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The Meaning of the Cross in Mark

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I Introduction

What is the meaning of the Cross in the Gospel of Mark? For some, any historic meaning emerging from Jesus' passion is difficult to determine and, as a result, may be lost to the modern reader altogether.¹ Granted, the process of looking to antiquity for meaning, while not simultaneously projecting contemporary meaning into the narrative, remains a challenged if not impossible task. Attempts to ascertain meaning from ancient contexts ultimately require a lens—that is, an angle of observation through which meaning emerges.

By the term Cross, I intend all that encompasses the prediction and passion of Jesus. Consequently, 'Cross,' with a capital 'C,' serves as a metaphor for the efficacious nature of Jesus' suffering while 'cross,' with a lower case 'c,' serves to identify the specific mode or occasion of Jesus' death. In this paper, I will argue that the Cross (as a motif) serves as an overarching theme in Mark's story.² As a story, the second Gospel reveals the narrator's beliefs and values.³ But more specifically, as a proclamation, Mark arranges sayings and events from the life of Jesus to draw specific theological conclusions and calls his readers to embrace the meaning of the Cross. Mark combines the passion predictions, issues of identity, and the cross event into one overarching motif—the Cross—to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God.

In this paper,⁴ I will demonstrate (1)

that the meaning of the Cross in Mark serves as a central concern of and climax to the narrative and (2) that the Cross serves as evidence of Jesus' identity. I propose to do this by analysing the narrative of Mark as a literary whole, through a brief survey of various academics who have contemplated the subject, and by focusing attention on how the passion predictions, namely Mark 8:31, 9:30-32, and 10:32-34, are used within the context of Mark's gospel.⁵

Furthermore, this paper approaches Mark's presentation of the passion predictions as authentic sayings of Jesus even if recollected from traditions contained within the early 'pre-Gospel' church. The arrangement of the predictions indicates that Mark believed Jesus anticipated his death in Jerusalem and that meaning was to be gained from Jesus' experience on the cross.⁶ From this position, it is reasonable to assume that Mark was not attempting to explain what the disciples believed about Jesus' predictions of death or their understanding of the meaning of the Cross. To the contrary, he is attempting to explain what his readers should understand about the

significance of Jesus' suffering and death.⁷

Mark's prologue (1:1) indeed sets the stage for his Gospel and it is his particular claim of Sonship that finds resolution at the foot of the cross.⁸ Even if one maintains that the phrase 'Son of God' is not original to the text, as many have, the subsequent addition may reasonably indicate that an early copyist recognized the same plot resolution suggested in this paper and added the phrase for clarity.⁹ Thus, this paper argues that Mark uses the episode of the cross as proof for the thesis of his narrative, namely that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

II Mark as a Literary Whole

1 Genre

'Gospel' is the most frequent post-Apostolic designation assigned to the first four books of the New Testament to distinguish them from other types of

¹ See R. W. Funk, R. W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1993), 24; David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (trans. George Eliot; New York: MacMillan, 1892), 563-74, esp., 566. Strauss states, '[T]he minute predictions which the Evangelists put into [Jesus'] mouth must be regarded as a *vaticinium post eventum*' (prediction after the event).

² It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the question of criteria in searching for authentic sayings of Jesus.

³ See David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 7.

⁴ All Scripture citations are from the NRSV.

⁵ Although Mark 9:12 is a saying about the suffering of the Son of Man, it does not include a reference to his death. Since the context seems directly related to John the Baptist, and does not include a prediction of Jesus' death, this passage is not included in the passion predictions under review in this paper.

⁶ Peter Balla, 'What did Jesus think about his approaching death?' in *Jesus, Mark and Q: The Teaching of Jesus and its Earliest Records* (ed. Michael Labahn and Andreas Schmidt; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 249.

⁷ See Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 33 and R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 23.

⁸ Cf., Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 53-57, especially 54, n. 13 and Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 30-32.

