

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Theological exegesis and internal trinitarian relations

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## Abstract

The Gospel of Mark includes a series of passages that depict direct interaction between Jesus and God. When viewed in their full literary, historical and canonical contexts, these passages can be seen to address an embryonic trinitarian question concerning the relationship between trusting and worshipping Jesus and trusting and worshipping the one God of Israel. They provide grounds for affirming that mutual love, knowledge and communication have a place in the immanent life of the Trinity, and that these elements bear a meaningful analogical relationship to the love, knowledge and communication that ideally characterise human father–son relations.

**Keywords:** analogy; Gospel of Mark; love; theological exegesis; trinitarian relations; Trinity

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus affirmed that the Father loved him before the foundation of the world (John 17:34), and according to Matthew, he said that no one knows the Son except the Father or the Father except the Son (Matt 11:27). But the nature of that intratrinitarian love and knowledge is a matter of ongoing debate, even among theologians who otherwise share a traditional understanding of the divine processions, affirm the principle of inseparable external operations and wish to distance themselves from what is generally termed ‘social trinitarianism’.<sup>1</sup> There are those who envisage a robust intersubjectivity among the divine persons and those who deny it, those who see significant continuity with human interpersonal love, knowledge and communication and those who do not.<sup>2</sup> According to some, these components of

<sup>1</sup>Direct engagement with various forms of social trinitarianism lies outside the scope of this article.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas McCall says that it would be wrong to insist on ‘a single divine subjectivity’ in the Trinity: ‘Relational Trinity: Creedal Perspective’, in Jason S. Sexton (ed.), *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2014), p. 137. McCall also speaks of ‘distinct centers of consciousness and will’ (*Whose Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), p. 70) and holds that ‘we should think of the divine persons as co-inhering in “I–Thou” relationships’ (*Two Views*, p. 156). Richard Bauckham speaks of relational intimacy (*Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015), p. 34), and Kevin Vanhoozer envisages relationality involving communicating agents: ‘the three persons are distinct communicative agents that share a common communicative agency’ (*Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 244). Paul Fiddes disagrees with such formulations. He accepts

internal trinitarian life, whatever they may entail, can only be aspects of the relations of origin (generation, filiation, spiration); in the view of others, they break the bounds of that category.<sup>3</sup> Still others question the wisdom of even trying to conceptualise these things which pertain to the hidden life of God.<sup>4</sup> And the debate is more than purely theoretical. It carries significant implications for how Christians perceive the God they worship.

The two main sources of input informing these discussions are biblical exegesis and the pursuit of logical coherence. Since our knowledge about intratrinitarian knowledge, love and communication depends first and foremost on specific statements in scripture, a theologically oriented biblical exegesis would seem the surest route toward understanding them. At the same time, trinitarian thinking has always sought to maintain logical and doctrinal consistency. From that perspective, the most pressing issue with regard to intratrinitarian love and knowledge is reconciling those elements with the doctrines of divine unicity and simplicity.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I will primarily pursue the exegetical path – not completely disregarding the logical pressures relating to God’s unity, transcendence and simplicity, but for the moment holding them at a certain distance. I will focus on one specific class of relevant scripture passages, those which narratively depict communication between God and Jesus.<sup>6</sup> To gain still sharper focus, I

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the presence of intratrinitarian *communication* but not of distinct *communicators* (*Two Views*, p. 152). Adonis Vidu can speak of mutual or reciprocated love but rejects the idea of a separate or numerically distinct love and knowledge between the Father and the Son (*The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2021), pp. 99, 265). Vidu also speaks in terms of divine self-love and knowledge; he describes the Son as being ‘by nature the self-knowledge of the Father and yet by consequence the self-love of the Father’ (*Same God*, p. 316). References to mutual love are common in the Christian tradition (e.g. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 15.19; Richard of St Victor, *On the Trinity*, 3.14–20), but many theologians use the language of reciprocity in a very restricted way, placing their greatest emphasis on divine unicity and simplicity. Paul Molnar describes the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as being ‘perichoretically one in relations of mutual knowledge and love’ (*Two Views*, p. 52), but rejects the idea that the divine persons enact ‘I–Thou’ relations with each other (*Two Views*, 147). Katherine Sonderegger takes a more negative stance, directly challenging the claim that the relations between the divine persons are characterised by mutual love (*The Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), pp. 475–81).

<sup>3</sup>For emphasis on the relations of origin, see Vidu, *Same God*, pp. 112–13; and Stephen R. Holmes, ‘Classical Trinity: Evangelical Perspective’, in *Two Views*, p. 43. For the view that trinitarian relations are not limited to those of origin, see Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, p. 148. Fred Sanders seems cautiously open to this view; see his comments in ‘Redefining Progress in Trinitarian Theology: Stephen R. Holmes on the Trinity’, *Evangelical Quarterly* 19 (2014), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>See e.g. Karen Kilby, ‘Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010), pp. 65–77; E. Jerome Van Kuiken, ‘“Ye Worship Ye Know Not What”? The Apophatic Turn and the Trinity’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19 (2017), pp. 401–20.

