

The Identity of Jesus in Mark's Gospel

Introduction

The identity of Jesus is one of the most important themes in the Gospel of Mark. Throughout the Gospel, different people try to work out who Jesus really is and what his actions mean. Some are amazed by him, some question him, and others misunderstand him completely. Even his own disciples find it difficult to understand his identity and purpose. This can be seen when Jesus calms the storm and the disciples ask, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' (Mark 4.41).¹ Their question reflects something that runs throughout the whole Gospel.

Mark introduces Jesus in several ways. He is the Messiah, the Son of God and the Son of Man. However, these titles are only part of the picture. To understand Jesus properly in Mark, it is also necessary to look at how he teaches, heals people, forgives sins and responds to those around him. Most importantly, his identity is connected with his suffering and death. Peter is able to recognise Jesus as the Messiah, but he struggles when Jesus explains that suffering will be part of his mission. This essay argues that Mark presents Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah, but shows that his identity can only be fully understood when his authority is considered alongside his service, suffering, death and resurrection.

Jesus as the Son of God

Jesus' relationship with God becomes clear very early in Mark. The opening verse introduces the story as 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ'. Some ancient manuscripts also contain the words 'Son of God', although there has been discussion among scholars about whether these words were originally included.² Even with this textual issue, it soon becomes obvious that the title Son of God is important to Mark.

At Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven says, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Mark 1.11).³ The reader is told something important about Jesus before most of the people around him understand it. This creates an interesting situation because the reader already has some idea of Jesus' identity while the disciples are still trying to make sense of what they see.

Surprisingly, the unclean spirits sometimes understand Jesus better than the people around him. In Mark 3.11, they recognise him as the 'Son of God'. The disciples have much more time with Jesus and witness his teaching and miracles first-hand, yet they still struggle to understand him. Mark uses this contrast several times and it shows that simply being close to Jesus does not automatically mean that someone understands who he is.

Jesus' identity as God's Son is confirmed again at the transfiguration. Peter, James and John see Jesus transformed before them, and a voice from the cloud says, 'This is my Son,

the Beloved; listen to him!’ (Mark 9.7). The words ‘listen to him’ are particularly important because they give weight to what Jesus has been teaching his disciples. This includes his difficult teaching about suffering and death.

One of the most interesting uses of the title comes near the end of the Gospel. After Jesus dies on the cross, a Roman centurion says, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’ (Mark 15.39).⁴ This confession comes from an unexpected person and at an unexpected moment. Jesus has just died and appears to have been defeated. Yet it is at this point that the centurion recognises something important about him. This suggests that, for Mark, the cross is closely connected to understanding Jesus as the Son of God.

Jesus as the Messiah

The question of Jesus being the Messiah becomes especially important in Mark 8. Jesus asks the disciples what other people are saying about him. They give several answers, including John the Baptist, Elijah and one of the prophets. Jesus then makes the question personal: ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answers, ‘You are the Messiah’ (Mark 8.29).⁵

At first, Peter seems to have understood Jesus correctly. However, the conversation that follows shows that he has only understood part of the picture. Jesus begins to explain that the Son of Man will suffer, be rejected, killed and then rise again. Peter does not accept this and rebukes him. Jesus responds strongly by saying, ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ (Mark 8.33).

Peter knows the correct title, but he does not yet understand what kind of Messiah Jesus will be. It seems that suffering and rejection do not fit with his expectations. This is an important moment because Mark shows that calling Jesus the Messiah is not enough by itself. A person also needs to understand the type of mission Jesus has come to carry out.

Jesus is not shown as a political leader who gains power by defeating his enemies. Instead, his journey takes him towards Jerusalem, rejection and crucifixion. This gives a different meaning to the idea of the Messiah. His victory does not come through avoiding suffering but through going through it.

