
Exegesis 24:

The Son's Limitation of Knowledge

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This study of Mark 13:32 and related verses explores the doctrinal implications of current interpretations and suggests its purpose in revelation.

There are three verses to be considered in this study, but Mark 13:32 is the most basic and the one which will be examined in its context. It reads (using the UBS 3 Greek text¹), "But of that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, only the Father." There are no textual difficulties, though we may note that TR² has "and the hour".

The Matthean equivalent of this verse is 24:36, "But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, except the Father alone." Many manuscripts, including TR, omit "nor the Son", but its attestation is strong and it is widely accepted. TR also has the article before "hour" and inserts "my" before Father, but neither of these variants is given in UBS 3. The slight variations between this verse and the Marcan version indicate that neither are dependent on each other. Here the emphasis on the Father is stronger, "the Father alone".

The third verse is Acts 1:7, "And he said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in his own authority.'" This is clearly very similar in content to the other two verses in the way it shows that there is knowledge which belongs exclusively to the Father. Two points arise out of bringing this verse alongside the other two. Firstly, in this case Jesus was asked about the time when the kingdom would be restored to Israel, whereas in the other verses it is the time of the Son's return which is in question. Are these two entirely separate events, one event or at least two parts of one complex event? This study takes the view that they are at least two parts of the same complex event. Secondly, the reference to times and seasons means that we must not interpret "day and hour" too narrowly, as if it were possible to determine the year, or even month, of the Lord's return, but cannot get any closer than that.

Summarising what these verses teach we can note that the timing of the events surrounding the return of Jesus Christ is not for human beings, even apostles to know. Nor is this surprising, for even the angels of heaven do not know it. This must mean also that the demons do not know either. The devil knows that his time is short (Revelation 12:12; cf. Matthew 8:29), but he does not know how short. The time is known by the Father, however. Mark 13:20 says, "Unless the Lord has shortened those days, no flesh would be saved..." indicating that although Jesus does not know the time, he knows that the Father does, and that the Father has shortened it for the elect's sake (see also, e.g. Acts 17:26).

What is surprising to us, and a source of great difficulty, is that the Son does not

know the day or hour. This has been a difficulty from the beginning. Ambrose thought that the phrase “nor the Son” was an Arian interpolation³, but there is no evidence for this at all. However we try to understand this limitation of the knowledge of the Son, we have to acknowledge that we are facing a mystery. The question is, what sort of a mystery is this? Three answers seem possible.

1. It is an incarnational mystery

That is to say, limitation of knowledge is a necessary corollary of the incarnation. The Son in his incarnate condition is not omniscient and does not know the time of his return. This can be approached, or looked at, from at least three different angles. The first is the idea of *kenosis*. In some way the incarnation involved not only the Son leaving the glory that was his and the exercise of his divine attributes, but the attributes themselves were curtailed or left behind in the act of self-emptying (Philippians 2:7). The kenotic understanding of Philippians 2:7 was adequately answered by Warfield⁴ many years ago and it would be a diversion to consider it any further here. Secondly, this can be looked at from the point of view of the union of the human and the divine in the one person of Christ. Augustus Strong says: “This communion of the natures was such that, although the divine nature in itself is incapable of ignorance, weakness, suffering, or death, the one person Jesus Christ was capable of these by virtue of the union of the divine nature with a human nature in him.”⁵ Thirdly, it can be looked at from the view point of psychology. Tony Lane says: “It does not make sense to speak of the same one person being simultaneously ignorant and omniscient. This is not a biblical paradox but a docetic undermining of biblical teaching on the true humanity of Christ.”⁶ It is, of course, true that it is impossible for us to understand the psychology of Christ, but for that reason we have to take care in considering what makes sense to us.

It seems clear that this view involves the assertion of a single consciousness and a single will to the incarnate Son, a conclusion which Strong expresses forcibly: “Christ has not two consciousnesses and two wills, but a single consciousness and a single will. This consciousness and will, moreover, is never simply human, but is always theanthropic – an activity of the one personality which unites in itself the human and the divine.”⁷

2. It is a christological mystery

Here I am restricting the word “christological” in a quite arbitrary way, and contrasting it with the incarnational view. According to this view Christ was ignorant according to his human nature, but not according to his divine nature. This is the usual, orthodox way of understanding these verses. For example Wayne Grudem says, “This ignorance of the time of his return was true of Jesus’ human nature and human consciousness only, for in his divine nature he was certainly omniscient and certainly knew the time when he would return to the earth.”⁸

It has to be acknowledged that while this is easy to say it seems incomprehensible, and Tony Lane’s comment is not altogether surprising. However, such a formulation does not necessarily open up the possibility of minimising the real humanity of Christ. It is clear that Christ did not call on his divine knowledge to inform his human mind. So, for example, he grew in knowledge, Luke 2:40,52. He was dependent on revelation

from the Father for every word of his message, John 8:28. We can surely assume also that he learned the Scriptures in the same way as every other Jewish child, and that it was by the Holy Spirit that he was given perfect and unique insight into their meaning. Some writers have used analogies to help in our understanding of this mystery.

