

## THE PARADOX OF AUTHORITY AND SERVANTHOOD IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

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The Gospel of Mark has been described as a paradoxical gospel, a riddle that teases its readers' response, and a narrative that possesses an enigmatic and puzzling character.<sup>1</sup> This paradoxical and puzzling character is seen clearly in the paradox of authority and servanthood in Mark's Gospel. The paradox highlights the relationship of two important Marcan motifs: the Christological motif of authority and the discipleship motif of servanthood—motifs that interact intricately in Mark. This paradox serves as a key Marcan rhetorical device that urges readers to show servanthood in their exercise of authority within the community of believers and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

### DEFINITION OF PARADOX

A paradox is a statement that departs from accepted opinion (the etymological nuance), or an apparently self-contradictory or ab-

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Bailey, "Perspectives on the Gospel of Mark," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12 (1985): 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> The few Marcan scholars who have discussed paradox have treated this issue in a generally cursory manner. These scholars and their works are Robert Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 184-94; Philip Davis, "Mark's Christological Paradox," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35 (1989): 3-18; Dorothy A. Lee-Pollard, "Powerlessness as Power: A Key Emphasis in the Gospel of Mark," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 173-88; and Demetrios Trakatellis, *Authority and Passion* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 1987).

surd statement (the derivational nuance).<sup>3</sup> Thus a "paradox" is an unusual and apparently self-contradictory rhetorical statement or concept that departs dramatically from accepted opinion. Mark used the paradox to jolt and challenge his readers to depart from the accepted opinion that servanthood is incompatible with authority.

Mark included various examples that indicate the prevailing opinion on authority and servanthood during his day. For example he recorded Jesus' words, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them" (Mark 10:42). But Jesus challenged His disciples to depart from society's prevailing principle on authority (viz., that the persons of authority are the ones who are to rule over the ones with little or no authority): "But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant" (10:43). Thus Mark dramatically presented his readers with the challenge to become servants.

In its derivational meaning a paradox involves an apparently self-contradictory statement or concept that can convey unified truth (i.e., the polaric aspect), despite the existing contrariness of two opposing assertions (i.e., the antinomic aspect). The antinomic aspect of the derivational meaning is seen clearly in the verbal paradox of authority and servanthood: "save his life" and "lose his life" (8:35); "first" and "last" (9:35; 10:31); "great" and "servant" (10:43); "first" and "slave of all" (10:44). These opposites emphasize the divergence between authority and servanthood.

In addition the polaric aspect of the derivational meaning is also evident in Mark's Gospel. By tracing the disciples' failure to understand the paradoxical nature of Jesus and His work, Mark was encouraging his readers not to commit the same miscomprehension of this paradox. The authoritative one is the one who serves, and the proof of that authority is in the service rendered on behalf of others.

#### DESCRIPTION OF PARADOX

Five elements make a paradox recognizable. First, a paradox is a "both-and" proposition (as in Mark's emphasis on both authority

<sup>3</sup> "Etymological nuance" refers to the original meaning of the word "paradox" (παράδοξος). It combines the preposition παρά, "contrary to," and the noun δόξα, "opinion," thus producing in its earliest stages the meaning of "contrary to opinion or expectation." "Derivational nuance" refers to the shift in meaning later in the eighteenth century through the influence of Renaissance poets and Christian theologians since Soren Kierkegaard.

and servanthood). Second, a paradox has tension and/or conflict. In the Gospel of Mark certain key characters (e.g., the hostile religious leaders and the misunderstanding disciples) failed to grasp either the authority motif or the servanthood motif because of their paradoxical relationship. Third, a paradox has an element of awe, surprise, or amazement. The crowds who witnessed Jesus' exorcisms and healings responded with amazement or marvel (1:27; 2:12). They were shocked by the tremendous display of Jesus' power and authority. They also were amazed by who Jesus is and the seeming paradoxical nature of His person. Fourth, a paradox is a rhetorical or stylistic figure. Mark used paradox as an intentional rhetorical device to influence his readers to follow a servanthood-motivated lifestyle in the exercise of their authority. Fifth, a paradox needs an audience. Mark encouraged his readers to reflect on its penetrating truth individually, and then to undergo a reversal of standards consistent with Jesus' values.