<sup>5</sup>See e.g. Brian Leftow, ‘Anti-Social Trinitarianism’, in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O’Collins (eds), *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), pp. 203–49; James E. Dolezal, ‘Trinity, Simplicity and the Status of God’s Personal Relations’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16 (2014), pp. 79–98; Katherine Sonderegger, ‘Risking Simplicity for Love’s Sake: Paul Hinlicky’s Trinitarian Personalism’, *Pro Ecclesia* 26 (2017), pp. 175–80; Daniel Spencer, ‘Social Trinitarianism and the Tripartite God’, *Religious Studies* 55 (2019), pp. 189–98; Thomas Joseph White, ‘Divine Simplicity and the Holy Trinity’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18 (2016), pp. 66–93.

<sup>6</sup>I follow the usage of the Gospel writers here by referring to ‘God’ and Jesus. In other contexts, it will be necessary to highlight Jesus’ own divine status and consider what these passages reveal about the trinitarian person of the Father.

will limit my discussion to three passages in the Gospel of Mark that depict direct discourse between Jesus and God: the account of Jesus' baptism (1:9–11), the depiction of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (14:32–42), and the cry of dereliction from the cross (15:34). Although these passages form only part of the total New Testament witness concerning the theme of intratrinitarian love and knowledge, they are nevertheless quite important, and they provide a good testing ground for illustrating certain aspects of Gospel exegesis and exploring hermeneutical principles pertinent to the debate about trinitarian relationships.<sup>7</sup>

It must be acknowledged that many theologians are not immediately impressed by the claim that exegeting passages such as these can help us with questions about a possible personal dimension to the internal trinitarian relations. Three hermeneutical problems seem to block the way forward. A first difficulty relates to Jesus' incarnate state and resulting possession of two natures. Christian theologians have traditionally affirmed that certain of Jesus' experiences pertain to him in his human nature only. Many of the New Testament passages portraying or referring to his interactions with the Father would seem to belong to this category. As such, it is often argued, they reveal little or nothing, or at least nothing directly, concerning the *ad intra* relationship between the Father and Son, since that pertains purely to the Son in his divine nature.<sup>8</sup> A second problem concerns the Bible's use of analogical language. Theologians generally agree that scriptural depictions of God which employ the language of human experience and relations (such as references to God as Father and Son, and to the Father and Son loving, knowing and communicating with one another) should be interpreted analogically and not univocally. Terms like 'love', 'sonship', and 'fatherhood' mean something different in the case of God than in the case of humans. One could therefore argue that the vast gap separating the world of human experience from the inner life of the transcendent God makes it impossible to obtain meaningful ideas about trinitarian relations (beyond the bare concept of begetting-begottenness implied by the names Father and Son) by drawing lines between the human relational terms and their counterparts in the internal life of the Trinity.<sup>9</sup> A third problem is reflected in the claim that theological conclusions cannot be simply read off the raw events of Gospel history. Just as Jesus' miracles do not in themselves prove his divinity and the mere fact of his death does not explain the atonement, so events like the cry of dereliction, Jesus'

<sup>7</sup>Other relevant biblical material includes those passages which directly affirm the presence of love, knowledge and communion between the Father and the Son (Matt 11:27; John 5:20; 10:38; 14:31; 15:10; 17:34), and Romans 8:26, which stands by itself in ascribing the communicative act of intercession to the Holy Spirit. While such passages describe general principles or features of the trinitarian relations, the narrative depictions of communication between Jesus and the Father (e.g. Mark 1:11 and pars., 14:36 and pars.; 15:34; Luke 22:32; 23:46; John 12:28; 17:1–26) portray specific instances or moments of intratrinitarian conversation.

<sup>8</sup>E.g. Holmes, *Two Views*, p. 44: 'when we hear Jesus pray, either in Gethsemane or in the high-priestly prayer of John 17, we necessarily hear the authentically human voice of the incarnate Son pleading with God, not an internal triune dialogue between the eternal Father and the eternal Son'. Vidu likewise warns against taking the earthly conversations between Jesus and the Father as a direct picture of internal trinitarian relations, although he allows that they indicate something about those relations obliquely: 'the eternal receptivity of the Logos, that is, the thought that his entire being and existence are received from the Father, is played out on a human level through the human obedience of Jesus Christ . . . It is thus quite wrong to say that the human existence of Jesus reveals nothing of the Son's *proprium*' (*Same God*, p. 177).

<sup>9</sup>On the inscrutable nature of the divine persons, see Vidu, *Same God*, p. 122; Sonderegger, 'Risking', p. 180; Kilby, 'Apophatic', pp. 67–71.

prayer in Gethsemane and the events accompanying his baptism do not by themselves convey sure doctrinal insight concerning the eternal relations within the Trinity.<sup>10</sup>

I will argue that, despite these significant hermeneutical challenges, the direct discourse passages in Mark do indeed contribute to the conversation concerning the question of *ad intra* love, knowledge and communication. When viewed in their full literary, historical and canonical context, these passages can be seen to address an embryonic trinitarian question concerning the relationship between trusting and worshipping Jesus and trusting and worshipping the one God of Israel. Moreover, they provide good grounds for affirming that mutual love, knowledge and communication do have a place in the immanent life of the Trinity, and that these elements bear a meaningful analogical relationship to the mutual love, knowledge and communication that ideally characterise human father–son relations. These relational elements thus form part of scripture’s testimony about God; as such, they should be given due attention theologically and in church preaching and teaching.

