

WHO DO *YOU* SAY I AM?
NARRATIVE EXEGESIS OF MARK 8:29

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This paper was written for the course *Approaches to New Testament Studies* at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit in Leuven. It gives an exegesis of Mark 8:29 where Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is. The paper tries to incorporate several exegetical methods, but focuses on narrative criticism, a method that is close related to the genre of Mark's Gospel. After a study of the individual parts of the verse, these elements will be brought together. In doing this it will become clear what Mark wants to communicate to the reader. Finally, the question how the genre influences the communicated message in contrast to other genres will be addressed briefly.

QUESTION

Mark 8:29 has quite an easy translation. There are no real difficulties in the verse. It splits up in two parts: a question by Jesus and a response by Peter. Below several aspects of both parts are highlighted.

“But you”

The question Jesus asks comes after his initial question in v. 27: “Who do people [οἱ ἄνθρωποι] say that I am?”¹ In v. 29 Jesus already in his question separates the disciples from οἱ ἄνθρωποι by the way he poses the question. The “but” (δὲ) expresses a contrast, but the emphasis of “you” (ὁμεῖς) underscores this even.² Most English translations do not have this emphasis (ESV, NKJV, NRSV). The NIV translates with ““But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”” This grasps the Greek text a lot better.

In it Jesus already shows his expectations. He does not simply want to separate the disciples for other people; he wants them to give a better answer than theirs.³ As will be argued for later on, Mark wants the reader to identify with the disciples, so this simple use of ὁμεῖς serves a bigger goal than merely depicting what Jesus asked the disciples. It is used ten times in the Gospel of Mark. Three times it is an addressing of the Pharisees (7:11, 18; 11:17). The other times it is directed toward the disciples (6:31, 37; 8:29; 13:9, 11, 23, 29). The ὁμεῖς in 8:29 is the only mention that is followed by a question from Jesus. It is a general call to the disciples to take a stance. The reader – through identification with the disciples – is called to do the same.

“Who do you say I am?”

The disciples answer that people think he is John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets (v. 28). Though it seems quite puzzling that John the Baptist is mentioned here since Jesus' and John's careers partly overlapped, this does not need to be problematic.⁴ Robert Kernaghan sees the identification with John the Baptist (after his death) as a superstitious belief that Jesus is someone “who returned from beyond the grave with superhuman powers.”⁵ He explains that this is a form of superstition that goes beyond the biblical tradition.⁶ However, this explanation may go to far. The simplest explanation is that people did not see Jesus as the resurrected Elijah or John, but as *an* Elijah or *a* John.⁷ These men represent the prophetic office

¹ Unless mentioned otherwise, the English Standard Version is used. In Greek, Nestle-Aland (27th edition) is used.

² Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 399.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 398-9.

⁵ Ronald J. Kernaghan, *Mark*, IVPNTCS (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 157.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 328. He adds that this is the second time Jesus is identified as John (6:14-16), but that this may just be a way of speaking and not an indication of superstition.

in both the Old and the New Testament era. Those names are then just an indication that people considered Jesus to be an important prophet. The last group of people claiming that Jesus is one of the prophets is in that case not complementary to John and Elijah. All three terms are parallel expressions to say the same thing; the people say Jesus is a prophet. R.T. France adds that it indicates Jesus not merely being *a* prophet, but one of *the* prophets – a “well-known prophetic figure.”⁸

That Jesus poses this question again to his disciples *and* that the use of δὲ and ὑμεῖς shows a contrast with and a different expectancy from the people, suggests that Jesus is not satisfied with the answer given by the people. This does not need to imply that Jesus is not a prophet,⁹ but it does imply that he is *more* than just a prophet. It implies that he is not satisfied with the view of the people. Being a prophet is positive and gives him position, but this is not enough. The people do not grasp the full identity of Jesus.¹⁰ Jesus however expects the disciples to do so.

