

The Christology of Mark  
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From almost the very beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, his followers acknowledge him to be the "Messiah" (Gr. *Christos*, "anointed," from which we get the name Jesus Christ).<sup>1</sup> "Christology" can be both literally and literarily defined then, as the study of how and why Jesus is truthfully called "Christ." This Christological analysis of Mark's gospel presupposes that Jesus' identity as Christ can be substantiated from the text, which we also presuppose is authoritative toward such an evaluation. Synonyms for "Christ" or "Messiah" in Mark's gospel include "Son of Man" and "Son of God," as our study will show.

While there have been various approaches to Christology throughout the history of Biblical interpretation, a comparative analysis of which is beyond the scope of this paper, it is fitting that I acknowledge my own preference for a primarily Christological hermeneutical approach to all of Scripture. While it appreciates the value of historical, cultural and even grammatical considerations, a Christological hermeneutic is first and foremost a *theological* reading of the text, which views all of Scripture according to its Christological, and specifically, its soteriological or *salvific* significance—in other words, according to God's revelation of himself to humankind in the person and work of Jesus Christ for the purpose of our redemption. As Donald G. Bloesch explains, "According to this approach, God reveals himself fully and definitively only in one time and place, viz., in the life history of Jesus Christ. The Bible is the primary witness to this event or series of events. This revelation was anticipated in the Old

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*. (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1994), 3.

Testament and remembered and proclaimed in the New Testament.”<sup>2</sup> The Bible as “witness” is very different than the Bible as “revelation.”<sup>3</sup> Bloesch continues, “The Word of God is neither the text nor the psychological disposition of the author behind the text but is instead its salvific significance seen in the light of the cross of Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

How is Jesus’ identity as “Son of Man,” “Son of God,” “Christ,” “Messiah” and by undeniable conclusion, God’s revelation of *himself*--the Savior that Israel understood according to her prophets would be none other than God (cf. Isaiah 43:3; 45:21; Hosea 13:4)-- witnessed by Mark’s gospel? This paper will examine four sources of this witness within the gospel itself by citing examples of each of the following: 1) the evangelist’s references to Old Testament prophecy through his narration of events; 2) Mark’s record of the statements made about Jesus by others; 3) Mark’s record of Jesus’ own actions; and 4) Mark’s record of Jesus’ own words.

### **How Mark’s Narration Uses the Old Testament to Witness Jesus’ Identity**

The evangelist, as the storyteller, refers both directly and indirectly (by implication or allusion) to Old Testament prophetic passages, and these references have direct bearing upon the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert K. Johnston, ed., *The Use of the Bible in Theology/Evangelical Options*. (Wipf & Stock Pub, 1985), chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth also taught that the Bible itself is not revelation, but rather a witness to revelation. “Protestants have found some difficulty with Barth’s emphatic assertion that Scripture itself is not to be directly identified with divine revelation...Yet [he] also insists that revelation does not ‘bypass’ this witness. This witness becomes revelation when God speaks through it”: Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: an Introduction*, 5th ed. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 129,155.

<sup>4</sup> Johnston, *The Use of the Bible in Theology*, chapter 5.

question of Jesus' identity. In fact, it is reasonable to infer that Mark is confirming Jesus' identity for his original audience<sup>5</sup> with some of these references. While some commentators have cautioned against an extensive reflection on Old Testament allusions in Mark, especially those that may not have been obvious to the gospel's original hearers, suggesting that this will lead us away from the evangelist's intended meaning;<sup>6</sup> I contend that what Mark's original audience may or may not have understood of Old Testament connections does not fully encompass the *Spirit's* intended meaning, or God's revelation of himself through Mark's witness to us today. We do ourselves a disservice by reading *any* New Testament text in isolation of the Old Testament. As Karl Barth boldly proclaims, "Whether we like it or not, the Christ of the New Testament is the Christ of the Old Testament, the Christ of Israel. The man who will not accept this merely shows in fact he has already substituted another Christ for the Christ of the New Testament."<sup>7</sup>

