

PLATO'S *TIMAEUS* AS A SYMBOL  
OF GREEK CULTURE IN  
MARK 10:46–52: A CONTEXTUAL  
INTERPRETATION

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“Greek culture claims for itself the clearest vision that a human being can attain; Mark responds that such vision is partial at best, and that the best it can manage is to respond to an inspiration of the Jewish God, so as to beg his Jewish son for the gift of sight.”



Although all three synoptic gospels narrate the healing of a blind beggar or beggars outside Jericho, only Mark names the person healed: the blind beggar is “the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus” (10:46). More than one commentator has suggested that in naming the blind man of Jericho, Mark has built into the story a reference to Plato’s *Timaeus*, a philosophical dialogue that was then the preeminent literary symbol of the Greek aspiration to wisdom. In 1995, Bas van Iersel and Jan Nuchelmans provided what I take to be

a compelling argument for this interpretation.<sup>1</sup> In 2003, Gordon Lathrop offered an intertextual reading that presents Mark as responding to an influential passage from the *Timaeus* concerning sight and blindness.<sup>2</sup> Neither discussion, however, adequately explores what I take to be the essential context—both thematic and stylistic—of Mark’s story. In the following pages I will situate within this essential context the most important points made in these earlier discussions.

Although the story of Bartimaeus clearly belongs to the central Marcan theme of blindness and sight, its more specific thematic context is Mark’s reflection on the place of Gentiles in the kingdom of God. It is the third of three stories in which Mark presents Jesus in conversation with a Gentile. The symbolism of these stories exhibits a clear pattern: before non-Jews can benefit from the power at work in Jesus, they must accept the decisive role of the Jews in the history of God’s plan for the world. In this way, Mark seeks to balance a clear realization that Gentile Christians are not bound by the whole Torah with an equally clear insistence that the God who is now calling the Gentiles is precisely the God of the Jews. His treatment of this theme culminates when the third and last Gentile, identified as the son of Timaeus, joins the crowd of Jewish pilgrims going up to the Temple for Passover, thus fulfilling the eschatological prophecy of Isaiah: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations” (56:7).

The story of Bartimaeus acquires another sort of context from Mark’s method or style of writing. Van Iersel and Nuchelmans rightly reject the view that the identity of Bartimaeus must be understood in symbolic terms because the story lacks a coherent literal meaning.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, the story of Bartimaeus combines the basic elements of a healing story with those of a vocation story; the result is perfectly coherent when

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1. Bas M. F. van Iersel and Jan Nuchelmans, “De zoon van Timeüs en de zoon van David: Marcus 10, 46–52 gelezen door een grieks-romeinse bril,” *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 35 (1995): 107–24.

2. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 25–32.

3. Van Iersel and Nuchelmans, “De zoon van Timeüs en de zoon van David,” 109–11.

read literally.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, they distinguish the denotative or literal meaning of the story from its connotative or symbolic meaning, arguing that Mark uses specific verbal cues to signal the presence of a secondary, connotative meaning that at least some in his audience are equipped to notice.<sup>5</sup> This is nearly right. We shall have occasion to see, however, that it would be more surprising if the story of Bartimaeus did not have a symbolic meaning than if it did. The central question of Mark's gospel concerns the hidden identity of Jesus the Nazarean, and one way Mark expresses his answer to this question is by interweaving stories and crafting narrative detail so as to show that the deeds of Jesus transcend, in meaning and power, their particular historical setting.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, to read Mark's stories without their symbolic resonance is to miss, in an important way, the central claim being made by their narrator: that Jesus is, in a unique and world-altering sense, "the Son of God."

Even given Mark's manner of writing and his interest in the place of the Gentiles within the kingdom of God, one might well ask whether the context of Mark's gospel as a whole admits the possibility of a reference to a work of Greek philosophy, however widely read. I shall try to show that Mark's message concerning the place of Gentiles in the kingdom of God and his symbolic mode of writing combine to create a natural place within his narrative for a symbol of Hellenistic culture as a whole, and that his reference to the *Timaeus* has been crafted to occupy this place. The *Timaeus*—or perhaps its title character, a Pythagorean philosopher from Locri in southern Italy—fits Mark's concern with the Gentiles because for Mark, as for Paul and John, the known world consists on the one hand of Jews, and on the other of non-Jewish participants in the dominant Hellenistic culture—that is, of Greeks. If, therefore, the *Timaeus* is

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4. For the uniqueness of this story as integrating call and healing with a view to discipleship see Dean B. Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices: Markan Intercalations, Frames, Allusionary Repetitions, Narrative Surprises, and Three Types of Mirroring* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 167–68.

5. Van Iersel and Nuchelmans, "De zoon van Timeüs en de zoon van David," 114.

6. For Mark's use of literary structure to direct attention to the symbolism with which his stories of Jesus are laden and so reveal their theological meaning, see above all Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*.

an apt symbol for Greek culture, it is thereby an apt symbol of non-Jewish culture as a whole.

To prepare for a reading of the story of Bartimaeus, I will first consider within their own immediate contexts the stories of the Gerasene demoniac and the Syrophenician woman. In fact, I have chosen to consider at some length the larger narrative sequences to which each of these stories belong. The story of Bartimaeus belongs to an intricate web of story and symbol, and understanding its place in this tapestry takes us three quarters of the way to understanding *why* the story might be structured by a striking reference to Greek philosophy, and so to recognizing *that* it is so structured. I will then look briefly at the crucial theme of blindness and sight in Mark, and finally I will discuss the immediate context of Jesus' encounter with Bartimaeus. In reading the story of Bartimaeus itself, I will first argue that Mark is in fact referring to Plato's *Timaeus* or to its title character; then look at three narrative details that can, although they need not, be understood in light of this reference; and finally consider the additional possibility that Mark has in mind a specific passage from Plato's dialogue.

