

## Is Mark's Jesus a Davidic Messiah?

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It has been claimed that Mark contains a historical memory of Jesus as the Davidic Messiah, the one who would restore sovereignty to Israel. That claim rests on a dozen passages or groups of passages in Mark.<sup>1</sup> As a footnote to my reconstruction of Mark,<sup>2</sup> I here argue that these passages do not prove that point, and that the theory of a Historical Jesus who sought to realize God's promise to David cannot stand.

### Notes on Supposed Davidic Messiah Passages

**Mk 2:25-28** [Cites David as having eaten the Bread of the Presence, authorizing Jesus' disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath]. This passage is a controversy over the interpretation of the Torah, and has nothing to do with the Davidic Messiah.<sup>3</sup>

**Mk 4:1-9 and 21-33** [Preaching the coming Kingdom]. There is no explicit reference to the Davidic Messiah theme or to an earthly kingdom in these passages.

**Mk 10:47** [Bartimaeus hails "Jesus, thou Son of David"]. Preceded by, and probably connected with, a passage (Mk 10:28-45) in which Jesus predicts he will "give his life as a ransom for many;" this is suspect as containing divinization and other late elements.<sup>4</sup> Mk 10:17-25 teaches a view of the Kingdom as Heavenly rather than earthly, agreeing with other Markan mentions of the Kingdom of God or Heaven.<sup>5</sup>

**Mk 11:1-10** [Jesus' entry into Jerusalem evokes Zech 9:9 ("riding on an ass"); the crowd acclaims the coming "Kingdom of David"]. This, the most plausibly Davidic Messiah passage in Mark, is clearly an expression of belief in Jesus as a Davidic Messiah. But the claim is that of the crowd, not of Jesus. There is no reason to think that the expected kingdom will be earthly (as in the Davidic scenario) rather than heavenly (as in the rest of Mark). The passage is highly allusive, implying literary invention, and is prefaced by prophecies demonstrating Jesus' divine prescience or clairvoyance, which make it suspect as part of the divinization stratum in Mark.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The following list of passages is repeated from Brooks **Resurrection** 81.

<sup>2</sup>See Beckwith et al **Two Reconstructions**, in this volume.

<sup>3</sup>For an extended analysis of this passage, see Crossley **Date** 160-172.

<sup>4</sup>For the lateness of this theme within Mark, see Brooks **Divinization**. For the strong similarity of Mark's Passion to John's (unlike the rest of John), see Koester **History** 187-188.

<sup>5</sup>And as Crossley 78 in effect notes, any Jew could be called a "son of David."

<sup>6</sup>Ambrozic **Hidden** 35, "The only examples . . . of this appellation ["our father," of David] apart from this passage and Acts 4:25, occur in late rabbinic texts . . . [it is] a formulation of the Christian community which knows Jesus to be the Son of David;" cf Yarbrow Collins 514.

**Mk 11:11** [The Jesus party inspect the Temple]. No Davidic Messiah content.

**Mk 11:15-17** [Jesus drives out the money-changers]. No Davidic Messiah content. All that can be said is that it represents a conflict between Jesus and the Temple.<sup>7</sup>

**Mk 11:16** [Preventing commercial access to the Temple grounds]. See previous.

**Mk 12:35f** [Jesus argues that the Messiah need not be a descendant of David]. This passage is an interpolation,<sup>8</sup> whose end is clearly marked by the resumption of Jesus' usual criticism of the scribes (12:38f). All of 12:32-37, including the part about David, thus does not belong in the earliest state of the text, and does not concern us here.

**Mk 15:2** [Pilate asks if Jesus is King of the Jews; he answers, "Thou sayest"]. This ambiguous line has been widely discussed.<sup>9</sup> The most natural response of Jesus will be denial, and I agree with those who construe it that way (as "You say so"),<sup>10</sup> in which Jesus puts the burden of proof back on Pilate. If his reply is interpreted as positive, it makes no sense for Pilate to ask him again (as he does repeatedly in Mk 15:4-5), or for Jesus to refuse to reply.

**Mk 15:9, 12, 18, 32** [Jesus is mocked by Romans and Jews as a Messianic pretender, the King of the Jews (or Israel)]. These passages are designed to show that Pilate unwillingly executed Jesus, and that his death was due to "the Jews,"<sup>11</sup> who appear only in Mark 15. Apart from this late apologetic motive (a wish manifest in all Christian texts, not to antagonize Rome), Mark clearly has the accusation of sedition made against Jesus by the Temple establishment.

**Mk 15:26** [The inscription on the cross reads "King of the Jews"]. Mark consistently presents the statement as a lie promulgated by the High Priest. That it convinced the Romans, who proceeded accordingly, was precisely what he intended.

**Mk 15:34** ["My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"]. If this is interpreted as Jesus' feeling abandoned by God, the text must have been written in a non-Judaic context, because any literate Jew would know that Psalm 22 is a hopeful prayer, and David is saved by God. In that case, the passage is late. If it was written in a Judaic context, auditors would know that Jesus was saved by God through the Resurrection.<sup>12</sup> In either case, the passage is late.

<sup>7</sup>Taylor 463, "There is no doubt that pilgrims were fleeced by the traders . . . and that the Temple police and, above all, the priests were ultimately responsible."

<sup>8</sup>Koester **Text** 25. The fact that this whole passage, Mk 12:35-37a, is presented as an answer to a question which no one has asked, is an anomaly which argues against its originality. See Taylor 490, who supplies the missing question.