I will begin with several observations based on a straightforward historical reading of Mark’s direct discourse passages, paying special attention to the way Mark has shaped his narrative and what that may reveal about his theological and pastoral purposes. I then move to a more explicitly theological exegesis – building on the earlier analysis of the historical sense of the text, but now coming to Mark’s narrative with a set of questions relating to a trinitarian debate that arose at a time much later than when Mark wrote.

### Mark’s story of the relationship between Jesus and the Father

At three points in Mark’s story of Jesus’ mission, he opens a window into the relationship between Jesus and God, allowing readers to listen in on words that one speaks to the other. The first such occasion comes at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. When Jesus is baptised, as he comes out of the water, he hears a voice from heaven: ‘You are my beloved Son. I am well pleased with you’ (Mark 1:11). A second instance comes near the end of Jesus’ ministry. In the garden of Gethsemane, he prays, ‘*Abba*, Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will’ (Mark 14:36). The third instance occurs during Jesus’ final moments on the cross. He cries out, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?* – My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:34).

As we seek to understand what these scenes tell us about intratrinitarian love, knowledge and communication, several features of Mark’s presentation should immediately be observed. (1) These passages are clearly instances of communication, in that they record direct address using the grammatical first- and second-person pronouns: I, my, me, you and your. (2) In two instances, father–son language is used. (3) The topics that Jesus and the Father speak about centre on the relationship between them: at Jesus’ baptism, the Father speaks of his love and approval of the Son; in Gethsemane, Jesus expresses his commitment to carrying out the Father’s will; when Jesus cries out from the cross, his question concerns why the Father has abandoned him. (4) Each of these passages is marked by emotional intensity and highlights feelings and interior states. The emotional element is most obvious in the Gethsemane passage and in Jesus’ cry from the cross,<sup>11</sup> but even the Father’s words at Jesus’ baptism convey a warmth of

<sup>10</sup>See Vidu, *Same God*, pp. 94–5: ‘Our experience of “divine acts” cannot be taken to be epistemically basic or absolute in any way ... the nature and reality of the divine acts in history is not fully expressed by what may be experienced ... Divine action *ad extra* does not wear its meaning on its sleeve.’

<sup>11</sup>Mark describes how Jesus progressively withdrew from others to be alone with God in Gethsemane. He describes Jesus’ inward distress and trouble twice, first in third person narration, then by citing Jesus’ own

feeling. (5) Mark's portrayal of the relationship between Jesus and God seems to focus on *Jesus' experience* of that relationship. For example, the account of Jesus' baptism subtly calls attention to his experience of that event. The scene is presented from Jesus' perceptual point of view. It is he who sees the heavens being torn open, and the words from heaven address him directly. This way of presenting the scene calls attention to Jesus' reception of the message those words convey.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the immediately surrounding context (the humble step of receiving John's baptism, the desert temptation that immediately follows) shows that, when the Father speaks, his aim is not just to inform Jesus about certain aspects of their relationship, but more specifically, to assure and encourage him as he starts a mission whose difficult nature is already beginning to make itself felt. Taken together, these features suggest that Mark sought to give special attention to the relationship between Jesus and the God he called Father, and particularly to Jesus' experience of that relationship.

A further set of relevant observations relates to factors which show that the three scenes involving direct discourse between Jesus and God form a distinct, connected and coherent storyline embedded within Mark's larger portrayal of Jesus' ministry. (1) These are only passages in Mark that depict speech between Jesus and God, a distinctive shared quality that nudges readers to link them together.<sup>13</sup> (2) An additional linking factor is that the second and third of these passages contain words in Aramaic followed by their translation into Greek. This feature, which occurs only two other times in Mark, highlights the memorable nature of the sayings and reinforces the thought that they are connected. (3) The direct discourse episodes occur at critical points in Mark's account of Jesus' mission: at the very beginning of the mission; at the most critical testing point (i.e. when completion is near but there is still time to turn back); and at the end, when the last test has been passed and only the full extent of the consequences remains to be seen. That these scenes occur at crucial stages in the development of Mark's overall plot gives them a certain prominence and calls attention to the way the events they depict contributed to the fulfilment of Jesus' mission. (4) These three episodes are united by the themes of mission, testing and faithfulness. When viewed together, they display a discernible plot, with a beginning, progression and end, and which involves both tension and resolution. As the story progresses, two tensions emerge. One relates to Jesus' faithfulness. Beginning with the testing that immediately followed his baptism, continuing through various forms of opposition he experiences during the course of his ministry, reaching a crucial point at Gethsemane and then continuing still further until Jesus feels abandoned on the cross, the pressure to turn away from his mission mounts. Readers are thus confronted with a question: will Jesus remain true to the mission the Father has given him? A second tension arises from the conflict between what Jesus has heard concerning the Father's love and what he increasingly comes to experience of the Father's will. Here the question put before readers is, can the cup Jesus has been given to drink and God's seeming absence at

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words: 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.' In the case of Jesus' cry of desolation, the words are taken from Psalm 22, but the themes that Mark develops in the preceding context show that they also represent a genuine cry from the heart.

