

THE UNITY OF THE GOSPEL OF MARK

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About two decades ago Eric Dinkler and Ferdinand Hahn came up with almost identical conclusions concerning the tradition and redaction of Mark 8:27-33. What made this similarity of their conclusions particularly remarkable was the fact that they had worked completely independent of each other. The agreement between them reinforced their conclusions. Along with many other New Testament scholars I accepted that the correctness of their conclusions had been established in this way, until recently when I had to discuss the passage in a book intended for intelligent lay persons not versed in New Testament scholarship. It was clear to me that I could not present the Dinkler/Hahn argument persuasively to such readers. Furthermore, I was convinced that this was not because they did not have the expertise to follow the argument. In the context of such readers, the Dinkler/Hahn argument appeared contrived, but not only that argument; I came to the conclusion that much of what we as New Testament scholars do is contrived; that much of what we do is more concerned with erudition than with understanding. The reason why we come up with similar conclusions in our research is simply because we use the same methods, not because we succeed in uncovering the truth. If we were to use different methods, we would come up with different results. In the present case, if we continue to use the same method the results would remain the same, whoever does the research. It is the method itself which needs to be questioned. In the following I propose a different method, and even if the results were not to be more convincing, it should at least show that a change of the method reveals that the Dinkler/Hahn results are not as self-evident as it may seem.

The Dinkler/Hahn interpretation takes our passage as having been based on a probable authentic tradition which comprised only verses 29 and 33, in which Peter declares that Jesus is the messiah, a declaration which Jesus rejects as a temptation of the devil. Into this Mark wove at least two other traditions which occur elsewhere in this gospel, revealing that they are independent, i.e. not bound to their present context. First, verse 28, the peoples' speculations about who Jesus was, which occurs in a very similar form in 6:14-16 where it was also incorporated into a larger whole. Furthermore, *Scriptura* 4 (1981) pp 1-7

verse 31, the first prediction of the passion, which is repeated in 9:31 and again 10:33f. The passage also contains a formulation which is Mark's own, verse 30, the statement of the so-called messianic secret. Mark thus interpolated these two independent traditions and his own statement of the messianic secret into the original tradition of verses 29 and 33, and gave the entire passage a new introduction with Jesus' prompting the question, also adding some transitions. This may make good sense to New Testament scholars - it did to me - but I was unable to persuade myself that I could make a convincing case for it to intelligent readers who were not New Testament scholars.

It appeared as if Mark did a real cut and paste job. We are not helped out if we attribute to him some theological idea as the reason for patching the traditions together in this way. It will be evident how ridiculous such a suggestion is if I compare it with someone who tries to say something by making use of an existing sentence and adding a few additional words here and there. As an alternative I decided to try out a different approach to see how that might work. I would give Mark more credit as an author, namely, that he himself wrote the passage but that in doing so he made use of existing material; the existing traditions functioning like words in the construction of a sentence. In that way the passage could be considered as a more unified composition.

Taken in this way we can only assume that he made use of two existing traditions, i e those of verses 29 and 31, because of their independent existence in other contexts elsewhere in the gospel. All the other formulations could have been by Mark himself, but may also have included existing traditions. In any case the task of interpreting is not of patchwork, but of a unified composition. The question whether or not parts of it were preformulated is of no particular significance in the interpretation of the passage. Our question is what Mark was trying to say with his composition; with this macro-sentence which was itself again an element in the even larger syntactic structure of his gospel as a whole.

To begin with we may note that Mark structured the first part of our passage (vv 27-30) in a similar way to his structuring of 9:2-9, the story of the transfiguration. In both cases Jesus' identity is revealed in the circle of his intimate followers, and this revelation followed by the command to secrecy. Peter's declaration that Jesus is the messiah (8:29) is paralleled by the divine voice declaring that he is his beloved son (9:7). This parallelism in the structure gives expression to a certain parallelism in the meanings of the two passages as well. Both contain statements about Jesus' identity - that he is the messiah (8:29), the Son of God (9:7) - which are combined in a single formulation in the trial before the Sanhedrin (14:61f). Mk 8:27-30 and 9:2-9 are two different statements of what is in fact a single identification of Jesus. To be the messiah is to be the Son of God, and vice versa, although the latter term is probably understood to express this single conception at a deeper level.