Later, during Jesus’ trial, the high priest asks him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ Jesus answers and speaks about the Son of Man being seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven (Mark 14.61–62). At this stage, different parts of Jesus’ identity come together. He is connected with the Messiah, the Son and the Son of Man. Although he is about to suffer, his story will not end with suffering.

Jesus as the Son of Man

The title ‘Son of Man’ appears many times in Mark and is normally used by Jesus when speaking about himself. It is connected with his authority, his suffering and his future vindication. This makes it an important part of understanding Mark’s view of Jesus.⁶

An early example appears in the healing of the paralysed man. Jesus first tells the man that his sins are forgiven. The scribes are troubled by this because they believe that only God

can forgive sins. Jesus then says that 'the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' and heals the man (Mark 2.10). His actions support what he has said and demonstrate an unusual level of authority.

Later, the title becomes strongly connected with suffering. After Peter calls Jesus the Messiah, Jesus says that 'the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected ... and be killed, and after three days rise again' (Mark 8.31). Similar predictions appear in Mark 9.31 and 10.33–34. Jesus repeats the message because the disciples find it difficult to accept.

These predictions also make it clear that the cross is not simply something that unexpectedly happens to Jesus. He knows that suffering lies ahead and continues with his mission. At the same time, each prediction looks beyond death towards resurrection.

Mark also connects the Son of Man with future glory. In Mark 13.26, Jesus speaks about people seeing 'the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory'. There is therefore a contrast between suffering and glory. The Son of Man will be rejected, but rejection will not have the final word.

The Authority of Jesus

Titles are not the only way Mark explains who Jesus is. His actions are just as important. From the beginning of his ministry, people notice something different about the way he teaches. Mark 1.22 says that people are amazed because he teaches 'as one having authority'.

This authority is shown in different situations. Jesus heals people who are sick, casts out unclean spirits and forgives sins. The healing of the paralysed man is a good example because the scribes ask, 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?' (Mark 2.7). Their question helps the reader to understand how unusual Jesus' actions are.

His authority is also shown through nature. In Mark 4, Jesus and his disciples are crossing the sea when a serious storm begins. The disciples become frightened, but Jesus commands the wind and sea to become calm. Afterwards they ask, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' (Mark 4.41).

This is not just another miracle story. It raises a direct question about Jesus' identity. Later, in Mark 6.45–52, Jesus walks on the sea. In the Old Testament, control over the sea is often associated with the power of God. Some scholars therefore see these scenes as particularly important for understanding how Mark presents Jesus.⁷ They show that his authority goes far beyond that of an ordinary teacher.

However, Mark does not present Jesus as someone who performs miracles simply to impress people. His power is often used to help those who are suffering or excluded. He heals the sick, responds to people who come to him for help and restores individuals to their communities. His authority is therefore closely connected with compassion and service.

The Disciples Struggle to Understand

One of the more realistic parts of Mark's Gospel is the way the disciples repeatedly misunderstand Jesus. They spend time with him, hear his teaching and see his miracles, but they still do not always understand what he is trying to show them.

There are also several occasions when Jesus tells people not to spread information about him. In Mark 1.34, he prevents demons from speaking because they know who he is. After Peter identifies him as the Messiah, Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone (Mark 8.30). Scholars have often referred to this pattern as the 'Messianic Secret'.⁸

One reason this is significant is that people could easily misunderstand what the word Messiah means. Peter is a clear example. He has worked out the correct title but still cannot accept that Jesus will suffer.

The disciples also misunderstand Jesus when they think about power and importance. They argue about which of them is the greatest, but Jesus tells them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all' (Mark 9.35). James and John later ask Jesus if they can have important positions beside him. Once again, Jesus has to correct their understanding.

These conversations make Jesus' teaching feel practical rather than only theological. The question is not simply whether the disciples can identify Jesus correctly. Understanding him should also affect the way they behave. If Jesus chooses service rather than status, his followers are expected to learn from that example.