Mark begins his narrative, which he defines as the "good news" (Gr. *Euaggelion*, often translated "Gospel") of Jesus Christ, by quoting Old Testament prophecy (cf. Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3). By identifying the fore-running "messenger" of Malachi, and the "crying voice" of Isaiah as John the Baptist, Mark is boldly proclaiming that Jesus is the Savior promised to Israel, and that he is in fact God. Also from the context of Isaiah 40 it is further understood that Mark is announcing, "the glory (i.e., the salvation, cf. Isaiah 52:10; Luke 3:6) of God is about to be

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<sup>5</sup> Mark's Greek speaking audience "possessed at least a basic knowledge of the Old Testament. Where Mark's mostly Gentile readers obtained this knowledge is not certain, but it is quite possible that one factor involved their pre-Christian training in the synagogue either as proselytes to Judaism or as God-fearers," and "this basic knowledge is assumed from the opening of Mark's gospel": Robert H. Stein, "Is Our Reading the Bible the Same as the Original Audience's Hearing It? A Case Study in the Gospel of Mark," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46, no. 1 (2003): 63.

<sup>6</sup> Stein is one who takes this position: Stein, "A Case Study in the Gospel of Mark," 63.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics - Volume 1, Part 2 - The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Reprint ed. (T. & T. Clark, 1988), 488-499.

revealed" (cf. Isaiah 40:5). With his introduction, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1), Mark is ascribing divine authority to his gospel: this is not merely the evangelist's story *about* Jesus; this is Jesus' own word. It is *his* good news to his people. The cross is also clearly in view through the prophetic foundation of Mark's introduction ("Comfort my people...her iniquity is pardoned," cf. Isaiah 40:1-2), which establishes the salvific significance of events that follow in the narrative.

In this description of Jesus' compassion for the crowd, "because they were like sheep without a shepherd; [he] began to teach them many things" (6:34); Mark is likely alluding to several Old Testament prophetic texts about the time of Messiah and the establishment of the New Covenant (cf. Isaiah 48:17; 61:1-3); but this passage in Ezekiel is especially significant in light of later references in Mark to Jesus as "Son of David" and the coming of David's kingdom through him (cf. 10:47-48; 11:10):

Ezekiel 34: 22 I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. 23 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. 24 And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken. 25 I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely.

Finally, Mark's narration of Jesus' trial and crucifixion in chapter 15 contains obvious allusions to three Messianic psalms (22, 69 and 109), as well as to Isaiah 53, which Christians commonly understand to be prophetic of Christ. While some scholars question this latter connection with the "Servant Song," I believe a close study of the larger context of Isaiah 53, beginning with chapter 52,<sup>8</sup> will confirm that the entire passage is speaking of Christ and his satisfying sacrifice, and the subsequent victory of the Gospel over the nations. The association

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<sup>8</sup> For just one of many examples, it is doubtful that anyone would deny that the "servant" of Isaiah 52 is the subject of Isaiah 53 as well. Paul quotes Isaiah 52:15 in Romans 15:20-21, and confirms that the prophecy is fulfilled by Christ, and by the Gospel going to the Gentiles.

between Mark's Passion narrative and "the Suffering Servant" of Isaiah 53 is indeed confirmed by the context of Isaiah, even without Mark 15:28 ("So the Scripture was fulfilled..."), which some manuscripts and translations, including the academically acclaimed NRSV, omit.

