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Jesus' Identity as "the Son of God" Revealed in the Narrative "The Transfiguration of Jesus" (Mark 9:2-8)

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ABSTRACT:

This article is an exegesis of the narrative “The Transfiguration of Jesus” in Mark 9:2-8, the powerful evidence of Jesus’ full identity as the “Son of God” and the manifestation of His glorious state that are inseparable from his suffering, death, and resurrection. His final triumph must take place in and through his suffering and death. Thus, we, as his followers, are invited to participate in the future triumph and glory of God by following his “way” to gain the promised glory.

Jesus’ Identity as “the Son of God”

Revealed in the Narrative “The
Transfiguration of Jesus”
(Mark 9:2-8)

by Sister Hang T.H. Nguyen

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Mark is recognized as deeply Christocentric¹ due to its orientation to the revelation of Jesus’ identity. It is usually noted that the framework of Mark’s Gospel is partly Christological, and the question

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- 1 Donald Senior, John J. Collins, and Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, eds., *The Catholic Study Bible: The New American Bible, Revised Edition*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), RG 430. All Scripture quotations are from NABRE.



of Jesus' identity is one of his major themes. With this theme, Mark develops the revelation of Jesus' identity as the² (cf. Mark 1:1, 15:39). In particular, in the Transfiguration narrative (Mark 9:2-8), Mark once again focuses on the person of Jesus. The three disciples, Peter, James, and John, are witnesses of Jesus' Transfiguration into divine glory that reveals His full identity as the "Son of God" (9:7);³ but they did not understand. Like the three disciples, many of us still cannot comprehend the revelation in the Transfiguration account. Thus, it is meaningful to do an exegesis of the Transfiguration narrative to gain a significant understanding of its revelation.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Mark situates the Transfiguration account in Mark 9:2-8, which follows Jesus' discourse on the first prediction of his passion, death and resurrection (8:31-33) and the conditions of any disciple who would deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Jesus (8:34-9:1). The previous passages (8:31-33 and 8:34-9:1) associate the themes about the passion and resurrection of the Son of Man with "his future coming in glory" and the challenges of discipleship.⁴ This discourse ends with Jesus' promise that there are "some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come in power" (9:1). This saying provided strong evidence that Jesus regarded the Kingdom of God as future and near. It also implies that God's kingdom is already present in Jesus' ministry.⁵

The Transfiguration scene (9:2-8) is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in its power. The three disciples had been referred to as "standing here" (9:1). This passage gives a "proleptic anticipation" of Jesus' future glory and serves to give the readers assurance of Jesus' promise in verse 9:1. The heavenly voice declaring Jesus as God's Son. It also serves to reinforce the true nature of Jesus' identity confessed by Peter in 8:27-33.

2 Dennis Sweetland M., *Mark: From Death to Life*, NCP Biblical Commentaries (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), 17-18.

3 Dennis Sweetland M., *Mark: From Death to Life*, 114.

4 Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Beginning of the Gospel: Introducing the Gospel According to Mark*, vol. 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 32.

5 John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, Sacra Pagina Series: vol. 2 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 273.

For Mark, the sonship of Jesus is seen in his obedience which leads to death; therefore, the declaration of Jesus as God's Son serves to reinforce the passion prediction in 8:31.

The Transfiguration event precedes the report of the descent of Jesus with his three disciples from the mountain and of their conversation related to the coming of Elijah (9:9-13), which shares the themes of messianic secret and resurrection. This passage is understood as the conclusion of the transfiguration narrative, in which Jesus commands the disciples not to tell anyone about what they have seen until after the resurrection (9:9). It can clearly be seen that the secrecy surrounding the person of Jesus has a temporal limit. Jesus' demand provides the strongest support for the theme of the messianic secret that Jesus' identity remains a secret until the cross, but then its nature will be clear.⁶

SETTING IN LIFE

Mark wrote his Gospel for Christians in Rome who lived throughout the difficult times of Nero's persecution and the violence of the Roman-Judean war around 70 AD.⁷ From the social and historical context of the first century in Palestine, the Messiah Christians would not be a suffering Messiah, as Jesus taught about in Mark 8:31, but a military leader who would victoriously establish the Reign of God within history.⁸ In the account of Peter's confession (8:27-30) as well as in the first prediction of Jesus' passion (8:31-33), the disciples misunderstand the Messianic role of Jesus. At this point, Jesus heads towards his fate of passion, death, and resurrection in Jerusalem to make his disciples understand the true nature of his mission, which contrasts with that of the common Messianic ideals that they adhere to. The Transfiguration is a key part of that account of Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus' announcement of his passion, death, and resurrection was a shock to the disciples, as evidenced by Peter's reaction (8:32). Thus, six days later, Jesus led three disciples up to the mountain

6 John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 904.

7 Donald Senior, John J. Collins, and Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, eds., *The Catholic Study Bible*, RG 429.