<sup>9</sup>See for example Yarbrow Collins 713, quoting W C Allen's suggestion that Jesus answered ambiguously because "He claimed to be the Messiah, but in a sense different from any current meaning attached to the title."

<sup>10</sup>Taylor 579, "Σὺ λέγεις appears to mean, 'You say it.' Cf Moulton 1/86t, Blass 260, Swete 368, Klostermann 177. It is an affirmation which implies that the speaker would put things differently."

<sup>11</sup>For the attribution of Jesus' death to the Jews rather than the Romans, see Yoder **Them**.

<sup>12</sup>For the degree of familiarity with Psalm 22 to be expected of readers of this passage, and the failure of the passage if that expectation is not met, see Brooks **Perga** 101f, with references.

### General Comments

In sum, the Davidic strand in Mark is sketchy at best, and is contradicted by the authorial voice and by various characters in the Gospel. It is evidently a late addition. If the supposed Davidic passages are removed from Mark, the text reads smoothly, without unexpected thematic or doctrinal interruptions, and makes consecutive sense.

**The Supposed Davidic Agenda.** No supposed Davidic passage suggests any political or military action, even in the Temple. Mark shows Jesus collecting all sorts of followers, but not a single warrior. There is no evidence in Mark that Jesus planned a “Davidic” or any other revolution.

**The Entrance Into Jerusalem.** The explicitly Davidic entrance to Jerusalem, perhaps the strongest support for the theory of a Davidic Jesus, and the divinizing Last Supper scenes, are associated with predictions about the colt and the supper room, and are best taken as literary inventions belonging to the later divinization layer in Mark.

**The Cleansing of the Temple.** According to the Babylonian Talmud, “Some forty years before the destruction of the Temple, the principal council of Jerusalem was removed from the place in the Temple called the Chamber of Hewn Stone to Ḥanuth. Around 30 CE, Caiaphas expelled the Sanhedrin and introduced the traders into the Temple, in both ways centralizing power in his own hands.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus’ intervention with the activities of the vendors in the Temple thus had support of its own in contemporary Jewish thinking,<sup>14</sup> and does not imply a Davidic Messianic agenda on his part.<sup>15</sup>

There is also support in Mark’s picture of Jesus as opposing wealth. The Rich Man in Mk 10:17b, who asks what he shall do to inherit eternal life, gets in response Jesus’ teachings about sharing wealth in this life, so that one can enter “the Kingdom of God” (which is in Heaven). Jesus ends with the famous metaphor, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.” That he should intervene in the Temple on behalf of the poor who were being defrauded by the rich (in this case, the Temple itself), is entirely consistent.

The fact that Jesus returned every day and taught in the Temple excludes the possibility that he would have allowed the merchants back in the holy precincts while he was there. However, there is no evidence that he prevented people from praying or sacrificing there, or that he prevented the merchants from practicing their business outside, as they had done before the High Priest’s changes. Because of Jesus’ disciples and “the people” following and listening to him, Caiaphas was unable to restore his control or remove Jesus. It is clear that Jesus’ continued presence in the Temple, where he preached his radical ideas, was the reason for Caiaphas to seize Jesus and hand him over to the Romans as a rebel.

<sup>13</sup>Chilton **Pure** 122, citing “the Babylonian Talmud (‘Abodah Zarah 8b, Shabbath 15a, Sanhedrin 41a).”

<sup>14</sup>Chilton 124 notes further that Jesus “had the support of tradition in objecting to placing vendors in the Temple, and Caiaphas’s innovation in fact did not stand.”

<sup>15</sup>Horsley **Prophet** 156 rightly notes, “The sources give no indication whatever that Jesus was somehow leading a rebellion.”

**The Trials.** The Sanhedrin and Pilate trial scenes (even if both are original) show Jesus as being railroaded by the Temple establishment. *Whoever wrote these scenes* thought Jesus was not guilty as charged. Even if later additions to the execution story were retained, they would support the view that Jesus was not guilty of a capital crime.

**The Crucifixion.** It has been argued that the historicity of the Davidic Messiah is proved by the fact of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus was undoubtedly crucified by the Romans, but that fact does not prove the validity of the charge against him.

**The Galilee Jesus.** As is argued above, the only passages which can plausibly be associated with the Davidic Messiah theme are in the last or Jerusalem half of Mark. In the first or Galilee half, Jesus is consistently portrayed as concerned with morality, and focuses on faith healing (including exorcism). Mark's image of Jesus in Galilee offers no support for the idea of a Davidic agenda on Jesus' part.

**Origin.** Where then does the Davidic theme come from? It may represent the view of early Israelite Christians who saw the crucifixion as the workings of God's plan, following the long OT tradition of holy Jewish prophets being unjustly killed by Jerusalem religious-political power-wielders, as shown by the prophecies and literary references to this history in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. But there is no evidence that the Davidic strand is any earlier than the other late material in Mark. It simply represents the beliefs of one constituent group within early Christianity, which Mark, as the home authority text for half a century after the death of the Historical Jesus, needed to represent, in order to retain the allegiance of all the movement followers.

**Conclusion.** There is no reason to think that the few Davidic passages are early in Mark, or reflect anything historical. The text does not support the idea that either Jesus in Mark, or the Historical Jesus, ever attempted to carry out a Davidic revolution.

### *Works Cited*

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