⁹ On textual issues regarding 'Son of God' in Mark 1:1 see France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 49 and Alexander Globe, 'The Caesarean Omission of the Phrase 'Son of God' in Mark 1:1', *HTR* 75:2 (Apr 1982): 209-218. Cf., Jan Slomp, 'Are the Words "Son of God" in Mark 1.1 Original?', *BT* 28 (1977) 143-50. Slomp argues that the phrase, 'Son of God', is secondary and should be omitted.

biblical literature, such as Epistle or Apocalyptic. Furthermore, the classification of 'Synoptic' Gospel identifies the similarities found between Matthew, Mark, and Luke—with Mark serving as the primary source for the others. However, as Willi Marxsen has noted, the use of the term gospel is unique to Mark's writing and its use is substantially different from how it is generally applied to the writings of Matthew or Luke.¹⁰ Here, *euangélion* reveals the content rather than the form of the book.¹¹

Hengel supports this notion when he states, 'At the beginning of his Gospel the [*euangéliou Iesou Christou*] as an objective genitive means the gospel about Jesus Christ, i.e. the saving events of the ministry and death of Jesus in the "biographical" work that is now beginning.'¹² This does not suggest that Matthew and Luke are not Gospels, rather Marxsen and Hengel accentuate Mark's use of *euangélion* (gospel, 1:1) in a manner similar to that in Paul—as the core of the kerygma. In contrast to Paul, however, Mark's proclamation (kerygma) of the gospel draws upon the earthly life and teaching of Jesus to demonstrate the essentiality of the Cross.¹³

Efforts to categorize Mark largely as historical or biographical in nature are difficult because they require establishing historicity and determining what meaning the central character attached to his/her actions. From this perspective, the goal for understanding the meaning of the Cross in Mark would be to determine what the historical Jesus believed his suffering or death might mean either for himself or for his followers. However, Mark may only incidentally address that concern. In other words, Mark's goal was not necessarily to reveal what Jesus was thinking about the cross so much as what he (Mark) or the post-resurrection apostolic witness believed it meant, not only for himself but also for his readers.

Perhaps a more accurate way to regard Mark's genre would be that of a theological biography.¹⁴ As a theological biography, the inclusion and arrangement of selected information is specific to the theological emphasis intended by the author. Although Mark may have arranged the story with specific interests in mind, it is not the intention of this paper to suggest that he invented the tradition on which the story was based. Some might suggest that arranging material in a narrative for specific purposes may constitute, in the strictest sense, an invention of the story. As noted earlier, some scholars maintain that the passion predictions

were not authentic to Jesus but were post-Easter creations later attributed to him. Others, such as Raymond Brown, however, conclude that the passion predictions were probably not the invention of the writer. Brown most forcefully concludes,

I judge very unlikely the thesis that none of these sayings anticipating a violent death stems from Jesus. Clearly early Christian preachers enlarged and intensified the motif of Jesus' foreknowledge of the divine plan, but such massive creativity without some basis in Jesus himself is implausible.¹⁵

2 Manner and Style

Writing as a theologian, Mark arranges and interprets the tradition to meet the needs of his audience.¹⁶ As a gospel (kerygmatic proclamation) or theological biography, the meaning of the Cross takes on new and possibly greater implications than whatever Jesus may or may not have indicated, with neither perspective necessarily contradictory or antithetical. As has already been noted, the primary concerns of this paper are not questions of validity or accuracy of oral or written accounts; rather at issue is how those preaching the gospel understood the

events of Jesus' suffering and death and what significance they attached to it in light of their own experience.¹⁷ So, in what way does his manner or style address the community's concerns?

It is possible that Mark's community or audience was suffering persecution and could neither understand the role suffering might fulfil in the community's experience or, for that matter, what role it fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Thomas Boomershine argues that Mark is addressing the believer's fear in the early church as they faced persecution in proclaiming the gospel of Christ.¹⁸ Ellen Bradshaw Aitken elaborates on how the early church found comfort in the life of Jesus when she states,

Stories were told, songs were sung, and rituals were performed in such a way that Jesus' death became the central point in the reenactment of the cultic life of the community. Moreover, the performance of the memory of Jesus' death... was closely related to the self-definition and constitution of the community. To tell a story about Jesus' death was also to tell a story about the identity of the community.¹⁹

Aitken's approach is unique in that she does not look at the passion narratives themselves, but rather at texts

10 Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies in the Redaction History of the Gospel* (trans. James Boyce, Donald Juel, William Poehlmann, and Roy A. Harrisville; Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 207-16.

11 See France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 53.

12 Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, 53. Cf., France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 53.

13 See Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist*, 214, n. 14 and Paula Fredrikson, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews* (New York: Random House, 1999), 35.

14 See Craig L. Blomberg, 'The Diversity of Literary Genres in the New Testament', in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues* (ed. David A. Black and David S. Dockery; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 275.

