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Abstract “Christology” is the study of the nature of Jesus Christ. Christologies are generally understood on a continuum from “high” (emphasizing the divine nature of Jesus) to “low” (emphasizing the human nature of Jesus). This article explores the Christology of King Benjamin’s speech in the Book of Mormon and compares it to that of the Gospel of Mark.

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An Analysis of Benjaminite and Markan Christology

Julie M. Smith

THE TERM *CHRISTOLOGY* refers to the presentation of the life and nature of Jesus Christ. The purpose of this essay is to explore King Benjamin's Christology (see Mosiah 3), to consider its similarities to that found in the Gospel of Mark, and to explore some implications of Benjamin's Christology.

Christology is often described as being on a continuum from low (which emphasizes the human nature of Jesus) to high (which emphasizes his divine nature). It is definitely the case that Benjamin's description of Jesus contains elements of a high Christology since he begins by describing Jesus as "the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity" (Mosiah 3:5). Yet the very next line describes Jesus as "dwell[ing] in a tabernacle of clay" (Mosiah 3:5), which reflects a decidedly low Christology. This emphasis on the mortal nature of Jesus continues as Benjamin relates at length Jesus's physical suffering (see Mosiah 3:7).

The general scholarly consensus is that Mark displays the lowest Christology of the four Gospels. And it is certainly the case that Mark's depiction of Jesus emphasizes his very human elements: he is presented as a disciple of John the Baptist; he exhibits a variety of emotions (see Mark 1:41; 3:5; 6:34; 8:12; 10:14; and 14:33–34), including amazement (see Mark 4:40; 6:6; 14:34); his first attempt at an exorcism is not

successful (see Mark 5:7–8); he changes his mind (see Mark 7:24–31); and he does not know all things (see Mark 13:32). However, this consensus ignores the higher elements of Mark's Christology, probably because they are not apparent on the surface but are only noticeable when Mark's stories of Jesus are put into conversation with other biblical texts. In over two dozen instances, Jesus exercises powers that, in the Hebrew Bible, were restricted to God alone.¹ For example, in Mark 1:8, John the Baptist teaches that the one coming after him would bestow the Holy Spirit upon them. In the Hebrew Bible, only God gives the Spirit to people,² so one effect of John's statement is to equate Jesus with the God of the Bible. John's statement may echo Ezekiel 39:29—where the Lord God promises to pour out the Spirit on the house of Israel. This allusion would further strengthen the case for identifying Jesus with the biblical God. There is another manner in which Mark's Christology is clearly very high: Mark frequently presents Jesus occupying the narrative role of the God of the Bible. In about a half dozen major instances³—and an even larger number of minor ones⁴—Mark's text echoes one or more stories from the Hebrew Bible and places Jesus unequivocally into the role of God. Thus, Mark displays—albeit covertly—a very high Christology indeed. This attribute Mark and Benjamin share. So the best descriptor for both of their presentations of Jesus is a full (neither exclusively high nor exclusively low) Christology.

It is generally recognized that the major thematic focus of Mark's Gospel is discipleship. So it is important to consider Mark's Christology in light of what the text has to say about the disciples. The disciples—especially the Twelve and especially Peter—swing between a too low Christology and one too high. Peter's view of Jesus is far too low in the instances where he wants to manage and direct Jesus's ministry for him (see Mark 1:37; 9:5) and then far too high when he rejects Jesus's

1. See Mark 1:8, 17, 41; 2:8, 12, 17, 28; 3:5, 28; 6:31, 48; 7:27–29, 37; 8:1–13; 10:47; 13:26, 27, and 31.

2. See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 55.

3. See Mark 2:1–12; 4:35–41; 5:25–34; 6:45–52; 7:24–30; and 10:17–31.

4. See Mark 1:3, 16–20; 2:19; 3:5, 13; 5:1–20, 41; 6:35–44; 7:15; and 13:1–2.

prophecies of his own suffering (see Mark 8:32). Peter, like the other disciples, is unable to grasp a full Christology. (The exception is the woman who anoints Jesus [see Mark 14:3–9]; her actions—uniquely in this gospel—embrace a full christological vision.) The wisdom of King Benjamin has long been acknowledged by interpreters; perhaps his own full Christology was a guard against his people adopting either a too high or a too low Christology. It merits further study to determine if there is any relationship in the Book of Mormon texts between a lopsided christological vision and poor outcomes for the people who hold them.

