

Marcan Christology

Narrating the Christ

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Halfway through the Gospel of Mark, Jesus asks his disciples, “Whom do men say that I am?” (Mark 8:27) and then more piercingly, “But whom say ye that I am?” (8:29). Perhaps the earliest of the Gospels to have been written and likely a major source for both Matthew and Luke, the narrative of Mark presents a powerful christological understanding of Jesus’s identity and salvific work. It loosely fits the genre of a first-century Roman biography, which has been defined as a “prose narration about a person’s life, presenting supposedly historical facts which are selected to reveal the character or essence of the individual, often with the purpose of affecting the behavior of the reader.”¹ Its fast-moving, vivid, action-packed story invites the reader into the narrative world to experience Jesus’s mortal ministry and crucifixion through the perspective of his disciples. Mark’s presentation of Jesus is also generally considered to be the most human and relatable portrait of Jesus because of the range of strong emotions Jesus

displays.² At the same time, however, Mark's portrait of Jesus invites awe and wonder at Jesus's divinity, thus making Jesus's dualism as both human and divine a central aspect of the Marcan Jesus.³

While there are many ways to explore Mark's presentation of Jesus, the compelling story aspect of Mark's Gospel makes the use of a narrative lens particularly apt. By considering the work of scholars who take seriously Mark's narrative Christology—what Jesus says and does in the context of the narrative and actions of others—Latter-day Saints can gain new insights into Mark's presentation of Jesus. Through a focused, close reading of the scriptures, we can come to see a Savior who is fully human and fully divine; who experiences and portrays strong human emotions as he teaches, provides miracles, and challenges perceptions; and who acts as the model disciple, showing us all the necessity of service, suffering, and sacrifice.

Background of the Gospel of Mark

Though formally anonymous, early Christian tradition attributed this Gospel to John Mark and suggested that it was written in Rome (AD 60–75) as a record of Peter's teachings.⁴ In the early centuries of Christianity, the Gospel of Mark was often overshadowed by the other Gospels because it was seen as an abbreviated version of Matthew. Its increase in popularity and scholarly attention in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is largely due to the reversal of the traditional view that Matthew was the earliest Gospel.⁵ Most New Testament scholars today favor Marcan priority because of the way the Gospels of Matthew and Luke follow the Marcan wording and ordering of events.⁶ In recent years, scholars have also come to appreciate the Gospel of Mark as a carefully crafted story—most likely shared orally—that presents its own theological themes and understanding of Jesus.⁷ Close analysis of the text reveals that Mark's Gospel is a highly structured literary work with a three-stage geographical progression, topical ordering of events, intercalation or sandwiching (placing one story within another), triads or sets of

three, repetition, parallel scenes, foreshadows and echoes, and vivid details.⁸ Each of these elements makes the text more memorable and performable, and collectively they indicate that Mark's Gospel was likely constructed as an oral text and performed multiple times before being written down.⁹

The Gospel of Mark had its beginning in an oral culture.¹⁰ In first-century Mesopotamia, storytelling was ubiquitous, writing was largely seen as a representation of speech, oral communication was considered true communication, and people wrote to transfer oral stories rather than to replace oral performances.¹¹ Scholars estimate that in the ancient Roman Empire only between 5 and 10 percent of the people—mostly wealthy elites—were able to read or write in the first century; consequently, the vast majority of people experienced everything they learned aurally.¹² As Whitney Shriner reports, “Good speakers were admired and attracted the sorts of large crowds that we would associate with rock stars. Crowds would fill up theaters to hear a famous rhetorician from out of town.”¹³ Performance of sacred stories was also an important part of worship services, and letters such as those written by Paul would have been performed for their intended recipients.¹⁴ Most people would have experienced the Gospel of Mark as an engaging two-hour performance because they had neither access to the text nor the ability to read it.¹⁵

From Titles to Narrative Christology

Recognizing that the Gospel of Mark most likely originally functioned as an oral story has important implications for our understanding and study of Mark's Gospel and its portrait of Jesus. First, this recognition invites a perceptual shift to consider the many aspects that make up a performative event: the storyteller, audience, location, sociohistorical circumstances, and rhetorical impact. The interpretive process largely shifts from the reader to the performer as the presentation of Jesus depends a great deal on who is telling the story. How does Jesus sound? What is his tone? What clues or suggestions does

the text offer as a script for storytelling performances?¹⁶ Second, it reinforces the importance of studying Mark's portrayal of Jesus from a narrative vantage point since the Gospel of Mark was intended to be experienced as a single story in a single sitting.

