

July 22, 2012  
Saint Mary Magdalene

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

A life-long proponent of the "Q Hypothesis," I believe that Matthew and Luke relied on the same literary "source" (German *Quelle*) for the material their gospels have in common but do not share with Mark.

Like other proponents of this hypothesis, however, I have also been puzzled that this supposed *Quelle*, which mainly contained didactic material, also included the account of the centurion who appealed to Jesus on behalf of his ailing servant (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10). Why would that this single narrative be included in a document that otherwise embraced only didactic material?

Recently it has occurred to me that there is a very simple explanation for that inclusion: the presence of a true "parable" in the account of the centurion's servant. This parable, this didactic *mashal*, would explain the inclusion of centurion story in the hypothetical Q.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this parable, found in both versions, is the fact that the centurion---not Jesus---is the one who tells the parable. He says to Jesus, "I also am a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

Plainly put, this is a real parable---a traditional biblical *mashal*, symbolic speech in which the meaning is conveyed through metaphor, simile, and/or allegory. In this case, the metaphor is military.

The centurion's parable has to do with authority, *exsousia*: "I also am a man placed under authority." That is to say, the centurion, in order to understand what Jesus is about, has recourse to what in military terms is called the "chain of command," because he recognizes in Jesus a source of authority, the ability to make things happen by way of simple, even monosyllabic, command. This is something the centurion understands.

Indeed, it is possible that no one in the New Testament understood better than this centurion the proper function of Jesus' parables. He tells this parable to explain to Jesus why it is not necessary for the Savior to come and visit the sick man in person. The proper word of authority is all that is needed. Jesus' presence is no more necessary to the situation than the presence of a military officer in every place where his authority extends.

In his short declaration about authority, then, it is easy to discern that the centurion faithfully copies the style of Jesus' own parables. Just as our Lord sent his listeners to their own labor and occupations to discern the inner mysteries of divine grace---just as

he directed the farmer, for example, to inspect the spiritual aspects of both the sowing (Luke 8:4-15) and the harvest (10:2)-just as he encouraged the shepherd (15:4-15) and the fisherman (Matthew 4:19) to consider the religious dimensions of their labor- so this centurion proposes the circumstances of his military profession in order to illustrate the spiritual quality of a truth. He examines the conditions of his own calling in order to convey a specific quality of the ministry of Jesus.

And what does the centurion communicate in this parable? He expresses the unseen but effective power of authority. He knows himself "subject to authority"; he recognizes his subordination to the government of Rome and to Herod Antipas, from whom he received his commission, and he knows how to delegate that authority to others.

First, the centurion is a man who does what he is told, because he acknowledges the claims of that unseen spiritual reality called "authority." In addition, he extends some measure of that authority; he speaks a command, and others obey him. His word is effective. To borrow the language of the Epistle to the Hebrews, this authority, to which the centurion refers, is "not seen," but there is no doubt about the "evidence" of it.

The centurion is manifestly familiar, not only with the Lord's parables, but also with his miracles. He may not have seen those wonders firsthand, but he knows about them from others. Word has reached him already that Jesus' "word was with authority" (Luke 4:32).

Because it is a spiritual reality, authority is essentially invisible but is expressed in signs. Yet, no one reasonably doubts the real and very consequential existence of authority; there is overwhelming witness to it everywhere, and the centurion knows this from his own life and vocation. Consequently, he is able to recognize the evidence of authority in Jesus.

The centurion's faith, then---declared greater than any in Israel---is based on hearing and then thinking through what he has heard; he weighs well the evidence to which there is witness. And that evidence testifies to something any sensible centurion can detect at a glance: the authority of lordship, the ability to hold complete sway by a direct command.

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**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**

[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

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