#### 1. THE GERASENE DEMONIAK (3:7–6:44)

Mark begins to explore the universality of the kingdom of God—and therefore the place of Gentiles or Greeks within it—immediately after telling us that early in Jesus' ministry a wide spectrum of Jewish leaders, from Pharisees to Herodians, has decided to put him to death. This event leads directly to Jesus' first clear encounter with a Greek, in the territory of the Gerasenes, within the region of the Decapolis. To understand the significance of his actions in Gerasa, we need to understand their literary and cultural context.

The literary context for Jesus' first visit to the Decapolis, and hence also its intended theological context, is symbolically mediated by Mark's treatment of the Sea of Galilee. The basic sequence of events is as follows. Preaching by the sea, Jesus orders a boat to be prepared on account of the crowd (3:7–12). He then gets into the boat (4:1) and preaches to the crowd gathered by the sea (4:2–34). Finished preaching, he sets out for the other

side (4:35–36), calming a storm that arises on the way (4:36–41). He expels a legion of demons from a man in the territory of the Gerasenes, destroying a large herd of pigs in the process (5:1–20). He then crosses the sea again but remains close to it (5:21), where Jairus finds him, leading to the cure of a woman with a hemorrhage and the raising of Jairus's daughter (22–43).<sup>7</sup> Although the action then moves away from the sea, the larger narrative to which the sea belongs continues, culminating in the feeding of five thousand Jews in the wilderness (6:30–44).

### 1.1. *The boat (3:9–4:34)*

In seeking an interpretation of these events, we should begin with the points that are clearest. The first of these is that the preparation of a boat (3:9) and eventual embarkation (4:1) serve as a narrative frame for the intervening events.<sup>8</sup> This is clear on the face of it, and made clearer by the fact that the resulting initial sequence is a ring composition with three primary layers, of the form  $A B_1 B_2 C B_2 B_1 A$ .<sup>9</sup> The outermost or  $A$  ring involves the two scenes by the sea, in which Jesus first orders the boat to be prepared and then gets into it. The second or  $B$  ring involves a contrast between Jesus' natural family and the family formed by those who hear his word; it thus consists of two subordinate

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7. In fact, 4:35–6:44 and 6:45–8:10 seem to form parallel retellings of the Exodus, including the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan, Israelite unfaithfulness, manna in the wilderness, and conquest of the land: Sun Wook Kim, "Structural and Thematic Similarities between Psalm 78(77 LXX):12–32 and Mark 4:35–8:21 in Light of Spatial Settings and Exodus Imagery," *The Expository Times* 28, no. 7 (2017); Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 365–70.

8. Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, The Anchor Bible 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 256, finds it odd that the boat is prepared but not used in 3:9. But Marcus more than once writes as if Mark were crafting a chronological account in the ordinary sense, rather than blending chronological and thematic order in such a way that chronology sometimes gives way to other considerations.

9. Deppe omits the boat from this structure (*The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 121, 499). He takes 3:7–12 to belong to the narrative frame of 1:40–3:12 (119, 498), and restricts the narrative significance of the boat to chapter 4, where it links the parables of 4:1–34 to the miracle stories that follow (137). The preparation of the boat in 3:9 is then simply a look ahead to this later material (121, 513).

rings,  $B_1$  and  $B_2$ . After the boat is prepared, that is, Jesus goes up the mountain and appoints twelve men to be with him and to be sent forth by him ( $B_1$ : 13–19). His natural family, however, sets out to take charge of him, convinced that he is out of his mind ( $B_2$ : 20–21). When they arrive ( $B_2$ : 31–32), Jesus responds by proclaiming that his true family is composed of those who have gathered to hear him and of all who do the will of God ( $B_1$ : 31–35). He then he begins to teach by the sea ( $A$ : 4:1).

At the center of the composition, finally, in the  $C$  position, is an exchange between Jesus and the scribes, who claim that he is possessed by Beelzebul and that he drives out demons by the prince of demons (3:22–30). In response, Jesus first refutes their claim by noting that a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand; the allegation of the scribes therefore implies that the reign of Satan is at an end (3:23–26). He then suggests that the reign of Satan is in fact at an end, because one stronger than Satan has arrived to tie him up and to plunder his house (3:27). He concludes by condemning his opponents in the strongest possible terms (3:28–30).

Rather more than the structure of the ring composition should now be apparent. The whole sequence is about the founding of the kingdom of God; it shows how Jesus continues to fulfill the words with which his public ministry began: “The kingdom of God is at hand” (1:15). The sequence brings to the fore several aspects of the founding of the kingdom. It presupposes the destruction of an opposing kingdom, that of Satan (3:27). It involves a new kind of leader: the one who is called and appointed by Jesus himself, to be with him and to go forth into the world, to preach and to wield his power to drive out demons (3:13–15). Most importantly for our purposes, however, Mark insists that we can understand the kingdom of God only by recognizing that it is not based on the natural ties of family and homeland, but on hearing the words of Jesus and doing the will of God (3:21, 31–35). This radically new character of the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus implies that the kingdom can emerge into clear view only to the extent that Jesus is rejected by those to whom he is bound by ordinary human ties: his family thinks he is mad; the scribes say he is possessed by Beelzebul. In this context, we can begin to grasp that Jesus, far from having failed, is engaged in a different sort of project altogether.

