participatory experience in Mark 6:45-52 as an example of the disciples' viewpoint and the reader's viewpoint in the Gospel according to Mark. We will start with a high-level descriptions in the book overall and then move to a detailed account using Mark 6:45-52.

The Disciples' Experiences – High-Level Description

Non-Participatory Experiences

A survey of the Gospel according to Mark reveals two categories of experiences, non-participatory and participatory. In addition, there is a movement toward participatory experiences in the first six chapters. An initial description of the types of experiences leading up to Mark 6:45-52 will set up the rest of the discussion on the disciples' degree of understanding of Jesus' identity. The disciples experience a variety of potential faith-producing events. The forms are intentional and are meant to appeal to different senses in order to move the disciples toward knowledge of his identity. The initial category includes non-participatory experiences where the disciples witness events but do not directly play a part. First, the disciples are exposed to Jesus' teaching and this appeals to their sense of hearing. A few examples include Jesus teaching the general people in the synagogue in Mark 1 and his teaching the disciples using a parable about the seed sower and explanation in Mark 4:1-20. Second, Jesus allows the disciples to witness an event which points to his identity and this appeals to their sense of sight. Some examples include the disciples seeing Jesus heal Simon's mother-in-law in Mark 1:29, the crowd witnessing his healing the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12, and his healing on the Sabbath in Mark 3:1-6. Both of these types of events appealed to the disciples' sense of hearing and sight without directly involving them.

Participatory Experiences

The second category includes experiences where the disciples participate. The first sub-category includes trials where Jesus is present with the disciples and the event is against them. For example, Jesus is with the disciples in the midst of the storm that threatens them in Mark 4:35-41 and he calms the storm. Another sub-category includes events where Jesus is present with the disciples and they contribute to the event. An example of this type of event is the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6:30-44 where the disciples and Jesus work together. Jesus gave thanks and blessed the loaves and the disciples set them before the people. Finally, another sub-category includes trials where Jesus is not present with the disciples and the event is against them. An example is in Mark 6:45-52, which we will consider, where Jesus sends the disciples ahead and the wind torments their boat. Overall, there is a transition from non-participatory to participatory experiences.

Transition to Participatory Experiences

The stories in Mark 6 demonstrate a change in the types of experiences. Before these events occur, Jesus begins to express his displeasure with the disciples' lack of understanding and faith in Mark 4. The disciples begin to take an active role in Jesus' ministry starting in Mark 6:7-13 when he sends them out to preach, drive out demons, anoint the sick, and cure. Up to that point, the disciples had been observers. The disciples report the results of their ministry and then they undergo back-to-back participatory experiences, the feeding and the boat events, that potentially function to reveal his identity. The disciples, despite the change in the nature of their experiences with Jesus, continue in their lack of comprehension and faith.

The Reader's Analysis – High-Level Description

The reader outside the story views the events differently than the disciples who are in the story. The reader approaches the series of stories at a different level than the disciples in three specific ways. First, the reader knows Jesus' identity and the text serves to prove that he is the Christ and Son of God. More specifically, the reader is able to interpret the references to Jesus' true identity that the disciples did not understand as they experienced the events. The specific examples will be considered later in the detailed description section. Second, the reader is able to analyze the events in light of past and future stories recorded in the book. For example, the reader can relate how the disciples go through different types of experiences as they are challenged in their understanding of Jesus. Finally, the reader's faith is strengthened or challenged by the stories in a different manner than the disciples who are in the midst of the account. This change is a function of the reader's knowledge of Jesus' identity from the start and his or her capability of relating other stories in the book. We will now move from a high-level, general description to a detailed description by using Mark 6:45-52 as the example pericope.

The Disciples' Experiences – Detailed Description

The events described in Mark 6:45-52 clearly portray that the disciples do not comprehend their experiences as revealing Jesus' identity as the Son of God. In summary, they experience events but they do not understand their significance. The event is composed of three parts. First, the event is set up by an act of obedience. Jesus urges the disciples to embark in the boat to the other side toward Bethsaida and they obey without any questions (Mark 6:45). Second, the actual event occurs and the disciples are overwhelmed by the wind and their astonishment at Jesus. In particular, the combination

of the disciples staying up all night, their struggle against the wind, the appearance of a ghost, and Jesus entering the boat followed by the ceasing of the winds leaves the disciples in a state of amazement. The ghost sighting, in particular, fits right into a known Jewish popular belief of the appearance of unusual apparitions on the sea (Wisdom 17:3f, 15).¹ The event provides a participatory experience but they are unable to ascertain what really occurred. The third part of the event is the response. The disciples, as described in Mark 6:52, do not understand the event in the same way that they did not understand how five thousand people were fed from five loaves of bread and two fish. The result of this misunderstanding is their hearts were hardened and Jesus' identity remained unknown due to their lack of understanding and faith.