8 John M. Perry, *Exploring the Messianic Secret in Mark's Gospel* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 14-15.

to witness his glory in the Transfiguration to strengthen their faith.⁹ Traditionally, the mountain is identified as Mount Tabor.¹⁰ Mountains, in the Bible, are regularly places of communication between the divine and the human. However, according to F.J. Moloney's commentary, the transfiguration account existed before Mark's gospel; so, it is hard to determine the setting¹¹

SOURCE CRITICISM

Bishop Papias described that Mark, the secretary and interpreter of the Apostle Peter, wrote his Gospel based on the account of the sermons he heard from Peter. Mark faithfully records the traditional understanding of the Gospel's origin that was passed onto him.¹² A reference to Jesus' transfiguration is found in 2 Peter 1:16-18, in which Peter describes himself and other disciples as "eyewitnesses" of Jesus' majestic glory.

Many commentators agree that the transfiguration story in Mark followed an Old Testament model which is the description of Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 24 and 34. There are many common features in both: the reference to "six days" (Mark 9:2; Exodus 24:16), the high mountain (Mark 9:2; Exodus 24:12); the shadowing cloud (Mark 9:7; Exodus 24:16), the voice from the cloud (Mark 9:7; Exodus 24:16), three companions (Mark 9:2; Exodus 24:1, 9), a transformed garment (Mark 9:3; Exodus 34:30), and the reaction of fear (Mark 9:6; Exodus 34:30). Furthermore, in Exodus 24:13, another reference is that Joshua is singled out and taken up the mountain with Moses. *Joshua* in the Septuagint version is often rendered Ἰησοῦς, "Jesus." Thus, the early Church may have seen in Exodus 24:13 a hidden prophecy that is fulfilled in the transfiguration narrative in which once again Moses and Jesus are together.¹³

9 J.E. Aguilar Chiu, "Mark" in J.E. Aguilar Chiu, ed. et al, *The Paulist Biblical Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 2018), 1000.

10 Rafael Frankle, "Tabor, Mount" in D.N. Freedman, ed. et al, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 304-305.

11 Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 178.

12 Dennis, *Mark: From Death to Life*, 13-14.

13 Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary: vol. 34B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 34.

LITERARY FORM

The literary genre of the transfiguration account remains strongly debated. A vast majority of scholars regard the transfiguration as a historical narrative with miraculous elements.¹⁴ Numerous scholars refer to it as originally a post-resurrection story due to its details fitting well with evidence in the New Testament: the “cloud” is associated with Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:9); the notation - “after six days”- may indicate a Sabbath when the resurrection took place (16:2). But the precise details are hard to determine.¹⁵

Some interpreters suggest the transfiguration narrative is “Christophany; revelation of Jesus’ real identity.”¹⁶ According to Adela Y. Collins, the Transfiguration has the same kind of genre as *theophany* narratives of the Old Testament. Jesus’ description as a shining, semi-divine figure has some parallels in Roman and Hellenistic texts, and its clearest parallel is with the theophany of Moses at Sinai.¹⁷ For Delbert Burkett, the best classification of the transfiguration narrative is as an *apocalypse*, a revelation of the eschatological enthronement of the Son of Man which is inspired in a natural way from the theophany of Sinai.¹⁸ John P. Heil suggests the genre of the transfiguration as “epiphany”- a modern, technical designation for an ancient literary genre and outlines the epiphanic elements: Jesus’ transfiguration, the appearance of Elijah and Moses, and the voice from the overshadowing cloud.¹⁹ The word “overshadow” here is similar to the use of the term in some references of the Gospel: the transfiguration (Mark 9:7; Matt 17:5; Luke 9:34); Mary was overshadowed by the power of the Most High (Luke 1:35); John was

14 Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 2:273.

15 Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 33–34.

16 Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 275.

17 Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 416–17.

18 Delbert Burkett, “The Transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:2–8): Epiphany or Apotheosis?,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138, no. 2 (2019): 413–14.

19 John Paul Heil, *The Transfiguration of Jesus: Narrative Meaning and Function of Mark 9:2-8, Matt 17:1-8 and Luke 9:28-36*, *Analecta Biblica*: 144 (Rome, Italy: Editrice Pontificio istituto biblico, 2000), 23.

filled with the holy Spirit (Luke 1:15).²⁰ From the categories of literary genres mentioned above, I personally support the epiphanic genre which seems to come closest to the description of the transfiguration account.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

Mark 9:2 talks about the time and place that Jesus was transfigured. The notion of “after six days” may indicate the event occurred nearly a week later and would be the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise in verse 9:1.²¹ It could be explained as a repetition of the theophany that Moses experienced after six days on Mount Sinai before God called him from the cloud (Exodus 24:15-17).²² Differing from Mark, Luke notes “eight days” and tells that the reason why Jesus led these disciples up a high mountain is “to pray” (Luke 9:28) – a theme in the Lukan Gospel is that Jesus often prays at important moments of his life.²³