Earlier discussions on New Testament Christology focused almost exclusively on the titles for Christ found within the Gospels—namely, Son of God, Son of Man, Christ, and Lord—and what these titles revealed when placed within a historical or theological context.¹⁷ While there is still value to such christological approaches, innovative approaches to the Gospels help us to see and understand the person and work of Jesus in new ways. Since Robert Tannehill introduced the term *narrative Christology* in 1979,¹⁸ many scholars have begun looking at Mark's narrative holistically, arguing that Jesus can be grasped only within the narrative.¹⁹ As M. Eugene Boring states simply, "Mark's narrative is already a Christology."²⁰ In essence, advocates of narrative Christology believe that "we learn who Jesus is through what he says and does in the context of the actions of others."²¹ In other words, the narrator of Mark's Gospel does not offer many evaluative words or judgments of Jesus, preferring instead to show who Jesus is through his actions and dialogue and others' actions and dialogue in relation to him. Other aspects to consider when analyzing Mark's portrayal of Jesus are what drives and motivates Jesus, what his traits are, how they are illuminated by comparison or contrast with other characters, and what Jesus seeks and works for.²² Narrative structure and plot must also be given due consideration as they too may reveal character.

A strength of narrative Christology, as pointed out by Boring, is its ability to hold ideas in tension and "allow paradox without synthesis."²³ Mark, for instance, composes a narrative in which Jesus is presented as both divine and human without qualification or dilution.²⁴ As Jacob Naluparayil writes, "The use of the narrative method produces an overall tendency to incorporate the different aspects of the Marcan presentation of Jesus instead of stressing one aspect at the expense of others."²⁵ This in turn allows us to see Jesus in his full

complexity. Another strength of the narrative approach is the recognition that this is someone's depiction of Christ. Even though Jesus was a real, historical figure, any story that one hears of him is necessarily mediated through the teller.²⁶ This recognition encourages us to seek out and learn from the different portraits of Jesus offered by a myriad of individuals in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and other Restoration scripture. Each of us—including the Gospel writers—has experienced Christ differently in our lives, and the narrative approach allows us to celebrate and learn from these differences rather than dismiss them. I begin with an analysis of Mark's narrative Christology in Mark 1 to illustrate how a close, careful reading of the text illuminates Mark's portrait of Jesus.

God's Beloved, Obedient Son

The prologue to Mark's Gospel (Mark 1:1–15) establishes Jesus's significance and prepares the audience to trust Jesus through statements made by the narrator, by John the Baptist, and by God. With the opening line, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1), the narrator establishes Jesus as the central figure of his story. The opening line acts as a title for the work²⁷ and is highly distinctive as the only place where the narrator pronounces a direct, generalized assessment of Jesus—elsewhere, the narrator prefers to show who Jesus is through actions and dialogues and to place assessments of Jesus in the mouths of the characters.²⁸ At the outset of the story, however, the narrator wants to make it known that Jesus is "Christ or the anointed one"²⁹ and "the Son of God," but what these titles mean in the first century is highly debatable and becomes clear only as we explore the narrative as a whole.³⁰ The next assessment of Jesus is uttered by John the Baptist: "There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you with water; but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost" (1:7–8). John's statement establishes Jesus's importance and authority as greater than that of a prophet

and prepares us for what God will say about Jesus after his baptism: “Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (1:11). God’s proclamation of Jesus as his Son confirms the narrator’s assessment of Jesus and is crucial to establishing Jesus’s authority and the narrator’s credibility.³¹ Both can now be trusted because God, the highest authority in Mark’s narrative world, has ratified Jesus’s status as his Son. Thus, by the time Jesus speaks his first words, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel” (1:15), the audience is prepared to listen to him and trust whatever he may say or do.

