

T h e   T h e o l o g y   o f   M a r k

by

Luis Fidel Mercado

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Professor: Dr. Samuel MacLean Gilmour

Andover Newton Theological School

Newton Centre, Massachusetts

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The Gospel of Mark has come into its own in the last century, since its priority to the other Gospels was established. At first it received importance as a historical document devoid to a great extent of theological content. Today, however, the book is believed to contain not only historical facts, but to be clothed with the general theological outlook germane to the primitive Christian community.<sup>1</sup> Mark takes for granted the primitive Christian tradition about Jesus and the apostolic faith.<sup>2</sup> Or as Branscomb puts it: "Faith and theology had already been combined in this tradition, and what is often described as Mark's theology is really the early Christian belief as to the historical facts."<sup>3</sup> Thus Mark gives the historic origins of the Christian faith but not apart from the theology of primitive Christianity.

It is our purpose in this paper to consider in broad outline the nature of the theological or doctrinal content of the Gospel of Mark. We shall rely for our presentation on first-hand study of the book itself and on the works of such scholars as R. H. Lightfoot, Frederick C. Grant and others.

The chief theme of the Gospel of Mark is the crucified Messiah as the

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Today it is no longer possible to maintain that there can be any writing of history without a certain degree of interpretation. The selection of the facts and the way they are put together reveal the presupposition of the writer. This is exactly what we have in Mark: historical facts plus interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick C. Grant, The Earliest Gospel (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943), p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Grant, ibid.

fulfillment of God's promise to his people.<sup>1</sup> Of Jesus' teachings Mark gives very few. Only in chapter 4--the so-called "Parable Chapter"--and in Chapter 13--the so-called "Little Apocalypse"--are there considerable amounts of teaching. However, he considers at length--directly and more often indirectly--Jesus' Messiahship and its nature.

In fact this gospel admits us to the knowledge of Jesus' messiahship from the very beginning. The title of the book is: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."<sup>2</sup> Immediately we are introduced to the ministry of John the Baptist. He is the forerunner, the one who prepares the way for the coming one. "After me," he says, "comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."<sup>3</sup>

Soon the mightier one appears on the scene to be baptized by John. It is none other than Jesus of Nazareth. A very significant event takes place at this time. While Jesus was being baptized the heavens were opened and the Spirit like a dove descended upon him. And a voice from heaven spoke: "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well-pleased."<sup>4</sup> "The words imply the perfection, divinity, and sinlessness of Him to whom they are addressed."<sup>5</sup> Then follows the journey to the wilderness where Satan tempted him.

<sup>1</sup> R. H. Lightfoot, The Gospel Message of St. Mark (2d. ed; London: The Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:1

<sup>3</sup> Mark 1:7

<sup>4</sup> Mark 1:11

<sup>5</sup> Lightfoot, op. cit. p. 32.

This brings us down to verse thirteen of chapter one, the end of the prologue. In this section we are told about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the one with whom the Father is well-pleased. The reader knows from the start what is the nature and the office of the one who is going to be the subject of the narrative. He is the Messiah, the Son of God. The author puts in his hands the key which reveals the meaning of the story about to be told.<sup>1</sup>

The account of the temptation casts a forward look. Just as Israel was tempted forty years in the wilderness and failed, so now the Messiah is tempted for a period of forty days. But the outcome is a complete triumph over the forces of evil. This victory in the wilderness foreshadows his final victory at the cross and resurrection, a victory won in a most paradoxical manner. Emerging victorious He now can proclaim his uncompromising and unqualified message, saying: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I agree with the thesis propounded by Lightfoot in relation to the prologue of the Gospel of Mark. He rejects as arbitrary the major break that Westcott and Hort made in their famous Greek New Testament between verses 8 and 9, implying thereby that the ministry of our Lord commences with his baptism and the temptation. The prologue, therefore, extends from verses 1-13. The purpose of the author is to give to the reader the standpoint from which the content of the book is to be understood. In this respect Mark's prologue is similar to John's. Enslein is in full agreement with this treatment of the prologue to Mark. "The whole opening section (1:1-13)," he says, "is to be regarded as a unit and serves a deliberate purpose not unlike that of the more famous Johannine prologue. These verses have the deliberate purpose of letting the reader know, before the story starts, who Jesus is: he is divinely acknowledged as the beloved Son of God; it is he who is the greater successor of whom the Baptist is to speak." Morton S. Enslein, "The Artistry of Mark," Journal of Biblical Literature (Vol. LXVI, 1947), pp. 393-394.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:15

A crucified Messiah was both for the Jew and Gentile, a contradiction in terms, or as Paul put it, a stumbling-block and foolishness to each one respectively.<sup>1</sup> This is truly the supreme paradox of Christian faith. Yet it is exactly what Mark proclaims in this Gospel. Even in the first half of the book the shadow of the cross is never too far away.