#### METHOD IN THE STUDY OF THE PARADOX

Reader-response criticism, narrative criticism, and rhetorical criticism can help surface the paradoxical interplay between the motifs of authority and servanthood in Mark's Gospel.<sup>4</sup> Such an interplay is to be viewed from the perspective of the implied readers (i.e., the idealized readers who have linguistic and literary competence to grasp the intentions of the text and the author).<sup>5</sup>

With the help of reader-response criticism, one can observe the impact of the paradox on the readers at the discourse level.<sup>6</sup> The relevant tools of this method (e.g., anticipation and retrospection) enable one to see how Mark addressed his readers at

<sup>4</sup> Recent discussions of these forms of biblical criticism may be found in John Paul Heil, *The Gospel of Mark as a Model for Action: A Reader-Response Commentary* (New York: Paulist, 1993); Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1994); Stanley E. Porter, "Literary Approaches to the New Testament: From Formalism to Deconstruction and Back," in *Approaches to New Testament Study*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and David Tombs (Sheffield: Academic, 1995), 77–128; Mark Allen Powell, "Narrative Criticism," in *Hearing the New Testament*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 239–55; Stephen H. Smith, *A Lion with Wings: A Narrative-Critical Approach to Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: Academic, 1996); and Joel F. Williams, *Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: Academic, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> The "implied" readers, also called "ideal" or "informed" readers, refer to imagined reader-critics who read the narrative, who are influenced by the rhetorical features of the text, and who come to accept the values and commitments of the writer.

<sup>6</sup> The term "discourse level" refers to Mark's means of narrative rhetoric or how he presented the content of the narrative in addressing his readers.

critical sections where the paradox is present. Moreover, this method helps distinguish between the dramatic (i.e., through events and characters) and verbal instances (i.e., through paradoxical sayings) of the authority/servanthood paradox. In relation to the verbal instances of the paradox, readers find a way to comprehend not only the antinomic meaning (i.e., the divergence of two polar opposites) but also the polaric meaning (i.e., convergence of two polar opposites) of the paradox's antithetical sides. They understand the sayings by transforming the paradox into metaphor(s).

Narrative criticism investigates Mark's characterization of certain figures in the narrative in reference to the authority and servanthood motifs. The tools of characterization include direct description by the storyteller, other characters' responses, individuals' words and thoughts, and self-characterization. These tools help portray those characters who had authority and yet served Jesus (e.g., John the Baptist and Joseph of Arimathea), those individuals who did not have authority but still served Jesus (e.g., Bartimaeus and the woman who anointed Jesus), those who had authority but did not serve Jesus (e.g., the religious leaders, the rich man, and Judas Iscariot), and those who had authority but struggled to serve Jesus and others (e.g., the disciples). These characters serve as Mark's ingenious way of presenting the authority/servanthood paradox. In addition the motif of conflict between the religious leaders and Jesus regarding the issue of authority draws attention to the need to recognize the paradox and to emphasize the need for servanthood.

Rhetorical criticism enables readers to spot rhetorical indicators of the paradox (e.g., inclusios, chiasms, repetitions), along with the other rhetorical devices (e.g., the amazement motif and the probing question). These devices enable readers to reflect on the significance of the paradox and its relevance to them.

The following discussion applies the methods of reader-response criticism, narrative criticism, and rhetorical criticism in an eclectic approach to understanding the paradox of authority and servanthood in the Gospel of Mark.

#### APPLICATION OF AN ECLECTIC APPROACH TO THE MARCAN NARRATIVE

In addition to the prologue (1:1-15) and epilogue (15:42-16:8), the Book of Mark may be divided into three major sections. The first major section (1:16-8:21) has key dramatic instances of the paradox. Though both motifs of authority and servanthood are present, this first major section highlights Jesus' authority.

The second major section (8:22-10:52) features several verbal instances of the paradox within the narrative's three paradoxical discipleship discourses (8:27-38; 9:30-50; 10:32-445).

