

Adverbial *πόθεν* in Mark 12:37

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Problem. In Mark 12:37, Jesus points out that David (in Psalm 110) speaks of the Christ as his “Lord,” and asks, And whence is he his *son*? The Synoptic Gospels Mark, Matthew, and Luke have these versions of the question,

Mk 12:37	καὶ πόθεν αὐτοῦ ἐστὶν υἱὸς	and whence is he his son?
Mt 22:45	πῶς υἱὸς αὐτοῦ ἐστὶν	how is he his son?
Lk 20:41	καὶ πῶς υἱὸς αὐτοῦ ἐστὶν	and how is he his son?

Now, *πόθεν* is related to *πῶς* by the suffix *-θεν* “from,” whence the “whence” of the above translation.¹ Both words occur elsewhere in Mark. Except in this passage, neither is substituted for the other in Matthew or Luke, nor is either replaced by the other in manuscripts. Pershbacher gives “how, in what way” as a meaning of *πόθεν*, and cites these two examples of that meaning:

Mk 8:4	How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?
Mk 12:37	How is he his son?

The first can be construed spatially (“from what source,” thus “where are we going to get all that bread from?”). For the second, that interpretation is less obvious.² The commentators accordingly wrestle with it. Swete 289 cites Demosthenes Crown 242: οὐκ ἔστι ταῦτα. . . πόθεν, for the equation whence = how. Rawlinson 175 “it is better to take the words as meaning ‘in what sense, then, is he his son.’” Taylor 492: “πόθεν (6:2, 8:4*) is used in the sense of πῶς, ‘how?’ . . . The question is ironical.”

Solution. I suggest that it is literal. Jesus says, in effect, “I have cited David for my claim that the Christ is David’s Lord. From *where* (from what equal authority)³ can you show that he is his son?” Jesus has a text to cite, while his opponents have none. So he wins – and with a certain flair, having posed an unanswerable question.⁴

If this nuance is not understood, then *πόθεν* is indeed a solecism: spatial *πόθεν* where nonspatial *πῶς* would be better Greek. This is how it is treated by Matthew and Luke, and also by many manuscripts. Some manuscripts (Sinaiticus uncorrected, Freer, Family 1, Family 13) go further, and harmonize Mark to Luke.

¹Blass §104 “Adverbs in *θεν*” answer the question “whence.”

²Arndt 686 lists only Mk 12:37 as a Synoptic example of meaning #3 “of cause or reason how, why, in what way;” so also Danker 838. This category may actually be empty; see below.

³So understood by Gundry (1993) 718f, but without visible effect, since later commentators still expound “how:” Perkins (1995), Evans (2001), Witherington (2001), Edwards (2002), Boring (2006), Yarbro Collins (2007), Stein (2008), and Marcus (2009).

⁴For another example of classical wit see Brooks **Interrogative** 54, and further n6 below.

Synoptic Implications. Mark's crudities are often altered by Matthew and Luke; the directionality of those alterations is one of the arguments for the Synoptic sequence Mk > Mt, Lk.⁵ The Matthew and Luke parallels to Mk 12:37 would count as such corrections, of seemingly wayward *πόθεν* to conventionally correct *πῶς* – except that here, the corrections are erroneous: they are based on a misreading. Mark's Greek is quite adequate to his purpose, and in Mk 12:37 he has given us a momentary glimpse of a Jesus lively in debate, and scoring a point by what amounts to wit.⁶

As for the theory that Mark, far from being the oldest Gospel, is a conflation of Matthew and Luke, let it be assumed that *πῶς* would here be better Greek than *πόθεν*. Having before him those two Gospels, all the supposed conflator Mark has to do to write presentable Greek is to retain the *πῶς* which is present in both his sources. Instead, he gratuitously deviates into the supposedly incorrect *πόθεν*.

Whence this deviation?

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⁵For passages in Mark likely “to give offence” and thus to have been altered by the other Synoptists, see Hawkins **Horae** 117f. For the priority of Mark, see also Brooks **Four**.

⁶Is there a hint of personal satisfaction as Jesus delivers this line? If so, changing witty *πόθεν* to routine *πῶς* might be meant to reduce it. Signs of human emotion in Jesus are often suppressed in the later Gospels. To the Hawkins 119 list of passages “seeming . . . unworthy of [Jesus],” which includes Mk 3:5 (anger at the Pharisees) and 10:14 (indignation at the disciples), one might add Mk 1:41 “moved with pity” (or its variant, “was angered”), 1:43 “sternly charged [the leper],” and 10:21 “Jesus, looking upon him, loved him,” all of which are absent in the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. See further Allen xxxi-xxxii.