Mark, however, does not apply the actual title of Messiah to the Lord too often. It occurs seven times in the best manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> The terms Jesus Christ (1:1) as they appear in the title to the gospel are considered a proper name.<sup>3</sup> Peter uses the word in his confession (8:29). The disciples are said to belong to Christ in 9:41. In 12:35 Jesus contrasts the relationship between David and the coming Messiah but does not refer to himself as the Messiah. In 13:21 Jesus again refers to the coming Messiah but warns his disciples not to pay any attention to those that claim to be messiahs. In 14:61 and 15:32 the title is applied to him by his adversaries. Mark uses other terms to explain the Lord's nature and his function, namely, Son of God, Only Son, Holy One of God, Son of Man. All of these, however, point in different ways to his messiahship.

The Lord's messiahship and his coming crucifixion are not apparent either to the disciples or to his opponents. In the first half of the book his messiahship is unknown to all except to the demons, who are believed to possess an uncanny knowledge of the supernatural.

In the latter part of the Gospel, starting with Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, the disciples partake of the messianic secret. Jesus

<sup>1</sup> I Cor. 1:13

<sup>2</sup> Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.; also Frederick C. Grant & Halford E. Luccock, The Gospel according to Mark, Vol. VII of Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951) p. 641.

now begins to make a series of statements in which He affirms repeatedly that He must die and rise again, saying in the last instance that He will be handed over to the Gentiles. The disciples are led step by step into the mysterious ideas of suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection. Nevertheless, they remain somewhat unaware and obtuse to the meaning of all that is going to happen. All the rest of the people remain outside the knowledge of his messiahship till the very end when Christ himself confesses it before the High Priest (14:62).

The first half of the book up to Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (8:27-30) is devoted to the presentation of the mighty works and acts of power of Jesus. There are twelve of these mighty works and acts of power in Mark. Ten of these occur before Peter's confession. These mighty acts are obviously to Mark tokens of the Lord's messiahship, but he is careful to point out that they were not regarded as such when they took place. They produced amazement and awe but no acknowledgment of his messiahship. When the demons confess him as the Holy One, or by any other name, they are silenced.

"Part of St. Mark's purpose may be to emphasize that the Lord's conduct, in spite of the great impression which He made, was wholly free from any effort to arouse public excitement, which indeed He did the utmost to suppress; and that it gave no colour whatever to a charge of seditious messianic activity," observes Lightfoot.<sup>1</sup> At any rate, this picture of a Messiah that does not draw attention to himself <sup>accords</sup> ~~squares~~ well with the all-important theme of the book of a suffering and crucified Son of man.

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Another important theme of the first part of the book and one which

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 37.

becomes paramount at the end, is the opposition of the Jewish leaders to Jesus. In 2:1 to 3:6 we find a series of conflict stories that grow in intensity and culminate in a decision on the part of the Pharisees and the Herodians to destroy Him. In chapter 3 scribes come from Jerusalem for the first time and accuse Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebub and healing in his name. Again in chapter 6 the theme of opposition crops up. On the one hand, we learn of Jesus' rejection by his own country. This could be taken as a pointer to the final rejection by the nation at large. On the other hand, we learn of the death of John the Baptist, the forerunner. Later in the story Jesus speaks of the death of John the Baptist in relation to what the Son of man should suffer.<sup>1</sup>

Two more conflict stories appear before the confession at Caesarea Philippi. In chapter 7 the Pharisees put forth the question of ceremonial purity and draw from Jesus a most scathing remark, in which he calls them hypocrites. In chapter 8 they ask for a sign. Jesus' answer is brief and sharp: "Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation."<sup>2</sup>

Peter's confession of the messiahship of the Lord is obviously a turning point in the gospel. From there on the crowd remains somewhat in the background until the very end, the mighty acts are limited to two, and the intense opposition of the scribes and Pharisees does not appear until the final and fatal week, except when they pose the question of divorce in chapter ten. Teachings now become more prominent, but they are given chiefly to the disciples. However, only awe, religious fear and amazement are evoked

<sup>1</sup> Mark 9:13

<sup>2</sup> Mark 8:12

in the disciples by the nature of the new teachings.