### **How Others Witness Jesus' Identity**

There are three accounts in Mark of "unclean spirits" addressing Jesus with the titles "Holy One," "Son of God" and "Son of the Most High God" (cf. 1:23; 3:11; 5:6-7). In each case, Jesus does not contradict them, or dispute the implications of their recognition. In the case of the man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue (1:23), it is noteworthy that he addresses Jesus as both "Jesus of Nazareth," and "the Holy One of God," emphasizing that the *man* Jesus is at the same time *God*. The name "Holy One" is indeed a confession of Christ's deity. "Holy One" is a phrase used throughout the Old Testament to refer to God (cf. 1 Samuel 2:2; Job 6:10; Psalm 89:18); and the book of Isaiah, upon which Mark bases his "good news of Jesus Christ," more specifically uses the name "Holy One of Israel" to refer to Israel's Redeemer, Savior and Creator (cf. Isaiah 41:14; 43:3,15; 45:11; 47:4; 54:5). And in this prophetic psalm, Jesus Christ, through David, refers to himself as God's "Holy One," when speaking of his resurrection from the dead<sup>9</sup>:

Psalm 16:10 For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol ; Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay. 11 You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand there are pleasures forever (NAS).

Aside from Peter's bold confession, "You are the Christ" (cf. 8:27-30), Mark records relatively little about the disciples' understanding of Jesus' identity. In this instance, their confession is stated as a question, which Mark is likely using rhetorically to further confirm Jesus' identity as God, who alone is sovereign over the forces of nature because he created them:

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<sup>9</sup> In Peter's sermon at Pentecost, he confirms that Psalm 16 is indeed speaking of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 2:24-34).

Mark 4: 39 [Jesus] woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Indeed, *who is this?* Consider these phrases from Psalm 65, which praises the God of Creation, and the God of our Salvation who forgives our sins, as the same God who silences the roaring of the seas:

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion...When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions.... By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation...By your strength you established the mountains...You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples. Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs...(cf. Psalm 65:1-8)

The blind beggar Bartimaeus' recognition of Jesus as "Son of David" (cf. 10:46-52) is significant for several reasons. First, Jews would have understood this as a reference to God's promise through the prophet Jeremiah, and associated it with the gathering of Israel into her "land," and her day of salvation:

Jeremiah 23:3 Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. 4 I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord. 5 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 6 In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Furthermore, Jesus does not rebuke Bartimaeus for addressing him this way, but rather rewards his utterance by asking, "What do you want me to do for you?" And after Jesus has healed him

he confirms, “Your faith has made you well.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly this man had faith that Jesus could heal his physical blindness; but we see also in his initial request, “have mercy on me,” together with his recognition that the man “Jesus of Nazareth” is also the “Son of David” who would restore Israel through a new covenant of peace (see again, Ezekiel 34:22-25), that his faith is in Jesus as his Savior.

On the occasion of what is sometimes called Jesus’ “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem, the crowds shout, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven” (cf. 11:8-10)! There is a clear allusion here to Psalm 118 (in fact verse 26 is directly quoted), which associates God’s mighty and powerful acts of salvation with his mercy and forgiveness, and the performance of Israel’s righteousness, and which in hindsight elucidates our understanding of the true nature of the “kingdom of David,” regardless of the expectations of first century Jews.

And a final example of another’s witness is from the Roman centurion who watched Jesus die: “Surely this man was the Son of God” (cf. 15:39)!

### **How Jesus’ Actions Witness His Identity**

Old Testament prophecies of salvation and the forgiveness of sins often include the language of physical healing, associating disease and sickness with sin, and health and wholeness with the forgiveness of sin. For example, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases” (Psalm 103:2). And in this description by Isaiah of the New Jerusalem, wherein God dwells with his people, which we

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase, “your faith has made you well” (i.e. “saved you,” Gr. *sozo*) is also Jesus’ response to the unclean woman who touches his garment (5:34). We have precedent in Mark for the association of physical healing with spiritual healing (i.e., salvation, or the forgiveness of sins) in 2:5-12, the former serving as a sign or symbol of the latter, and the greater.

understand to be fulfilled in the church (cf. Hebrews 12:22-24; Revelation 21:2, 9-10); the eradication of “sickness” is accomplished by the forgiveness of sins:

Isaiah 33:24 And no inhabitant [of the New Jerusalem] will say, "I am sick"; the people who live there will be forgiven their iniquity.