This conclusion emerges with even greater force when we notice the events that precede and follow the narrative sequence centered on the Sea of Galilee. The sequence opens when Jesus “withdraws” toward the sea with his disciples (3:7); this withdrawal is occasioned by a decisive confrontation that unites a bizarre confederation of Jewish leaders against Jesus: “the Pharisees went out and immediately took council with the Herodians against him to put him to death” (3:6). At the other end, immediately after the final scene by the sea, Mark reworks the earlier contrast between Jesus’ natural family and his selection of the Apostles. Jesus returns with his disciples to Nazareth, which Mark pointedly identifies only as his “homeland [*patris*]” (6:1); he is rejected by the townspeople (6:2–4); and after registering his amazement at their unbelief (6:5–6a), he summons the twelve and sends them out with authority over unclean spirits (6:6b–7). The lesson is clear: Jesus’ rejection by his own people is somehow presupposed by, perhaps even required by, his founding of the kingdom of God. We might put ourselves in the situation of his disciples thus: we see Jesus clearly demonstrating his authority to institute the kingdom or reign of God; his own people, the racial and ethnic people chosen by God through the patriarchs, rejects him; therefore we must understand the kingdom of God in other terms.<sup>10</sup>

As noted above, the narrative frame opened by Jesus’ withdrawal toward the sea—and above all by his instruction that a boat be prepared in view of the crowd—closes when he enters the boat and begins to teach (4:1). Given the stories framed by the preparation of the boat, the content of his teaching once he embarks should come as no surprise. It consists in the first place of three parables concerning the preaching of the word and the kingdom that results from its reception: the parable of the sower (4:2–9, explained at 13–20), the parable of seed that bears fruit of itself (4:26–29), and the parable of the mustard seed (4:30–32). Organically embedded within this sequence of parables we find a reflection on the “mystery of the kingdom of God” (4:11), occasioned both by Jesus’ use of the parable form and by the parable

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10. The resemblance to Pauline thought is unmistakable, but Mark makes the point quite clearly in his own vocabulary and syntax—the terms being stories and the syntax their literary arrangement.

of the sower, which highlights the mysterious reality that despite its intrinsic power, the word sown by Jesus and his disciples will not always bear fruit. A fourth parable, the parable of the lamp (4:21–23), continues this reflection on the mystery or hiddenness of the kingdom.

### 1.2. *The sea (4:35–41)*

For our purposes, however, a detailed understanding of Jesus' teaching from the boat is less important than what happens afterward: "On that day, as evening drew on, he said to them, 'Let us cross to the other side.' Leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat just as he was. And other boats were with him" (4:35–36).<sup>11</sup> Only at this point does Mark's deployment of the boat reach its fulfillment. The boat framed the events in which Jesus, rejected by his own people, inaugurated a new and different form of community; it then carried his mysterious teaching about the nature of this community. Now, however, the boat has begun to move, and the collective weight and stress of the events that it has framed and supported is brought to bear on a single question: *Where is it going?* Where is Jesus going? To what end is he leaving the crowd behind? Where is he leading his flotilla of disciples, so to speak? And why—to add a final piece to the puzzle—must he calm a violent storm to get there?

The question of Jesus' destination will indeed determine the ultimate meaning of his dramatic journey over the sea. The events of the journey, however, carry multiple layers of meaning, the first and most obvious of which we can approach without knowledge of the destination. "A violent squall came

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11. For quotations from Mark I have relied freely on the New American Bible, Revised Edition, but have not hesitated to revise the translations or to substitute my own when a more literal rendering was necessary. All other translations of Scripture are those of the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE).

Marcus supposes that Jesus has disembarked at 4:10, and now gets back into the boat (*Mark 1–8*, 332). In fact, after the parable of the sower (4:1–9) chronological order yields to thematic order. Mark begins to work his way back toward the chronological narrative by bringing the theme back to the kingdom of God understood in terms of the sowing of seed (4:26–34) but does not fully return to the day on which Jesus enters the boat until 4:35.



up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up” (4:37). Wakened by his disciples, Jesus “rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ The wind ceased and there was great calm” (4:39). The disciples “were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?’” (4:41). The question thus posed by Jesus’ disciples is at the heart of the Marcan theme of blindness and sight. For the moment we should note only that Mark intends us, his readers, to be able to answer the disciples’ question: he begins his gospel by proclaiming Jesus the Messiah and Son of God (1:1). In the context created by this proclamation, the disciples’ inability to answer the question forced on them by Jesus’ mastery of wind and sea forces us to enter more deeply into their lack of vision, and thus also to confront the ways in which we too might still be blind.

In themselves, in fact, the events that provoke the disciples’ question are sufficient to answer it. In the literary and liturgical imagination of Jesus’ people, power over the raging sea belongs to the Creator God. This symbolic use of the sea is particularly prominent in the Psalms, Isaiah, and Job. God establishes and rules the created order by overcoming the primeval chaos represented by the sea (Ps 74:12–14, 89:9–12, 93; Jb 38:8–12).<sup>12</sup> His power over the sea symbolizes his power to protect his people in tumultuous times, and to restore them from exile (Ps 46:1–4, 65:8; Is 51:9–21). Because God will eventually establish his kingship over the whole earth, he is the hope and savior of the ends of the earth and of those far off across the sea (Ps 65:6–9; cf. Is 66:18–24). In short, “The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord over the mighty waters. . . . The Lord sits enthroned above the flood! The Lord reigns as king forever!” (Ps 29:3, 29:10). It is therefore clear that—however exactly this ought to be understood theologically—in mastering wind and sea Jesus exercises in his own person the power of God the Creator. His power fills his disciples with fear (4:41), but its implication is too much for them to grasp.

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12. This includes overcoming hostile or demonic powers, as is evident in the language of 4:39. See James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 149–51.

Before following Jesus to his encounter with those across the sea, however, we must now read with greater care, in light of the story of his crossing, the words with which Mark describes his entry into the boat. Translated literally, they read, “And again he began to teach by the sea; and a very great crowd was gathered to him, so that he, getting into a boat, sat down on the sea [*hoste auton eis ploion embanta kathēsthai en tēi thalassēi*], and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land” (4:1). Two features of this description stand out. First, the phrase “on the sea,” which in fact is not needed at all, modifies the verb “sits” rather than the noun “boat.” Second, Mark stresses that, unlike Jesus, the crowd is not on the sea but on the land. Both features are missing from Matthew’s narrative, in which Jesus simply gets into the boat and sits down, and in which the crowd stands not on the “land” but on the “shore” (*aigialos*, 13:2). In Luke, for whom the Sea of Galilee is merely the Lake of Gennesaret, we read that “sitting down he taught the crowds from the boat” (5:3).