Looking closely at what Jesus says and does in chapter 1 of Mark’s Gospel reveals Jesus’s basic character. First, Jesus is obedient to God. His first act, baptism (Mark 1:9), signals his submission to God; and his second act, being “driven” by the Spirit into the wilderness (1:12), confirms his willingness to be obedient to God even when it is difficult. Significantly, God’s pronouncement of Jesus as the one he loves and with whom he is “well pleased” (1:11) comes after Jesus has displayed his obedience by being baptized. Mark’s concise version of Jesus’s forty days in the wilderness—mentioning only that “angels ministered unto him” and Satan “tempted” him (1:13)—helps the audience see Jesus on a cosmic scale as he associates with immortal beings. It also announces a major theme of Mark’s Gospel: Jesus is at battle with Satan and Satan’s dominion.³² After the trial in the wilderness, we have Jesus’s first spoken utterance: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel” (1:15). This is a significant line because it encapsulates what Jesus cares about: teaching the gospel and preparing people for “the kingdom of God.” As David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie write, it also “discloses his understanding of himself as an agent of God and his purposes.”³³ His next spoken line, uttered as he calls his first disciples, Simon and Andrew, propels this motif of repentance and preparation for God’s kingdom forward as it indicates Jesus’s role in the process. It is by following Jesus as the enabler—“Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men” (1:17)—that we

may become something more than we are, that we may become whom he sees us as. Simon, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen until Jesus gave them a vision of what more they could be and suggested a path forward. Other foundational aspects of Jesus's character as a teacher, healer, and exorcist are set forth in rapid succession, as Mark moves quickly from one act of Jesus's to the next. Jesus teaches (1:21–22), casts out an unclean spirit (1:23–27), heals Simon's mother-in-law (1:30–31), heals the sick and casts out devils (1:32–34), departs to a solitary place to pray (1:35), preaches (1:39), casts out devils again (1:39), and heals a leper (1:40–45). Throughout all these actions, Mark emphasizes Jesus's authority and the crowd's astonishment.

By the end of chapter 1, Mark has established the image of Jesus's identity and salvific work that informs the first half of the story. Jesus is God's beloved, obedient Son, who acts to further God's kingdom through preaching and healing. Significantly, this image of Jesus will likely resonate with most believers' understanding of Christ because the similarities among the Gospel writers' Christologies are greater than their dissimilarities.

Mark's More Human Jesus

However, as we continue to pay close attention to what Jesus says and does and what others say about him, we will find in Mark a more human Jesus—a more emotional and harder-to-define Jesus—than that found in the other canonical Gospels, which will enrich our understanding of the Savior of the world. Mark's understanding of Jesus as one who felt and portrayed strong emotions may come as a surprise to the many individuals who picture an always composed and never ruffled Jesus—such as that presented in *The Life of Jesus Christ Bible Videos* made by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Notably, these moments of human realism in Mark are often omitted or toned down in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.³⁴ For instance, Matthew and Luke omit the compassion that Jesus feels toward a leper that he heals—“And Jesus, moved with *compassion* [or

pity in the New International Version],³⁵ put forth his hand, and touched him” (Mark 1:40–41; emphasis added; cf. Matthew 8:1–2; Luke 5:12–13)—as well as the love that Jesus feels for the rich young man—“Then Jesus beholding him *loved* him” (Mark 10:21; emphasis added; cf. Matthew 19:16–22; Luke 18:18–22). Matthew and Luke also do not mention Jesus’s anger, such as the anger he feels toward the Pharisees for questioning the lawfulness of healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath—“And when he had looked round about on them with *anger*, being *grieved* [or *deeply distressed* in the NIV] for the hardness of their hearts” (Mark 3:5; emphasis added; cf. Matthew 12:9–14; Luke 6:6–11)—and the displeasure Jesus feels when the disciples forbid the little children to come unto him—“But when Jesus saw it, he was much *displeased* [*indignant* in the NIV and the New Revised Standard Version or *angry* in the Common English Bible and the Good News Translation]” (Mark 10:14; emphasis added; cf. Matthew 19:13–15; Luke 18:15–17). The moment when Jesus expresses surprise at the Nazarenes’ unbelief is also omitted in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke—“And he *marveled* [*was appalled* in the CEB, *greatly surprised* in the GNT, *was amazed* in the NIV] because of their unbelief” (Mark 6:6; emphasis added; cf. Matthew 13:53–58; Luke 4:16–30). Jesus’s desire for solitude and need to commune with God for strength and direction is also more apparent in Mark’s narrative (Mark 1:35; 6:45–46).