The Reader's Analysis – Detailed Description

A reader of Mark 6:45-52 is presented with a quick-moving story that does not appear to include any explicit references to Jesus as the Son of God. The reader could easily move past this story without considering the detailed references to Jesus' identity. The pericope, however, is teeming with precise allusions to Jesus' identity. The question of whether the writer inserted the details to further his proof or the events occurred in such a way as to point directly to Jesus will not be considered in this paper. Either way, the references serve to advance the Mark 1:1 conception of Jesus as described. The following analysis provides examples that point to Jesus' identity.

¹ C.E.B. Cranfield. *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Cambridge: University Press), 226.

Pass By

One example of a reference to Jesus' identity is found in the description of Jesus as wanting to pass by them (ἤθελεν παρελθεῖν αὐτούς). There are a variety of proposals for the significance of this description. First, one meaning is found in the literal interpretation that he simply meant to pass by them and arrive ahead of them at Bethsaida. Second, taking the verse as a composite whole, Jesus wanted to reveal his presence to them as they were struggling by passing them.² Lastly, the reference to passing by points to a theophany where the transcendent Lord "passes by" as God did at Sinai before Moses in Ex 33:19,21 and at Horeb before Elijah in 1 Ki 19:11. The passing by of the Lord indicated his divine, saving presence.³ In addition, the sea context in conjunction with passing by also points to Job 9:8 and 9:11 where God is described as "he walks he walks upon the waves of the sea... if he goes by me, I will not see him, and if he passes by me, I will not recognize him".⁴

Mountain

A related example to the "passing by" illustration is the mountain reference. The writer does not provide an explanation for Jesus' decision to pray on the mountain (ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὸ ὄρος προσεύξασθαι). The reference, however, shares the mountain characteristic with Moses and Elijah's experience with God passing by. Furthermore, Jesus himself is revealed as the Son of God when he was transfigured before Peter, James and John on a

² William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 47.

³ Lamar Williamson, *Mark, Interpretation* (ed. James L. Mays; Louisville: John Knox Press), 131.

⁴ Williamson, *Mark*, 131.

mountain in Mark 9:2-8. Jesus is seen talking with Moses and Elijah. These references, tied together, point the reader to a deeper understanding of Jesus' identity.

“It is I”, “Do Not Be Afraid”

Jesus' words to the disciples provide two references to his divine identity. First, he said, “It is I!” (ἐγώ εἰμι) to the disciples. The revelation formula is used in words of God to Moses at the burning bush in Ex 3:1-14.⁵ The event at the burning bush was another example of a human who did not understand the presence of God in a supernatural event. In the same manner, Jesus' follow-up words of “Do not be afraid!” (μὴ φοβεῖσθε) also point to the divine response to the human fear of God's presence. Two examples of this response include God's words to Abram in a vision in Gen 15:1 and God's words to Jeremiah in Jer 1:8. These phrases were meant to provide assurance to the disciples as well as point to Jesus' identity.

Walking on Water and Calming the Winds

The references to Jesus coming to them walking on the sea (ἔρχεται πρὸς αὐτοὺς περιπατῶν ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης) and as a ghost (φάντασμα) contribute to the epiphany, or story of the appearance of a divine figure.⁶ On the one hand, the reader can interpret the disciples' assumption that Jesus was a ghost as another indication of unbelief.⁷ On the other hand, the reference shows that they are similar to the Old Testament characters who experienced theophanies in Exod 3; 19; Josh 5; 1 Sam 3; and Isa 6. Each of these

⁵ James A. Brooks, *Mark* Vol 23 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press), 112.

⁶ Williamson, *Mark, Interpretation*, 130.