In another context, both features of Mark’s formulation might be written off as insignificant. Mark would not be the first author to place an unnecessary prepositional phrase in an odd place; and of course the crowd is on the land: that is why Jesus had to get into a boat in the first place. Given what is about to happen, however—Jesus is about to demonstrate divine power by his mastery over this very sea—the fact that he teaches the crowd while seated upon the sea is surely significant.<sup>13</sup> So is the fact that the “crowd” remains on the land, whereas soon afterward Jesus will “force” (*ēnagkassen*) his disciples to journey out onto the sea without him, and then come “towards them walking upon the sea” (6:48).

Why, then, does Jesus preach the mystery of the kingdom while seated upon the sea, and why does he then, as a direct consequence of his words, set off for the other side? It is time to consider his destination, and with it the cultural context of the events that unfold there.

### 1.3. *The pigs* (5:1–20)

Jesus’ crossing of the sea takes him, as we saw at the outset, to the territory of the Gerasenes: of the city of Gerasa within the larger

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13. See also Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 126.

region of the Decapolis. This destination invokes a tense human geography, without which we cannot understand the significance of his actions there.<sup>14</sup> The Decapolis was a group of cities located mainly south and east of the Sea of Galilee, each of which was granted limited autonomy under Rome after being conquered by Pompey in 63 BC. They were thoroughly Hellenistic cities, having been founded or refounded at various times after the conquest of the region by Alexander the Great. In the case of Gerasa, we know that some local traditions attributed the founding of the city to Alexander himself or to his general Perdiccas.

We can grasp the human setting of Jesus' encounter with the Gerasene demoniac by sketching the history of the Decapolis from the death of Alexander in 323 BC to the time of Jesus. When Alexander's empire was divided among his generals after his death, control of Judea and of the region of the Decapolis passed to the Ptolemaic dynasty centered in Alexandria. After a long struggle, the area then passed to the control of the Seleucid dynasty centered in Antioch. The aggressive program of Hellenization pursued by the Seleucids, and above all by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, led in Judea to the successful Maccabean revolt of 166–160 BC and the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty in Jerusalem. After the Hasmoneans ceased to be vassals of the Seleucids, the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BC) expanded his territory to include a region east of the Sea of Galilee that included the Decapolis. This territory would have formed part of an ideal Davidic kingdom, being historically associated with the tribes of Dan and Manasseh. According to Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 13.15.4), Jannaeus or at least his troops destroyed the Decapoliitan city of Pella because its inhabitants refused to adopt the Jewish way of life; in this they echoed the policy of forced circumcision and assimilation pursued by his predecessors John Hyrcanus in Idumea (Edom) and Aristobulus I in Galilee.

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14. Depepe rightly argues that "Mark has specific theological reasons for his geographical descriptions" (*The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 353); in particular, his inexact geographical references are combined with "transparent narrative signals for discerning Jewish versus Gentile locales" (*ibid.*, 354). Geographically speaking, Gerasa is not a possible setting for Jesus' encounter with the demoniac, as Gerasene territory did not border on the Sea of Galilee; the Gergesa found in some maps is much more likely. Marcus points out that the Hebrew root *grš* "to banish" was commonly used for exorcism (*Mark* 1–8, 342).

It is therefore unsurprising that the Hellenistic residents of the Decapolis welcomed the Roman Pompey as a liberator; and indeed for centuries afterward the whole region numbered its years from the advent of Pompey.

In the context of this history of cultural aggression, it is significant and indeed shocking that upon arriving in the Decapolis, Jesus should immediately occasion the destruction of two thousand pigs. Remember the story of martyrdom in 2 Maccabees: "It also happened that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and tortured with whips and scourges to force them to eat pork in violation of God's law" (7:1). On its surface, Jesus is committing an act of cultural aggression in the grand tradition of Antiochus Epiphanes and of John Hyrcanus and his successors. The destruction of the pigs is not, after all, merely a rogue act of the legion of demons. Rather, the air is thick with irony when Jesus accedes to Legion's request not to be expelled from the area, allowing the demons to enter the swine. Away go the pigs, bearing the now ridiculous demons with them into the depths of the sea over which Jesus has just demonstrated his authority. And with the porcine demons, we must conclude, goes the non-Jewish impurity of the Decapolis itself.<sup>15</sup>

Let us review. Rejected by his natural family and by the religious leaders of his own people, Jesus proclaims that he has come to bind Satan and plunder his house. Simultaneously, he preaches the advent of a kingdom constituted not by race or ethnicity but by the act of hearing God's word and doing his will. Seated in divine authority upon the sea, he explores the mystery of this kingdom in parables. Immediately afterward he crosses the same sea, which now appears as the boundary that separates Jew from Greek. This boundary cannot be crossed without a fight; it is, after all, perhaps the fundamental boundary in a Jewish worldview marked from beginning to end by its attention to

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15. The name "Legion" and the pigs themselves are also symbols of Roman occupation: see, for example, Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 351. As I shall note momentarily, however, this reference belongs to Mark's retelling of the Exodus in terms of the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus rather than to any directly political message. The more general role of the pig as a cultural boundary marker (*ibid.*, 342) remains primary: Jesus proposes to remove the impurity of the Gentiles so as to call them into the kingdom, and the power of Rome will not pose an effective threat to his will (see also Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 356n64).

boundaries, beginning with the moment in which God separates light from darkness (Gn 1:4). But the storm is calmed: the kingdom whose advent Jesus is now enacting is the kingdom of God, and it comes with the authority wielded by Jesus himself to overcome primeval chaos once more, recreating the world and establishing within it a new order.<sup>16</sup> This is Mark's vision; this is the depth and power with which he has reflected upon the inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom.

