



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

His Actions Speak

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Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” ~ John 14.8–9

“Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” ~ Mark 2.9–11

The texts cited above represent two types of deity claims for Jesus in the gospels. John 14.8–9 is one of several texts in that document to state a direct claim (cf. John 1.1–5, 14, 18; 8.58–59; 10.30–33); Mark 2.9–11 makes an implied claim, showing that Jesus possessed divine authority to do what only God has the right to do.

At first, Mark 2.13–17 doesn’t seem to be a deity-claim text, but a closer look reveals that it enlarges on the point of 2.1–12. Our focus is on Mark, but we should see that all the Synoptics record the stories of the forgiven paralytic, the call of Levi, and the subsequent meal with a group of tax collectors and sinners together (2.1–12, 13–14, 15–17; cf. Matt 9.1–13; Luke 5.17–32). This suggests that the three episodes were broadly understood to be a thematic unit.

As discussed [previously](#), the healing of the paralytic is presented as a demonstration that Jesus had divine authority to forgive sins (vv. 9–12). It is also a sign that “the Kingdom of God [had] drawn near. The paralytic experienced the fulfillment of God’s promise that the lame would share in the joy of the coming salvation (Isa. 35:6; Jer. 31:8).” This “demonstration that God had come near to his people,” with its accompanying “mediation of messianic forgiveness,” is what the onlookers found to be so amazing (v. 12) (Lane 1974, 99–100).

Mark 2.13 marks a transition. Jesus has left the house where the paralytic was healed (cf. v. 1) and is now “beside the sea” where he is teaching the crowd. He is still in Capernaum, the first important site around the northern end of the Sea that travelers encountered as they moved from the territory of Herod Philip to the area ruled by Herod Antipas. Working at a tax booth that would have been a governmental fixture in that fishing town is Levi (Lane 1974, 101–102), an agent of “the Roman-installed-and-supported government of Herod Antipas” (Hurtado 1989, 39).

If Mark’s account was a dramatic video, at this point the music in the background would surely begin to convey tension. Tax officials in the employ of either the Romans or their client kings “were detested everywhere and were classed as the vilest of men” (Lane cites the Babylonian Talmud *Baba Qama* 113a which grouped customs officials with “murderers and

robbers”). A tax collector was one of society’s outcasts who “was disqualified as a judge or a witness in a court session, was excommunicated from the synagogues, and in the eyes of the community his disgrace extended to his family” (Lane 1974, 101–102). Thus, it is a stunning development when Jesus says to Levi, “Follow me” (ἀκολουθέω, *akoloutheō*), the same thing he had said to Simon and Andrew (Mark 1.16–18). As Morna Hooker writes, “For Jesus to call ordinary fishermen to be his disciples was extraordinary; but to call a tax gatherer to follow him was nothing short of scandalous” (Hooker 1991, 94). But as the fishermen had done before him, Levi “rose and followed him” (Mark 2.14).

The background music would likely intensify as we transition to the next scene which finds Jesus sharing a meal with “many tax collectors and sinners” (v. 15). The text says the outcasts “were reclining with Jesus” (συνανάκειμαι, *synanakeimai*), wording that “suggests that Jesus-the-Messiah-and not Levi, was the host at this festive meal” (Lane 1974, 106). The significance of this is brought out in what follows. Both Jesus and “the scribes of the Pharisees” knew this was a gathering of “sinners and tax collectors” (v. 16). But where the Pharisees saw them as contaminating influences who needed to be excluded, Jesus-the-Messiah saw them as people who needed healing and were worthy of his welcome. As Lane writes,

The specific reference in verse 17 to Jesus’ call of sinners to the Kingdom suggests that the basis of table-fellowship was messianic forgiveness, and the meal itself was an anticipation of the messianic banquet. When Jesus broke bread with the outcasts, Messiah ate with them at his table and extended to them fellowship with God. Mark’s interest in recording this incident lies precisely in the demonstration of forgiveness which it affords. It takes its place very naturally with the two preceding sections of the Gospel (Ch. 2:1–12, 13–14) as a *sovereign demonstration of the forgiveness of sins* (Lane 1974, 106–107; emphasis added).

As we reflect on the events in verses 13–17, we need to appreciate that both Levi’s call and the meal with outcasts continue the forgiveness theme of verses 1–12. Although forgiveness is not explicitly announced in verses 13–14 or 15–17, it is understood in those verses. In welcoming the notorious taxman Levi and the other tax agents and sinners, Jesus implicitly extends to them the forgiveness he had explicitly granted to the paralytic. Thus, the stories of the paralytic, Levi, and the meal guests comprise one story, “a story about saving grace” (Hooker 1991, 97). Since such an unconditional gift can only be given by the authority of God, the episodes together constitute a claim that Jesus was God among men, a teacher who was confident that he was “the herald of [the] arrival” of “God’s kingdom [that was] com[ing] to a sinful Israel by God’s free and gracious initiative” (Hurtado 1989, 40).

Works Cited

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