Both Matthew and Luke record the same instance of John the Baptist sending his disciples to inquire of Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Luke 7:21 Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. 22 And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.

By quoting the prophet Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 33:5-6), Jesus is answering John in such a way that there would be no doubt left in his mind: “You don’t need to wait, the day of salvation has come, and I am the one.” Likewise, in Mark’s gospel, Jesus comes on the scene healing, and specifically according to Isaiah’s prophecy,<sup>11</sup> he heals the lame, the blind, the deaf and the mute, as well as many other diseases (cf. 1:29-34; 40-45; 2:1-12; 3:1-6; 5:21-41; 6:53-56; 7:31-36; 10:46-52). In addition to healing physical disease, Jesus casts out many “unclean” or “demonic” spirits (cf. 1:21-28; 32-34; 5:1-11; 7:24-30; 9:14-29).

Jesus is also presented by Mark as a teacher. As mentioned above Jesus taught people in response to his compassion for them (cf. 6:34). According to his stated purpose, “to call sinners to repentance” (cf. 2:17), he taught in the synagogues and cast out demons (cf. 1:38-39). Mark’s coupling together of synagogues and demons may or may not be of consequence, but it is interesting in light of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple, whereby he claims authority over “God’s

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<sup>11</sup> The eschatological context of Isaiah’s prophecy, which Jesus claims to be fulfilling presently, should not be missed. The signs of healing he is performing are associated by the prophet with the day of God’s judgment or vengeance, the salvation of Israel and the gathering of all God’s people into “Zion,” the expulsion of “ravenous beasts” from Israel’s “land,” and the ending of her “sorrow” forever (cf. Isaiah 35:1-10).



house” which the religious rulers of the day<sup>12</sup> had turned into “den of thieves” (cf. 11:15-18). As noted earlier, Jesus’ authority over the laws of nature—strongly implicational of his deity—is demonstrated by his calming of storms (cf. 4:39-41), and furthermore by his walking on water (cf. 6:45-52); and in two instances of him feeding large crowds by creating food for them (cf. 6:30-44; 8:1-10).

The raising of Jairus’ daughter from the dead is perhaps the most dramatic example in Mark’s gospel of Jesus’ authority over the natural world. But it is the *salvific* significance of this physical resurrection that is notable in our study here. Sandwiched within this story, at first seeming to be an awkward interruption, is the story of the unclean woman, an outcast from society, who hopes to be healed of her hemorrhage simply by touching Jesus’ clothes (cf. 5:21-41). When Jesus addresses the woman, he tenderly calls her “Daughter,” thereby enunciating the wholeness of her healing. She is no longer an outcast, but a cherished family member of Israel’s household. (This may remind us of Isaiah’s image of the restoration of Israel’s “daughters” which is prophetic of the New Jerusalem, cf. Isaiah 60:4). In both cases—the healing of the woman, and the raising of Jairus’ daughter—Jesus states that faith is required in order for healing and resurrection to take place. Whether you are an outcast of society, or a member of the religious and social elite, it is your faith that will “make you well,” a “wellness” that has significance beyond the present moment. As Morna Hooker states, “the child’s resurrection would be understood as a symbol of [Israel’s] own future resurrection. The story of the woman would have been of special interest to the Gentiles, since they too, had once been ‘outsiders’, excluded from

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. John 10:10; Revelation 2:9

the community of God's people. Both stories would have brought reassurance of the new life and salvation which came to believers through the power of Jesus.”<sup>13</sup>

### **How Jesus' Words Witness His Identity**

In Mark's gospel, “Son of Man” is the title Jesus most often uses of himself (cf. 2:10; 2:28; 8:31; 8:38; 9:9; 9:12; 9:31; 10:33; 10:45; 13:26; 14:21; 14:41; 14:62). That this title is properly understood to be synonymous with “Christ” or “Messiah,” and is indeed a claim to deity is adequately confirmed by Jesus' own words.