I have not included the events at Gerasa within this review because we have not yet determined their full significance. We have seen that, on the surface, Jesus has committed an act of cultural aggression. This impression must, I believe, be allowed to stand, for unless we take it seriously we cannot understand what it means that the Greeks are to be included in the kingdom. Jesus comes to the Decapolis and performs an action that can only be read as asserting that, in the cultural conflict between Jew and Greek, the Jew is fundamentally correct: Israel is the people of God, and Jewish law and culture are therefore superior to Greek law and culture. We shall find two further occasions in which Mark subtly or not so subtly insists on this fact. Without it, we cannot understand Jesus' extension of the kingdom beyond the boundaries of his own nation, for this kingdom is precisely the fulfillment of Jewish expectation, and therefore of the law and culture of the Jews.<sup>17</sup>

In the present case, in fact, we cannot avoid the conclusion that Jesus arrives in the Decapolis precisely as a Jewish conqueror, the right arm of the Lord of hosts. Like Moses at the Red Sea and Joshua at the Jordan, he leads a band of Israelites miraculously across the waters that separate them from the land that has been promised them. Like Moses and Joshua, he encounters the troops of an opposing kingdom: the name of the demons is "Legion," and the symbol of the "Legio Decima Fretensis," which was active in Galilee and

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16. See also Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 159.

17. Marcus finds in the story's combination of openness to the Gentiles and insistence on Jewish culture evidence that Mark has imperfectly integrated previously existing material into his narrative (*Mark 1-8*, 347). This is to miss the sharp logic of Mark's lesson and his provocative use of symbols: for a Gentile, to follow Jesus is to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Jewish God.

the Decapolis during the First Roman-Jewish War (66–70), was a wild boar. These opposing troops, like Pharaoh's army, are destroyed by being plunged into the sea.<sup>18</sup> Yet there are crucial differences as well. Most important among these is the displacement of opposition to the kingdom from the Gentiles themselves to the evil spirits who oppress them. Indeed, Jesus' language in calming the sea is already that of an exorcist.<sup>19</sup> Consequent upon this, however, is a change in the significance of the sea. The sea dominates the rest of Jesus' Galilean ministry: he crosses and recrosses it, forcing his disciples to accompany him, so that instead of a barrier it becomes the divinely appointed means of passage from one side to the other, a symbol of the universality of the kingdom.<sup>20</sup> We shall find reason to think that Mark is exploiting this new possibility when he tells the story of the Syrophenician woman.

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18. For a more thorough look at the Exodus theme in Mark 4:35–8:21, which includes the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan, Israelite unfaithfulness, manna in the wilderness, and conquest of the land, see again Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 365–70; Kim, "Structural and Thematic Similarities."

19. Edwards, *The Gospel According of Mark*, 149–51; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 336–39.

20. See Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 370–71, quoting Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 189. The assessment of Elizabeth Struthers Malbon is particularly trenchant: "The disciples cannot cross the sea even with the aid of a boat (6:48); Jesus does not even need the boat to cross the sea (6:48). Thus, not only is the sea less a barrier and more a bridge between lands for Jesus, but for him the sea itself becomes as land" ("The Jesus of Mark and the Sea of Galilee," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, no. 3 [1984]: 377; see also 375).

Deppe follows Achtemeier in reading 4:35–6:44 and 6:45–8:10 as adaptations of pre-Markan parallel chiasmic miracle catenae, arguing that in Mark's hands these involve a complex geographical mirroring. The first catena involves an initial crossing of the sea to Gentile territory, followed by a return to Jewish territory and culminating in the feeding of five thousand Jews. The second involves a crossing to Jewish territory, insofar as Jesus sets out for Bethsaida, which Deppe treats as Gentile territory (355, 500; Jn 12:20–21; see also note 23 below), but ends up in Gennesaret instead. This is followed by a return to Gentile territory culminating in the feeding of four thousand Gentiles and subsequent arrival at Bethsaida (342–387, esp. 371; 500). Regardless of the hypothetical source, it seems certain that the passages 4:35–8:10 involve a careful interweaving of the Jewish and Gentile missions, mediated by crossings of the sea and culminating in the eschatological or eucharistic banquets.

In the absence of further information, we would have to read the destruction of the pigs as implying that in order to enter the kingdom Gentiles must accept the dietary restrictions of the Mosaic law. We shall note shortly that later in his gospel Mark explicitly rejects this conclusion (7:19). Even within the present sequence, however, two additional details should give us pause. First, Jesus does not allow the man who had been possessed to accompany him. Instead, he gives him a command: "Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you" (5:19). He does not, that is, allow the man who has been healed to separate himself from his own family and people; he commands him to remain with them, and to proclaim within his own cultural context what God has done for him. We shall find later that this command throws into relief the outcome of the healing of Bartimaeus, who, Mark tells us, "followed him on the way" (10:52).<sup>21</sup>

## 2. THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN (7:1–8:21)

The second sequence in which Mark describes Jesus' ministry to the Greeks begins with an attempt to cross the sea to Bethsaida, which leads instead to a controversy with the Pharisees at Gennesaret (6:45–7:15). It ends with a warning against the Pharisees (8:14–21), followed by the healing of a blind man at Bethsaida.<sup>22</sup> Although still narrated in highly symbolic terms, this sequence makes the inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom considerably more explicit than did the sequence centered on

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21. Here I pass over the final events in this sequence centered on the sea: the intercalated healing of a woman with a twelve-year flow of blood and the raising of a twelve-year-old girl, both on the Jewish shore (5:22–43). Paired with the preceding events on the Gentile shore, these miracles show that Israel too is impure, standing in need of Jesus' power to cleanse and heal.

22. Bethsaida is east of the Jordan. As the destination to which Jesus tries to get his disciples to go without him (6:45), but which they fail to reach until much later (8:22), after significant developments in the Gentile mission, the town fits the narrative best as a marker of Gentile territory: Malbon, "The Jesus of Mark and the Sea of Galilee"; Stephen H. Smith, "Bethsaida via Gennesaret: The Enigma of the Sea-Crossing in Mark 6,45–53," *Biblica* 77, no. 3 (1996): 349–74; Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 148–51. We shall also see, however, that the blind man of Bethsaida is paired closely with Peter.

the Sea of Galilee. Indeed, our second sequence might be read as directly enacting a reality symbolically anticipated in the earlier sequence. What does it involve?