As illustrated above, reading other translations may help us gain a better sense of the strong emotions that Jesus displays because the early modern English of the King James Version may in some instances mask Jesus’s emotions to readers’ contemporary ears. One example of this is when Jesus expresses his frustration at his apostles’ inability to cast a spirit out of a young boy or, more likely, his frustration at the general lack of faith he perceives in all of Israel—“O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I suffer you?” (Mark 9:19). The much more prevalent translation of this statement—“You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?” (Mark

9:19 NRSV)—changes the tone of Jesus’s statement and makes his frustration much more palpable, as it seems he is being compelled to be with them—“how much longer must I”—rather than choosing to be with them. These differences in tone may be simply the result of our disconnect from early modern English or they may reflect a desire on the part of the King James translators, similar to that of the authors of Matthew and Luke, to soften Mark’s portrayal of Jesus. Mark’s portrayal of a more expressive Jesus, however, should be appreciated and studied because it provides a more relatable Jesus who has felt the emotions that we all commonly experience.

Both Human and Divine

One of the most notable aspects of Mark’s Christology, however, is how he depicts a Christ that is both divine and human without qualification or dilution. In a narrative these oppositional aspects may exist together uncontested in a way that they could not in a theological treatise because the story may simply highlight different aspects at different moments.

Jesus’s divinity may be seen most clearly in his actions and others’ reactions to him. Jesus’s power to heal and cast out spirits is a tangible manifestation of his divinity and authority from God. The other miracles he performs, such as calming the seas (Mark 4:38–41), walking on water (6:47–51), feeding the five thousand and four thousand (6:34–44; 8:1–9), raising Jarius’s daughter from the dead (5:35–43), and—perhaps most significant—forgiving sins (2:5), are also manifestations of his divinity and authority. The most common reaction to Jesus, his teachings, and his works is astonishment and, for many, a desire to follow him.³⁶ Repeatedly throughout the Gospel, the narrator reports that all were astonished (1:22; 7:37; 10:24, 26; 11:18) or amazed (1:27; 2:12; 6:51; 9:15; 10:32) or that they marveled (5:20; 12:17; 15:5) because his teachings and works set him apart from any mortal being. Jesus also commonly evokes fear in his apostles as he shatters their understanding of what is possible when he calms

the sea (4:41), walks on water (6:50), transfigures before them (9:2–6), and tells them of his life path to be killed and then rise the third day (9:31–32). In Mark’s Christology, Jesus shares the human situation as a fellow human being even as he is the Son of God exercising divine power, evoking awe in all, and challenging mortal understanding. Such a display of seemingly contradictory elements shows how narrative Christology may incorporate the different aspects of the Marcan Jesus rather than flatten the multidimensional Jesus apparent within the text. For us readers, such a portrait is beneficial because it not only brings us much closer to the reality of Christ, which is of course complex, but it also helps us accept the complexity and paradoxes that invariably arise when we seek to more fully understand almost any aspect of theology.

Jesus’s Understanding of Himself

Another important layer of Mark’s Christology is ascertaining how Jesus sees himself. That Jesus sees himself as the agent through whom the kingdom of God is proclaimed and effected is clearly evident from the first line Jesus speaks—“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15)—until his crucifixion on the cross.