15 Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1487. Also Balla, 'What did Jesus think?', 244-45 and Joachim Gnilka, *Jesus of Nazareth: Message and History* (trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 245, n. 20.

16 See Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, 2-3.

17 Consider Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist*, 183, esp., n. 126.

18 Thomas E. Boomershine, 'Mark 16:8 and the Apostolic Commission', *JBL* 100:2 (June 1981): 237.

19 Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, *Jesus' Death in Early Christian Memory: The Poetics of the Passion* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 16.

that provide indications of the process of telling of Jesus' suffering and death.²⁰

Building on the work of Gregory Nagy,²¹ Aitken suggests that there is a 'linguistic phenomena of memory in community and that "recollection" of the "there and then" is a matter of retelling the story and redoing the rituals in the "here and now".'²² Although Nagy's focus is on Homer and archaic Greek lyric poetry, he demonstrates how each time a story or description (epithet) is repeated or performed, 'it is both [the] same and different in meaning....with each of its countless returns (recountings) the epithet refers [not only] to the same thing, but to a new instance of the same old thing'.²³

What Nagy refers to as 'recollecting forward', Aitken describes as 'reactualization' entailing the 'identification of the "there and then" of scripture and the "here and now" of the present situation of the community'.²⁴ In other words, a deeper meaning inherent

within a story may develop while remaining consistent with, but not exaggerating, the original context. In this sense, Nagy states, 'Meaning is thus "inherent" in the context, not "conferred" exclusively by the context.'²⁵ Mark's proclamation endeavours to describe the role suffering plays not only in the life of Jesus but also in the life of the believer.

3 Plot and Resolution

In 4:41, the disciples ask, 'Who then is this?' The answer to the disciples' quest for Jesus' identity looms large in Mark's plot. In the narrative, the passion predictions function as the dominate and recurring theme. In the scheme of Mark's writing, Jesus does not offer his death as a proof of anything. However, Mark offers the Cross as evidence of Jesus' divine Sonship.

An element of irony occurs when the first to 'see' is not one of the apostles but the Roman centurion (15:39)—a particular twist that would have possessed poignant meaning if Mark's initial audience were in fact Roman nationals who did not possess a Jewish heritage. Here, the centurion's declarative claim of Jesus as 'Son of God' serves as the climax of the narrative, at least in so far as evidence for Mark's claim in 1:1 is concerned.²⁶

Granted, a 'voice from heaven' declares, 'You are my Son' in 1:11 and

a human voice declares Jesus to be 'the Holy One of God' in 1:24 and 'Son of the Most High God' in 5:7. However, Mark attributes the knowledge of the latter human assertions to an evil spirit. Furthermore, Mark's version of Peter's confession in 8:29 does not include the title, 'Son of the living God', as in Matthew 16:16. And, although the High Priest (by way of accusation) comes very close to using the expression, 'Son of God,' Mark is careful to avoid the phrase and recounts the High Priest's words as, 'Son of the Blessed One?' in 14:61.

Thus, Mark informs the reader at the onset that Jesus is the Son of God but reserves any human witness of this claim until Jesus' death on the cross. Within Mark's structure, the plot is able to resolve only by way of the cross.²⁷

Similarly, it is Jesus' death on the cross, rather than the resurrection, that serves as the pivotal action and is the hinge-pin, so to say, on which the story swings. Once it is clear that it is only after Jesus' death that the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God can be grasped, then it is possible to see the manner by which Mark weaves the Cross through the book.

As Roy Harrisville demonstrates, when one reads the Gospel of Mark from end to beginning, 'that is, from Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross in 15:34 to the report of John the Baptist's arrest in 1:14, the death motif is

easily recognizable as a constant'.²⁸ Irrespective of how Mark's centurion may have conceived the title, 'Son of God', such a title is the one Mark highlights for Jesus and one that may be properly understood only in light of and after Jesus' death on the cross.²⁹

III The Cross and Jesus' Identity at a Glance

Numerous scholars have contemplated the role of the Cross in Mark. In 1983, Craig Evans suggested a growing consensus among scholars that Mark's Gospel 'should be understood as developing a *theologia crucis*' and that this theology of the Cross is understandable in Mark in 'terms of suffering and the cross rather than in terms of miracle, vision, and apparition'.³⁰ Ten years later Robert Gundry published perhaps the most extensive work to date on Mark's use of the Cross. For Gundry, Mark does not use a 'theology of suffering' to correct an overemphasis on a 'theology of glory'. To the contrary, he

²⁰ E.g., 1 Cor. 11:23-26 and 15:3-5; 1 Pet. 2:22-25; select passages from the Epistle of Barnabas; and Hebrews 5:7-10, 6:4-8, and 13:10-16.