### 2.1. *The two coastal cities (7:1–31)*

Crossing back to the eastern side of the sea is as nothing to Jesus, who simply walks across the face of the water. Yet adverse winds hold back the disciples, and Jesus allows himself to be diverted with them (6:45–53). This leads to a confrontation with the Pharisees and scribes. Here, as in the earlier confrontation concerning plucking grain on the Sabbath (2:23–28), Jesus uses a relatively minor complaint on the part of his opponents as an occasion to claim a much more radical authority over the life of God’s people. This time the Pharisees complain only that some of his disciples eat with unwashed hands (7:1–5). This criticism elicits a strong response (7:6–15), culminating in the claim that “nothing that enters one from the outside can defile that person” (7:15). Jesus’ disciples are understandably puzzled by this claim (7:17), and Mark, in conveying Jesus’ explanation (7:18–23), permits himself a rare authorial intervention: “Thus he declared all foods clean” (7:19b). In making this radical declaration, Jesus makes explicit and puts into action the reordering of creation symbolized by his crossing of the Sea of Galilee: observance of Torah will no longer serve as a cultural and religious boundary separating Jew and Greek.<sup>23</sup>

Like his previous boundary crossing, this action leads Jesus to Gentile territory: “From that place he went off to the district of Tyre” (7:24). In the Hebrew scriptures, the city of Tyre appears as the center and primary symbol of the Phoenician mercantile empire, and thus as a gateway to the world (Is 23; Jer 25:2; Ez 27–28). Tyre “sits at the entrance to the sea, trader to peoples on many coastlands” (Ez 27:3). Along with the half-legendary Tarshish, the farthest destination of the Phoenician ships, Tyre and nearby Sidon were such powerful symbols of the world beyond Israel that Joel presents their ships as the agents of the

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23. Deppe observes that the controversy and teaching of 7:1–23 determine the larger meaning of the encounter with the Syrophenician woman (7:24–30) (*The Theological Intentions of Mark’s Literary Devices*, 405).



diaspora, conveying the people of Judah to the Greeks (4:4–8). Correspondingly, Isaiah presents the ships of Tarshish as bringing the exiles home, laden with silver and gold (60:9). In the time of Jesus, the advent of Hellenism and Roman conquest meant that Tyre looked out not just toward the Mediterranean world in general but, in a particular way, toward Greece and Rome.

In Tyre, Jesus is approached by a woman whose daughter has an unclean spirit. Whereas Matthew describes this woman as “a Canaanite,” calling to mind the Old Testament conflict between the people of Israel and the Canaanites whom they displaced or subjugated, Mark describes her as “a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth.” This is a rich description. In calling her a Phoenician, Mark in fact indicates that she is a Canaanite, but describes her ethnicity from a Greek rather than a traditional Hebrew point of view. The prefix “Syro” may reflect a Hellenistic and then Roman perspective on Phoenicia, which beginning with the Seleucid dynasty was ruled from Syria. The additional term “Greek,” finally, makes explicit the crucial consequence of the woman’s Syro-Phoenician identity: she is a Greek, that is, a Gentile.<sup>24</sup>

In his dialogue with this woman, Jesus commits his second act of cultural aggression against the Greeks: “Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs” (7:27). It is possible, of course, to imagine the interchange in ways that take the edge off this statement, but this approach can only take us so far. The figure of Jews and Gentiles as children and dogs, respectively, parallels the drowning of two thousand pigs: it asserts the priority of the Jewish people and of their culture in God’s plan of salvation in a manner so pointed as to be unmistakable. It implies that in order to benefit from Jesus’ ministry, the Greeks must accept that the word of God came first to the Jews, with all the implications of this fact. In this scene, therefore, even more clearly than in the drowning of the pigs, we find that precisely the insistence on Jewish priority opens a door to the Greeks.<sup>25</sup> Not only does the

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24. For all this, as well as other possible interpretations of the term “Syro-Phoenician,” see Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 462–63.

25. Marcus finds it strange to see Jesus in Mark’s gospel so bluntly channeling the Jewish claim to priority (*Mark 1–8*, 470); compare his reaction to the

Greek woman accept the point at issue—“Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s scraps” (7:28)—but her response is so disarming that it goes a long way to settling the issue of Gentile inclusion in the kingdom. Jesus himself has just declared all foods clean, but Mark (and with him Matthew) knows that this is not enough: Greek disciples must accept the path by which the word of God has come to them, and Jewish disciples must see the faith and humility that this understanding can elicit in Gentiles who hear the word.

## 2.2. *The two seas (7:31–8:21)*

After this exchange, Mark tells us that Jesus “left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis” (7:31). From Tyre, Sidon lies in nearly the opposite direction from the Sea of Galilee. Yet this series of geographical references hammers home the collective symbolism of the places within Mark’s narrative. The journey through Sidon completes the reference to Tyre and Sidon, in case we should have missed the significance of Tyre taken by itself. The journey on from Sidon, meanwhile, is not simply to the Decapolis but “to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis.” Mark thus connects the Great Sea, the Mediterranean, to the Sea of Galilee, in case we should have missed the significance of either taken alone. The complete journey, from Tyre to the Decapolis, connects the Syrophenician girl with an unclean spirit to the man possessed by Legion.