While the Marcan Jesus is a Jesus of deeds, with Mark reporting the miracles of Jesus in the most fulsome and descriptive way of any of the Gospels and sharing Jesus teaching in parables and short, pithy statements rather the longer sermons and discourses reported in the other Gospels, Jesus emphasizes that he came primarily to teach. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus tells Simon explicitly, “Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also: *for therefore came I forth*” (Mark 1:38; emphasis added); Mark portrays Jesus teaching or preaching more than any other act; and Jesus prioritizes his teaching over his healing. For instance, Jesus’s desire for individuals not to share the miracles he performs seems to be motivated out of his desire to preach (see 1:43–45; 7:36–8:1). While news of his healings and

miracles draws many people to him, it also seems to make it difficult at times for him to preach (1:45). On occasion, Mark depicts Jesus leaving the miracle-seeking crowds so that he may find other communities and individuals to share his message with (see 3:7–10; 6:31–34). Jesus also turns every situation into a teaching moment. For example, when his mother and brethren come seeking him, he uses it as a moment to explain a new conception of family—that all who do the will of God are Christ’s family (3:31–35); when his disciples are disputing over who will be the greatest, he uses their concern to teach them what it actually means to be the greatest (9:33–35; 10:35–45); and when he sees the poor widow casting in her two mites, he uses her example to explain how God judges our actions and sacrifices (12:41–44).

Jesus Challenging Perceptions

Teaching is central to Jesus’s mission because preparing people for the kingdom of God entails teaching them to see and judge as God does rather than as man does; consequently, the Jesus of Mark constantly challenges one perception after the other. One of the first religious practices that Jesus challenges is appropriate Sabbath-day observance. He does this first through his actions, as he performs his first two miracles (casting out a spirit and healing a disease) on the Sabbath (Mark 1:21–31). He later challenges the Pharisees’ views of the Sabbath explicitly through dialogue after they condemn his disciples plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath and his healing a withered man’s hand on the Sabbath because they viewed both as a form of work (2:23–3:5). Jesus uses these moments to teach the Pharisees that they have failed to understand what the Sabbath is for: “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath” (2:27). Or in other words, the Sabbath is to give individuals rest from their troubles and worries; consequently, there could not be a more fitting time to heal someone.

Jesus also challenges Jewish purity laws (what makes a person clean or unclean). The catalyst for this discussion is when the Pharisees find fault with the disciples eating with unwashed hands

(Mark 7:1–5). Jesus uses their critique to first point out that they place the traditions of men above the commandments of God because the requirement to wash pots and cups before eating came from man, not God (7:6–9). He then goes on to redefine their understanding of what makes one clean or unclean when he proclaims, “There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man” (7:15). This statement shows Jesus to be revolutionary because if taken literally it essentially means that Jesus was nullifying a significant portion of the Levitical law code.³⁷ Cleanliness and purity were now to be determined by one’s moral actions and attitude, not by one’s eating or washing practices or those people one comes into contact with. Jesus taught this principle through his actions as well, as he regularly interacted with those who were considered unclean, such as sinners and those with various diseases (see 2:15–17). In this way, he also challenged the treatment of the marginalized and outcast. All were to be treated with kindness and invited to be part of the kingdom of God (2:17).

The most important perception Jesus alters is what it means for him to be the Christ and by extension what it means to be his disciple. Peter is correct when he answers Jesus’s question “But whom say ye that I am?” with “Thou art the Christ” (Mark 8:29). But it is also clear from the text that Peter does not understand what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. This verse has often been seen as the turning point in Mark’s Gospel because the rest of the Gospel may be seen as Mark’s attempt to help his audience understand what it means for Jesus to be the Christ.³⁸ In many ways, being the Christ is not the glorious calling one would expect; instead, it is about suffering, sacrifice, and resurrection. Or as Jesus explains to his disciples, “the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (8:31). Here, Jesus radically redefines the role of the Messiah and then proceeds to radically redefine what it means to be his follower: “Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take

up his cross, and follow me" (8:34). Clearly, this description of discipleship does not suggest ease and worldly accolades; instead, it asks disciples to forgo this world for the next and to follow his example of servant leadership. As Jesus will later explain to his disciples, "And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:44–45).

