

The Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John: Complementary Christological Compositions

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Introduction

There is a strong tendency within scholarship directed towards the New Testament documents to brush aside implicit counter claims in route to making a definitive argument. The premise upon which this work stands is: many scholars neglect to adequately take into account implicit claims from Mark's gospel that Jesus is divine, which parallel the divinity of Jesus explicitly proclaimed in John's gospel.¹ As I make this argument, I will also attempt to demonstrate that John's christology is an expansion of Mark's christology. In other words, Mark's gospel and John's gospel are not as far removed from one another as many scholars assume.

Prelude to the Healing of the Paralytic / Mark 2.1-12

It has become commonplace to argue that Jesus was not viewed as divine by early Christians until the advent of John's gospel.² The premise of this argument is that the "high christology" found in John is the result of an evolutionary process. James Dunn makes the following statements:

When we turn to the NT writings themselves and compare early with late *it is difficult once again to avoid seeing some kind of development* – a development

¹ When I use the term "divine" in relation to Jesus I mean two things: (1) that Jesus is presented as exceeding the status of his predecessors from Hebrew Bible traditions such as Moses, Elijah, and Elisha; and (2) as such Jesus is understood to be linked with God so closely that he is to receive the cultic devotion of the gathered community along with God. I concur with the view of Larry Hurtado that early Christians reformulated their understanding of monotheism around Jesus in such a way that Jesus shares in God's divine state yet is subservient to God. See Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 52. He writes, "... there are a fairly consistent linkage and subordination of Jesus to God "the Father" in these [Christian] circles ... This is why I have referred to this Jesus-devotion as a 'binitarian' form of monotheism: there are two distinguishable figures (God and Jesus), but they are posited in a relation to each other that seems intended to avoid a ditheism of two gods, and the devotional practice shows a similar concern (e.g., prayer characteristically offered *to God through/in the name of Jesus*)."² Italics his.

² The driving force for this argument must be the primacy many scholars give Mark in the search for the historical Jesus. It is believed by most that Mark is the earliest gospel. Mark's gospel is not as theologically driven as is Matthew, Luke, and John. There is, for instance, no birth narrative in Mark. Thus, the argument goes that Jesus is as close to human (a prophet – perhaps) in Mark as we are going to find in the canonical (early) gospels. P.M. Casey says, "I have also assumed that both Mark and Q contain a large quantity of authentic source material, much of which was written down in Aramaic by Jews long before the writing of the Gospels, and which can therefore be properly understood only if we apply it to the assumptions of Jewish culture." See P.M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co.; Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1991), 57.

from the concept of the word as the word of preaching, where Christ is the sum and substance of the message proclaimed, to the concept of the word as Christ himself, Christ the *incarnation* of God's word uttered from the beginning of time in creative and redemptive power.³

...: so far as our evidence (Christian and non-Christian) is concerned, *the author of John 1.1-16 was the first to take that step which no Hellenistic-Jewish author had taken before him, the first to identify the word of God as a particular person; and so far as our evidence is concerned the Fourth Evangelist was the first Christian writer to conceive clearly of the personal pre-existence of the Logos-Son and to present it as a fundamental part of his message.* Certainly therefore the Fourth Gospel can properly be presented as the climax to the evolving thought of first century Christian understanding of Christ: ...⁴

P.M. Casey, writes:

The Gospel attributed to St John is the only New Testament document in which the deity and incarnation of Jesus are unequivocally proclaimed.⁵

When we consider all three synoptic evangelists, we see that their Christology is determined by the self-identification of the community, rather than the author. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all portray Jesus as a person of the highest status and of fundamental function in salvation history: none of them portrays him as fully divine.⁶

Are scholars such as Dunn and Casey correct? Are scholars who hold such positions guilty of brushing aside implicit counter claims in route to making a definitive argument? I suggest scholars such as Dunn and Casey are incorrect and that such scholars are guilty of overlooking important texts (though few in number), because these texts are not congenial to the argument they want to make.⁷

³ James D.G. Dunn, *Christology In The Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 248. Italics his.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 249. Italics his. Notice his use of the phrase, "evolving thought" in the last sentence. Of course, to make this argument Dunn has to posit an understanding of the early Pauline passages that is awkward at best. See pages 33-46, 113-125.