The third major section (11:1-15:41) highlights the servanthood motif (though it also has episodes that show authority), culminating in Jesus' passion and death, His highest expression of servanthood.

#### THE PARADOX OF AUTHORITY AND SERVANTHOOD IN MARK 1:1-8:21

In the first major section of Mark (1:1-8:21) readers are introduced to dramatic instances of the paradox of authority and servanthood. The prologue (1:1-15) includes four paradoxical juxtapositions of material (1:2-8, 9, 10-11, and 12-13) and the parallel patterning of John the Baptist and Jesus. These juxtapositions and patterning present the paradoxical merger of the two motifs of authority and servanthood at the very outset of the narrative, showing their importance and raising the need to determine more accurately the relationship between the two motifs through reading the entire narrative.

The authority/servant paradox in Mark 1:16-2:14 is seen in the lengthy presentation of acts of authority by Jesus,<sup>7</sup> and the attitudes and actions of servanthood by key persons in the story.<sup>8</sup> The import of Jesus' paradoxical nature is also seen in the crowd's sense of wonder and awe. The people's amazement functions rhetorically as negative portrayals of the characters' inability to comprehend Jesus and as a warning to readers not to imitate such a response.

In Mark 2:18-3:12 the authority/servanthood paradox is more dramatically evident in the conflict with and opposition by the religious authorities, who claimed authority for themselves but who did not wish to serve.<sup>9</sup> The negative characterization of these re-

<sup>7</sup> Instances that display Jesus' authority in Mark 1:16-2:14 are the call and the following (which manifests servanthood) of four disciples (1:16-20); Jesus' exorcism and teaching with authority (1:21-28); His healing of Simon's mother-in-law and her servanthood (1:29-31); Jesus' healing of the leper and His servanthood (1:40-45); Jesus' healing of the paralytic and His authority to forgive (2:1-12); the call and the following of one disciple (2:13-14). The importance of this string of authoritative events is emphasized by the framing of the two "call" stories in Mark 1:16-20 and 2:13-14.

<sup>8</sup> Jesus, Peter's mother-in-law, Peter and Andrew, James and John, and Levi are characters who show attitudes and acts of servanthood.

<sup>9</sup> The antagonistic questions the religious authorities raised showed their negative characterization (2:16, 18, 24; cf. vv. 6-7). Their questions were answered by Jesus with great authority (2:17, 19-22, 25-28). But what is paradoxical is that when Jesus asked them one question afterwards (3:4), they were silent and sought to kill the One who actually has authority and who serves (3:6).

religious leaders reveals their lack of comprehension of Jesus' paradoxical nature. Readers are thus warned not to overlook the importance of understanding Jesus and the paradox of authority and servanthood.

Similarly in Mark 3:13-6:30 opposition by the religious authorities intensified despite the extension of Jesus' authority.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the servanthood motif in this section underscores the importance of obedience and faith found in various characters in the story, especially the disciples and other minor characters who had no authority.<sup>11</sup> Faith and obedience are seen as key indicators of the servanthood required of disciples. Thus for them to appreciate Jesus' authority motif in the paradox, readers are to exemplify both faith and obedience, which the religious leaders did not demonstrate at all.

Mark 6:32-8:9 continues the dramatic paradox through the authority motif and the addition of more misunderstandings by Jesus' disciples.<sup>12</sup> These misunderstandings point up the danger of not being aware of who Jesus is. Mark implicitly urged his readers to grasp the truth that Jesus' authority and servanthood are key to understanding His nature.

In the last segment (8:10-21) of this major section, opposition by the religious leaders and misunderstanding by the disciples intensified." Ironically the religious leaders, who should have been aligned with God, continued to oppose and test Jesus, and the disciples, who were expected to understand Jesus, continued to misunderstand Him. This underscores the growing incomprehension of these characters regarding Jesus' paradoxical nature.

<sup>10</sup> Instances of authority and servanthood reflected in Mark 3:13-6:30 are Jesus' delegation of authority to the disciples (3:13-19), the increase in opposition against Jesus (3:20-35), Jesus' miraculous authority at the sea (4:35-41), exorcism of a Gerasene man and his obedience to Jesus (5:1-20), healings of Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman (5:21-43), the continuation of opposition (6:1-6), and the commissioning of the disciples and their obedience (6:7-30). The major section of Mark 3:13-6:30 is bracketed by Jesus' call of the Twelve (3:13-19) and His commissioning of them (6:7-31).