Jesus’ second and third miracles in the Decapolis—which bring to a close our second narrative sequence concerning Gentiles and the kingdom—continue in equally dramatic fashion the work begun in the two exorcisms. A man who cannot hear, and who can speak only with difficulty, is brought to Jesus (7:32). In narrating the subsequent cure, Mark refuses to let us miss the significance of the moment. Jesus takes the man “off by himself away from the crowd” (7:33a). He puts his fingers into the man’s

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story of the Gerasene demoniac (note 12 above). Marcus helpfully suggests a possible context of writing in which tension between Jews and Gentiles might have led Gentile Christians to minimize or overlook the role of the Jews in God’s plan of salvation (*Mark 1–8*, 471).

ears, and, spitting, touches his tongue (7:33b). He looks up to heaven and groans aloud (7:44a). Finally, he speaks to the man in Aramaic: “*Ephphatha*: be opened!” (7:34b). The man’s ears are opened, and “the chain of his tongue” is “loosed,” so that he is able to speak rightly. By the power of Jesus, the Greeks are enabled not only to hear the word but also to proclaim it. This leads directly to the feeding of four thousand Gentiles in the district of the Decapolis—Exodus and Eucharist again, but with all the new significance made possible by Jesus’ crossing and recrossing of the sea (8:1–9).<sup>26</sup>

### 2.3. Preliminary conclusions

What conclusions can we draw from these two narrative sequences? One set of conclusions concerns the specific theme of the two sequences. First, as we have seen, there is a common thread in Jesus’ encounters with the Gerasene demoniac and with the Syrophoenician woman. In each case, Mark insists on the role of the Jewish people in God’s plan for the Greeks. However, this insistence does not preclude but actually opens the way to inclusion of the Greeks in the kingdom of God. Second, Mark’s use of the Decapolis and its history, and the terms in which he identifies the Syrophoenician woman, indicate that in Mark, as in Paul, the contrast between Jew and Gentile appears as a contrast between Jew and Greek. This implies a sense in which Hellenistic culture either stands in for or is simply identified with non-Jewish culture in general. A third consequence, extremely general but by no means unimportant for our purposes, is that the theme of Gentile inclusion in the kingdom is deeply important to Mark, that he has thought deeply about this theme, and that he has considered carefully how to express it by telling the story of Jesus’ words and actions.

A second type of consequence has to do precisely with Mark’s manner of expressing himself. Consider a list of the symbols that we have seen him deploy: Jesus’ natural family and the people of Nazareth; the Sea of Galilee and the Great Sea; his

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26. Deppe presents and assesses the compelling evidence that the two feedings are of Jews and Gentiles, respectively (*The Theological Intentions of Mark’s Literary Devices*, 373–84).

seat on and power over the sea, along with the storm itself; the Decapolis and the twin cities of Tyre and Sidon; the Gerasene demoniac and the Syrophenician woman; the pigs and their destruction; Jesus' refusal to allow the Gerasene man to follow him back across the sea; the death of John the Baptist; the feeding of a great crowd in the wilderness (twice); the healing of the deaf mute.<sup>27</sup> Each of these people, places, and things arguably has, and all but a few certainly have, a fairly specific larger meaning within Mark's narrative. In this respect, they can and should raise our expectations concerning other parts of the gospel.

It would be tendentious to conclude from the symbolic character of Mark's narrative that he does not take himself to be writing the life of a real person. In fact, I am inclined to wonder whether a sharp distinction between the literal and the symbolic might not actually betray Mark's understanding of the life of Jesus. At the risk of trying to say too much, I want to suggest at least briefly that Mark has a *sacramental* understanding of the events he recounts, in the following sense. In his sermon on the sea, Jesus refers to the mystery of the kingdom of God; throughout his gospel Mark presents this mystery in terms of the mystery of Jesus. The central question of Mark's gospel is not, "What did Jesus teach?" but "Who is Jesus?" Mark answers this question in his title—Jesus is "Christ, the Son of God"—only to spend his entire gospel showing how problematic this answer has proven for those to whom it is proposed. Mark's own understanding, however, is clearly expressed in the way he writes. Because of who Jesus is, for him to cross the Sea of Galilee *is* to remove the boundary between Jew and Greek; for him to calm a storm *is* to recreate the world; for him to stand on the soil of the Decapolis and cast out a legion of demons *is* to remove the uncleanness of the Greeks—and so forth. Precisely because Jesus is the Son of God each of his actions is both an intervention in the particular situation sketched within the narrative and a decisive intervention in the history of the world

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27. We can add, from the same chapters, a woman's flow of blood (5:25–34), a dead girl (5:21–24, 35–43), a period of twelve years for each of them (5:25, 5:42), the pairing of bread and fish (maritime quail, so to speak: 6:38–43, 8:5–7), and the green grass on which Jesus makes his sheep repose (6:39).

as a whole.<sup>28</sup> To attempt to separate these two aspects of the narrative would be to miss the central claim being made by the narrator, namely that Jesus is, in a unique and world-altering sense, “the Son of God.”

### 3. BLINDNESS AND SIGHT IN MARK

Before long it will be time to turn our attention directly to the story of the blind beggar of Jericho. This story, however, belongs not only to the theme of Jesus' ministry to the Greeks but also to the theme of blindness and sight that dominates Mark's gospel. We must therefore consider at least briefly the contours of this theme.

It would be no exaggeration, I think, to suggest that Mark's gospel is fundamentally about blindness and sight. Perhaps it would be more accurate, however, to say that Mark's gospel is fundamentally about blindness, and that exploring the reality of human blindness forces us to reckon with the power of Jesus himself to confer sight on the blind. To recognize the decisive role of blindness in creating the problematic of the narrative it is enough to consider what was the original conclusion to Mark's gospel, so far as we can tell: “Go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.’ Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:7–8). There is no question that Jesus has risen, but he has immediately gone before the disciples to Galilee, leaving us once again to grapple with the reality of our own incomprehension, and above all with the fundamental condition required of us if we are to see the risen Jesus: that