RESPONSE

Peter

Not all commentators elaborate on Peter’s role in this passage. Why is he the one confessing? Of course, there is the ancient tradition that Mark is Peter’s interpreter.¹¹ But whether this is of significance here, is another question. Robert H. Stein identifies Peter here as a spokesman for the disciples.¹² However, it seems that this is something he merely concludes on what the text itself reports, so this does not answer the initial question. David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie argue that “ancient characterization in Greco-Roman literature tended to portray stylized characters.”¹³ There is little attention for individual characters and most individual characters refer to the group they are part of.¹⁴ This supports Stein’s opinion with literary argumentation.

Further, contrary to the Matthean account (16:17-19) Peter is not given a special position here. Jesus also does not charge Peter in particular not to tell; he addresses the whole group of disciples in v. 30 (αὐτοῖς).¹⁵ He continues by teaching “them” that he must suffer. Thus, Peter’s insight is probably not the result of his personal reflections, but his being the spokesman for the group.¹⁶

“The Christ”

In answering that Jesus is the Christ, the heart of the passage and maybe of the whole Gospel of Mark is given here. Jesus accepts Peter’s response. “The confession is correct . . . Jesus is the ‘Christ.’”¹⁷ First, Mark himself has already mentioned this in the first verse of his Gospel, so it is true what Peter is saying. Second, Jesus’ demand in v. 30 (not to tell anyone) and

⁸ Ibid., 328.

⁹ An indication fort his seems to be that in 12:21-22 Jesus contrasts “Christ” with “false christs and false prophets.” *A* christ is distinct from *a* prophet but *the* Christ here is not distinguished from *the* prophet. This seems to imply that the Christ is a prophet, but not just a prophet.

¹⁰ France, *Gospel of Mark*, 329.

¹¹ Papias in Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.39 in Thomas C. Oden, and Christopher A. Hall, eds., *Mark, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament II* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), xxi.

¹² Stein, *Mark*, 395.

¹³ David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey & Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999), 100.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ France, *Gospel of Mark*, 329.

¹⁶ Ibid. Even v. 33 shows that Jesus was first “seeing the disciples” before he rebuked Peter.

¹⁷ Stein, *Mark*, 399.

his teaching on the ‘Son of Man’ (and not the ‘Christ’) in v. 31 do not contradict Peter’s identification.¹⁸ Moreover, the not telling fits the “various secrecy motives in this Gospel.”¹⁹ At several occasions Jesus speaks in parables and terms of secrecy (e.g. 1:44; 4:11-12). In these cases it is not a matter of covering lies or fallacies. On the contrary, when very true things are revealed, the secrecy motive is often apparent. This motive then does not contradict Peter’s confession, but enforces it. When Mark’s audience hears v. 30 they are immediately reminded of the other “secrecy” motives. They are let in on the secret and they understand that what Peter has acknowledged here is important.

The use of the “Son of Man” in v. 31 also underscores Peter’s confession. This can be seen in Mark 14:61. There, the episode in 8:27-30 is turned upside down. Instead of Jesus’ asking an open question about his identity and the response being that he is the Christ, the high priest there asks him a closed question about his identity: “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” Here Jesus responds by saying that he is the Son of Man, evoking the high priest to tear his garments. This again shows that “Son of Man” and “Christ” are closely connected. Even though Jesus does not answer the question of the high priest with a simple “yes”, Jesus is mocked here as if he has. Brendan Byrne sees the three identity passages (1:7-11; 8:27-9:8; 14:53-15:39) as pillars of Mark’s Gospel. In each of the case the divine sonship is present in the response: the first times the Father gives those, the last time the centurion is answering.²⁰ Next to the introduction of Mark in 1:1 and the identity episodes in 8:27-30 and 14:61-62, ὁ χριστός is mentioned a few times by Jesus himself (9:41; 12:35; 13:21, 22). This is after the identification of Jesus as the Christ *and* after his demand not to mention this to other people. The reader understands when hearing Jesus’ first references to the Christ, that they are in on the secret. They understand that Jesus speaks about himself here. The last reference to “Christ” is again one that relates to identity. In Mark 15:32 the chief priests and the scribes mock Jesus. They laugh with his – in their eyes – false identity.