Mark makes it clear that Jesus's disciples do not understand this message by juxtaposing Jesus's statements about his suffering and sacrifice with his disciples' continual desire for honor and prestige. The irony is palpable when Jesus's statement "The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day" (Mark 9:31) is immediately followed by the disciples disputing among themselves who is the greatest (9:33–34). And then again a chapter later, when Jesus's statement "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: And they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again" (10:33–34) is immediately followed by James and John asking to sit on his right hand and on his left hand in the next life (10:35–37). In both instances, Jesus uses their inappropriate question to reorient their understanding of what it means to be the greatest and what it means to have authority: "But whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all" (10:43–44). Observant readers may note that these juxtaposed events are actually separate events that may not necessarily have taken place one after another. This observation should in turn highlight for readers that Mark has deliberately constructed his narrative to emphasize the disciples' inability to comprehend what Jesus was teaching them about his role as well as theirs. A possible reason for this is that Mark's Jesus teaches both in words and in actions that suffering, service, and sacrifice are essential aspects of being part of God's kingdom—"If

any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all" (9:35)—and his disciples' inability to comprehend Jesus's message about himself and his followers indicates just how radical, unexpected, and difficult his teachings were.

Jesus's Suffering

At the center of Mark's Christology is Jesus as the suffering servant who faithfully follows God's will and gives his life before rising three days later. He is the model disciple who shows us that service, suffering, and sacrifice are necessary qualifications for being part of God's kingdom. While this may be ascertained by looking at Jesus's words and actions, as we have discussed thus far, perhaps it is best emphasized by looking at Mark's basic narrative structure and plot. Mark's Gospel is generally divided into a prologue (Mark 1:1–1:13 [15]) followed by three major divisions: Jesus's authoritative ministry in and around Galilee (1:14 [16]–8:22 [26]), Jesus's journey to Jerusalem (8:27–10:52), and Jesus in Jerusalem (11:1–16:8).³⁹ Dividing Mark's Gospel in half is Jesus's crucial question to Peter, "But whom say ye that I am?" (8:29). In the first half of the narrative, Mark presents Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, who teaches and acts with authority and power and grows in popularity. Miracle working, teaching, and challenging norms and perceptions are central to Mark's depiction of Jesus in the first half of the narrative and affirm that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. The second half of the narrative then shifts the focus to Jesus's suffering, death, and resurrection in order to reorient the meaning of being the Messiah.

That Mark wants the passion narrative—the account of Jesus's suffering, death, and resurrection—to be the center of his story is indicated by the fact that the narrative slows down significantly once Jesus enters Jerusalem. This fact has not been lost on readers, as Mark's Gospel has famously and repeatedly been described as "a passion narrative with an extended introduction" because Mark proportionally spends more time expounding on Jesus's suffering, death,

and resurrection than any other Gospel writer.⁴⁰ As Donald H. Juel further explains, “One-third of Mark’s Gospel is devoted to an account of Jesus’s last few days [other scholars will more accurately list this as 40 percent].⁴¹ One-sixth to his last twenty-four hours.”⁴² Up until this point, Mark’s narrative has offered a fast-moving overview of the highlights of Jesus’s ministry, but now the narrative moves slowly, offering a detailed look at the events leading to Jesus’s death and resurrection. We see Jesus’s escalating confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees as he continues to perform miracles, teach, and challenge accepted norms. Most moving is Mark’s depiction of Jesus in Gethsemane, where we see a very human Jesus cry out to God his Father, “Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt” (Mark 14:36).