Unusually, both King Benjamin and Mark give an outsized role to women in their respective christological visions. Given that traditional considerations of Christology have been almost entirely androcentric, this is most remarkable. In Mark's account, Jesus's ministry is shaped by his interactions with women: his suffering is foreshadowed by a woman's experience (see Mark 5:25–34),⁵ the scope of his ministry expands to fully include gentiles after an encounter with a woman (see Mark 7:24–30), a woman anoints him in a scene redolent with symbolic allusion to his suffering and kingship (see Mark 14:3–9),⁶ and the meaning of his atoning death is explained with reference to its effect on women's roles (see Mark 15:40–41).⁷ Benjamin's account refers only once to a woman (see Mosiah 3:8). His text, however, is substantially shorter, thus making his reference to Mary more prominent. In a passage entirely focused on Jesus and what he will be and do, a reference to anyone else stands out conspicuously. The fact that that reference is to a woman is then doubly notable. Significantly, there is a parallel structure in Mosiah 3:8 used to name both Jesus and Mary. Just as Jesus is significant and thus named, so is Mary. The oddity of the reference points to Mary's significance in the story of Jesus. So both Mark's and Benjamin's christological visions are much more female focused than would generally be expected.

5. See also Julie M. Smith, "A Redemptive Reading of Mark 5:25–34," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 95–105.

6. See also Julie M. Smith, "'She Hath Wrought a Good Work': The Anointing of Jesus in Mark's Gospel," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 5 (2013): 31–46.

7. See also Julie M. Smith, "Narrative Atonement Theology in the Gospel of Mark," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54/1 (2015): 29–41.

Interestingly, Benjamin's description of Jesus's mortal ministry does not contain any reference to Jesus teaching or speaking. If one had only Benjamin's account, one would assume that Jesus's ministry was "all action and no talk." Similarly, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus does not speak very much: there is no Sermon on the Mount, there is no farewell discourse. He does, of course, speak—almost all of Mark 4 is devoted to parables, and Mark 13 consists of the Olivet Discourse. But Mark's portrait of Jesus is focused on Jesus's actions, not his words. In this regard, King Benjamin's portrayal of Jesus is quite similar to Mark's. One senses the root of Saint Francis of Assisi's famous admonition, "Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words."

Benjamin's account of Jesus's life does not include information about the appearances of the resurrected Jesus. Neither does Mark's Gospel; it is important to note that the earliest manuscripts of Mark ended with Mark 16:8, which means that these texts did not contain a resurrection appearance. The appearances of the resurrected Jesus seem so fundamental to the Christian tradition that it can be difficult to imagine telling the story of Jesus without them, yet both Benjamin and Mark do so. This constitutes an invitation to reconsider what is essential about Jesus's ministry. It may be that, in both cases, the simple fact that the audience of both Mark and Benjamin would not personally be in a position to see the resurrected Jesus, so that experience might hold less relevance for them. Additionally, eliding the appearances allows each text to focus on other issues: in Mark's account of Jesus's life, the main focal point is discipleship, and in Benjamin's, the focus is more on the workings of the atonement. In neither case are the resurrection appearances necessary to accomplish their goals.

There are, of course, differences between Mark's Christology and Benjamin's. Benjamin speaks specifically about the atonement and how it works, while Mark does not. This is not to say that Mark does not teach about the atonement, but the topic is broached through the narrative⁸ and not through direct statements. This is probably the biggest point of divergence between the two Christologies.

