

# TRANSFIGURED UNDERSTANDING — A CRITICAL NOTE ON MARK 9:2-13 AS A PAROUSIA PREVIEW

by Ben Witherington III\*

It is the great merit of Mary Ann Tolbert's recent intriguing study of Mark, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective*<sup>1</sup> that she forces us to examine the parts of Mark's narrative in the light of the whole, instead of simply dissecting it into individual isolated pericopes. She also stresses the need to have a sense of the flow of the narrative if we wish to understand what it is that Mark wants us to know about the subject matter he is treating. Mark is a skillful theological editor of his material, and we have a right to expect that the *sequence* of events and sayings recorded in this Gospel may have as much to tell us about the meaning Mark intends to convey to the authorial audience as the actual *substance* of the various pericopes themselves.

Bearing the above in mind, I would like to suggest that it is necessary, especially with a much-controverted story like that found in Mk 9:2-13, that we pay especially close attention to what has immediately preceded such a pericope. In this case, Mk 8:38 and Mk 9:1 require careful scrutiny. Most scholars are in agreement that Mk 8:38 refers to what will be true of the Son of Man at the parousia. Yet it is striking that there are at least two words in this verse that are certainly capable of having a double meaning. The verb *erchomai* can of course mean "to come," but it also has the sense of "to appear" or "to make an appearance" as well (cf. Jn 4:27, Rom 9:9). Secondly, the word *angeloi* has as its most basic meaning "messenger," which may refer either to a human or to a supernatural messenger depending on the context. Mark does use the term *angeloi* to refer to what we call angels (Mk 3:13, but cf. Mk 16:5 where he chooses a different term altogether) but this does not mean he could not use the word in its more generic sense in another context (cf. Mk 1:2). Suppose then we translate the last clause of Mk 8:38, not as is usually done, but rather "when he appears in the glory of his Father with the holy messengers." It may also be that the use of *erchomai* in Mk 9:1b has a similar thrust as it does in Mk 8:38 in which case it should read "until you see the Dominion of God appearing in power." How does this illuminate the story of the Transfiguration?

Firstly, we are told in Mk 9:2 that Jesus underwent some sort of metamorphosis before Peter, James, and John, and on the other hand in Mk 9:4 we are told that Elijah with Moses "appeared" to them, and they (i.e., Elijah and Moses) were *talking* to Jesus. As the story stands in the Markan outline there is no reason why we could not see in Elijah and Moses the holy messengers previously referred to, who now convey a divine message to Jesus.<sup>2</sup> This in turn is followed by a divine message for the disciples from heaven (vs. 7). Furthermore, the description of Jesus' clothing in vs. 3 can easily match up

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with the reference in Mk 8:38 to a glorious appearing.

Secondly, the coming of the Dominion, even with power, has already been evidenced during the ministry of Jesus according to Mark's presentation of the Gospel. Whether we think of the exorcisms, the other sorts of healing, the nature miracles, or simply the preaching of the Good News which changes human lives, all of these events are meant to be interpreted in light of what Jesus announces at the very beginning of Mark's Gospel — the Dominion of God is *already* at hand/near, or as Tolbert would translate the verb in the perfect in Mk 1:15 — "has come near."<sup>3</sup> The words and deeds of Jesus up to Mk 9:1 have already been manifesting the Dominion come with power. The emphasis in Mk 9:1 however is on *seeing* the Dominion appear in power, in short on some sort of epiphany. This is precisely what we encounter in Mk 9:2ff. Thus it is not difficult to see that the sequence Mk 8:38 and Mk 9:1 is preparing the hearer or reader for the story about the Transfiguration, though of course there is also probably a secondary allusion, at least in Mk 8:38, to the parousia.<sup>4</sup>

Once we have observed the flow of the narrative, other considerations also make a primary allusion to the parousia in Mk 9:1 seem doubtful.<sup>5</sup> Mark is telling his audience in 9:1 that some of the first disciples of Jesus would live to see the Dominion of God appear in power. There is no good reason why the immediately succeeding pericope could not be Mark's attempt to show how this promise was fulfilled. This certainly makes better sense of Mk 9:1 in the Markan outline than seeing in it a reference to the parousia.<sup>6</sup> If, as is likely, Mark was writing around 68 A.D. or *later*, it seems highly unlikely that the Evangelist would have placed on Jesus' lips a saying calling the truthfulness of Jesus' proclamation into question since he knew the parousia had not yet come to pass, and according to Mark's own discussion of preliminary events in Mk 13 likely *would* not do so for some time to come.