<sup>12</sup>In contrast to Matthew's account, where the words from heaven are presented in the third person and address the bystanders.

<sup>13</sup>In Mark 9:7, God speaks from heaven and affirms that Jesus is his Son in a manner very similar to the declaration made at Jesus' baptism. But in this passage, God's words are not directly addressed to Jesus, but to Peter, James and John.

the cross be reconciled with the Father's earlier words of assurance at the time of Jesus' baptism?<sup>14</sup> (5) The story has a meaningful ending. With respect to the tension created by the increasingly strong testing of Jesus' faithfulness, there is clear resolution: in the face of the most intense pressure, Jesus remains perfectly faithful to his mission. The situation is more complex with regard to the tension created by the Father's apparent abandonment of the Son he has said he loves. In terms of immediate narrative impact, the final scene in the sequence of direct discourse episodes cannot fail to leave readers with a sense of sharp dissonance – Jesus cries out from the cross and receives no answer. At the level of Mark's total Gospel story, however, readers will know that a resolution did indeed come. The Gospel contains multiple references to Jesus' coming resurrection and heavenly glory (e.g. 8:31, 38; 9:9, 31; 10:34, 37–40; 13:26; 14:61–2), and it ends with a scene depicting his empty tomb (16:1–8).<sup>15</sup>

As we consider what Mark's direct discourse passages may reveal about intratrinitarian relationships, it is important to recognise that they do not stand as isolated incidents but work together as parts of a developing story.<sup>16</sup> Perceiving this helps us see that the relationship between Jesus and Father was a matter of specific interest to Mark and enables us to notice themes and dynamics that are less visible when the passages are examined simply as individual texts. Tracking this storyline and the narrative shaping that sustains it also helps us identify Mark's pastoral/theological *purposes* for including these bits of Father–Son conversation in his Gospel.

Reference to Mark's purposes leads to a third set of observations about these passages – and an initial response to the problem of how to move from the raw events of Jesus' life to valid theological conclusions. The Gospel of Mark does not present readers simply with raw events, but with a *rhetorically shaped* narrative of those events. The Gospel is Mark's attempt to communicate a pastoral/theological message – to bear witness to Jesus, God and the good news. What message or messages, then, does Mark intend to communicate through his portrayal of these interactions between Jesus and God? How does he wish to impact his readers? Based on the details he includes in recounting these scenes, in combination with themes that are evident in the Gospel of Mark as a whole, the following suggestions can be made. (1) If Mark portrays the relationship between Jesus and God in a way that calls attention to Jesus' experience of that relationship, this suggests he wants Jesus' experience to serve as a model showing readers what their own relationship with God might be like. By highlighting what Jesus experienced and felt, he encourages readers to reflect on their own experience of prayer, trust and obedience.<sup>17</sup> (2) The Markan Jesus is more than simply a model, however. He is also a saviour, deliverer and Lord. It is therefore inherently likely that Mark

<sup>14</sup>The stretches of narrative lying between Jesus' baptism and Gethsemane and between Gethsemane and the cross cohere well with this storyline. While other plots and subplots also run through Mark's Gospel, the interconnected themes of mission, faithfulness and testing are present throughout. The three scenes involving direct address between Jesus and the Father are simply high points that bring those themes into greater focus.

<sup>15</sup>In this context, it is often pointed out that, while Jesus cites the opening words of Psalm 22 on the cross, that psalm ends with an affirmation of God's deliverance.

<sup>16</sup>For a fuller analysis of the storyline conveyed through Mark 1:9–11, 14:32–42 and 15:34, see Timothy Wiarda, *Interpreting Gospel Narratives: Scenes, People, and Theology* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), pp. 117–26.

<sup>17</sup>The structure of the Gethsemane narrative reinforces such a conclusion. Mark sets Jesus' struggle to remain faithful alongside Peter's similar struggle, such that Peter's failure serves as a foil for Jesus' positive example. Mark's wider Gospel narrative likewise supports the view that he wishes Jesus' interactions with

intends his portrayal of the relationship between Jesus and the Father to serve pastoral and theological purposes that connect to this set of roles as well. (3) Furthermore, in several passages Mark portrays Jesus as a more-than-human figure. Jesus acts in ways that are appropriate to the God of Israel.<sup>18</sup> He is David's Lord as well as David's son (Mark 12:35–7). This more-than-human aspect of Mark's characterisation of Jesus must necessarily colour our perception of Jesus as he appears in the direct discourse passages. (4) Of particular importance in this regard are the passages in Mark that identify Jesus as God's Son. In addition to 1:11, six other passages likewise apply this term to Jesus (1:1; 5:7; 9:7; 12:1–9; 14:61; 15:39).<sup>19</sup> What any one of those passages implies about Jesus thus tends to carry over into all the others. In two instances the term 'Son' could possibly have a messianic sense, but in the other four it clearly attributes supernatural status to Jesus. The parable of the tenants, for example, makes a clear distinction between the many servants (the human prophets sent to Israel) and the 'beloved son' (Jesus). Even more revealing is the identification of Jesus as God's beloved Son in the transfiguration account, a passage that is unmistakably linked to the baptism scene by the occurrence of voice from heaven and use of the term 'beloved'. Jesus' manifestation in a transfigured state signals that he somehow belongs to the heavenly realm.<sup>20</sup>

