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The Man Behind The Curtain: The Shape of Markan Christology

Cover Page Footnote

Hays, Richard. *Echoes of Scripture In The Gospels*. Baylor University Press. Waco, TX. 2016.

Introduction

“Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,” says the wizard as the young girl’s dog pulls the curtain back to reveal the true nature of the great and powerful Oz. He is a sham, and a liar. The wizard desperately does not want anyone to peek behind the curtain to see his true identity. This, in some sense, is how the “New Quest”¹ for the historical Jesus has seen the story of the New Testament. The NT authors are creating a myth about a Jewish rabbi and hoping that no one pulls back the curtain to see who Jesus of Nazareth truly is. This “New Quest” has bled into the realm of New Testament studies, especially within the discipline of Christology. Who is Jesus? What did he think about himself? Was he the Son of God? All of these questions are pertinent within the realm of Christology. But, as one takes a closer look at what the NT actually says about Jesus, he or she will see the opposite effect as the authors draw back the veil, and call each person to discover, in a fresh way, the man behind the curtain. In the case of Mark’s gospel the discovery of the man behind the curtain will be through the use of a figural reading of Israel’s scriptures, a veiled literary structure, and literary seams that shape the gospel as a whole.

The Gospel according to Mark is one of the most widely used gospels in the debate concerning early Christology, and many have debated the kind of Christology that the gospel of Mark has. Does Mark have a high Christology (meaning a high view of Jesus’s divinity) or a low one? For the sake of brevity and the argument presented in this paper, the assumption will be that Mark had a very high Christology. Examples shall be provided in the body of the paper to support this claim.² The deeper question this paper will be observing is, “What is Mark’s Christology doing?” As one journeys down the yellow brick road to find the man behind the

¹ This term comes from N.T. Wright’s work on Jesus in his book *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 28-82.

² A word of gratitude must be made to Richard Bauckham for his work on early Christology within Christianity in his book *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 18-21. Many of the assumptions made in this paper are indebted to specifically the section on divine Identity.

curtain, he or she will run into first, Mark's figural Christology, second, the "veiled" literary structure of Mark's gospel, and finally encounter the man behind the curtain himself.

Mark's Figural Christology

It is well known that Thomas Jefferson took scissors to his personal Bible taking out all of the miraculous events that took place in the Gospels. He was confronted with the picture painted of this Jewish rabbi, miracle man, prophet. This was not just an Enlightenment problem; this has been the problem since the moment Jesus rose from the dead. Many people try to focus on one aspect of Jesus, Like Burton Mack and his depiction of the historical Jesus as a Greco-Roman Jewish thought leader.³ For Mack, the other identities that Jesus is attributed with in the gospel of Mark, like his identity of *Christos* or *Kyrios*, is Christian Mythology later invented.⁴ Studying Jesus as a monolithic character within Mark, may provide fruitful advances in scholarship, but Mark is not dealing with a monolithic depiction of Jesus. Instead he is dealing with a dynamic and multi-faceted figure of history. Jesus, like a diamond, needs to be rotated and observed from many angles for his beauty and true character as a figure of history to be fully appreciated. This is where understanding the Christology of Mark is vital.

As Mark begins to narrate the story of Jesus, one must be aware that "many readers have underestimated the importance of the Old Testament in Mark's Narrative,"⁵ as Richard Hays has observed. Citing Mark 4:24-25, Hays argues that Jesus' word to his disciples is a strong admonition to pay close attention to what they hear and a reminder that the measure they give they will get back.⁶ Mark is calling the reader to listen closely to the narrative and to the most compelling figure in history. The closer one looks, the more he or she will find within this

³ Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵ Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco: Baylor, 2016), 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

narrative of who Jesus is. By doing this Mark reveals his Christology to be a figural Christology.

A figural Christology is a hermeneutic that sees the OT prefiguring Jesus as opposed to

predicting Jesus. Hays writes,

There is consequently a significant difference between *prediction* and *prefiguration*. Figural reading of the Bible need not presume that the Old Testament authors – or the characters they narrate – were conscious of predicting or anticipating Christ... Because the two poles of a figure are events within “the flowing stream” of time, the correspondence can be discerned only after the second event has occurred and imparted a new pattern of significance to the first.⁷

This is how Mark depicts Jesus throughout his Gospel. The OT scriptures were partially full vessels longing for the day when Jesus would come to fulfill them. Jesus is not ripping apart the meaning of the original texts, but filling them up to their God-intended completeness.