Geoffrey Grogan says:

How can absolute knowledge and limited knowledge co-exist? An idea that has helped the present writer arises from the fact that none of us ever uses as much knowledge as he possesses. Most of the knowledge we have is not present to our conscious minds. Consciousness is like a very small tip of a very large iceberg. It is our conscious knowledge that we are aware of using. If I have learned something in the past and yet it is hidden in my subconscious mind at the moment awaiting the appropriate stimulus before it can come into my consciousness, can I be said to know it? In a sense I do and in a sense I do not. Perhaps such items as these were below the level of Jesus' consciousness so that, at that moment, for purposes of conscious action, he could not be said to know them, and yet they were present in the great unlimited reservoir of divine knowledge which was in union with his human nature. I cannot give you chapter and verse for this, but it has helped me.⁹

Another writer who has explored this theme is Donald Macleod, linking it with the temptation and the cross:

The other line of integration between the omniscience of the divine nature and the ignorance of the human is that just as Christ had to fulfil the office of Mediator within the limits of a human body, so he had to fulfil it within the limits of a human mind. Part of the truth here is suggested by the first of the three temptations in the desert: "tell these stones to become bread" (Mt.4:3). The essence of the temptation was that the Lord disavow the conditions of the incarnation and draw on his omnipotence to alleviate the discomforts of his self-abasement... Christ had to submit to knowing dependently and to knowing partially. He had to learn to obey without knowing all the facts and to believe without being in possession of full information. He had to forgo the comfort which omniscience would sometimes have brought. This, surely, was a potent factor in the dereliction (Mk.15:34)... He suffers as the one who does not have all the answers and who in his extremity has to ask, Why? The ignorance is not a mere appearing. It is a reality. But it is a reality freely chosen, just as on the cross he chose not to summon twelve legions of angels. Omniscience was always a luxury within reach, but incompatible with his rules of engagement. He had to serve within the limits of finitude.¹⁰

3. It is a trinitarian mystery

This is not just a mystery relating to Christ as incarnate, but to the relationship between the Father and the Son. This is, after all, what the language of the verses strongly suggests. In particular the stress in Matthew, "the Father alone", and Acts, "which the Father has placed in his own authority", make this almost irresistible.

- a) Remember that Acts 1:7 refers to a post-resurrection situation. Even if we granted that there was a limitation of knowledge arising in some way from the incarnation, would this continue after the resurrection? The evidence is not decisive on this point – the resurrection was not the return of the Son to the glory which he had with the Father prior to the incarnation. Nevertheless, two verses suggest that the resurrection involved a new condition which sits uneasily with a limitation arising

from the incarnation. In Matthew 28:18 Jesus says, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.” And Romans 1:4 says, “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.” The second verse has a number of imponderables when it comes to detailed interpretation. For example is the verb “declared” or “appointed”? Is Christ by the resurrection now “Son of God with power”? Matthew 28:18 might suggest that this is a likely understanding of the verse. It is surely surprising to find the risen Christ, in the course of giving commandments to the apostles, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God (Acts 1:2,3), speaking of “things which the Father has placed in his own authority.”

- b) The similarity of Matthew 24:36 with Matthew 11:27 suggests that Matthew 24:36 ought to be understood in a trinitarian sense. 11:27 reads: “All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal him.” It seems quite arbitrary to understand the earlier verse in one way, and the later verse in quite a different way. When Ridderbos says: “Obviously ‘Son’ here does not denote the complete unity between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity (as, e.g., in 11:27). It refers only to the relationship that Christ has to God by virtue of his office (see the comments on 17:5) a relationship that does not make him omniscient. The Son therefore must wait for the Father to tell him when to return, for the Father alone knows the day and hour (see Acts 1:7)”¹¹ it does not seem quite so obvious that the verses should be interpreted in such different ways. If Matthew 24:36 is not to be understood in a trinitarian sense, why should 11:27?
- c) We ought to ask also how far the limitation of knowledge referred to here is unique. Is what we have here just one aspect of the limitation of knowledge which arises from the incarnation, or isn’t this wholly unexpected and quite unique? Granted that according to his human nature Jesus did not know Chinese, isn’t it quite clear that the limitation of knowledge here is of a completely different order to that? There is something special here; this is knowledge which the Father has reserved to himself. There is a parallel here with Mark 10:40, “But to sit on my right hand and on my left is not mine to give, but is for those for whom it is prepared”, which also surely has no reference to any limitation arising from the incarnation of the Son.
- d) How can we understand this as a trinitarian mystery? The fact that there is one God suggests undivided knowledge. By definition God knows everything. To suggest one person of the trinity does not have the full knowledge that belongs to Godhead appears to deny the essential deity of that person.
 - i. Nevertheless the distinction between the persons is real. Difficult though it is to comprehend there are actualities that only belong to the particular person. Neither the Father nor the Spirit became incarnate. The Father and the Son send the Spirit, but the Spirit did not send the Son. Not only are there distinctions relating to the persons and their actions, but there are distinctions that relate to the attributes as well. The knowledge that the Father has of the Son is not the same as the knowledge that the Son has of the Father. Moreover the Father does not have personal knowledge of life in this world, whereas the Son does. In this case there is a knowledge which is proper to one person of the trinity but not to the other two. In considering these verses, then, we are not talking of the

omniscience of God as God, but of the knowledge which arises from their interpersonal relationships.