It thus appears that all three of the passages are related in that they all answer, from Mark's point of view, the question of who Jesus was. However, whereas Jesus commanded his disciples in 8:30 and 9:9 not to reveal this truth - according to 9:9 "not until the Son of Man rose from the dead" - he himself allowed it to become public at his trial before the Sanhedrin. It may also be significant that it is already at his death, not after his resurrection, that the centurion comes to the recognition that he is "indeed the Son of God" (15:39).

If we also include (8:31-33) in our deliberations, another structural similarity between 8:27-33 and Jesus' declaration before the Sanhedrin is revealed. In both cases the declaration that Jesus is the messiah (the Son of God) is followed by an interpretation - in 8:31 by the prediction of Jesus' suffering and resurrection, and in 14:62 by messianic passages from Scripture. These interpretations are progressive, however. The interpretation of 8:31 in terms of Jesus' suffering is not repeated in 14:62 because as 14:41 indicates, Jesus had already entered into the suffering predicted in 8:31. Thus in 14:62 the focus is on the future of the resurrection not on the passion as in 8:31.

After the second prediction of the passion (9:31) Mark states that even though the disciples did not understand what Jesus meant, they were afraid to ask him about it (v 32). From the time the command to keep the transfiguration secret had been given until the resurrection had taken place (9:9), they wondered what Jesus meant by "rising from the dead" (v 10). Here in 8:31-33 their lack of understanding is even more radical. Peter dares to contradict Jesus, bringing Jesus' harsh rebuke upon himself (v 33). That Jesus turned around to face the rest of the disciples evidently indicates that the rebuke was directed towards them as well.

All of this taken together suggests that, notwithstanding the formulation of 9:9, the messianic secret motif did not concern specifically the resurrection of Jesus, but gave expression to the idea that the very messiahship of Jesus had to be kept secret because its meaning could not be grasped outside the context of the passion and resurrection of Jesus. Not even his disciples, to whom he tried to communicate this meaning especially by means of the predictions of the passion, were able to understand it until the resurrection had taken place. (We can only presume this final understanding because Mark nowhere reports it.) It seems clear that Mark was aware that the disciples' conception of Jesus' messiahship was contrary to the subsequent Christian conception to which Mark himself adhered, and for which the passion and resurrection were of central importance.

The Meaning of the Passage

The present passage marks an important transition in Mark's gospel from the vague rumours as to who Jesus might have been to the true understanding of him as the messiah, interpreted in terms of his forthcoming passion and resurrection. Mark gives compositional expression to this, on the one hand, by repeating the people's speculations concerning his identity (v 28, cf 6:14c-15), followed by the declaration that Jesus is the messiah (v 29), thus posing the declaration of his true identity against these vague rumours of the first part of the gospel, and, on the other hand, by having Jesus interpret his messiahship by means of the prediction of the passion (v 31). Continuity with the passion is maintained throughout the second part of the gospel by Jesus' two repetitions of the prediction in the narrative that follows (9:31 and 10:33f). He then calls

for the final, paradoxical act to begin when he declares: "The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is handed over into the hands of sinners" (14:41).

By juxtaposing the first prediction of his passion with Peter's confession of him as the messiah, Jesus poses the correct understanding of his messiahship against the disciples' inability to understand it. From now on the gospel no longer concerns the vague rumours, but proceeds on the basis of an understanding of him as the messiah who was to suffer and be resurrected. This understanding of him is reinforced by the declaration of him as the Son of God in the transfiguration on the mountain (9:2-8).