⁵ Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*, 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 156. Casey postulates, in the same paragraph, that Jesus can only be proclaimed divine when in the hands of a strictly gentile community such as the Johannine community who had been removed from the synagogue. Interestingly, the biggest differences between Dunn and Casey are two fold. First, Dunn argues that in Paul Jesus is neither pre-existent nor divine. See Dunn, *Christology In The Making*, 46. Casey argues that in Paul Jesus is pre-existent but not divine. See Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*, 124-125. Second, for Dunn the evolutionary process of Jesus' divine nature which has no root in what the historical Jesus claimed for himself is an appropriate development. See Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 254. For Casey, the whole evolutionary process is inappropriate and needs to be undone. See Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*, 178.

⁷ Casey's scholarly method is prone to simply an adding up of the texts to see which positions have the greatest number of testimony. The one with the greatest number wins and the minority texts are simply held to be false. For example, Casey states that because the word, "son" appears on Jesus' lips only once in

The Healing of the Paralytic / Mark 2.1-12

Mark 2.1-12 is an important implicit claim that serves as evidence that Mark – like John – believes Jesus to be divine. When Jesus returns to Capernaum, word spreads that he is at home. As is characteristic of Mark’s gospel, a large crowd gathers around Jesus. The crowd is such that there is not even room at the door to the house. Four men carrying a paralytic, unable to get to Jesus, remove the roof from the house and lower the paralytic down. Jesus, impressed with the faith of the four men, says to the paralytic, “My son, your sins are forgiven.” The nearby scribes begin to question within themselves (διαλογιζόμενοι ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν). They ask, “Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”⁸ Jesus perceiving in his spirit that the scribes are questioning his authority responds, “Why do you question thus in your heart? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your pallet and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins” Jesus commands the paralytic to take up his pallet and walk. The paralytic does so before all the people and the people are amazed.

Mark, in this passage, does not say anything as explicit as: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” “I and the Father are one,” or “before Abraham was I am.” Nonetheless this passage implies that for Mark, Jesus is divine. First, notice that the scribes who criticize Jesus do so inwardly – in their hearts (v.6). In other words, Jesus is not responding to something they actually say. One may infer Mark’s Jesus has the ability to read minds.⁹ While many of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible have the ability to accomplish extraordinary feats as does Jesus in the canonical gospels, there is not a prophetic figure who is said to read minds. For Mark there is something more to Jesus – he is divine. Next, and most important for my argument, observe what Mark says the scribes are thinking in response to Jesus’ declaration that the paralytic’s sins are forgiven. Verse 7 says, “Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” It is a rhetorical question.¹⁰ The correct and obvious answer is, “no one.” This is the point Mark is trying to make about Jesus – Jesus like God can forgive sins. Thus, Jesus manifests the same divine authority to forgive sins that God has.

Mark and three times in Q, then the historical Jesus did not speak of himself as such. His argument is that if the historical Jesus had done so this terminology would have been all over the place in the synoptics as it is in John. There is nothing wrong with arguing that the historical Jesus did not use the title, “the Son” or “Son of God.” But to do so on the grounds of its infrequent occurrences in the synoptics is problematic. If there were no occurrences then the argument might be made on those grounds. But, in fact, there are three occurrences. See Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*, 25.

⁸ This translation is fine. The Greek, however, is more poignant – τί οὗτος οὕτως λαλεῖ; βλασφημεῖ τίς δύναται ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας εἰ μὴ εἰς ὁ θεός; Literally, “Who speaks in this way? It is blasphemy! Who is able to forgive sins if not one – God.”

⁹ Was this “body language” as some critics suggest? I think not. Certainly body language can demonstrate that something is on someone’s mind. Exactly what is on someone’s mind, body language can not demonstrate. Joel Marcus treats Jesus’ ability to “see” in the dark across the sea three or four miles in a similar fashion to my treatment of Jesus’ supernatural ability to read minds. See Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 423 & 430.