This understanding of figural exegesis is very important from a literary perspective as Millay suggests when assessing the importance of Hays’s work on figural Christology.⁸ The literary emphasis on this sort of exegesis allows Mark to focus less on Jesus as some robot that has to move from proof-text to proof-text, and more on showing the reader how Jesus is the great climax and fulfillment of *all* of Israel’s scriptures. This may be where modern readers and scholars (especially those in the “New Quest”) of Mark get frustrated, because he does not provide a formula for Old Testament quotations or allusions. This is where the idea of a *metalepsis* becomes important for Mark’s Gospel narrative to see how he figurally interprets Israel’s scriptures. While examples of a *metalepsis* will be provided in the next section, it will be helpful to understand a basic definition moving forward. Hays writes that a “Metalepsis is a

⁷ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 3. A small word of clarification on Hays’ quote, especially the part about “anticipating Christ.” The OT authors are very adamantly anticipating the *Christos*, or messiah in the OT. The bigger question is whether the OT authors actually anticipated the Galilean rabbi, Jesus. Understanding how the OT authors saw the *Logos* before the incarnation is not a debate suited for this paper, and this quote is about how Jesus acts as the second pole in the figure, and does not take away meaning from the first pole, but enhances and gives new meaning to the first pole.

⁸ Thomas Millay, “Septuagint Figura: Assessing the contribution of Richard B. Hays” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70, no. 1. (2017), 95.

literary technique of citing or echoing a small bit of a precursor text in such a way that the reader can grasp the significance of the echo only by recalling or recovering the original context...”⁹

One can not simply use the small piece that Mark is quoting from the OT to understand everything he means. They must pay close attention, because the measure they give will be the measure they receive when it comes to understanding what Mark is saying (4:24). Now that Mark as a figural interpreter of scripture has been grasped, one must look at the examples of Mark’s figural Christology at work.

Now, examples from Mark will be observed to see Mark’s figural Christology take shape. First, the opening lines set up Mark’s Christology, and one of the few explicit quotations in Mark’s Gospel sets up how Mark sees Jesus.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”¹⁰

Mark is clear to his audience who Jesus is. He is the “Christ,” or messiah, and the Son of God. Then Mark quotes Isaiah, but this quote is not only from Isaiah. This is a quote blended from Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:1, and Isaiah 40:3.¹¹ By doing this, Mark has shown that who Jesus is, and the story that is about to take place cannot be explained by just proof-texting the OT. One must take in the breadth of God’s word and pay close attention to where the scriptures are pointing them. Mark is combining all three scriptural references to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the figures of God going before the Israelites (Ex. 23:20), John fulfilling the figure of the Elijah-like Messenger (Mal. 3:1), and Jesus also being the LORD who’s path will be laid before his coming (Isa. 40:3).

⁹ See Hays, *Echoes of Scripture.*, 11.

¹⁰ Mark 1:1-3, NRSV, Note: all quotations of scripture will be in the NRSV unless stated otherwise.

¹¹ David Garland, *Mark: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 42.

One thing to especially note within this complex scriptural quotation is the use of the word *Kyrios*, or “Lord” in English. *Kyrios* was the word associated with God’s name “YHWH” in the time of Jesus. Mark is subtly implying that Jesus is the *Kyrios* of Isaiah’s prophecy. But, as one will see just a few lines later, Jesus is distinct from the Father who also has the identity of *Kyrios*. This is Mark’s way of saying Jesus and the God of Israel both share the identity of *Kyrios*, or of YHWH.¹² It is the foundation of the veiled identity of who Jesus of Nazareth is, and readers are not just supposed to “get it” when it comes to Jesus’ identity from the beginning.