When Peter declares in the name of all the disciples that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus charges them to tell no one. From there on until the middle of chapter ten (10:33), our Lord speaks repeatedly to his disciples concerning his coming passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. In order to have the complete picture before us, we shall quote the three momentous predictions about the passion.

8:31-33. And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God but of men."

9:30b-32. And he would not have any one know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him.

10:32d-34. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise."

These three passages give us the basic theme that runs from 8:31 up to the very end of the story. It is the theme of the suffering, crucified and resurrected Messiah. First we hear it from the lips of our Lord; then during the last week of his life the events of the passion, crucifixion, and resurrection take place. We are no longer dealing with teachings but with historical events, not devoid, of course, of interpretation, as it was pointed out at the beginning.

Also we see in these sayings the reaction of the disciples to this



kind of teaching. Peter misunderstands completely the connection of the Son of man and the will of God. The disciples as a whole did not understand the meaning of this new revelation concerning our Lord's messiahship and were afraid to ask him. Besides, Jesus did not want anyone to know about this new teaching.

It is important to realize that at no time do we get the impression that Jesus is a martyr, a pawn of the circumstances and prejudices of the Jews. On the contrary, according to Mark, Jesus sees the cross as part of the way of obedience to the divine will. It is all according to the Scriptures. The ransom saying epitomizes the meaning of his sacrifice: "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."<sup>1</sup>

The usage of the term Son of man strikes the reader as he reaches this point in the narrative, and before we go any further a few words should be said concerning its possible meaning.

In the New Testament the term occurs outside the Gospels only in Revelation 1:13 and 14:14, where the expression "one like a son of man" is used following Daniel 7:13, and in Acts 7:56, where the martyr Stephen claims to see the Son of man standing at the right hand of God. The use of the term is almost limited to the Gospels and is only used in sayings of Jesus. It occurs eight times in Q; fourteen times in Mark; eight in the special material of Matthew; seven in that of Luke and twelve in John. It never occurs in Paul.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:35

<sup>2</sup> Grant, op. cit., p. 642.

Of Mark's fourteen uses of the term two occur in 2:10, 28.<sup>1</sup> The remaining occurrences appear in the second half of the book, namely, 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 13:26; 14:21a, 21b, 41, 62. Thus between 8:27 and 16:8 the term is used in twelve contexts. Nine of these appear in connection with service, suffering, and death. The other three refer pointedly to the future coming of the Son of man in power and glory.

The term emphasizes on the one hand Jesus' connection with humanity.<sup>2</sup> It brings to mind the words of Psalm 8: "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him," and also its use in Ezekiel, where it is employed to emphasize the prophet's humility and humanity in contrast with God.

Its significance in the New Testament, on the other hand, is connected with its use in Daniel 7:13 where it is said: "There came with the clouds of heaven one like unto a son of man."<sup>3</sup> In this context in pre-Christian

<sup>1</sup> In relation to these two sayings Grant says the following: "Of Mark's fourteen uses of the term, those in 2:10, 28 have been thought to mean 'man' ('man can forgive sins;' 'man is lord of the sabbath'); but this seems improbable--not only that Mark should use the term in a different sense here, but that such doctrines should have been propounded in the tradition, or by Jesus himself." Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 41; Grant, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Lagrange rejects this identification of the term Son of man with the celestial Son of man of Daniel. He says: "Si 'le Fils de l'homme' avait eu clairement ce sens, Jésus aurait donc, dès le début, proclamé sa messianité en termes découverts, ce qui eût été en opposition avec toute sa conduite..." In the Petrine confession he sees no transcendental meaning. "Au titre glorieux de Messie," he says, "Jésus oppose celui de Fils de l'homme, comme celui qui convenait à sa vie et à ses douleurs et à sa mort. Il est impossible de supposer qu'à ce moment il voulait faire allusion au Fils de l'homme de Daniel. ... Il me semble donc que lorsque Jésus se nomme Fils de l'homme, il entend simplement 'l'homme que je suis', pour attirer l'attention sur sa personne, sans prendre ouvertement, et pour ainsi dire officiellement, le titre de Messie." M.-J. Lagrange, Évangile selon Saint Mark (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie., ed., 1947) p. CL. This seems to us to be an oversimplification. However, he allows for the following  
(Concluded at foot of page 10.)