¹⁰ Mark uses this pericope much like the account of the calming of the storm (4.35-41) After Jesus rebukes the wind and commands the sea to be still, Marks states the disciples were filled with awe and said, “Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?” The answer to this question, like the answer to the scribe’s question, is obvious to the reader.

The conclusions of this pericope are just as clear as the christological passages in the Pauline corpus (cf., 2 Cor 5.19; Phil 2.5-11; Col 1.15-20) and in the Johanne writings (e.g., John 1.1; 1.14; 5.8; 6.35; 10.11; 10.30; 11.25; 14.6). If in Paul, the earliest Christian documents we have, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” and if in the latest canonical gospel we have – John – Jesus and the Father are one; then it should come as no surprise that something similar would be stated in Mark. And Mark predates John by several years.

If, however, one wants to argue that Jesus is not presented as divine prior to the advent of John’s gospel, the above rationale will not do. When commenting on Mark 2.1-12 Dunn states, “The Son of Man’s authority to forgive sins ‘*on earth*’ (Mark 2.10) would almost certainly be understood as an anticipation of his future role in eschatological judgment (Mark 8.38; 13.26f.; 14.62), not as a reflection of his previous authority in heaven.”¹¹ Dunn, however, misses Mark’s point.

In my estimate how the title “Son of Man” is to be understood in this passage or elsewhere is irrelevant. Whether the title is used as the equivalent of the personal pronoun “I,” an application of Daniel 7.13-14, or if it is used in relation to pre-existence or future judgment has no effect on Mark’s view that Jesus is divine. Dunn, here and elsewhere, makes too much of pre-existence. I do not argue that Mark believes Jesus to be pre-existent as John does.¹² I do argue that Mark like John believes Jesus to be divine. Pre-existence is not, as Dunn seems to imply, a prerequisite for divine status.¹³ The ability to forgive sins, however, is a prerequisite for divine status.

Casey argues for three stages of christological development. The first stage mirrors the original Jesus movement with the Christian community as a branch of Judaism. The second stage consists of many gentiles entering the Christian fold without becoming Jewish. In the third stage Christianity becomes a gentile religion.¹⁴ Thus, Jesus is viewed as divine only in stage three. Casey places the synoptic gospels and Acts in stage two.¹⁵ A review of his “Index of References” reveals, however, that he nowhere addresses Mark 2.10.¹⁶ This is remarkable. Is this so because he feels the statement is insignificant or because he realizes that this implicit claim to divinity disturbs his three stage argument?

Prelude to the Healing of the Man by the Pool / John 5.1-18

In contrast to scholars like Dunn and Casey, John understands Mark’s christological claim. So well, in fact, that he incorporates it into his gospel. Shortly, I will argue that

¹¹ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 88-89.

¹² Though, because Jesus’ pre-existence is present in Paul and John, it may be that Mark simply assumed it.

¹³ For example, Dunn states, when discussing why Mark 10.45 should not be understood to imply pre-existence, “But we have already seen ... that such formulae can equally well be used of a prophet, and when used in self-reference the claim would be of a divine *commission* not of a divine origin ...” (italics his). See Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 89. Even if Mark knows nothing of a belief in Jesus’ pre-existence, Jesus’ ability to forgive sins – a role, as indicated by the scribes’ questioning, only credibly carried out by God – grants him a “divine origin.”

¹⁴ Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*, 97.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁶ Casey’s references to any part of the Mark 2.1-12 are only within the context of cross referencing. *Ibid.*, 69 and 73.

John is using Mark's account of Jesus healing the paralytic as he writes his account of Jesus healing the man by the pool. First, though, Matthew and Luke's rendition of Mark's account must be considered.