²¹ See Gregory Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 52.

²² Aitken, *Jesus' Death in Early Christian Memory*, 15. See also Shmuel Feuerstein, *Biblical and Talmudic Antecedents of Mediated Learning Experience Theory: Educational and Didactic Implications for Inter-Generational Cultural Transmission* (Israel: ICLEP, 2002), 135-138.

²³ Nagy, *Poetry as Performance*, 52.

²⁴ Aitken, *Jesus' Death in Early Christian Memory*, 22-23.

²⁵ Nagy, *Poetry as Performance*, 52, n 39.

²⁶ See George Nickelsburg, 'The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative', *HTR* 73 (Jan-Apr 1980): 175. Cf., France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 610 and 659 and Fredrikson, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 32.

²⁷ Gnilka, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 264. Also, Christopher Bryan, *A Preface to Mark: Notes on the Gospel in its Literary and Cultural Settings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 119.

²⁸ Roy A. Harrisville, *Fracture: The Cross as Irreconcilable in the Language and Thought of the Biblical Writers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 125-26. For a detailed description of this reverse reading, see 126-27.

²⁹ See Nickelsburg, 'The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative', 175. 'The anarthrous [without the article] form of the noun (hyios) may not express Mark's view of the uniqueness of Jesus' sonship. However, even if it does not, the language is appropriate to a pagan soldier;' For a more extensive treatment, see France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 660 and Watts, *The Gospel of Mark*, 24.

³⁰ Craig A. Evans, 'The Function of Isaiah 6:9-10 in Mark and John', *NovT* 24:2 (April 1982): 137-8.

suggests that Mark has glorified the passion.³¹ As an unabashed apology for the Cross, he insists that Mark contains 'no ciphers, no hidden meanings, [and] no sleight of hand'.³²

Gundry confirms Mark's gospel as a proclamation but maintains that Mark's intention was evangelistic in nature (i.e., for the unconverted) and not for a supposed-suffering community of believers.³³ He argues that the phrase 'Son of God' is original to the prologue but maintains that 1:1 does not function as the overarching theme of the book. Here, Gundry joins others who link 1:1-8 as the opening of Mark's gospel.³⁴ Furthermore, even though he highlights Jesus' experience on the cross as a critical moment in revealing his divine identity as the Son of God, he suggests that the tearing of the temple curtain (15:38)—and not the cross or manner of death—provides the occasion for the centurion's 'son of god' claim (15:39).³⁵

Michael Bird traces two prominent themes in Mark: Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom of God and Jesus' pending crucifixion. He indicates that the Cross signifies the coming of the kingdom of God in power. Bird suggests that the connection between Jesus' death and the coming kingdom is not explicit but only indirectly linked in Mark 2:18-22, 14:22-25, 14:62, and 15:1-40. He states, 'Jesus speaks of his death as establishing a new order and fulfilling the hope of Israel by redeeming their

sins and in doing so, *he demonstrates the link between his death and the kingdom* (emphasis original).'³⁶

For Bird, suffering is not the antecedent to glory but, so to say, two sides of the same coin. He argues that the centurion's confession serves as the climax of Mark's Christology and demonstrates how it points to Jesus kingship. He states, 'As sonship engenders a commission, it is likely that Jesus' sonship entails going to the cross...it is only at the cross that Jesus' sonship is properly recognized and acclaimed.'³⁷ Bird maintains that Mark connects divine issues of Sonship and kingship, with Jesus' mission of redemption, at the cross.