This leads to one further point. If indeed we are meant to connect Mk 8:38, Mk 9:1 and the pericope about Transfiguration it becomes increasingly unlikely that Mark saw this latter event as a preview of the resurrection (much less a retrojected resurrection narrative).<sup>7</sup> Rather, texts like Mk 13:26 and Mk 14:62 and the language used there suggest he saw Mk 9:2ff. as a preview of the parousia, where a glorified Jesus, the OT saints, and the followers of Jesus would all be reunited in a celebration not unlike that undertaken during the feast of booths (cf. Mk 9:5 and Mk 14:25).

When Mark wants to refer to the parousia and its sequel there are at least four elements that come to the surface — the glorious appearing of Jesus with clouds, the fellowship of Jesus with the saints, the confirmation of Jesus' identity once and for all, and the coming of the Dominion of God with power. All four of these elements also appear very clearly in Mk 9:2ff. Thus we must conclude that while Mark does indeed see in this story a preview of coming attractions, it is not the resurrected Jesus but the Christ come in glory that is foreshadowed here. Mk 9:1, as Mark intended his audience to understand it, must be seen primarily as a reference to the event which foreshadows the parousia, not a reference to the parousia itself.

As Tolbert and others have been reminding us of late, it is not enough to

dissect the parts of Mark, rather we must see the parts in light of both the immediate literary context and the larger Markan whole. If we heed this reminder we may be able to avoid largely fruitless debates about retrojected resurrection stories. Such debates are never really settled in the long run in any case since the earliest text of Mark we can presently recover contains no resurrection appearance stories, and some would even say Mark never intended to include such stories in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Published by Fortress Press, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> That there are numerous correspondences between Markan eschatological material and that found in Revelation is well known. Cf. for instance E. S. Fiorenza *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 35ff. It is intriguing to me that in Rev 11:1ff. we find a discussion of the two witnesses, who in vs. 6 are described very clearly as having the abilities ascribed to Elijah and Moses respectively in the OT. (cf. C. Rowland *The Open Heaven* (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1982), p. 419.). These two figures are said in 11:7 to give testimony, and in 11:10 to be great prophets. In addition they are said to be slain and resurrected and their appearance in the latter condition is said to terrify those who saw them. Furthermore, a heavenly voice speaks to them, and they are taken up into heaven in a cloud. Notice too that the death of these witnesses is said to take place in the same city where also "their Lord" was crucified. The various correspondences between this account and that found in the sequence of pericopes from Mk 8:31-9:13 are too numerous to simply ignore. Is Rev 11:1ff. a retelling of the Transfiguration story without the transfigured Jesus as the focus? Is Mk 9:2ff. the casting of a Jesus story in light of some sort of Jewish eschatological tradition about the roles of Moses and Elijah at the end of human history, that we find in some form in Rev 11? These possibilities deserve further reflection, and I incline to think that the latter is more probable than the former. This would comport with the view argued in this article that Mk 9:2ff. should be seen as parousia preview.

<sup>3</sup> Tolbert *Sowing the Gospel*, 117.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting, however, that when Mark clearly speaks of that future event he talks about the Son of Man coming in or with clouds, not with holy messengers cf. Mk 13:26, Mk 14:62.

<sup>5</sup> I do not rule out a parousia "echo" in Mk 9:1., but I think it is not the main thrust of the verse.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. my study comparing and contrasting the eschatology of Jesus and Paul entitled *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World* (Edinburgh/Downers Grove: I.V. Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Since the authentic text of Mark as we now have it ends at Mk 16:8, it is an argument from silence to suggest that this is a retrojected resurrection story, since we don't know what a Markan resurrection appearance narrative would look like. We do however have Mk 13:26 and 14:62 to guide us in understanding how Mark viewed the parousia and there are notable parallels between Mk 9:2ff. and those texts including "power," "glory," "clouds" and a transfigured Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> I must confess, however, to still being very unpersuaded that Mk 16:8 was the original intended ending of this Gospel. The Gospel story is not meant to end like a Greek tragedy, with women fleeing from the tomb in fear, and speaking to no one. This is hardly Good News according to Mark's own definition of that concept, for he had already spoken of a reunion with Jesus in Galilee, and throughout the Gospel Good News amounted to something positive happening between God and Human beings.