Luke (5.17-26) follows Mark much more closely than Matthew (9.1-8). A significant difference, however, is that in Luke's rendition no mention is made as to Jesus' location. Mark and Matthew both state that Jesus is at home in Capernaum (cf., Mark 2.1; Matt 9.1).¹⁷ Luke, however, makes no mention of where Jesus is when he heals the paralytic (this is a significant observation for my forthcoming comments about John's rendition of Jesus healing the paralytic). Luke simply states, "On one of those days, as he was teaching, there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, ..." (5.17). The key elements from Mark are the same in Luke: (1) the paralyzed man is carried by men (5.18 - though there is no mention of how many men); (2) because of the crowd the men let the paralytic down through the roof (5.19); (3) Jesus is impressed by the men's faith (5.20); (4) a controversy results over Jesus' claim to forgive the man's sins (5.20-24); (5) and the crowd is astonished when the man walks (5.26).

Matthew is quite different from Mark. In Matthew, as with Mark, a paralytic is brought to Jesus (9.2), Jesus is impressed with the faith of those bringing the paralytic (9.2), Jesus forgives the paralytic's sins (9.2), controversy results (9.3-6), the paralytic walks (9.7), and the people present are amazed (9.8). Matthew, however, makes no mention of a house, a crowd around the door, or the paralytic being lowered through the roof. The most important difference, however, is that Matthew omits Mark's "Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

The core of the account is the same for all three synoptic writers but both Matthew and Luke feel free to edit, change, and/or correct Mark's version.

The Healing of the Man by the Pool / John 5.1-18

John takes this one step further with his account of Jesus healing the man by the pool in Jerusalem (5.1-18). John, following the literary convention of his day, rewrites Mark's account.¹⁸ In other words, John's gospel is a midrash, generally defined, on Mark's gospel. By the time John penned his gospel, the synoptics had been in circulation long enough to achieve a status of authority. There is no reason why in the year 90-100 C.E. (the traditional date for John), the synoptics could not have been considered scripture in some Christian communities. Apparently, for John's community they were considered scripture because John does nothing new when he rewrites Mark. John and the other New Testament writers rewrite the Hebrew Bible when they apply writings that originally had nothing to do with Jesus, to Jesus. Josephus does this numerous times in his *Jewish Antiquities* (e.g., Ant. 2.7.1; 3.2.7-9). Other writings from antiquity that set the precedent

¹⁷ Notice how Matt changes Mark's order of events surrounding the account of the paralytic. Matt places the calming of the storm (8.23-27) and the healing of the Gerasene demoniacs (8.28-34 - there are two demoniacs in Matt) before the healing of the paralytic. Mark places these accounts *after* the healing of the paralytic (4.35-41; 5.1-20).

¹⁸ I assume John to be authored about 90-100 C.E. Likewise, I assume that the author(s) of John makes use of Mark 2.1-12 to develop the account of the paralytic in John 5.1-18. In other words, I assume this is not an account of a separate incident.

for John are, *Genesis Apocryphon*, *Jubilees*, *Assumption of Moses*, the *Qumran Temple Scroll*, and Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*.¹⁹

The healing of the man by the pool, like all of John, is on the one hand so different from Mark's account. Yet, it is also strikingly similar. First – the differences. The healing takes place not at a home in Capernaum but at a pool in Jerusalem (5.1-4). Yet, it must be remembered that Luke makes no reference to where the healing of the paralytic occurs.²⁰ Thus, there is no mention of the paralytic being carried to Jesus by other people or the paralytic being lowered through the roof (as with Matt) to Jesus. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, Jesus affirms the faith of those carrying the paralytic. In John, Jesus addresses the man directly, "Do you want to be healed?" (5.6). For John an aspect of the controversy surrounding the healing of the paralytic is that the healing takes place on the sabbath and the man carries his pallet on the sabbath (5.9b-10; 16).²¹ This account is not a sabbath controversy in Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

Now – the similarities. The man is obviously paralyzed (5.7-9). There is a crowd (5.13). Though the nuance is different, forgiveness of sin is central (5.14). One major component of the ensuing controversy, in addition to the healing taking place on the sabbath, has to do with a high christological claim. John 5.18 says, "This is why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath *but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God*" (italics mine). This is John's version of "Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