The most crucial conception in the passage is the declaration that Jesus is the messiah. Because of its ambiguity, however, it is not the most decisive. Nevertheless, it is precisely its ambiguity which makes it so crucial. It marks an important transition in the gospel, but does not by itself clarify who Jesus is. That is why the disciples are commanded to keep it secret. It would not be understood correctly until it was possible to interpret it within the context of the passion and resurrection. Jesus tries to dissolve the ambiguity inherent in the designation by interpreting it with the first prediction of the passion in the intimate circle of the disciples but they do not understand him. That is what is decisive.

This interpretation to the intimate circle of the disciples of what the declaration means that Jesus is the messiah is what Mark intends with the statement in 4:11b: "To you the mystery of the kingdom of God is revealed (lit. 'given'); to those outside everything comes in parables". In this regard note the comment which follows the prediction of the passion in the present passage: "And he spoke the word openly" (v 31). After clarifying the meaning of his messiahship Jesus conversed frankly in the intimate circle of his disciples about this "mystery" of the kingdom of God which remained concealed from those outside, and was to remain so until the passion and resurrection had taken place. The "mystery" which was revealed to the disciples (cf 4:11), but which they did not understand (cf already

4:13) was that Jesus was the messiah (8:29) but understood in the sense of his passion and resurrection (v 31). In New Testament times the most common meaning of "mystery" as used by Jesus in 4:11 was that of the dying and rising deity of the *mystery religions*. That is the meaning which comes to expression when Jesus commands the disciples to keep secret the knowledge revealed in Peter's declaration and interpreted by means of the prediction of the passion. The rest of the gospel is a further exposition of that mystery. According to Mark, only Jesus, the cult deity and initiator into the mystery, understood this before (and during) the passion - until the centurion recognized it when he saw the way Jesus died (15:39).

Mark thus appears to have stated clearly that Peter as spokesman for the disciples did not understand messiah in the sense intended by Jesus, and Mark made good use of Peter's inability to understand Jesus' intention to bring out the true meaning of his messiahship. Even though the disciples had come to recognize that Jesus was the messiah (8:29), and were in that regard a clear step ahead of the people (v 28), they too could not understand the secret of its meaning (vv 32f) until after the crucifixion and resurrection, i e after they had actually experienced the mystery of the kingdom of God.

The gospel of Mark, it appears, is not a report of events in the life of Jesus which lead up to his death, but a cultic myth in which the mystery of the kingdom of God is gradually disclosed, beginning with Peter's confession and the interpretation of it by means of the first prediction of the passion, and leading deeper into it with the second and third predictions until Jesus finally announces that the actual mystery was about to begin in 14:41, "The hour has come, behold the Son of Man is handed over into the hands of sinners".

The disciples' ignorance should not be taken in the sense of a mere report of their inability to understand Jesus, although that is also involved. In the sense of Mark's gospel as a cultic myth they represent the initiates who stand in uncomprehending awe before the mystery that is being disclosed, in contrast with those outside with their loose speculations, and probably also with the centurion who remains a spectator notwithstanding the fact that it is he who first recog=

nizes that Jesus is "truly a son of God" (15:39). It now also becomes clear why the gospel ends as it does - why it has to end that way, with the young man's statement: "Say to the disciples and to Peter, 'He proceeds ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, as he told you'" and with the women's awed flight from the grave: "They fled from the tomb because they were trembling, beside themselves. And they said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid" (16:8). The gospel prepares for the manifestation of the presence of the risen Lord in the worshipping community.

Matthew and Luke did not recognize Mark's gospel as a cultic myth, and certainly did not intend their gospels as cultic myths in the same sense. Therefore they could not end their gospels where Mark did, because without the resurrection appearances their gospels would have been incomplete. This probably also contributed to Matthew's elimination of all the references to the disciples' inability to understand. In the sense of his gospel that placed them in a too negative light. For Matthew they represented the beginning of an understanding Christian community. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke a transition was made from the present reality of the resurrected Jesus in the cult of the worshipping community to an interest in the past history of Jesus.