Judaism the term contained the concept of an ideal or supernatural Power. To this power is committed the task of establishing a divine kingdom on earth. Thus says Lightfoot: "In spite of the term's apparent emphasis on humanity, its technical Jewish use had resulted in an equal emphasis on the connection of the Son of man with God as against the nations of the world; therefore it tended to suggest the fundamental contrast between God and the world, and, above all, between God and sinners."<sup>1</sup>

Manson sees in the Son of man term found in the Gospels "the final term in a series of conceptions, all of which are found in the Old Testament."<sup>2</sup> These are the Remnant (Isaiah), the Servant of Jehovah (II Isaiah), the "I" of the Psalms, and the Son of man (Daniel). He sees in the Son of man of the Gospels another embodiment of the Remnant idea. "In other words," he says, "the Son of man is, like the Servant of Jehovah, an ideal figure and stands for the manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth in a people wholly devoted to their heavenly King."<sup>3</sup> Then he asks ~~the question~~ *to the question* of why does it happen that in the Gospels the term Son of man is so often and so obviously a designation of Jesus himself and finds the answer in <sup>A</sup> the outcome of the prophetic ministry of Jesus. He concludes:

(Continued from page 9) statement: "Rien n'empêche d'estimer que Jésus se réservait de développer au moment voulu ce nom de Fils de l'homme en le rattachant à la vision de Daniel." Ibid., p. CLI. Yet this involves to some degree a theory of psychological interpretation of the messianic consciousness of Jesus which may be more a reading into the Markan text of our own questions rather than true exegesis.

<sup>1</sup> Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> T. W. Manson, The Teaching of Jesus (2nd ed.; London: Cambridge University Press, 1959) p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

"His mission is to create the Son of man, the Kingdom of the saints of the Most High, to realize in Israel the ideal contained in the term. This task is attempted in two ways: first by public appeal to the people through the medium of parable and sermon and by the mission of the disciples; then, when this appeal produced no adequate response, by the consolidation of his own band of followers. Finally when it becomes apparent that not even the disciples are ready to rise to the demands of the ideal, he stands alone, embodying in his own person the perfect human response to the regal claims of God."<sup>1</sup>

*See Matthew for the use of  
king's words - no 'quoting man's law'  
single-appeal, imitations,*

Picking up again our main thread, it is obvious that there appears in the second part of Mark an identification of the Son of man with the suffering servant of Isaiah 40 to 55, ~~to say the least. The Messiah is thus identified with the suffering servant.~~ <sup>effect</sup> The term employed to carry out this identification is the Son of man, a quite unique usage of the term.<sup>2</sup>

Also in this second part Mark interweaves the theme of suffering and glory. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the placing of the

<sup>1</sup> T. W. Manson, op. cit., pp. 227-8.

<sup>2</sup> Grant sees in the term Son of man as used in the Gospels an original creation of the Christian community. He says: "It must be recognized that we have in this conception a pure creation of Christian thought, the consequence of continual reflection upon the career of Jesus, who is seen in the blazing splendor of his risen, glorified, exalted state 'at God's right hand,' from whence the heavenly Son of man was expected to come." Grant, op. cit., p. 642. He is not sure, however, whether Jesus referred to himself in this way. Ibid.

transfiguration experience six days after Peter's confession.<sup>1</sup> Next to the first proclamation of the passion is placed the account of an event in which three of the disciples beheld Jesus in the splendor of his supernatural being. The disciples now hear the voice from heaven that only Jesus had heard at his baptism and therefore receive divine confirmation to the insight that Peter had obtained at Caesarea Philippi. The event also points forward to the final victory, though that victory is to come only through the valley of the shadow of death.