The disciples’ recognizing Jesus as the Christ in the mind of the disciples seems to have primarily political weight; this is for example visible in the demand of John and James, when they show they want political power.²¹ That is why in the verses immediately following Peter’s confession Jesus starts to teach them what it means him being the Christ. Mark has brackets the whole travel narrative (8:27-10:52) between two stories of blind men being healed. In between those brackets the disciples simply do not acknowledge Jesus’ teaching on the suffering of the Christ (8:31; 9:31; 10:33). They are expecting political glory without his suffering.²² The whole travel narrative is packed with encounters between Jesus and his disciples because of them not understanding this. The clearest example comes right before the story of the blind Bartimaeus, when James and John are asking to share in Jesus’ glory (10:37-40).

GOSPEL AS STORY

Ronald J. Kernaghan acknowledges that Jesus’ question about his identity signifies a turning point in the gospel, because it brings to the front the “tension between [Jesus’]

¹⁸ Some MSS have ‘Son of God’, but this is probably due to the parallel text in Mat. 16:16 (see Stein, *Mark*, 404).

¹⁹ Kernaghan, *Mark*, 158.

²⁰ Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark’s Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 18-9. I would include 1:1 as a foundation for the whole Gospel. Already in the first verse Mark suggests that this Gospel will be about the identity of Jesus. This would also explain why Mark, contrary to Matthew 16:17 does not report of a commendation. Mark sees this as a given (see: Stein, *Mark*, 399).

²¹ Kernaghan, *Mark*, 157.

²² Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* 8.31, in Oden & Hall, *Mark*, 149; Rhoads, Dewey & Michie, *Mark as Story*, 90.

understanding of himself and the expectations of the people who were attracted to him.”²³ He however fails to explain why this is a turning point. There are many different opinions on the structure of Mark’s Gospel, but all consulted commentaries see this passage as a turning point.²⁴ Mark deliberately has waited to mention Jesus being the Christ again and has “reserved the open use of the title until this moment. Now at last the truth about Jesus is recognised and acknowledged.”²⁵

Reader-Response

France sees that the disciples throughout the Gospel have a continued growing awareness of whom Jesus is and what it means to follow him.²⁶ However, this does not entirely do justice to the text. From Mark 8:31 on the disciples never question Jesus’ identity, unlike they had done in 4:41. Further on, France however emphasizes the importance of this first climactic moment.²⁷ Moreover, he affirms that from here on, the focus is not so much on the identity of Jesus, but on the meaning of that identity.²⁸ Jean-François Bandoz even sees two parallel structures in the Gospel. He considers 8:27-30 still to be part of the first half of the Gospel; Mark answering the who-question. The part develops from “Jesus” (1:14) to “Christ” (8:29). In the second part the question is “What Messiah?” Also in this part there is a development; from Son of man (8:31) to Son of God (15:39).²⁹

Until this point in the narrative the reader has had an advantage over the disciples, because he was informed about the identity of Jesus (1:1).³⁰ During the first part of the Gospel the reader can see the disciples struggling with the question “Who is this man?” He can watch from a distance. The reader is watching the plot develop toward Jesus being acknowledged as Christ. Maybe the reader was supposed to be put on the wrong track to think that this would only be clear at the end of the Gospel.³¹ Whatever the answer, suddenly – in the middle of the narrative – the disciples understand. At that moment the reader cannot watch from a distance anymore. He is at the same level of the disciples: both know the identity of Jesus.³²

From that moment onwards the reader identifies with the disciples and their struggle to understand what it means that Jesus is the Christ. From the beginning of the following verses it already becomes clear that the disciples have difficulty grasping the meaning of Jesus being the Messiah.³³ Their spiritual blindness within the two stories of the blind men healed is appalling.³⁴ They seem to ignore all the references to Jesus’ upcoming suffering. The contrast between the

²³ Kernaghan, *Mark*, 156.

²⁴ E.g. France, *Gospel of Mark*, 320; Kernaghan, *Mark*, 156; Stein, *Mark*, 395. The diversity of where the second part of the Gospel begins (before or after the healing of the blind man, vv. 22-26) depends mostly on the view on the healing of the blind man as a bridge story to introduce the theme of the next part, or as one of the two brackets for this part (the other being the healing of another blind man in 10:46-52). There are strong cases for both stances, but it would take too far to elaborate on them here. Not all consulted commentaries are listed in the footnotes by the way, the most recent ones were chosen.