(5) The preceding observations about Mark's portrayal of Jesus as saviour, Lord and divine Son suggest that, when Mark made the story of Jesus' relationship with God part of his Gospel, he sought to do more than merely provide readers with a picture of what their own relationship with God might look like. Another of his aims, we may suppose, was to present Jesus as a completely sufficient and trustworthy saviour. By showing that Jesus carried out his saving mission without faltering, even in the face of intense pressures and testing, Mark was showing Christians that they could have confidence that Jesus would remain perfectly faithful as their deliverer. (6) It is very likely that another of Mark's purposes was to convey a message about the nature and extent of the ransom paid for our salvation (to use the language of Mark 10:45). The cup Jesus referred to in Gethsemane has traditionally been equated with God's wrath and judgement of sin. The cry of dereliction has often been understood as a matter of Jesus tasting something of the separation from God that results from human sin. Without fully explaining these things, Mark's story of the relationship between Jesus and God nevertheless points his readers to significant truths about the nature of Jesus' death. (7) Finally, and most important for the question of trinitarian relations, there is good reason to suppose that yet another of Mark's aims related to a very practical question about trust, obedience and worship that must have arisen in a movement that confessed Jesus as Lord while at the same time worshipping the one God of Israel. For Mark's first Christian readers, how did their commitment to serve and worship God relate to their commitment to serve and worship Jesus? Mark does not go as far as some other New Testament writers in addressing that issue, but it is quite possible that the passages in his Gospel that open a window into the Father–Son relationship were partly designed to speak to it. By portraying God the Father and Jesus the Son in a relationship marked by love and

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God to serve as an example, in that several other Markan passages also present Jesus as a model for disciples to follow, e.g. 8:31–8, 9:30–7, 10:32–45.

<sup>18</sup>See Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), pp. 62–78.

<sup>19</sup>While some manuscripts of Mark 1:1 do not include 'Son', it remains the more probable reading.

<sup>20</sup>Jesus' unique status is further reinforced at the end of the transfiguration episode, when the human figures Moses and Elijah disappear, and the disciples are left seeing Jesus only.

unity of purpose, acting in harmony for human redemption, Mark was showing his readers that the love, worship and trust they directed toward Jesus did not conflict or compete with that which they directed toward God.

### Theological exegesis with trinitarian questions at the forefront

The observations and suggestions offered to this point represent an attempt to interpret Mark's narrative and rhetorical interests largely at the level of historical exegesis.<sup>21</sup> I now want to take a more consciously theological approach, one that reads scripture with a set of doctrinal presuppositions already in hand (namely, the church's credal affirmations about Christology and the Trinity) while at the same time looking for additional insight concerning subsidiary doctrinal questions that are still being debated (specifically, those concerning the nature of intratrinitarian love, knowledge and communication). This will require direct engagement with the three hermeneutical challenges noted earlier.<sup>22</sup>

### The incarnation factor

The primary challenge facing anyone who seeks insight concerning *ad intra* love and communication from the type of Gospel scenes we are examining here relates to the Son's incarnate state. If we accept that much of Jesus' experience during his earthly mission, especially his struggles, temptations, sufferings and death, pertained to him in his human nature only, it is easy to argue that the words Jesus addressed to the Father during his earthly mission were spoken specifically in his human nature. When Jesus called out to the Father in the middle of his struggle in Gethsemane and his suffering on the cross, for instance, he was expressing thoughts and feelings belonging to his human nature. This argument is not easily dismissed. In fact, it gains even greater weight in the light of my observations about Mark's narrative focus and rhetorical aims. If Mark accented Jesus' lived experience with the aim of giving his readers an example of what their own relationship with God might be like, he must have expected them to perceive Jesus' relationship with God to be in many ways comparable to their own.

The situation is more complex in the case of Mark 1:11, however. It is not the incarnate Son who speaks at Jesus' baptism, but God in heaven. Our first thought, then, may be that Jesus' incarnate state does not come into play here. When the Father addresses Jesus, he speaks purely from his divine nature. Furthermore, when he speaks to Jesus the Son, must he not be speaking to him in both of his natures simultaneously? After all, there is only one Son, the one person in Christ's hypostatic union. It does not seem possible to separate the Father's love for the Son in his divine nature from

<sup>21</sup>Although the narrative connections linking Mark 1:9–11, 14:32–42 and 15:34 have not received as much attention as they deserve among commentators, they can be well supported on purely historical-critical grounds. Despite the predominantly episodic nature of the Gospel narratives and the general tendencies of ancient Greek biography (the literary genre to which Mark is increasingly assigned), there are other quite evident examples of carefully plotted storylines that develop across multiple Gospel episodes. Two of the clearest examples are the story of Peter's struggle and failure that runs from Mark 14:27–31 through 14:32–42, 54 and 66–72 to 16:7; and in the Gospel of John, the progressing story of Nicodemus (3:1–12, 7:45–52 and 19:38–42).