Another example that is even more in line with the veiled Christology that Mark employs is in Mark 6:45-52. Here, Jesus is walking on water towards his disciples who are struggling in the tumultuous sea, and it says that as he was walking on the water, “He intended to pass them by” (Mark 6:48). It is a strange saying, especially when it appeared that he was walking on the waters to help his disciples. Why would he pass them by? Well, Richard Hays noticed that the LXX (Septuagint) renders a passage in Job 9:

Who alone stretched out the heavens and *walks upon the sea as dry ground*, who made the Bear and Orion, the Pleiads and the chambers of the south; who does great things beyond understanding, and marvelous things without number. *Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him; he passes me by, but I do not perceive him.*¹³

It is made even more evident, to those who look closer that when Jesus gets into the boat Mark writes, “And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (6:51-52). This story would almost seem like Mark forgot to tell the reader about the disciples confusion about the feeding of the five thousand right before this story, and is just trying to make it up at the end of this story. But, when Job 9 is seen as the back drop

¹² Daniel Johansson, “Kyrios in the Gospel of Mark” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 1 (2010), 102.

¹³ Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture.*, 72.

for Mark's incredibly subtle allusion, then their confusion makes sense, because they could not perceive the *Kyrios* right there in front of them.

These are just a few of many examples within Mark's narrative that show Mark has a very high Christology. Although most of the time it is veiled to the characters in the story, and even some of the readers, who do not look close enough, Mark sees Jesus as embodying the God of Israel. Mark believes Jesus is sharing in the divine identity of YHWH in the Old Testament.¹⁴ Not only does Jesus partake in the divine identity of YHWH, but he is also Israel's messiah as seen through the royal imagery in the baptism narrative (1:9-11), and his debate about David's son also being David's Lord from Psalm 110 (12:35-37). This is Mark's Christology, but Mark does not lay out a systematic theology of Jesus. Instead, Mark tells a story about Jesus. This is where the road leads one through treacherous woods on the way to the man behind the curtain. It leads the diligent student of scripture to ask the question, "How does Mark shape his Christology within his Gospel?" This is what the next section will answer.

Mark's Veiled Literary Structure

By figuring out how Mark shapes his figural Christology within his Gospel, one may see that the topic may have shifted into a form of narrative Christology.¹⁵ This form of Christology is one that focuses specifically on the narrative texts we have about Jesus.¹⁶ So, is Mark's Christology a figural Christology, or narrative Christology? The answer to that question is, "yes." It must be noted, that these two forms of Christology are not to be separated, because for Mark his figural reading of the OT in relationship to Jesus takes on a narrative shape. A narrative shape that sets Jesus within his ontological identity and his literary identity, which for Mark, may

¹⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel.*, 19.

¹⁵ Michal Dinker, "A New Formalist Approach to Narrative Christology" *HTS Teologiese* (2017), 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

as well be one and the same.¹⁷ Mark is not a Protestant theologian with a systematic theology background. He is a first century follower of Jesus telling the story of Jewish itinerant rabbi from Galilee, whom he believes to be the messiah, and the Son of God.

This calls one to understand the narrative form of Mark's gospel as a whole. The way that Mark has written his gospel makes it seem that it is an incomplete gospel, and especially one that desperately needed Matthew, Luke, and John to help it out. Mark starts incredibly abruptly, and ends just as (if not more) abruptly. So, why did this Gospel even continue to hold authority over the people of God? While her reasoning for Mark not having as much apostolic authority as many have thought is unstable at best, Joanna Dewey gives one of the most compelling reasons for Mark's survival as a Gospel, "it was a good story."¹⁸ This, among many other reasons, is why Mark still holds a prominent place within the Canon. It has survived, because Mark is the unassuming master storyteller.

It is now time to come back to the proposition of this section: that Mark has intentionally shaped his narrative to frame his Christology. Since the time, resources, and length of this paper do not allow for an exhaustive overview of Mark's Gospel, there will be a handful of key moments that sufficiently show how Mark's narrative is not a haphazard compilation of events, but a carefully crafted narrative with the intent on proving who Mark believes Jesus to be. So, who does Mark believe Jesus to be?