²⁵ France, *Gospel of Mark*, 329.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 326.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 327.

²⁸ See also Kevin W. Larsen, “A Focused Christological Reading of Mark 8:22-9:13,” *Trinity Journal* 26, no. 1 (2005): 46.

²⁹ Jean-François Bandoz, “Prendre sa croix”: *Jésus et ses disciples dans l’évangile de Marc* (Paris: Cerf, 2009), 18-22.

³⁰ See Byrne, *Costly Freedom*, 139.

³¹ See France, *Gospel of Mark*, 326.

³² Rhoads, Dewey & Michie, *Mark as Story*, 139.

³³ Bandoz, *Prendre sa croix*, 81.

³⁴ The disciples’ acknowledgement of Jesus’ identity without understanding the theological meaning of it is represented symbolically in the two-phase healing of the blind man. He first sees men walking around like trees before he sees them entirely correct (Byrne, *Costly Freedom*, 140).

reader identifying with the disciples and him understanding their blindness motivates to not make the same mistake:

The narrative leads the reader not only to identify sympathetically with the struggles of the disciples but also, and at the same time, to see that, by Jesus' standards, the disciples are wrong. At every point where the disciples resist or oppose or fail to understand, the reader overhears Jesus showing the right way to follow.³⁵

It reaches a climax at the very end of the Gospel. Despite the disciples' treachery (14:20), their bad friendship in Getsemane (14:37-42), their flight (14:50), Peter's denial (14:66-72) and their complete absence during the worst suffering (15), the call at the end of the Gospel is: "[Jesus] is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you" (16:7). Discipleship is the goal of the revelation at the end of the Gospel.³⁶ The reader is supposed to identify with them at the very end and respond by *seeing Jesus*.

In Mark 8:29, there is something else at stake. If the reader identifies with the disciples, then he is drawn into a contrast with people who are identifying Jesus as a mere prophet.³⁷ *But what about you?* is a strong calling to not do injustice to the fullness of Jesus' identity. In the 21st century culture where Jesus is accepted as great moral teacher or an important social reformer, this call through the disciples implies that the reader responds by acknowledging Jesus not merely as a teacher or reformer, but as the Christ.³⁸

Influence of genre

The narrative genre plays a huge role in the way the passage is set up. Of course, it is a way of telling a true story, but it is more than this. Mark could have chosen to just tell the cognitive aspect of it all: "Jesus is the Christ and you should believe it and follow him." In doing this he might have opted for a more Pauline rhetorical style.³⁹ He could have stated his findings and then argued for them. Kernaghan reports Paul doing something similar to this in Romans 1:4.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Mark could have opted for a more poetic form giving glory to God. Paul's (probably) citing a hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 could be an example of how this might be done. However, this would not achieve the same reader-response Mark is obtaining with his Gospel. Until this verse, the readers had had an advantage toward the disciples. The reader already "knows" who Jesus is, but through the identification the reader is called to act upon this knowledge. The genre thus not only invokes a growth of knowledge; it implies a practical *and* affective transformation for the reader. It is much like in modern day cinema the story draws the viewer in.

This verse is very central in Mark's Gospel because it ties his Christology *and* the theme of discipleship close together. In Mark's Gospel, the Christology is not just an "information" package the reader has to accept and think about. It incorporates an immediate response of the reader in following Jesus. As said before, all consulted commentaries report this passage as a turning point in the Gospel. It is a pivotal verse. It forces the reader to shift from a distant observing to a sympathetic identification with the disciples. This identification implies a response to the question that goes beyond acknowledging Jesus as a prophet. He is the Christ.

³⁵ Rhoads, Dewey & Michie, *Mark as Story*, 140.

³⁶ Eugene M. Boring, *Mark*, NTL [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006], 3.

³⁷ France, *Gospel of Mark*, 329.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Admitted, Paul also often uses a more narrative style in his letters.

⁴⁰ Kernaghan, *Mark*, 158.