Though Mark does not share the significance of what occurs in the Garden of Gethsemane (that is disclosed only in Restoration scripture), he does share an image of Jesus that encapsulates much of what Mark wants his audience to understand about Jesus: his faith, humility, and absolute obedience to God (Mark 14:36); his common humanity that allows him to feel that his “soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death” and causes him to shrink from the suffering and death that awaits him (14:33–35); his compassion towards and understanding of his disciples’ human frailties (14:38–41); and his divinity that enables him to see the future and to meet it resolutely (14:41–49). This portrait is reinforced through Jesus’s trials and time on the cross. With his death as the critical act, his last words—“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”—indicate the depth to which Jesus has had to suffer in order to be God’s saving agent (15:34). Mark’s very brief depiction of events after the resurrection—ending, as most scholars agree, with the women finding his empty tomb and being told by a messenger that Jesus is risen and to go and “tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you” (16:7) and their subsequent fear, amazement, and silence (16:8)⁴³—keeps the narrative focused on the crucial

acts of Jesus's death and resurrection. And the open, rather than closed, nature of the ending invites Mark's audience into the narrative to take the place of the women at the empty sepulchre and to share the message of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.⁴⁴ Through the precision with which he constructs his narrative, and in particular that final week of Jesus's life, Mark has created his Christology.

Coming to Know Jesus through Mark

Jesus's question to Mark "But whom say ye that I am?" (Mark 8:29) is the crucial question for each of us. There are many ways that we may come to know that Jesus is the Christ—prayer, scripture study, experience, following the counsel of the Spirit, and modeling our life after Jesus all help us answer that piercing question. For many, a critical aspect of knowing that Jesus is the Christ is seeking to learn about and understand the mortal Messiah who lived two thousand years ago. Because each of the Gospels provides unique insights into Jesus's life, ministry, and death, a close, careful narrative reading of the texts helps reveal aspects of the text and Jesus's life that may otherwise remain unnoticed. In Mark's Gospel, we find a Savior who is fully human and fully divine. The Son of Man experiences and portrays strong emotions as he teaches, heals, and acts with divine authority and power. He is God's Beloved Son and the agent through whom the kingdom of God is proclaimed and effected. He is the suffering servant who faithfully follows God's will and gives his life before rising three days later. He is the model disciple who shows us all that service, suffering, and sacrifice are necessary qualifications for being part of God's kingdom. He is as declared in the opening line of the Gospel of Mark, "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1), and it is by coming to know him and following his example that we may become his disciples.

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Notes

1. Charles H. Talbert, *What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 17. For more information on how Mark fits within the genre of first-century Roman biographies, see Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 5–7; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 5–6, 10; John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 14–15. Written in the vernacular of popular spoken Greek, the Gospel of Mark belongs more in the category of popular literature than the elite literary works scholars typically analyze. For more information, see Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 70–78.
2. Scholars who discuss this include Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 294; John R. Donahue, "Jesus as the Parable of God in the Gospel of Mark," in *Interpreting the Gospels*, ed. James Luther Mays (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 159–60; Stephen H. Smith, *A Lion with Wings: A Narrative-Critical Approach to Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 58.
3. M. Eugene Boring, "The Christology of Mark: Hermeneutical Issues for Systematic Theology," *Semeia* 30 (1984): 138–39.
4. For a brief discussion of this, see Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 201; Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 24–26; France, *Gospel of Mark*, 7–8, 38–40.
5. For more information, see Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 173; Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 3–4; France, *Gospel of Mark*, 15–16.
6. For more information, see Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 4–5; Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 18–19.
7. For an extended discussion, see David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012). For a brief overview, see France, *Gospel of Mark*, 16–20.