<sup>11</sup> These minor characters are the Gerasene man, Jairus, and the hemorrhaging woman.

<sup>12</sup> These events are seen in the feeding of the five thousand (6:32-44), Jesus' walking on water and the disciples' lack of insight (6:45-52), the continuation of opposition (7:1-23), the healing of the Syrophenician's daughter (7:24-30), the healing of the deaf/dumb and the onlookers' disobedience (7:31-37), and the feeding of the four thousand (8:1-9). These episodes juxtapose the motifs of authority and servanthood. In addition the coupling of the motifs of authority and misunderstanding is bracketed by two feeding miracles (6:32-44 and 8:1-9) from which the disciples gained no insight or understanding.

<sup>13</sup> In this section Mark combined further opposition by the religious leaders, who demanded a sign from Jesus (8:11), with further misunderstanding by the disciples (8:18, 21), who still gained no insight.

In view of this, readers are reminded of the need to understand the paradox so that they do not fall into the trap of opposing or misunderstanding Jesus.

#### THE PARADOX OF AUTHORITY AND SERVANTHOOD IN MARK 8:22-10:52

Mark 8:22–10:52, the major and central section of this Gospel, includes four references to Jesus' authority/servanthood paradox (8:35; 9:35; 10:31, 45).

In the "saving one's life"/"losing one's life" verbal paradox in Mark 8:35 Jesus showed that the pursuit of worldly authority (i.e., wishing to save one's life) was not His way, because it leads to eternal, spiritual ruin (i.e., losing one's life). Instead servanthood for the sake of Jesus and the gospel is His way because it leads to a glorious future (i.e., saving one's life). In the "first"/"last and servant of all" paradox in Mark 9:35, Jesus taught that being truly great in His sight (i.e., being first) demands an attitude of welcoming and caring for the insignificant and strangers in society (i.e., being last of all), and of ministering to them, even in insignificant ways (i.e., being servant of all). Jesus' "first"/"last" paradox in Mark 10:31 concludes His teaching in 10:1–30 that the way to have genuine authority is not by opposing Jesus (vv. 1–12) or hindering insignificant people who seek to come to Him (vv. 13–16) or valuing greatly one's own goodness and wealth (vv. 17–22), but by receiving God's kingdom humbly as a child (v. 15), forsaking everything to follow Jesus (v. 28), and believing that God is the God of the impossible (v. 27), who rewards those who follow Jesus for His sake and the gospel's (vv. 29–30). In the "great"/"servant" and "first"/"slave" paradoxes in Mark 10:45, Jesus stated that the greatest expression of true authority (i.e., being great and first) is seen in the desire to follow Jesus' example in showing servanthood and offering His life as a ransom for many (i.e., being servant and slave of all).

In addition to these four verbal statements on the paradox of authority and servanthood, paradox is seen in 8:22-10:52, in which key stories are strategically placed between paradoxical discourses. Inserted between the first and second discourses (8:27–38 and 9:30–50), are two accounts that emphasize Jesus' authority: His transfiguration (9:1–13) and His healing of a demon-possessed boy (9:14–29). Between the second and third discourses (9:30–50 and 10:32–45) are three stories featuring the motifs of opposition by the religious leaders (10:1–9), misunderstanding by the disciples (10:10–16, 23–31), and lack of faith by a person from the multitude (10:17–22). These three Marcan motifs—Jesus' authority, the religious authorities' opposition, and the disciples' lack of understanding—prompt readers not to op-

pose Jesus in the way the religious authorities did, nor to display lack of insight in the way the disciples did, but to appreciate Jesus' authority in light of His servanthood. Moreover, Mark carefully arranged Mark 8:22-10:52 by framing the three paradoxical discourses with two healings involving blind men (8:22-26 and 10:46-52). The inclusio of the two healing accounts shows not only Jesus' authority but also His actual servanthood, which resulted in sight for the blind men and an opportunity for each of them to follow Jesus.

