Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.4 No.2 June, 2021; p.g. 144 – 148; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

WHEN THE MENTOR IS WRONG: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL APPRAISAL OF APOSTLE PAUL'S EVENTUAL ACCEPTANCE OF JOHN MARK (2 TIM. 4:11)

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Abstract

The apostle Paul rejected John Mark during preparation for the second missionary journey, resulting in the unfortunate episode of the split between him and Barnabas, an alien incident to the idealistic picture of the first generation Christian lifestyle and an embarrassment to those who see the apostle Paul as a "marble statue without blemish" (Janus 2:1). Years later, in the evening of his life and close to the end of his ministerial endeavours, when he was in need of companion and support and suffering from cold and loneliness in a dark Roman dungeon, he unbelievably and unashamedly begged John Mark to come to him in Rome. The man he wanted to leave behind some years before had become enviably valuable. And in spite of his early misgivings about the fitness of John Mask, he requested him to come to Rome at a time Christian leaders feared for their lives. His request is commendable because by way of contrast, some mentors don't accept being wrong and they don't bother to apologize or make amends when they make mistake. They are so fixed in their views that they don't see beyond their own rightness. This paper argues that a mentor can be wrong. It informs that it is not possible for a mentor to be always right. It persuades that trying to be always right is wrong. Adopting a socio-historical methodology, this paper recommends that Christian mentors should own up when they blow it. They should also look for people they have let down and reconcile with them if possible.

Keywords: Mentor, socio-historical, Appraisal, Apostle Paul, John Mark.

1. Introduction

The Mentor

Mentorship is the relationship in which a more experienced person helps a less experienced person (yuki: 404). Mentorship abounds both in the Old and New Testaments. A mentor offers knowledge that is especially useful to the other person (shea, 2002:8). Moses was a mentor to Joshua. Eli was a mentor to Samuel while Elijah was a mentor to Elisha. In the New Testament, Jesus was a mentor to the twelve disciples while Barnabas was a mentor to both Paul and John Mark.

2. The Social Perspective

Social in this context, relates to the relationship of persons in a community.

2.1 The Persons

Barnabas: Barnabas was a Levite Jew with home on the Island of Cyprus. He sold his land and brought the money to the apostles. His real name was Joseph but he was surnamed Barnabas, meaning son of encouragements (Acts 4:36). His role was that of a mediator (France:

1978) When the church kept its distance from Paul, it was Barnabas who took him to the leadership and introduced him after which he was given right hand of fellowship (Acts 9:26, 27). Without Barnabas, Paul would not have been known as he was. When the church of Antioch was planted, Barnabas became the senior Pastor but he co-opted Paul to the work and under his mentorship, Paul developed spiritually, mightly and ministerially. Barnabas was gifted in exhortation, spirit filled and trustworthy (Acts 11:23 – 30). He adapted to missionary work (Acts 13:2) and was self supporting (I Cor. 9:6)

> Barnabas was a sponsor and mentor to Paul. As a result, he started something very big. Not only did he play a key role in the beginning of the Christian church, but he also spurred the Christian growth of someone who would mentor many more people it sort of works as a flow chart. Barnabas mentored Paul, Paul then mentored many others, including Timothy who was the mentor to many others.

2.2 Paul

His Roman name was Paul while his Jewish name was Saul. He was a Jew from Tarsus of Cilicia (Acts 21:39) and prior to his conversion, he was violently persecuting the church, advancing in Judaism beyond many of his age (Gal. 1:13 – 14). He was a circumcised Jew from the tribe of Benjamin (Philip. 3:4 – 6) and as a Hebrew, he did not lack any of the Jewish credentials possessed by his critics (II Cor. 11:22). Trained under Gamaliel (Acts 22:23), he was a Roman citizen from birth and a Pharisee (Acts 20:4 – 5). He was converted on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:1 – 8) and later joined the church of Antioch as one of its leaders under the tutelage and sponsorship of Barnabas.

> Paul displayed humility by submitting himself in this process. Cohen and Nelson posit that sponsorship includes the concept of subordinating oneself to a senior member of the organization in order to grow and develop within the organization. Paul did not use his considerable Jewish pedigree (Php. 3:5 – 6) as a reason not to submit to Barnabas's overtures to come alongside Paul and show him the way in the Christian church (Regent.edu).

2.3 John Mark

John Mark also called Marcus was a missionary, gospel writer and evangelist who helped Paul, Peter and Barnabas in building the early church, His home town was Jerusalem and he had a godly mother called Mary (Acts 12:12). The early met church for prayers in his family's house and the family had a maid servant called Rhoda. Peter was so taken with him that he referred to him as his son (I Peter 5:13). He was related to Barnabas (Col. 4:10) and vacillated in his early years (Acts 13:13; 15:38) but became a faithful co-worker with Paul in his later years.

3. The Historical Perspective (Acts 15:36-41)

The historical perspective is the background text that informs what transpired during preparation for the second missionary journey. It is treated under (1) The proposal (2) The problem and (3) The Paroxysm.