Jesus leads the three disciples Peter, James, and John up a high mountain to witness His transfiguration. According to LaVerdiere, Jesus takes only three disciples to the mountain because the transfiguration is a private event, and Jesus instructs them to keep it secret until after the Resurrection (Mark 9:9).²⁴ Likewise, Craig stated that Mark likes to portray Jesus and his disciples in private, usually for a particular teaching. These three disciples also witness many special events of Jesus’ ministry (Mark 5:37; 13:3; 13:2; 14:33), and here they also form the inner circle.²⁵ The *mountain*, in Mark’s gospel, is a particular place for prayer and contemplation (6:46), for apostolic commissioning (3:13-19), and here as extraordinary revelation (9:2-8).²⁶

20 Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke’s Gospel*, Completely Revised and Expanded (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 38.

21 Heil, *The Transfiguration of Jesus*, 152.

22 C.S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible: vol 27 (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 359.

23 Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 268.

24 LaVerdiere, *The Beginning*, 42–43.

25 LaVerdiere, *The Beginning*, 42–43.

26 LaVerdiere, *The Beginning*, 42–43.

The description of Jesus “was transfigured;” the Greek verb μετεμορφώθη in the passive voice implies that God the Father is the agent.²⁷ Mark underlines the glorious nature of the Transfiguration. Thus, this event, following Jesus’ prediction of the royal status “in his Father’s glory” (8:38).²⁸ The “glory” recalls that of Moses’ face as conversing with God (Exodus 34:29), but; the verb here suggests 2 Corinthians 3:18, in which Paul contrasts the temporary glory of Moses with that of the Risen Jesus. However, in the Transfiguration scene, the transformation is temporary.²⁹

Mark 9:3 describes the manner of Jesus’ transfiguration. Unlike other Synoptic Gospels, Mark noticeably emphasized Jesus’ clothing rather than His features. With the description of Jesus’ clothes as “dazzling white,” Mark centers on Jesus’ clothing because clothing, in the ancient days as well as in many contemporary cultures, indicates the identity of a person. Thus, the clothing of the transfigured Jesus is also a manifestation the transfigured Jesus. Jesus’ clothing is so white that “no fuller on the earth could bleached them” expresses His transcendent identity.³⁰ With mention of the phrase “on earth,” Mark underlines the contrast of the earthly whiteness with the heavenly origin of the whiteness of Jesus’ clothes.³¹

Mark 9:4 describes the appearance of Elijah and Moses and their conversation with Jesus. Elijah and Moses are the two preeminent figures in the Old Testament and representatives of the Prophets and the Law. Their presence at Jesus’ transfiguration indicates Jesus’ role in fulfilling God’s promise in the Old Testament and contributes to the eschatological dimension of the scene in (cf. Revelation 11:3-13). In contrast to Matthew 17:3 and Luke 9:30, Mark used an unusual order - “Elijah with Moses.” In Mark’s Gospel, as Heil claims, the one mentioned second and introduced by “with” is the more remarkable figure, and thus all the Synoptic evangelists speak in the same sense.³²

27 David E. Garland, *A Theology of Mark’s Gospel: Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger (MI: Zondervan, 2015), 138.

28 Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 35.

29 Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 360.

30 LaVerdiere, *The Beginning of the Gospel: Introducing the Gospel According to Mark*, 43.

31 Camille Focant, *The Gospel According to Mark: A Commentary*, trans. Leslie R. Keylock (OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 359.

32 John Paul Heil, “A Note on ‘Elijah with Moses’ in Mark 9:4” *Biblica*, vol.80 (1999): 115, 115.

Mark 9:5 shows that Peter was overwhelmed by the vision of Jesus' transfiguration and of the presence of Elijah and Moses, and he exclaimed: "Rabbi, it is good that we are here!" Peter addresses Jesus as *Rabbi*. *Rabbi* derives from the Hebrew term רַבִּי, meaning "mighty," "great," or "numerous." Mark uses this term in the sense of Jesus' particular greatness. In this context, Jesus is called "*Rabbi*" in response to his miraculous action in his transfiguration.³³ The descriptive *good* is not specified. Perhaps, the present experience was such a pleasure; or it was just as an awkward and foolish exclamation of Peter as Mark describes in verse 9:6a. Then, Peter requested to make three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. The image of the *tents* is probably in reference to the tents which the ancient Israelites used for camping in the fields during the fall harvest festival. Thus, Peter thinks that he could prolong Jesus' transfiguration by making tents for the three figures.³⁴