⁷ Brooks, *Mark*, 112.

theophanies is characterized by an unrecognized encounter that brings awesome fear. In addition, the reader would group this pericope with Hellenistic miracle stories that depicted gods and heroes walking on the sea. Finally, Jesus walking on the sea alludes to God's divine action of walking on water as found in Job 38:16, Ps 77:19, and Isa 43:16.⁸

In addition, the reference to Jesus calming the winds is another reference to his divine identity. Jesus' authority over the winds is more significant than the already remarkable control over the physical weather. The reference alludes to the popular belief that spirits of the night brought disaster. This is illustrated by a tradition preserved in the Talmud.⁹ Furthermore, the power of Lord over seas and rivers, storms and wind, is repeatedly proclaimed in Old Testament as noted in the preceding sections.

Response Of The Disciples And The Reader

The previous sections show two different windows, the disciples' and the reader's, into the stories describing Jesus in the Gospel according to Mark. The focus of both views in Mark 6:45-52 is the boat story but the perspectives differ based on the viewpoint. In both instances, the individual interacting with Jesus, whether inside the story or outside the story, is moved closer to or further from the claim about Jesus in Mark 1:1. There is one other group that needs to be considered in this discussion.

The Pharisees interact with Jesus at the same level of the disciples. They are in the story and they make their assessments about Jesus based on their experiences of seeing and hearing. Their response to Jesus is the same as the disciples' response after the boat event in Mark 6:45-52. Jesus, in Mark 3:1-6, asked the Pharisees if it was lawful

⁸ Williamson, *Mark, Interpretation*, 130.

⁹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 236-237.

to do good on the Sabbath and they responded with silence. The writer of Mark describes Jesus as being grieved at their hardness of heart (συλλυπούμενος ἐπὶ τῇ πωρωσῇ τῆς καρδίας). Another reference to the state of the Pharisees' hearts is located in Mark 7:6, shortly after the boat event, where the Pharisees question Jesus regarding the disciples not living according to the traditions of the elders. Jesus describes the Pharisees by quoting Isaiah and says "but their hearts are far from me" (δὲ καρδία αὐτῶν πόρρω ἀπέχει ἀπ' ἐμοῦ).

The writer of Mark grouped the disciples with the Pharisees in terms of their hearts and their reaction to Jesus. Both the disciples and the Pharisees lacked faith and their hearts were hardened as a result. Furthermore, additional insight into Jesus' assessment of the disciples' faith is located in the first boat account in Mark 4:35-41. After Jesus rebuked the wind, he said to them "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" There is also a relationship between the level of understanding and the level of faith.

The writer of Mark shows how the disciples' lack of faith translates to a hardened heart and the inability to recognize Jesus' true identity. In a similar manner, the Gospel according to Mark provides the reader a similar opportunity to respond in faith and to recognize Jesus' true identity. The evidence comes through a different medium, the written word instead of a set of real experiences.

Jesus' adaption of Isaiah 6:9-10 provides the final point for this paper. Jesus was alone with the twelve disciples in Mark 4:10-20 and he explained the parable of the seed sower. He prefaced his explanation by providing a definition of those who were outside and those who were given the secret of the kingdom of God. He stated that for those

outside, everything comes in parables in order that “they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.”

The writer of Mark shows that Jesus related the sense of sight to perceiving and the sense of hearing to understanding. This occurred in the midst of the series of non-participatory events where the disciples were mainly seeing and hearing Jesus. The movement to participatory events provided additional evidence to the disciples of Jesus’ identity. The only piece that was missing was their faith as noted in Mark 4:35-41 and then even more so in Mark 6:30-52. There is a clear relationship between faith and the revelation of Jesus’ identity.

Finally, the reader is taken through the same series of events but he or she has the advantage of knowing Jesus’ identity. The writer of Mark provides specific allusions to Jesus’ divine identity. The choice of response of the reader outside of the story is the same the choice available to the disciples in the story. In summary, the reader must respond in faith and perceive that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God or the reader’s heart will become hardened. The reader, in light of Mark 6:45-52, will not only have misunderstood the loaves like the disciples but also have misunderstood Jesus’ passing by like God at Sinai and Horeb, saying “It is I” like other theophanies, and walking on water like God in the Old Testament. Mark’s Gospel includes events that involve both the disciples in the story and the reader outside the story. The disciples’ ability, as portrayed in Mark, to know Jesus’ true identity through experiences and the reader’s capacity to know God in Jesus through interpreting Scripture are both a function of faith.

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