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (1:1). The very first verse in Mark's Gospel lays out in black and white who Mark believes Jesus is. Jesus is the Christ or the messiah, and the Son of God. This moment is very important for readers of Mark's Gospel, because they have been given an insider status by knowing that Jesus is the messiah and

¹⁷ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁸ Joanna Dewey, "The Survival of Mark's Gospel: I Good Story?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* (2004), 495-496.

the Son of God.¹⁹ This is immediately backed up with the hybrid quotation discussed in the above section, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” (1:2-3). Mark has set up his figural methodology by showing who Jesus is through the lens of Exodus language from Exodus 23:20, apocalyptic judgment language from Malachi 3:1, and prophetic language through Isaiah 40:3.

It is also important to note that it is only the audience who is given the privilege of knowing Jesus’s identity.²⁰ The reason one must take this into account is because Mark will begin to make it less clear who Jesus is until certain key moments. The first of these key moments is in the baptism narrative. Jesus goes to be baptized by John, and as he comes out of the water, “he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (1:10-11).

The word “torn” in this passage comes from the Greek word *Schizō*.²¹ This is an important word for Mark’s Gospel, because this word ties in to Mark’s Christology by echoing Isaiah 64, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” This is another *metalepsis* that Mark is employing, where the eschatological passage of Isaiah 64 is being fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. It is obvious that Jesus is not identified with YHWH tearing the heavens and coming down, but he is identified with YHWH in 1:2-3. This is the beginning of Mark making Jesus’s identity less clear.

¹⁹ Stephen Ahearne-Kroll, “Audience Inclusion and Exclusion as Rhetorical Technique in the Gospel of Mark” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129 (2010): 720.

²⁰ Ibid., Ahearne-Kroll uses the term “audience” to identify those who would have experienced Mark’s Gospel in its immediate context, and most likely experienced it in oral form. I, however, am giving this definition room to encompass modern readers as well, because Mark’s Gospel universally uses inclusion and exclusion techniques no matter the context the person is reading from. The ignorance of the modern reader towards Mark’s ancient context does not change Mark’s technique from two thousand years ago.

²¹ George Lidell & Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 1746.

The tearing of the heavens is a vital moment in the opening of Mark's Gospel, because it is the revelation from the Father himself about who Jesus truly is. But, after this moment the characters (especially the disciples) question Jesus's identity. The tearing of the heavens could be considered a literary seam within the Gospel of Mark. There are a total of four literary seams: the baptism of Jesus (1:10-11), the confession of Peter (8:27-30), the transfiguration (9:2-8), and the tearing of the veil (15:37-39). Each one of these stories clearly defines Jesus' identity, but is followed by a misunderstanding of who Jesus truly is.

The events of the disciples not understanding Jesus's true identity after his baptism are reinforced by two stories on the sea. Not only do these stories depict Jesus as the *Kyrios* having command over the seas, they depict the disciples as not understanding who Jesus truly is. The first instance is in chapter 4 when Jesus rebukes the storm and it becomes calm. The disciples respond, "who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him" (4:41). The next story is in chapter 6 when Jesus walks to them on water. As noted above, this is another instance of Mark's Christology, but now one can see how it is taking shape within Mark's narrative. In alluding to Job 9, Mark says that Jesus meant to pass by them following the tradition of the LXX. Then this section ends with the strange verse, "they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (6:51-52).

These two examples after the first literary seam of the disciples not understanding Jesus's identity is an example of the "role of Paradox" in Mark's Gospel, as Narry Santos would put it.²² The disciples are with the messiah, the Son of God, and the *Kyrios* himself commanding the seas, and they cannot see it.

²² Narry Santos, "The Theological Role of Paradox in the Gospel of Mark" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (2015). This is not a specific example from Santos's article, but it fits into the work done to see that paradox is an important aspect of Mark's narrative.

The next seam is when Peter confesses, “You are the Messiah” (8:29). Finally, the disciples get it. They see that Jesus is the messiah, the Davidic king who will rule over Israel, and usher in God’s kingdom. But, this victory is not long lived, because once Jesus begins to describe what will happen to the messiah (i.e. being rejected by the elders, suffer, and die), Peter rebukes Jesus, because that is not what his expectations of the messiah were. Peter could only see in part who Jesus really was. Not only did he see only part of the picture by only seeing Jesus as the messiah, he only saw part of the picture by not understanding what the messiah must do.