The structure of this major section may be illustrated in this way:

- A . Healing of a blind man (8:22-26)
  - B. Discourse (8:27-38)
    - (Verbal instance of the paradox, 8:35)
    - C. Expressions of Jesus' authority (9:1-13, 14-29)
  - B.' Discourse (9:30-50)
    - (Verbal instance of the paradox, 9:35)
    - C.' Expressions of opposition, misunderstanding, and lack of faith (10:1-31)
    - (Verbal instance of the paradox, 10:31)
  - B." Discourse (10:32-45)
    - (Verbal instance of the paradox, 10:45)
- A.' Healing of a blind man (10:46-52)

#### THE PARADOX OF AUTHORITY AND SERVANTHOOD IN MARK 11:1-16:8

Mark 11:1-16:8 exemplifies Jesus' highest expression of servanthood, namely, His death on the cross. This last major section emphasizes that Jesus' followers must identify with Him and His servanthood despite opposition by religious (11:27-33; 12:13-17; 12:18-27; 14:1-2, 55-65) and political authorities (15:1-20, 24-26) and despite the failures of the disciples (14:26-31, 37, 40, 50-51, 66-72), especially Judas Iscariot (14:10-11, 43-45).

Though the motif of Jesus' authority is highlighted in various strategic passages of the Gospel (1:1-11, 12-14, 15-19, 20-25; 13:1-27; 14:17-31), the motif of His servanthood is emphasized particularly toward the end of the narrative, which records His passion and death (14:32-36; 63-65; 15:22-37). Also of note are actions of servanthood by the disciples (14:12-16), by those who have authority (12:28-34; 15:39, 42-47; 16:1-8), and by those who lack authority (12:42-44; 14:3-9, 21; 15:40-41). Moreover, several dramatic instances of the authority/servanthood paradox surface through Mark's juxtaposition of the two motifs (11:1-11; 12:38-40, 41-44; 13:1-27; 14:22-25, 32-42, 55-65; 15:22-37, 39, 42-47; 16:5-7). Remarkably two inclusios at the beginning and ending of Mark's Gospel frame the entire narrative. One inclusio is that of

John the Baptist and Joseph of Arimathea in 1:2–8 and 15:42–47, and the other is that of the ministering angels and the young man in 1:13 and 16:1–8. These two inclusions emphasize the lesson that the true pathway of authority is the way of service.

The paradox of authority and servanthood in Mark is intended to persuade Jesus' followers to balance these two motifs in their own discipleship role within the community of believers. One cannot exist without the other. The actions and attitudes of the religious authorities and of the disciples show that discarding the servanthood motif can be detrimental to one's faith. On the other hand Jesus and several minor characters show that both authority and servanthood are essential parts of discipleship.

Some characters in Mark lacked authority and others had it, and some lacked servanthood and some had it. These different characters underscore the need to display servanthood in the exercise of authority and discipleship. The absence of authority is no excuse for not being a servant toward others, nor is possession of authority.

The opposition toward Jesus by those who had authority and did not serve (*viz.*, the religious leaders) reveals their lack of comprehension regarding Jesus' paradoxical nature. Moreover, the misunderstanding of those who had authority but struggled to serve others (*viz.*, the disciples) points up the danger of misunderstanding Jesus.

In view of the opposition by the religious authorities and the misunderstanding of the disciples, readers are reminded of the need to understand the paradoxical nature of Jesus and the authority/servanthood paradox so that they do not fall into the trap of misunderstanding and opposing Him. In addition the sense of amazement and incomprehension by the crowds, the disciples, and the religious leaders functions rhetorically as a negative portrayal of these characters and as a warning not to imitate such inadequate responses.

In summary Mark's use of the authority/servanthood paradox in the narrative reinforces the truth that the way of authority is the way of service.

### CONCLUSION

The paradox of authority and servanthood is a key to understanding the relationship between Christology and discipleship in the Marcan narrative. This paradox reveals that following the authoritative Jesus means ministering to others with a heart of servanthood. "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

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