<sup>22</sup>This theologically oriented exegesis will also involve analysing Mark's narrative using terms and conceptual categories that belong to a later period of theological reflection, such as the distinctions between the divine and human natures of Christ and between immanent and economic aspects of the Trinity.



the Father's love for the Son in his human nature, or to say that the Father's affirmation applies to the Son in his human nature but not to the same Son in his divine nature.

When we reflect on this matter further and recall the specific way Mark has told this story, however, we discover reasons to think that perhaps the Son's incarnation and earthly mission *do* come into play when the Father addresses the Son at his baptism. As we have seen, Mark presents the Father's words as an affirmation designed to assure and encourage Jesus at the beginning of a very difficult mission. Furthermore, Mark has portrayed Jesus' baptism in a way that highlights Jesus' experience of that event. Attending to these nuances, might we say that the Father addressed the one Son, but the Son *heard* the Father's words one way in his human nature (and this is what is expressed in Mark's account) and another way in his divine nature? An interpretation along these lines might lend at least a measure of support for the claim that even Mark 1:11 cannot be used to shed light on *ad intra* relations.

Such a reading would face still another complication, however. This concerns the person of Jesus, the precise identity of the heavenly speaker when Jesus is addressed at his baptism, and the question of whether that act of communication should be viewed as an external or an internal operation. If the words spoken at Jesus' baptism are considered an external operation, then the speaker must be the triune God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit acting in inseparable unity.<sup>23</sup> But that does not seem correct, not if we view Jesus as one undivided person, the eternal Son. The voice from heaven does not address a person who is other than the eternal Son, nor does it address an impersonal human nature. The pronouncement, 'You are my beloved Son', must therefore be seen as an act of intratrinitarian communication; it is not an external, but an internal operation. As such, the speaker who affirms his love for Jesus must be identified, not as the inseparably operating triune God, but the Father as a distinct trinitarian person. Even when the incarnation factor is taken into account, then, there are good reasons for judging Mark's account of Jesus' baptism pertinent to the issue of *ad intra* love and communication.

But we must now consider another important line of evidence bearing on the question of whether and how Mark's depictions of interaction between Jesus and God shed light on the immanent relationship between the Father and the Son. This will require taking a closer look at Mark's use of Father–Son language.

<sup>23</sup>Many theologians appear to hold this view, or at least to affirm that the triune God was the ultimate cause of the address from heaven at Jesus' baptism, even if the speech is ascribed specifically to the Father. E.g. Gregg Allison and Andreas Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020), p. 288, n. 34: 'both the Father and the Son work together with the Spirit in all divine communications, and ... at times those communicative acts are ascribed to the Father or to the Son. For example, at the baptism of Jesus, the Father speaks words of commendation about his beloved Son.' Vidu cites Augustine: 'the Trinity together produced both the Father's voice and the Son's flesh and the Holy Spirit's dove, though each of these single things has reference to a single person' (*On the Trinity*, 4.5; cited in *Same God*, p. 162). While such judgements may be appropriate with respect to the effects experienced by those who *observed* Jesus' baptism, Mark does not focus on third-party observers, but only on the heavenly speaker and Jesus as the one addressed.

Vidu takes up the somewhat different issue of identifying the speaking subject when it is Jesus who addresses the Father. 'Are the human actions of Jesus to be attributed to the Son exclusively, or to the whole Trinity? When Christ is praying in Gethsemane, is it appropriate to say that the Son of God alone, through his human nature, is praying to the Father? Or should we say, the Trinity is praying in and through the human nature of the Son?' While acknowledging diversity in the tradition, Vidu takes the position that 'the Son is indeed the subject of Christ's human activity, while the causality of these actions belongs properly to the whole Trinity' (*Same God*, p. 181).

*The factor of analogical language 1: the intended scope of the Father–Son analogy*

While Christian theologians generally agree that scriptural depictions of God that employ the language of human experience and relations should be interpreted analogically, they would also generally affirm that, when such terms appear in scripture, they do communicate genuine truth. The disagreements arise when these twin affirmations are applied to specific passages. In the case of the passages which refer to mutual love, knowledge and communication between the Father and the Son, two points of difference emerge. One concerns the intended scope of the Father–Son analogy. Given that several significant features characterise human father–son relationships, including begetting–begottenness, shared nature, mutual love and communication, which of those features have an analogical correlate in the relations between the divine Father and Son? Some trinitarian theologians hold that the names ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ are designed to tell us only about the Son’s origin and nature – that he is begotten of the Father and shares the same divine nature. Others hold that these names are also designed to show that the internal relations between the persons of the Trinity are marked by a form of mutual love and knowledge analogous to that ideally found between a human father and son. A second point of disagreement concerns degree of continuity between the human father–son relationship and the relations that pertain between the trinitarian persons *ad intra*. While some theologians see a significant measure of continuity, others focus largely on the discontinuity. The latter group emphasise the gap separating human experience from the inner life of God and typically show little enthusiasm for trying to imagine or articulate what a trinitarian correlate to paternal–filial love might be like.