For Donald Juel, the themes of Messiah and temple are so closely related to Jesus' death that the story of Jesus the crucified Messiah is the 'second level [underlying theme] of the story...even if Jesus never made such a statement.'³⁸ Building on Juel's work, Nickelsburg presses the issue of Messiah and Temple further by suggesting that 'the death and resurrection of Jesus means the end of the old order and the Messiah's building of a new, spiritual temple—the church'.³⁹

Juel links all three passion predic-

tions with Jesus' identity and highlights the combination of 'Christ, the Son of God' (1:1) and 'Christ, the Son of the Blessed One' (14:61). Furthermore, he argues that Mark uses Son of God as a messianic title and that he intends it as such in 15:39, even if the centurion did not understand it on that level.⁴⁰ For Juel, the Cross reveals the Messiah as the Son of God. Others have offered similar conclusions.⁴¹ From this perspective, Mark's Jesus does not reject the title of Messiah, even if he favours the title 'son of man'. Rather, Mark seeks to demonstrate how Jesus reinterprets the concept. In opposition to first-century notions about the coming Messiah, Mark presents Jesus as the Messiah who is the Son who must die and rise again.⁴²

James Bailey demonstrates how Mark used the so-called 'secrecy motif' to show his audience how the cross reveals the identity of Jesus.⁴³ For Bai-

ley, and as noted earlier in this paper, the reader is informed early in the story that Jesus is the Son of God, first by the narrator and then through the witness of a heavenly voice (1:1, 11; also 9:7). He highlights how the reader must have been amazed as Jesus silenced the evil spirits that recognized him (1:25, 34) and later calls his own disciples to silence (8:30).

Taking a different perspective, John Keenan contemplates the Cross motif from a Mahayana perspective as the sign of true abandonment.⁴⁴ Upon viewing the abandonment of Jesus on the cross, Keenan suggests that the centurion makes his confession of Jesus as 'son of God'. He argues that Mark consistently suppressed the human confession of this title because of its 'linkage with miracles' and proffers instead that the title ascribed by the centurion must be linked with Jesus' death on the cross. He states, 'Here, where no miracles happen, the centurion, not a disciple, sees the truth that Jesus, dying in abandonment of all self-support, is the son of God.'⁴⁵ From Keenan's perspective, the centurion witnessed Jesus' abandonment and emptying of self—acts that genuinely displayed divine-like qualities in ways the religious practice of the day never had. In regards to abandonment, I suggest that Keenan is referring to Jesus relinquishing all attachments and desires of self and that it is in this moment of

⁴⁰ See Juel, *Messiah and Temple*, 83. Also William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Greig; (UK: James Clarke, 1971), 76-77.

⁴¹ See William Campbell, 'Engagement, Disengagement and Obstruction: Jesus' Defense Strategies in Mark's Trial and Execution Scenes', *JSNT* 26:3 (Mar 2004): 289, Gnika, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 252, and Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, 73-81, esp., 76-77.

⁴² For issues related to first-century perceptions of the Messiah, see Nickelsburg, 'The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative', 168. Also consider Campbell, 'Engagement, Disengagement and Obstruction', 290, n. 24 where he states, 'Mark's gospel devotes considerable energy to correcting this [Messianic] misconception (e.g., 8:29-37; 10:33-11:10; 12:13-17, 35-37; 14:61-62).'

⁴³ James L. Bailey, 'Perspectives on the Gospel of Mark', *CuTM* 12:1 (Feb 1985): 18. Cf., Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*.

⁴⁴ John P. Keenan, *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahayana Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 384. In regards to abandonment, I suggest that Keenan is referring to Jesus relinquishing all attachments and desires of self.

⁴⁵ Keenan, *The Gospel of Mark*, 384.

³¹ Gundry, *Mark*, 1-15, 1022-26.

³² Gundry, *Mark*, 1.

³³ Gundry, *Mark*, 1022-26.

³⁴ Gundry, *Mark*, 29-33.

³⁵ Gundry, *Mark*, 950-951.

³⁶ Michael Bird, 'The Crucifixion of Jesus as the Fulfillment of Mark 9:1', *TJ* 24:1 (2003): 27, 29.

³⁷ Bird, 'The Crucifixion of Jesus', 29-30.

³⁸ Donald Juel, *Messiah and Temple: A Study of Jesus' Trial before the Sanhedrin in the Gospel of Mark* (Dissertation series—Society of Biblical Literature; no. 31; Missoula: Scholars, 1977), 57.

³⁹ Nickelsburg, 'The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative', 177. Compare with Juel, *Messiah and Temple*, 208-9.

abandonment that Jesus' divine nature is publically revealed for all to see.