3.1 The proposal (Acts 15:36)

Paul made a proposal that he and Barnabas should revisit the churches they planted during the first missionary journey. "For the apostle Paul, the church at Antioch was not a parking lot. It was a launching pad. He could never settle down to a "comfortable ministry" anywhere as long as there were open doors for the preaching of the Gospel" (Wiersbe :33). While the first missionary journey was initiated by the Holy Spirit, the second missionary journey was initiated by Paul's own suggestion. It was a follow up type of evangelism where the former converts would be further trained or disciple.

3.2 The problem (Acts 15:37)

Barnabas accepted Paul's proposal and intended to take John Mark again though he vacillated earlier. Paul did not want to take John Mark on grounds that he deserted them at Perga and did not continue with them in the work. Paul was against the suggestion to take John Mark since in his view, mark had defected from the previous campaign and presumably, he felt that he might do so again (Marhsall :257) "John Mark may have been the one who told the Jerusalem church of the activities of Paul and Barnabas among the Gentiles (McCain :193).

It is not clear why John Mark deserted. Though Paul did not comment on it that time but he did not like what John Mark did. Clearly there was more to John Mark's departure than the narrator wanted to reveal. Whatever the problem had been, Paul was not willing to forgive and forget. Even the leading missionaries were clearly human beings, who could disagree (Adeyemo: 1328)

3.3 The Paroxysm

Paroxysm here is the outburst of argument between Barnabas and Paul. Barnabas could not proceed without John Mark and Paul could not go further with him, so they quarreled and consequently went their separate ways. The dispute over Mark resulted in two missionary journeys instead of one. Barnabas' special gift of encouragement no doubt helped his young nephew to make the grade and win Paul's approval later" (Lion Handbook: 560).

It may be surprising that God does not "clean up" incident like this. It shows that nobody is perfect and that the gospel happens in the human setting and condition.

> That Israelite literature reported the failing of its heroes even during the epic period may be not worthy, but by this time, it had long been standard for Greco-Roman biographers to admit their heroes weakness

Some scholars believe that the misunderstanding hint at the incident at Antioch, "when Barnabas was inclined to follow Peter's example of "play-acting" to Paul's great indignation" (Bruce: 318)

> It is possible that there was more to the quarrel that Luke told us. The incident of Galatians 2:11-14 may have occurred at this time in which Barnabas as well as peter vacillated on the question of eating with gentile believers. The matter settled but the memory of it may have remained to exacerbate this present dispute (Williams: 273).

4. The pleading (2 Tim. 4:11)

This section is the anchor text from where the topic is derived. It says "only Luke is with me get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry" (2 Tim. 4:11)

In this text, Paul begs John Mark with style. He did not only eat his former word, he ate a humble pie. Impliedly, Paul was simply accepting that he was wrong but has now come to his senses and pleading with John Mark to forgive him. According to Barclay:

> There was a time Paul had no use for Mark, when he looked on him as a spineless deserter and completely refused to have him on his staff. God can release the sleeping hero in the soul of every man. He can turn the shame of failure into the joy of triumphant service (Barclay: 218)

The trust that Barnabas had in God for the development of John Mark was not a waste. Barnabas believed in Mark and in the end, mark justified that belief" (Barclay: 118). Barnabas was right in giving John Mark another chance. Some think that Mark's knowledge of Latin made him particularly useful in Rome (NBC: 1182)

Subsequently, Mark was again found in the company of Paul at Rome during the Apostle's first imprisonment (Col. 4:10; Philemon 24). Afterwards he was with Peter in Rome (I Pet. 5:13), (Hendrickson: 321). Surprised that Paul could make such a request for John Mark, some have argued that a different john Mark was in question.

There is no necessary identity between the John Mark of the book of Acts (12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15: 37-39) with the Mark(s) found in the Pauline Corpus (Col. 4:10; Phm. 24; 2 Tim 4:11), the first epistle of Peter (I Pet. 5:13)…. (Michael: 244-259).

Conclusion

This paper addressed the eventual acceptance of John Mark by the apostle Paul. The apostle Paul had earlier rejected John Mark as unfit for the ministry because John Mark absconded during the first missionary journey.

Toward the end of his great career, when thick clouds gathered up, darkening the evening of his ministerial endeavors, he unbelievably but commendably begged John Mark to come to Rome and help him. This by implication indicated that he was wrong in his earlier rejection of John Mark. Paul was jaundiced about John Mark who though did not have stellar beginning but he proved his worth subsequently. The thematic thrust of this paper therefore is that a Christian mentor can be wrong. It is not correct to claim that a mentor is always right. Trying to be always right is wrong. Adopting a socio-historical narratology, mentors should acknowledge their mistakes as well as look for people they have let down and reconcile with them. The recommendations are pertinent because Christian mentors are not perfect, they are rather flawed and emblematic of humanity.

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