When Jesus responds to the faith of the paralytic and his friends by saying to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven,” the scribes charge him with blasphemy, as only God can forgive sins. Jesus' reply to them confirms that their understanding is indeed correct: only God can forgive sins. And just “so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” (in other words, so that you know that I, the Son of Man, am indeed God, “your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel”<sup>14</sup>), he says to the paralytic, “stand up” (cf. 2:1-12).

Jesus also claims, as the Son of Man, that he is “Lord of the Sabbath” (cf. 2:28); and in a similar instance, he claims authority over Moses (cf. 10:1-10). Three times Jesus predicts that he, as the Son of Man, will rise from the dead (cf. 8:31; 9:9; 9:31). And twice he predicts the Son

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<sup>13</sup> Morna D. Hooker, *Gospel According to Saint Mark, The (Black's New Testament Commentary)*, Reprint ed. (Hendrickson: Baker Academic, 2009), 148.

<sup>14</sup> “But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine... For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...I am the Lord and beside me there is no Savior...Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel... I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King... I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (cf. Isaiah 43:1,3,11,14,15,25).

of Man's coming in the power and glory of his Father (cf. 8:38; 13:26)<sup>15</sup>. In answer to the high priest's question, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus responds, "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." The high priest certainly understands Jesus to be claiming equality with God, and tears his clothes in hysteria over what he considers blasphemy (cf. 14: 60-63). Mark's gospel closes<sup>16</sup> with what is likely an intentional allusion to Jesus' prophecy before the high priest: "So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God" (16:19).

While speaking a parable against the Pharisees, Jesus identifies himself as the "stone the builders rejected" of Psalm 118<sup>17</sup>, thus naming himself as the performer of Israel's salvation and righteousness (cf. 12:1-11):

Psalm 118:19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. 20 This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. 21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. 22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. 23 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. 24 This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

In chapter 13 of Mark's gospel, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple (cf. 13:1-2)<sup>18</sup>, and the signs of his coming and the end of the age (cf. 13:3-13), which are placed within the same time frame. Then he states, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these

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<sup>15</sup> The Son of Man's "coming in the clouds with great power and glory" (cf. 8:26) is most certainly the same event as "the kingdom of God coming with power" (cf. 9:1), which Jesus emphatically declares would occur in the lifetime of his disciples.

<sup>16</sup> Verses 9-20, sometimes referred to as Mark's "longer ending," although canonical, are not in the oldest manuscripts and are likely not original to Mark.

<sup>17</sup> This is the same Psalm from which the crowds are quoting when they shout, "Hosanna!" (cf. Psalm 118:26)

<sup>18</sup> While some have gone to great lengths to insinuate that this statement must have been added later, in hindsight of the events of AD 70, there is no compelling reason to reject this as an authentic utterance of Jesus himself, prior to the temple's destruction.

things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (13:30-31). Here he is quoting from Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 40:8) and thereby equating his words with God’s, and again claiming equality with God.

As Jesus celebrates the Passover with his disciples, just prior to his betrayal, he proclaims to them what is surely the fulfillment of “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” that Mark announces at the beginning of his gospel: "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many” (cf. 14:24). Jesus is identifying himself as the righteous Servant who would justify many, by bearing their sins (cf. Isaiah 53:11; Romans 5:19; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus then goes on to quote Zechariah (cf. 14:27; Zechariah 13:7), placing himself squarely in the middle of that eschatological context, and very likely hearkening back to his words recorded at the beginning of Mark’s gospel: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (1:15).

Finally, speaking of the way he is taken in the garden, Jesus states “let the Scriptures be fulfilled” (cf. 14:48).<sup>19</sup> Before his accusers he keeps silent (cf. 14:61; 15:5).<sup>20</sup> And on the cross he cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34; cf. Psalm 22:1), thus fulfilling the purpose for which he, the Son Man, came: “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45).

*This is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

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<sup>19</sup> Possible referents include Psalm 22:6; Isaiah 53:7.

<sup>20</sup> Again, Isaiah 53:7 is likely in view here.