With respect to the range of ideas the Father–Son analogy should be understood to communicate, the direct discourse passages in Mark would at first glance appear to prove that the element of mutual love and knowledge is definitely included. When God identifies Jesus as his Son in the account of Jesus’ baptism, and when Jesus addresses God as Father in his prayer in the Gethsemane episode, those names form an integral part of a narrative depicting love and commitment. As we have seen, however, many would argue that these episodes depict only the relationship between God and Jesus in his human nature, and thus provide no direct clues concerning mutual love and commitment *ad intra*. But in fact, there is a clear line of evidence which shows that the Father–Son analogy does indeed shed light on internal trinitarian relations while at the same time reinforcing the conclusion that the analogy’s intended scope cannot be restricted purely to the elements of begetting–begottenness and shared nature. This is found in Mark’s wider usage of ‘son’ language, and indeed, the use of the names ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ in the New Testament as a whole.

In addition to the references in his accounts of Jesus’ baptism and prayer in Gethsemane, Mark also identifies Jesus as God’s Son in six other passages. In four of these (5:7; 9:2–8; 12:1–9; 15:39), the term ‘Son’ clearly highlights Jesus’ supernatural nature or status. Moreover, in two of those four passages, the transfiguration episode and the parable of the tenants, the emphasis on Jesus’ special nature or status stands side by side with reference to Jesus as a ‘beloved Son’. When we consider Mark’s total presentation of Jesus as God’s Son, then, and view it as an integrated whole, we see that the Father–Son analogy communicates thoughts about paternal–filial love as well as thoughts about shared nature. This conclusion about the analogical scope of Mark’s Father–Son language must affect our interpretation of every instance where such language occurs in the Gospel. Depending on the passage, one aspect of the

analogy may come to the fore more than another, but wherever Mark refers to Jesus as God's Son, the same combination of concepts lies embedded within the term; it is fundamental to Mark's characterisation of Jesus as the Son.<sup>24</sup> It is therefore impossible to separate Mark's Father–Son passages into two mutually exclusive categories, one in which the analogy highlights Jesus' divine nature, the other in which it highlights paternal–filial love. It is equally impossible to make a distinction between the Father–Son analogy as applied to the Father's relationship to the Son in his human nature and that same analogy as applied to the Father's relationship to the Son in his divine nature.

These conclusions are strengthened when we reflect on the use of Father–Son language in the wider New Testament. Looking at the matter from a purely historical perspective, the pervasive presence of Father–Son language throughout the New Testament implies that those terms were likewise pervasive in the first-century Christian churches. The Father–Son analogy as it appears in Mark therefore cannot be interpreted in complete isolation from the way it was used elsewhere within the thought-world of the first-century Christian movement. And in every major stream of New Testament writing, we find the Father–Son analogy communicating a combination of concepts that includes the ideas of shared nature, common purpose and mutual love, knowledge and commitment. If we take a theological approach and assume the essential unity of the scriptural testimony to God, we have still further reason to interpret the Father–Son analogy as it occurs in the accounts of Jesus' baptism and Gethsemane in harmony with its predominant use elsewhere in the New Testament. This is not to insist that Bible terms must always have the precisely same sense in every book and context, or to deny that John, Paul and the author of Hebrews may have expressed aspects of the Father–Son relationship that lay beyond Mark's range of thought. It is simply to say that it would be unrealistic to ask Christian readers of scripture to interpret the Father–Son language in Mark's direct discourse passages in a way that radically differs from their interpretation of similar language in the wider New Testament.

What about the element of communication that is such a prominent feature of Mark's portrayal of the relationship between Jesus and God? Does this too have an analogue in the immanent life of the Trinity? Three factors suggest that it does. First, Mark's Father–Son analogy is explicated by the story he tells in the three scenes we are examining, and that story is in turn informed by his use of the analogy. Therefore, just as the message conveyed by Mark's Father–Son analogy spans the divide between the immanent and economic divine relations, it is natural to assume that the message conveyed through his story of Father–Son communication likewise spans that divide. Second, as noted earlier, it is awkward to imagine that the words recorded in Mark 1:11 address Jesus in his human nature without simultaneously addressing him in his divine nature. Third, as argued earlier, although Mark tells this story in part

<sup>24</sup>On the basis of Markan passages that refer to Jesus having 'come' (Mark. 1:24, 38, 2:17, 10:45), Simon Gathercole argues that Mark alludes to Jesus' pre-existence in heaven before the period of his ministry on earth (see his *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark and Luke*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006). If this is correct, it would be yet another reason not to restrict the Gospel's picture of the Father–Son relationship to the period of the incarnation. It would also suggest that Mark was conscious of a distinction between Jesus' heavenly and earthly existence, which in turn would heighten the possibility that when he depicted the relationship between Jesus and God, he was not entirely oblivious to embryonic trinitarian questions. Some would argue that a further hint that Mark viewed Jesus as being pre-existent may be found in the words of Psalm 2:7, which lie in the background of Mark 1:11. McCall points out that the words of the psalm ('The Lord said to me, "You are my Son"') were traditionally interpreted as a reference to eternal generation (*Two Views*, p. 120).