Suffering, Service and the Cross

The final part of Jesus' life takes up a large amount of space in Mark's Gospel. His journey to Jerusalem, arrest, trial and crucifixion are described in detail. This tells the reader that Jesus' death is not a small part of the story. It is central to understanding why he came.

One of the clearest explanations is found in Mark 10.45: 'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'⁹ This verse connects Jesus' death with service. He does not describe greatness as having authority over other people. Instead, he presents his own willingness to give his life as the example.

This is especially important because the disciples have just been discussing positions of honour. They still think about greatness in terms of status. Jesus challenges this way of thinking and shows them a very different kind of leadership.

The same idea can be seen at the crucifixion. Jesus is mocked and called the 'King of the Jews'. People challenge him to save himself and come down from the cross. If the story is read only at surface level, Jesus appears weak. Yet Mark has already prepared the reader to understand the situation differently.

Jesus has taught that his mission involves giving his life. Therefore, refusing to save himself does not mean that he has failed. His death is part of the mission he has been explaining throughout the Gospel.

This makes the centurion's words after Jesus dies especially meaningful. A Roman soldier, rather than one of the disciples, recognises him as God's Son. Mark places this confession at the cross, bringing Jesus' suffering and identity together.

The Resurrection

Although the cross is central to Mark, Jesus' story does not simply finish with death. He has already told his disciples several times that he will rise again.

In Mark 16, women go to Jesus' tomb and discover that the stone has been moved. They are told, 'You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here' (Mark 16.6). The person who has been raised is specifically described as the one who was crucified. The connection between the cross and resurrection remains important.

The resurrection changes the meaning of what happened at the crucifixion. Jesus was rejected and killed, but death did not have the final say. His resurrection confirms that his suffering was not simply a defeat.

The earliest manuscripts of Mark finish at Mark 16.8, with the women leaving the tomb afraid. This ending may feel unusual because it does not provide the kind of neat conclusion that a modern reader might expect. However, it leaves the reader with the message that Jesus has risen and with the question of how people will respond to that news.

Understanding Mark's View of Jesus

There has been a great deal of discussion among scholars about exactly how Mark understands Jesus' relationship with God. Some scholars focus more strongly on Jesus' humanity, particularly his emotions, suffering and death. Others give more attention to the extraordinary authority Jesus displays, including forgiving sins, controlling nature and commanding supernatural powers.¹⁰

Both sides of this discussion are useful because Mark does not present Jesus in a simple way. Jesus experiences hunger, emotion, rejection and physical suffering. He dies a real death on the cross. At the same time, he does things that cause people to question who he really is.

For this reason, it is better to look at the whole story rather than depending on one title. 'Messiah', 'Son of God' and 'Son of Man' are all important, but Mark also uses Jesus' actions and relationships to build a picture of his identity.

The Gospel gradually takes the reader from the beginning of Jesus' ministry to the cross and resurrection. By the end, the question is not only who Jesus is, but what his identity means. His authority is important, but Mark also places service and suffering at the centre of his mission.

Conclusion

Mark's Gospel presents Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God and the Son of Man. His teaching and miracles show that he has remarkable authority, and the voice at his baptism identifies him as God's beloved Son. Even so, the people around him often struggle to understand what these things mean.

Peter's confession is a good example of this problem. He knows that Jesus is the Messiah but cannot understand why the Messiah should suffer. Jesus has to explain that suffering and rejection are part of the path ahead. The disciples also need to learn that following Jesus is about service rather than gaining status or power.

The cross brings these themes together. Jesus gives his life rather than using his power to escape suffering. At the moment of his death, the Roman centurion recognises him as God's Son. The resurrection then shows that death was not the end of his mission.

The identity of Jesus in Mark is therefore revealed gradually. His miracles and authority matter, but they are not the whole story. To understand Jesus properly, the reader also has to understand his willingness to serve, suffer and give his life for others. Mark's picture of Jesus combines authority with service, suffering with hope, and death with resurrection. This is what gives Jesus his particular identity and significance within the Gospel.

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