8. See Smith, "Narrative Atonement Theology."

Because most accounts of Jesus's ministry were written down long after his life, it appears that many of the lower elements of Christology were lost as time went on and as the tradition focused more on the exalted Savior than on the humble man from Nazareth. Yet the reality that Jesus was fully human is a crucial aspect of his identity and is of signal importance to understanding his mission on earth. It is no surprise that, generally speaking, later works tend to reflect a higher Christology and to elide lower elements of Christology, but it is nonetheless a loss to the reader, who needs to understand that Jesus was fully human. For example, one element of Mark's lower Christology is the story of a healing miracle where Jesus does not fully heal the man on the first attempt (see Mark 8:22–26). No other canonical Gospel includes this story. Similarly, Jesus's first exorcism attempt in Mark 5 is not successful (see Mark 5:7–8). While Matthew includes this story, Matthew has rewritten Mark's text so that the initial attempt is elided.

The conclusion drawn by many scholars is that Christologies developed from low to high as time went on after Jesus's death. But a close reading of Mark's Gospel disputes this notion: there is historical development to be sure, but it is not low to high but rather full to high. The high elements are there from the earliest records, but the low elements are later expunged. The impulse to present the mortal Jesus as all powerful is of course an understandable one, but it is unlikely that one can appreciate the majesty of Jesus without simultaneously appreciating his humanity. The fuller Christologies—those which include both lower and higher elements—are an important and theologically rich resource that provides the reader with a clearer picture of who Jesus was. Such full portraits of Jesus are found both in King Benjamin's words and in Mark's Gospel. While some interpreters have derided Mark's Gospel as something of a "rough draft" because it lacks the fully magisterial portrait of Jesus found in later Gospels such as John's, King Benjamin's words—especially since they come from an angelic source—are an important additional witness to the importance of presenting a full christological vision. Thus Mark's Gospel deserves close attention, as do King Benjamin's words.

Christological explorations of the Book of Mormon have usually focused on 3 Nephi, which is understandable, given its account of Jesus's New World ministry. However, this record should be bracketed from discussions of Christology—at least in relation to New Testament Christology—because it is the record of the visit of a resurrected and glorified being and not a record of the mortal Jesus. This puts it into an entirely different category as an extremely high Christology. On the other hand, if readers look to Book of Mormon discussions of Jesus's *mortal* ministry, they do find a depiction of a full Christology. Unfortunately, the distinct, unique witness of Benjamin's full Christology has sometimes been muted in favor of the much longer portrayal of Jesus in 3 Nephi, much as Mark's full Christology has often been missed as his unique witness has been harmonized with the other Gospels and their high (not full) Christology has prevailed. But preserving the distinct voices of each writer is important. The recognition that Mark is the Gospel with the fullest Christology is reason itself to study this text closely, in search of its portrait of Jesus. Perhaps the lower elements of Mark's Christology constitute some of the "plain and precious things" (1 Nephi 13:29) that Nephi taught were taken away from the record. (Interestingly, they would have been "taken away" by interpreters—not by scribes—and hidden, as it were, in plain sight.)

Similarly, the historical development of Christology from full to high can be put into conversation with the practice of writing Latter-day Saint history. Readers and scholars could compare how the story of Joseph Smith has been told at various moments in the church's history, with the "lower" aspects—his mistakes and errors—elided by some historians. This trend has reversed just recently; most would agree that the church and the Saints are better for it. Recognition that a movement from full to high Christology and biography is as natural as it is problematic is one important lesson to draw from a study of Mark's and Benjamin's Christologies.

Julie M. Smith received a BA in English from the University of Texas at Austin and an MA in biblical studies from the Graduate Theological Union. She is on the executive board of the Mormon Theology Seminar and the steering committee for the BYU New Testament Commentary. She is the author of *Search, Ponder, and Pray: A Guide to the Gospels* and the editor of *As Iron Sharpens Iron: Listening to the Various Voices of Scripture* and *Apocalypse: Reading Revelation 21–22*.