8. For more information, see Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 174–77; Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 16–19; France, *Gospel of Mark*, 11–14.
9. Scholars who discuss this include Philip Ruge-Jones, “The Word Heard: How Hearing a Text Differs from Reading One,” in *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance*, ed. Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 102; Richard A. Horsley, “Oral and Written Aspects of the Emergence of the Gospel of Mark as Scripture,” *Oral Tradition* 25, no. 1 (2010): 95; Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church: Speaking, Writing, and the Gospel of Mark* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 158–60; France, *Gospel of Mark*, 9–10.
10. Some of the best works on this issue include Whitney Shriner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003); Dewey, *Oral Ethos*; Hearon and Ruge-Jones, *Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*.
11. For more information, see Dewey, *Oral Ethos*, 160; David Rhoads, “What Is Performance Criticism?,” in *Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*, 85–86; Whitney Shriner, “Oral Performance in the New Testament World,” in *Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*, 49–51; Ruge-Jones, “Word Heard,” 102.
12. Rhoads, “What Is Performance Criticism,” 85; Shriner, “Oral Performance,” 49; Horsley, “Oral and Written Aspects,” 95, 104–8.
13. Shriner, “Oral Performance,” 51.
14. Dewey, *Oral Ethos*, 160; Rhoads, “What Is Performance Criticism?,” 86.
15. Shriner, “Oral Performance,” 49; Christopher W. Skinner, “The Study of Character(s) in the Gospel of Mark: A Survey of Research from Wrede to the Performance Critics (1901 to 2014),” in *Character Studies and the Gospel of Mark*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner and Matthew Ryan Hauge (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 32.
16. Holly E. Hearon, “The Storytelling World of the First Century and the Gospels,” in *Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*, 22; For a fuller discussion of the implication of biblical performance, see Rhoads, “What Is Performance Criticism?,” 88–99.
17. See France, *Gospel of Mark*, 23; Jacob Chacko Naluparayil, “Jesus of the Gospel of Mark: Present State of Research,” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 8 (2000): 192–93.

18. Robert C. Tannehill, "The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," *Semeia* 16 (1979): 57–95.
19. Leading scholarship on narrative Christology includes Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Mark's Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009); Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*; Ole Davidson, *The Narrative Jesus: A Semiotic Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Aarhus, DK: Aarhus University Press, 1993); Jacob Chacko Naluparayil, *The Identity of Jesus in Mark: An Essay on Narrative Christology*, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Analecta, no. 49 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 2000); Paul L. Danove, *The Rhetoric of the Characterization of God, Jesus, and Jesus' Disciples in the Gospel of Mark* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005).
20. Boring, "Christology of Mark," 136–37.
21. Tannehill, "Narrative Christology," 58.
22. Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 100.
23. Boring, "Christology of Mark," 138.
24. Boring, "Christology of Mark," 138–39.
25. Naluparayil, "Jesus of the Gospel of Mark," 217.
26. For more on this idea, see Smith, *Lion with Wings*, 16; James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 121; Scott S. Elliott, *Reconfiguring Mark's Jesus: Narrative Criticism after Poststructuralism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 8–9.
27. Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 60; Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, 59.
28. Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, 60–61, 66.
29. The Greek word *christos* means anointed; the Hebrew word *māšīaḥ* means anointed one. Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 25.
30. For an overview of some of the meaning of these terms in the first century, see Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, 62–66. For instance, "son of God" in the Bible refers to "a person or people with a special relationship to God, often with a special role in salvation history" (65).
31. Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 104; Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, 77.
32. Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 59.
33. Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 105.

34. Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 17; Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 18–19.
35. There are, however, some textual problems with this passage, with some early manuscripts reading “stirred with anger” rather than compassion. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 65; Huntsman, *Miracles of Jesus*, 45 and 148n9.
36. Expressions of astonishment and a desire to follow Jesus are repeated fifteen times in the Gospel of Mark.
37. For more information and the debate surrounding Jesus’s statement, see Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 227–29.
38. Among the many scholars who have made this observation are Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 183–85; Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 239; Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 264–65; France, *Gospel of Mark*, 11.
39. France, *Gospel of Mark*, 11–14; Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 46–50.
40. Martin Kahler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 80.
41. Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 301.
42. Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 139.
43. Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 194; Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 9; Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 460; Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 412–13.
44. For a discussion of an open versus a closed story, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1974), especially chapter 11. For a look at how New Testament scholars have used the idea of an open ending to explain the unsettling conclusion of Mark’s Gospel, see Thomas E. Boomershine and Gilbert L. Bartholomew, “The Narrative Technique of Mark 16:8,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981): 213–23; David J. Hester, “Dramatic Inconclusion: Irony and the Narrative Rhetoric of the Ending of Mark,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 17, no. 57 (1995): 61–86; Norman R. Petersen, “When Is the End Not the End? Literary Reflections on the Ending of Mark’s Narrative,” *Interpretation* 34, no. 2 (1980): 151–66.