- ii. Is it any more difficult to think of the Son choosing not to use his divine knowledge in his incarnate condition than it is to think of the Father retaining an item of knowledge and choosing not to disclose it to the Son? Is there not in fact a real similarity between these two things? It certainly seems more difficult to think of one person not having the full knowledge that belonged to both his natures, than two persons not having identical knowledge even though sharing the same nature.
- iii. If in a particular respect the Father withholds knowledge from the Son, that does not necessarily mean subordinationism. Subordinates can themselves withhold knowledge for good reasons, but they do not thereby cease to be such. If the knowledge belongs to the Father as Father then the fact that he does not reveal it to the Son has no bearing on their equality.
- iv. The verses are not so concerned to speak of the limitation of the Son's knowledge as they are to emphasise the Father's knowledge.

Is it legitimate to ask why the Son does not have this knowledge?

- a) If Christ's limitation of knowledge here is a necessary concomitant of the incarnation, then the answer would seem to be that he simply shares in the same ignorance that is our experience. However this is a totally unsatisfactory answer because the Father could have revealed the time to him. Many other details about the end were revealed to him, it was only the time which the Father put into his own hands. One might suppose that knowing all the events that take place beforehand would necessarily involve a knowledge of the time, but this is evidently not the case.
- b) Asking this question makes us realise that the incarnational approach to these verses is quite inadequate; even if it were true, these verses do not demonstrate it, for the real question they raise is not, What is it about Christ that means he is ignorant of the time? but, Why didn't the Father reveal the time to the Son?
- c) If a speculative answer is justifiable it might be tentatively suggested that this is a surprise of love. Love delights to bring joy and pleasure by surprises. The Son knows that he will return in power and glory, but perhaps the day will come as a joyful surprise to him. This may seem far too anthropomorphic, but God is love and the love between Father and Son must be the supreme example of love.

The context of this verse in Mark

- a) Verse 26 speaks of the coming of the Son of Man in great glory. The background of these words is surely Daniel 7:13,14. While on the surface v.32 may appear to limit the greatness of the Son of God, v. 26 emphasises the eternal majesty of the Son of Man.
- b) His sovereignty is also underlined in v. 27. He sends out *his* angels. Their role is to gather *his* chosen ones.
- c) Verse 31 stresses the eternal validity of Christ's words. It is striking to read straight on from v. 31 into v. 32. Geoffrey Grogan is undoubtedly right to say, "It is

important that these two verses should be taken together and interpreted in relation to each other, and it is singularly unfortunate that so many English translations, including the NIV, separate these two verses by the paragraphing structure they adopt.”¹² However we understand v. 32, it cannot be used to erode the absolute status of Christ’s words as infallible and certain, “my words will by no means pass away.”

- d) All these considerations taken from the context show how surprising this verse is. This limitation of knowledge occurs in one of the Gospel passages which emphasises above most others the glory and sovereign majesty of Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this verse

- a) The purpose evidently is to ensure that people would prepare themselves and be ready for when Christ would return, v. 33-37. If the time, even generally, were known beforehand, the temptation would be to put off repentance to the last minute.
- b) We ought to note that what we have seen means that it cannot be possible for anyone to work out from Scripture the time of Christ’s return. No-one knows the Scripture better than the Son of Man knew it, but if he did not know the time of his return, then it cannot be contained in Scripture. Conversely if it were contained in Scripture he could not have spoken this verse, because he would know it.
- c) We may finally say that this passage functions in at least these ways.
- To prevent idle curiosity.
 - To promote humility.
 - To rebuke false teachers and false prophets who try to fix dates, v. 21,22.
 - To keep us diligent in our duty as Christians.

References

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- ³ See JA Alexander, *The Gospel of Mark* (London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), p. 365.
- ⁴ BB Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1950), pp. 38-47.
- ⁵ Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology*, (London, Pickering & Inglis, 1956), p. 697.
- ⁶ Tony Lane, “Christology beyond Chalcedon”, in *Christ the Lord* (Leicester, IVP, 1982), p. 272.
- ⁷ *Idem*, p. 695.
- ⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, IVP, 1994), p. 561.
- ⁹ Geoffrey Rogan, *The Christ of the Bible and the Church’s Faith* (Fearn, Mentor, 1998), p. 240.
- ¹⁰ Donald MacLeod, *The Person of Christ* (Leicester, IVP, 1998), p. 169.
- ¹¹ Hermann Ridderbos, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Regency/Zondervan, 1987) p. 452. See also Grudem, *idem*; p. 562, 563
- ¹² *Idem*, p. 84.

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These are expanded notes of a fraternal address*