The greatest evidence that John is so impressed with Mark's christology that his healing of the man by the pool is a reworking of Mark's healing of the paralytic comes from a reading of the Greek. There are in fact precise literary parallels that demonstrate John uses Mark as a source. Mark 2.9 reads, "τί ἐστὶν εὐκοπώτερον, εἰπεῖν τῷ παραλυτικῷ, Ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι, ἢ εἰπεῖν, Ἐγείρε καὶ ἄρον τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ περιπάτει; – what is easier, to say to the paralytic your sins are forgiven or to say get up and take your pallet and walk?"²² Mark 2.11 reads, "Σοὶ λέγω, Ἐγείρε ἄρον τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ ὑπάγε εἰς τὸν οἶκόν σου – I say to you, get up – take your pallet and go to your house."²³

John uses the same combination of words in his account. John 5.8 states, "λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Ἐγείρε ἄρον τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ περιπάτει - Jesus said to him, get up, take your pallet and walk."²⁴ John 5.11 states, "ὁ δὲ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς, Ὁ ποιήσας με

¹⁹ I am grateful to Thomas L. Brodie for helping to mold some inchoative thoughts I had in relation to John as midrash. See Brodie, *The Quest for the Origin of John's Gospel*, 34-47. Also, he writes on page 70, "The overall impression is that John seems to have absorbed and transformed the entire gospel of Mark. However startling at one level, such a conclusion can also be stated as if it were almost a platitude: in absorbing Mark, John did essentially what Matthew and Luke did, but he did it in his own way."

²⁰ If Luke did not find it necessary to copy from Mark Jesus' location at the time of the healing, perhaps John felt the freedom to change the place of the healing from Galilee to Judea. Perhaps John thought Mark got it wrong. It is beyond the scope of this paper but I cannot help but wonder if maybe John also had a copy of Matt and Luke. Maybe it could be argued, based on the above observations, that John at least had Luke in addition to Mark.

²¹ Brodie states, "... , the raising of the man from sin and his mat, John synthesizes this with aspects of later Markan texts, texts from another group – those dealing with increasingly bitter sabbath controversies (Mark 2:23-3:6)." See Brodie, *The Quest for the Origin of John's Gospel*, 69-70.

²² My translation.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

ὕγιη ἐκεῖνός μοι εἶπεν, ἴσθι τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ περιπάτει – And he answered them the one who made me well, that one said to me ‘take your pallet and walk.’”²⁵ John 5.12 states, “ἠρώτησαν αὐτόν, Τίς ἐστὶν ὁ ἄνθρωπος ὁ εἰπὼν σοι, ἴσθι καὶ περιπάτει; – They asked him ‘who is the man, the one who said to you take (your pallet) and walk?’”²⁶ The phrase, ἴσθι τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ περιπάτει is the core that is not changed. All else is fair game.

It must also be observed that John and Mark both employ κράβαττος for pallet or bed or stretcher. Matthew and Luke, however, change the Markan choice of κράβαττος to κλίνη (cf., Matt 9.2, 6; Luke 5.18, 19, 24). Thus, in this regard John follows Mark more closely than do Matthew and Luke.

The evidence indicates that Mark’s account of Jesus healing the paralytic serves as the springboard from which John jumps. As is indicated by the word agreements, a common core of the Markan account is found in John. John simply exercises more freedom and creativity in his telling of the account than do Matthew and Luke.

Conclusion

The goal of this presentation has been to confront the tendency within New Testament scholarship to brush aside implicit counter claims in route to making a definitive argument. I have concentrated on one inferential claim from Mark’s gospel stating that Jesus is divine which parallels the divinity of Jesus explicitly proclaimed in John’s gospel. In support of this thesis, I have argued that John rewrites the Markan account of Jesus healing the paralytic. In the process, John uses Mark’s implicit claims of Jesus’ identity as a springboard from which to explicitly proclaim the divinity of Jesus. An argument concomitant with this central thesis has been that John uses Mark as a source for the writing of his gospel.

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²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