to present Jesus as an example for human disciples, he also aims to present him as the divine Lord they can trust, serve and worship. The communication Mark depicts must thus include that between the divine Father and the divine Son.<sup>25</sup>

### *The factor of analogical language 2: the question of continuity*

The deeper debate surrounding scripture's Father–Son imagery concerns the degree of continuity that exists between the love, knowledge and communication that characterise human father–son relationships and their counterparts in the internal life of the Trinity. If human qualities like mutual love and communication have analogues in the eternal trinitarian relations, what can be said about those analogues theologically and conceptually? Do they involve a form of intersubjectivity, or entail something akin to distinct centres of consciousness? Would they include something comparable to concrete moments of communication as opposed to eternal undifferentiated communion? While exegesis alone cannot provide a full answer to these questions, it does give us reasons not to dismiss them as ill-conceived and unnecessary. Mark calls specific attention to the Father–Son relationship by making it the centrepiece of a powerfully told story. Moreover, he appears to have shaped his narrative to make a rhetorical point about the essential relationship between Jesus and God – a point which will impact his readers at both a conceptual and an affective level as they seek to correlate their absolute trust, obedience and commitment to Jesus with their commitment to worship the one God of Israel. If we seek to read this set of passages in a way that is harmonious with Mark's rhetorical aims, and deeper still, with God's purposes in giving his church a Gospel in this particular form, we must allow them to impact our perception of the triune God.

At a minimum, these passages tell us that something like human love, knowledge and communication characterise the immanent life of God. That disclosure should not be downplayed out of concern that the biblical language might be taken too literally or lead to a tritheistic way of thinking. It deserves to be acknowledged, allowed to impact church preaching and teaching, and worked on theologically in the sense that theologians actively seek to correlate this aspect of scripture's witness with judgements and inferences that emerge from thoughtful reflection on the holy mystery of the Trinity.

### *The factor of rhetorically shaped biblical narrative*

There is no need to defend the claim that the Gospels do not present neutral accounts of events in Jesus' life but rhetorically shaped – or more specifically, pastorally and theologically shaped – narratives of those events. This has been the near universal assumption of Gospel scholars for at least the past two generations. In and through his Gospel, Mark purposefully offers his readers both pastoral encouragement and theological direction.

<sup>25</sup>Still another aspect of human father–son relationships that plays a central role Mark's story is relational asymmetry: the Father sends, the Son carries out the mission; the Father makes his will known, the Son accepts it. But this raises complex questions about authority and submission which cannot be treated here. See D. Glenn Butner, Jr., 'Eternal Functional Subordination and the Problem of the Divine Will', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58 (2015), pp. 131–49; Millard Erickson, 'Language, Logic, and Trinity: A Critical Examination of the Eternal Subordinationist View of the Trinity', *Priscilla Papers* 31 (2017), pp. 8–15.

If we recognise that Mark's narrative has been shaped to convey a theological message, that will immediately impact the way we frame our questions when we consider the words spoken between God and Jesus at Jesus' baptism, in Gethsemane and from the cross. Our primary question will shift from, 'What can we deduce from the fact that God and Jesus spoke to each other in this way?' to 'What can we deduce about the theological message Mark wished to convey and the pastoral impact he wished to have on his readers from the fact that he portrayed God and Jesus speaking to each other in this particular way?' The first question quickly runs into a roadblock because of the gap that separates the internal life of God from the things we observe and understand in the created world. The second question is not so inherently unanswerable. Tackling it is a matter of noticing Mark's narrative shaping, observing his overall picture of Jesus and use of the Father–Son analogy, and trying to discern his rhetorical purposes. Because Gospel narratives convey their theology by indirect showing more than direct telling, our analysis may not always yield perfectly certain answers concerning Mark's message. But exegesis can nevertheless show where the probabilities lie. In doing so, it allows the scriptural accounts of speech between Jesus and God to shed genuine light on the debate about intratrinitarian relationships.

As for the specific theological aims lying behind Mark's depiction of the relationship between God and Jesus, I have argued that one of his purposes was to help readers sense that there was no conflict or competition between the Father and the Son, and therefore no conflict or competition between worshipping and serving Jesus and worshipping and serving the one God of Israel. This implies that some aspects of what Mark portrays, including the qualities of mutual love, knowledge and conversation, must be viewed as pertaining to the relations between the Father and the divine Son (what later theologians would term the essential Father–Son relationship), since the Jesus who is the object of Christian worship is the Son of God in both his divine and human natures.

## Conclusion

In Mark's scriptural story, the interaction between God and the human Jesus harmoniously integrates with that between the divine Father and the divine Son. While the two levels of interaction may be distinguished for the purpose of theological analysis, both are always present, part of a single story. What happens at one level has its correlate at the other, such that these passages shed light on immanent as well as economic trinitarian relations. They show that mutual love, knowledge and communication have a place in the immanent life of the Trinity, and that these elements bear a meaningful analogical relationship to the love, knowledge and communication that ideally characterise human father–son relations. As theologians seek to describe and expound the church's confession of the Trinity in a way that is faithful to the total witness of scripture, this strand of biblical testimony must also be given full attention.