In light of this cursory review, I affirm Gundry's analysis that Mark essentially glorifies the passion and Bird's assertion that it is only at the cross that Jesus' Sonship is properly recognized. However, I would argue that Mark constructs his story in this manner in order to demonstrate the connection between Jesus' suffering and the suffering of his audience rather than primarily for evangelistic purposes.

In contrast to Juel, I do not think that Mark is endeavouring to highlight directly the Jewish conception of Messiah but I do agree with him that the passion predictions and cross event are intended to highlight the identity of Jesus. The confession of the centurion does not point to Jesus' work of redemption but as a revelation of his identity and affirms Mark's claim in 1:1.

As noted at the beginning, Mark combines the passion predictions, issues of identity, and the cross event into one overarching motif in order to demonstrate to his audience that the revelation of Jesus' identity is truly made known through the Cross. The question to explore now is how Mark's point correlates to the experience of his audience.

IV The Passion Narratives in Perspective

As an author, Mark uses the cross event, which was a source of confusion for the Twelve, as a lens to give meaning to Jesus' lessons on suffering (passion predictions) and identity. The co-

alescing of these three components—the Cross motif in the story—becomes Mark's proof for the opening claim in 1:1. In order to consider Mark's three-sided or triangular argument, it may prove helpful to identify similar characteristics in each passion prediction (Mk. 8:31, 9:30-32, and 10:32-34). Each passage contains (1) an element of misunderstanding or secrecy, (2) a prediction of suffering, death, and resurrection, and (3) an element involving the identity of either Jesus or his followers.⁴⁶

First, elements of secrecy exacerbate issues of misunderstanding or confusion. When speaking to the disciples about his mission or purpose, Jesus either calls them to silence or speaks to them in private (away from the crowds). From the disciples' point of view, Jesus does not explicitly address the source of their confusion. To the contrary, lessons on identity or predictions of suffering only worsen the situation. I suggest Mark used issues of confusion or matters of secrecy in the passion predictions in order to demonstrate that the believer's confusion over matters of identity and suffering could be explained only when contemplated retrospectively through the lens of the Cross. In other words, the disciples must 'see' Jesus die on the cross before they can understand the significance of either his or their own suffering or identity.

Second, Peter's resistance to Jesus' mention of dying in 8:31ff is followed by a pericope of what a true disciple 'looks' like. For Mark, a follower of

⁴⁶ See also Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, 269-70, for a similar construction.

Jesus suffers. His use of the word *dei* (must), in 8:31, demonstrates Mark's intent in the story. Jesus must (*dei*) go the cross before his identity can be fully known. Bryan suggests Mark's use of *dei* as a 'veiled reference to God's purpose,'⁴⁷ which is then answered in 10:45, while Brooks indicates that this verb implies divine necessity and connects its use to Isaiah 52 and 53.⁴⁸ In similar fashion, Juel translates *dei* as 'necessary' indicating that Jesus' death 'occurs according to the will of God'.⁴⁹

In light of this emphasis, one might conclude that Jesus' death in and of itself was the will of God. However, Balla nuances the use of *dei* in a slightly different manner by suggesting that Jesus' obedience to God's will would result in his death.⁵⁰ The important distinction in Balla's translation indicates that Jesus did not seek death *per se*, but that he sought to do God's will even if God's will meant dying in the process. Furthermore, Mark not only includes the notion that Jesus must suffer and die but that he must also rise again. If Jesus anticipated that his obedience to God would result in his death, he could likewise expect that God would vindicate him as well.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Bryan, *A Preface to Mark*, 104.

⁴⁸ James A. Brooks, *Mark*, (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 136. 'The most obvious Scripture is Isa 52:13-53:12, which also avoids the title "Messiah"'. See also France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 335 and Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, 257-65, 270-84.

⁴⁹ Juel, *Messiah and Temple*, 98.

⁵⁰ Balla, 'What did Jesus think about his approaching death?', 249, esp., n. 41.

⁵¹ See Balla, 'What did Jesus think about his approaching death?', 249.

Thus, the goal for Jesus was not suffering, death, or resurrection; rather it was obedience to God and serving one another.⁵²

Finally, issues of identity-or status—are of critical importance in the passion predictions. For Mark, identity is revealed through suffering. Obedience and servanthood define the status or identity of Christ and his followers. Juel notes how Jesus' words seem to call for martyrdom with talk of denying self, taking up the cross, and losing one's own life but concludes, 'It is not so much the prospect of death that is the focus. The issue seems more a matter of status [identity].'⁵³ The disciples ask, 'Who is this man?' But Jesus' response is in regard to who they must be.