Peter, as Mark comments in Mark 9:6, did not fully understand what was going on. His request to make the three tents was inappropriate because he was so terrified. For C.R. Kazmierski, the emphasis is not on Peter, but on Jesus, whose glorification is so impressive that even his closest companions cannot consider it properly.³⁵ For Donahue and Harrington, the fear of the disciples is respect for the mighty acts of God in Jesus (cf. Mark 4:41, 5:15, 16:8), not a fear of injury or death.³⁶

Then the cloud overshadows them and from it came a voice saying "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him" (Mark 9:7), a reference to the voice of the transfiguration in 2 Peter 1:17 and Matthew 17:5: "This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The heavenly *voice* indicates that God is the speaker. It echoes God's affirmation at Jesus' baptism: "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). The divine voice speaks to Jesus in the baptism but speaks to the disciples in the transfiguration. Both these narratives address Jesus' identity as the Son of

33 Hayim Lapin, "Rabbi" in D.N. Freedman (ed.) et al, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 601.

34 Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 270.

35 Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 37; cf. Carl R. Kazmierski, *Jesus, the Son of God: A Study of the Markan Tradition and Its Redaction by the Evangelist* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1979), 125–26.

36 Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 270.

God, one at the beginning of His ministry (Mark 1:1), and the other at the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem (Mark 9:7); both move forward to the centurion's identification of Jesus at his death on the cross (Mark 15:39).³⁷ Furthermore, the heavenly voice asserts the authority of Jesus' teaching and demands the three disciples to listen to Him. Here, Jesus' teaching refers to his passion and resurrection, to taking up one's cross and losing his life.³⁸

Mark 9:8 ends the event as suddenly as it began. Hardly had the voice from the cloud ceased when the disciples no longer saw Elijah and Moses, but only Jesus alone with them. Mark stressed that only Jesus, neither the great prophet Elijah nor the great lawgiver Moses, can accomplish God's redemptive plan.³⁹

THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

In the transfiguration, Jesus Christ is revealed as a glorious figure on the level with Moses and Elijah, who is called "the son of God" by the heavenly voice they hear. The transfiguration, in the Markan context of a journey narrative, provides a glimpse of Jesus' true identity and his glorious goal to which his journey will lead Him. Jesus, like Moses, is identified as a prophet, who is an important figure in the eschatological perspective;⁴⁰ like Elijah, Jesus will be transported to heaven in the glory of his Father and the holy angels (8:38). The scene, therefore, is an anticipation of Jesus' glory that must take place by his suffering, death and resurrection into glory (8:38).⁴¹ However, Jesus is superior to them since He is God's beloved son. Thus, Jesus is far more than an earthly messianic liberator (8:29) and a Spirit-filled prophet (8:28).⁴²

The divine voice for disciples to listen to Jesus as God's beloved Son refers to what Jesus has taught in 8:31; that it is necessary for the Son of Man to be rejected by the leaders of his people and killed before rising from the dead after three days. Mark highlights the necessity

37 Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 270.

38 LaVerdiere, *The Beginning*, 43.

39 Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 38.

40 Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 274.

41 Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark*, 179.

42 Garland, *A Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 138.

of suffering before glory. Jesus' humiliating suffering and death are compatible with his glory. The transfiguration and the crucifixion are connected to his glory. In both scenes, Jesus is identified as God's Son. Thus, in order to see Jesus in his glory, one must see how it merges with his suffering and powerlessness.⁴³

CONCLUSION

The impressive transfiguration of Jesus is the powerful evidence of Jesus' divinity and the manifestation of His glorious state that are inseparable his suffering, death and resurrection. His final triumph must take place in and through his suffering of rejection and death. Therefore, we, as his followers, are invited to participate in the future triumph and glory of God by listening and obeying his call to follow his "way" by denying ourselves, taking up our cross and losing our lives for the sake of gospel in order to gain the promised glory.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the heavenly voice commands us to "listen to Him" by taking time to meditate and reflect on his teachings in the Gospel. By listening, we come to know God's will and live in God's way. Like Peter, we would like to enjoy forever the glorious moment and the happy feeling that strengthens our faith, especially to overcome the hard times in our life.

In the life of faith, especially in the journey to follow Christ in a specific vocation, we are called to separate ourselves from our busy life and go up the "high mountain" –a symbol of the place of communication between God and humans –so that we can listen to the word of God, feel God's presence in our life and realize God's will. For us, being "on the mountain" is also understood as the time we spend praying, attending Mass, making a retreat, centering our lives in God. Like the three disciples, we could say: "Rabbi, it is good that we are here!" This assertion should also be the feeling of our religious life-the life of Jesus' followers who fully entrust their lives to God.

43 Garland, 139.

44 John Paul Heil, *The Gospel of Mark as Model for Action: A Reader-Response Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 188.

Jesus' garment became dazzling white as being transfigured. We are called to transform ourselves anew, as St. Paul said: "put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth" (Eph 4:22,24).



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