But, there is another chance immediately after this story for the disciples to understand. When Peter, James, and John follow Jesus up a mountain Jesus is transfigured before their eyes with dazzling white clothes, and Moses and Elijah are standing with him. Then a cloud overshadowed them and a voice came down from the cloud saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him” (9:7). This is an echo of the baptism narrative, but it is also a foreshadowing of his baptism of death. Jesus urges them to not tell anyone about this until he is raised from the dead. After this, Jesus explains for the second time how he must suffer, die, and be raised but the disciples still do not understand what he is saying (9:30-32).

Finally, Jesus makes his third attempt at explaining his death and resurrection to his disciples (10:32-34). One would think that after three explanations the disciples would understand, but the next story about James and John asking Jesus to sit at his right and left when he comes into his kingdom proves that they still do not get it (10:37).

One final observation about this middle section of literary seams in Mark’s Gospel is that they are bookended by two stories of blind men. The first story takes place right before Peter’s confession (8:22-26). When Jesus rubs saliva on the man’s eyes he asks if the man can see anything, but the man responds, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking” (8:24).

Then, Jesus puts his hands on the man's eyes again and they are fully restored. It is a strange story that almost makes it seem as if Jesus had trouble healing, but it is a part of Mark's literary technique. This story sets up the two literary seams of the disciples only being able to see Jesus's true identity in part. Because, after the three passion predictions, *Bartimaeus* sees fully right away (10:46-52). This is Mark's way of saying that the disciples only see in part, but soon they will see fully who Jesus is.

This leads to the literary seam that brings to climax what Mark inaugurated with the tearing of the heavens and confused with his veiled Christological claims. Jesus is being crucified and he "gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (15:37-38). The word *Schizō* is again employed in this story, but this time it is the veil of the temple. It is a very similar image, because the temple was the place where God's presence dwelt. After the audience is propelled away from the cross to see the veil tearing, a Roman centurion makes the proclamation, "Truly this man was God's Son" (15:39).²³ This moment is the climax of the story, not only, because Mark's literary plot situates it that way, but also because something happened to the temple veil in history that caused extra biblical sources to write about it.²⁴

The tearing of the veil of heaven at Jesus's baptism and the tearing of the veil in the temple both are accompanied by the proclamation of Jesus as God's Son. The first comes from God himself, where Jesus is given his identity as God's Son and does his ministry with full confidence of that identity. The second comes from the most unlikely character to understand Jesus's identity: a Roman centurion tasked with killing this would be messiah. It is the great

²³ Whitney Shiner, "The Ambiguous Pronouncement of the Centurion and the Shrouding of Meaning in Mark" *Journal For the Study of the New Testament* (2000), 10.

²⁴ Robert Plummer, "Something Awry in the Temple?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (2005), 306-315.

climax to Mark's literary masterpiece. To Mark, Jesus is this veiled messiah and Son of God who can only be understood through the lens of the cross.

The Man Behind The Curtain

Like Dorothy and her friends, the man behind the curtain is not who the characters in Mark's gospel expected. But, in the same way that the wizard helps Dorothy realize that the answer to her longing to go home was always right in front of her, Jesus, through the cross, reveals to the characters in Mark's gospel that the answer to their deepest longings was walking with them all along. They just did not perceive him. Mark's gospel ends with the women finding the tomb empty and told by a messenger to share the good news that Jesus has risen, and the haunting line, "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8). It is Mark's call to the readers by asking them, "what will you do?" When the reader encounters the empty tomb, will they re-read the story and pay closer attention? Or will they runaway and say nothing, because "amazement has seized them" (10:8)?

This paper may not have made Mark easier to understand, or provided a helpful overview of the entire gospel, but the aim was always to show that Mark employed literary seams (through a veiled literary structure) throughout his Gospel to shape his Christology. The seams are the highlight points in Mark's Gospel that he uses to show who Jesus is, and why he did what he did.

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