As has been repeatedly pointed out, the theme of the Gospel is the doctrine of the crucified Messiah. Divine testimony is given to Jesus' messiahship at his baptism and the transfiguration experience, and is also witnessed in his mighty acts. But Jesus being the crucified Messiah, Mark gives us the trend of events that led to the final clash between our Lord and the leaders of his nation and which resulted in his crucifixion.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lightfoot warns against a hasty acceptance of the view that the transfiguration was originally a resurrection appearance, even though those that sponsor such a view have the great name of Wellhausen behind them. "In the first place," he says, "all accounts in the gospels of appearances of the risen Lord begin in His absence. After His arrival He speaks, and His words are an essential element in the process of making Himself known to His hearer or hearers; sometimes also he acts; whereas at the Transfiguration He is present from the beginning, and silent throughout. Again, from the story of the draught of fishes in John 21, and its sequel in the restoration of Peter, we know what is the content of a Resurrection appearance in which St. Peter was concerned; and this story in John 21, in view of the recent denial of the Lord by Peter, naturally has indirect reference to the denial, in the fact of his three-fold restoration and commission. But in the story of the Transfiguration, St. Peter is simply one along with St. James and St. John; he is in no way singled out, either for rebuke or restoration. And thirdly, why should Moses and Elijah appear in a vision of the risen Lord?" Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

*the question for long quest*

In the story of the passion the evangelist sets before us certain emphases that reveal his mind. The reader gets a vivid impression of the complete dereliction and abandonment of our Lord. The chief priests plot against him, Judas conniving to hand him over to them. The disciples desert him, Peter, their leader, openly <sup>ly</sup> betraying him. The Sanhedrin condemns him and delivers him over to Pilate, the representative of the Gentile power. Pilate, making a mockery of justice, turns him over to be crucified. And if all of these were little, there is finally the nadir of abandonment: the sense of the Father's presence is withdrawn.

There is here indeed radical obedience and utter dereliction. The <sup>e</sup> only ~~one~~ who while he lived gave life, light, and health is now utterly abandoned. And yet his future power depends on his present state, as the passages from 8:29 clearly indicate and both the evangelist and the readers knew.

There are two passages in particular that show how Mark saw the death of Christ. The first is the enigmatic and theologically pregnant verse that appears in 15:38: "And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." Lightfoot believes that the reference in this verse is to the veil that the author of the epistle to the Hebrews calls the second veil (Hebrews 9:3).<sup>1</sup> It is as if Mark were saying to us that now the way is opened to the very presence of God through the one who has just died on the cross. There are now no barriers between God and man.

The other passage which is theologically significant is the confession of the Roman centurion. When he saw that Jesus had breathed his

<sup>1</sup> Lightfoot, op. cit., pp. 55-6.

last, he exclaimed: "Truly this man was a son of God."<sup>1</sup> The reader is immediately reminded of the momentous former occasions when the term was employed in respect to Jesus. At the time of his baptism the voice from heaven spoke, saying, "Thou art my beloved Son; with whom I am well-pleased."<sup>2</sup> Again on the occasion of the transfiguration a voice came out of the cloud, saying: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."<sup>3</sup> In the former occasion, Jesus alone heard the voice; in the latter, the entire event, including the voice from heaven, is directed towards the three disciples present, thus making them aware of the unique Sonship of Jesus. In the passage under consideration the words come from the lips of a man, and this one is a Gentile. It is a fitting conclusion to the gospel of Jesus, the crucified Messiah, whom God proclaims to be his Son but now begins to be recognized by men, even in his humiliation.

<sup>1</sup> Mark 15:39. Lagrange thinks that this confession does not carry too much weight in the overall theological picture of the book. He simply says: "La confession du centurion a bien peu de valeur auprès de ces augustes affirmations. [The other places where the term Son of God is used: at the baptism and the transfiguration.] Elle indique seulement l'impression que la mort de Jésus a faite sur un âme de bonne volonté." Lagrange, op. cit., p. CXLVII. I seriously doubt whether Mark would put those words in the mouth of a Roman centurion just to express good will. The very pathos of the story demands a deeper interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:11

<sup>3</sup> Mark 9:7

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A

an excellent piece of work, both in  
content and in form.

I believe you dismiss too lightly  
what Donald Riddle once  
called "the martyr-motif in Mark."

Thomas Gilman