After hearing Jesus' prediction for the second time (9:31), the disciples exhibit their lack of understanding by arguing over 'who was the greatest' (9:33-34). Mark follows this episode with the pericope of 'the first being last and servant of all' and with a lesson on the position of children in the kingdom of God (9:35-37). Here Mark emphasizes his point—that identity and status among Jesus' followers will not be measured in terms of human greatness but in matters of submission and humility.

The issue of status is most clearly developed following Jesus' final prediction of death in 10:35-45. Here James and John request, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory' (10:37). Mark does not

⁵² See Bryan, *A Preface to Mark*, 100-01.

⁵³ Donald Juel, *The Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 129-31.

explain what the sons of Zebedee meant by the term 'glory'. However, Jesus' response indicates the brothers' failure to understand what Christ's glory entailed or even how to obtain such positions. Jesus rather cryptically answers by telling them that they will indeed suffer and be identified with him (10:39)—although it is unlikely that they understood his answer at the time. Furthermore, he indicates that the 'right and left-hand' positions are not for him to bequeath. Ironically, of course, the positions James and John covet end up being occupied by two thieves at the crucifixion—one on the right and one on the left—an honour they earned by breaking the law!

Nevertheless, Mark constructs his story in such a way to demonstrate that the chief seats next to Jesus in his glory are not positions of exaltation or respect, rather they are positions of suffering and rejection. By ending the discussion with a lesson on servanthood, Jesus explains that identification, rather than position, with him comes by obedience to God and through service to one another. The declaration in 10:45 effectively summarizes the lessons on status and identity, both for Jesus and for his followers, and provides substance and meaning, not only to the impending cross event, but also to the present sufferings of Mark's audience.

V Conclusion

The argument in this paper maintains that Mark used the passion predictions consistently within an established tradition. Sufficient scholarship exists to indicate that Mark was building on a well-known tradition traceable not

only to the apostles but, in some manner or another, to Jesus himself. Furthermore, the value Mark places on the Cross as a theological concept was also consistent with an early tradition. For even the writings of the apostle Paul, generally accepted as pre-dating the writing of Mark, provide numerous examples of the Cross motif, commonly known as 'Paul's gospel', demonstrating its central importance within the early church.⁵⁴ The manner in which Mark unites the passion predictions, lessons on identity, and the cross event (the Cross motif in the story) serves as a lens enabling the recipients to see Jesus the Son of God and to hear the proclamation of 'Mark's gospel'.

Using a narrative critical approach, I have attempted to explain what role the Cross motif plays in the story of Mark's Gospel. The arrangement of the passion predictions in Mark indicates that Jesus anticipated that his obedience to God would result in his death in Jerusalem. Lessons involving status and identity—for Jesus and of his followers—are of primary importance. Here, the horizons of Christ and his followers become fused. As Aitken remarks, 'the fate of the individual and the constitution of the community are inextricably woven together.'⁵⁵ Within the construct of Mark's proclamation, the goal for Jesus was not suffering,

rather it was obedience to God and serving one another. Obedience and servanthood are what define the status or identity of Christ and what must identify his followers.

Finally, Mark uses the episode of the cross as evidence that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. The cross event serves as the pivotal action in Mark's plot and provides what I have described as the third side to Mark's triangular presentation (lessons of identity, predictions of suffering, and the cross event). Each element depends upon the other, forming the

guiding principle in his gospel. Even if one maintains that the phrase 'Son of God' is not original to the text (1:1), the subsequent addition may reasonably indicate that an early copyist recognized the same plot resolution maintained in this paper and added the phrase for clarity. Consequently, the narrative of Mark challenges the reader to 'see' who Jesus is in light of the Cross and then to understand who they are in light of their own sufferings. Mark invites the reader to see as the centurion saw and proclaim Jesus as the Son of God.

⁵⁴ Consider Rom 6:6; 1 Cor 1:13, 17-18, 23-24; 2:2; 2 Cor 13:4; Gal 2:20, 3:1, 5:11, 24, 6:12-14; Phil 2:8, and 3:18. Also, the central nature of the Cross motif consistent with Paul's gospel is evident in Eph 2:16, Col 1:20, and 2:14-15.

⁵⁵ Aitken, *Jesus' Death in Early Christian Memory*, 26.