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28. This is the sense in which N. T. Wright describes Mark's gospel as an apocalypse: a narrative that invests historical events with their theological significance. See his *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 390–96. Wright observes that the parable of the sower, with its explanation and accompanying reflections on Jesus' use of parables (4:2–20), tells us how to understand not just Jesus' mode of expression but Mark's, insofar as the parable offers a theological interpretation of the historical events involved in the preaching, rejection, and reception of the word (*The New Testament and the People of God*, 393–94).

we should not treat his rising as a final vindication or resting place, but should instead humbly follow him along the way he has marked out for us.<sup>29</sup>

In light of this ending, we should also note the irony in Jesus' words concerning his use of parables, in which Mark's exploration of the theme of blindness first begins to become explicit. "The mystery of the kingdom of God," he tells his disciples, "has been granted to you, but to those outside everything comes in parables, so that 'they may look and see but not perceive, and hear and listen but not understand, in order that they may not be converted and forgiven'" (4:11–12). For Mark, however, the clarity provided by this explanation lies not so much in the distinction between disciples and outsiders as in the irony that results when Jesus' words are applied to the disciples themselves. He immediately continues: "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand any of the parables?" (4:13). Later, when we find him for the last time in a boat with his disciples, he reproaches them in words that echo his earlier comment about those outside: "Do you have eyes and not see, ears and not hear?" (8:18).

In its broadest outline, we may sketch Mark's development of this theme prior to the story of Bartimaeus as follows. Jesus' early ministry is characterized by miracles that symbolically cleanse from sin and confer the power to do good: Simon's mother-in-law is enabled to wait on Jesus and his disciples (1:29–31); a leper is cleansed (1:40–45); a paralytic's sins are forgiven as he is enabled to stand and walk (2:1–12); a man's withered hand is restored (3:1–6).<sup>30</sup> These miracles, and the teaching that accompanies them (2:1–3:6 *passim*), raise questions concerning the authority at work in Jesus (1:27, 2:10, 2:28, 3:22), but not yet concerning his personal identity as such. Within Mark's narrative, the latter question arises in view of Jesus' dramatic displays of power over creation as a whole: calming a storm (4:35–41),

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29. See also Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 191–98; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 484–96.

30. It is not clear to me, therefore, that Mark's symbolic use of miracle stories begins only after the first period of Jesus' ministry, as suggested by Deppe following earlier writers (*The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 471–72).

raising the dead (5:35–43), multiplying loaves and fishes (6:34–44, 8:1–9), walking on water (6:45–52). These events lead the disciples to ask explicitly, “Who then is this?” (4:41); the same question occurs to the crowds and to Herod (6:14–16). Walking on water, Jesus says to his disciples, “Take courage, it is I [“I am”: *ego eimi*],” but they remain in uncomprehending astonishment (6:50–52). A third set of miracles, finally, focuses on Jesus’ power to confer hearing, speech, and sight: the healing of the deaf-mute in the Decapolis (7:31–37), of a blind man at Bethsaida (8:22–26), and of Bartimaeus (10:46–52). At this stage the disciples arrive at a partial answer to the question of who Jesus is, while at another level their blindness persists, awaiting a more decisive healing.

For us, this third stage in Mark’s narrative—that is, in his story of blindness and of the promise of sight—requires at least a slightly closer look. Its clearest markers are the twin stories of the blind men of Bethsaida and Jericho, which frame the most important teaching sequence of the gospel.<sup>31</sup> We do not need to examine this sequence in detail; the following sketch will be sufficient. It begins with Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah (8:27–30). This confession makes possible not just one but three predictions of Jesus’ suffering, death, and Resurrection, each of which the disciples fail to understand (8:31–33, 9:30–34, 10:32–40). Each time, their misunderstanding enables Jesus to explore the consequences of his own death and Resurrection for the lives of his disciples (8:34–38, 9:33–10:31, 10:35–45).<sup>32</sup> Between the first and second predictions, Jesus reveals his messianic glory to Peter, James, and John (9:2–8), while insisting that this glory must be understood in relation to the scriptural prediction that the Son of Man “must suffer greatly and be treated with contempt” (9:12; cf. 9:9–13 as a whole).

Enclosed between the two stories in which Jesus confers sight, therefore, Mark offers us a tightly woven story of actions and teachings centered on three predictions of the Passion. The general significance of blindness as the frame for this narrative is clear: although the disciples are persistently incapable of comprehending what will turn out to be the central events of Jesus’

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31. Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark’s Literary Devices*, 501.

32. For the triadic structure of 8:22–10:52, see Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark’s Literary Devices*, 159–62.

ministry (8:32–33, 9:10, 9:32, 10:32), Jesus himself has the power to open their eyes. We shall find, however, that this general connection undersells the significance of the two stories of blindness, each of which is also tightly tied to the specific events that *follow* it.<sup>33</sup>

The specific significance of the blind man of Bethsaida is clear enough. Immediately before this story, reflecting on the two miracles of loaves and fishes, Jesus asks his disciples, “Do you still not understand?” (8:21). Mark then relates the healing of a blind man in the town of Bethsaida in Galilee (8:22–26). This healing is unique in that it takes place in two stages: “Putting spittle on his eyes he laid his hands on him and asked, ‘Do you see anything?’ Looking up [or “regaining his sight”: *anablepsas*] he replied, ‘I see people looking like trees and walking.’ Then he laid hands on his eyes a second time, and he saw thoroughly [*dieblepsen*], was completely restored and gazed upon [*eneblepsen*] all things clearly” (8:23b–25). Mark then tells us how Peter, empowered by Jesus to look up or to regain his sight, confesses that Jesus is the Messiah (8:29; cf. the verb *anablepō* at 8:24). Immediately afterward, however, Peter violently rejects the suggestion that Jesus will be rejected and killed. He sees, but not clearly, lacking the courage and understanding required to gaze steadily at the whole truth (8:32; cf. 8:25).<sup>34</sup>

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33. We must therefore reckon with Mark’s practice of using a passage that serves as a frame for the preceding narrative to shed light on the subsequent narrative as well, or vice versa. As observed in note 10 above, for example, 3:7–12 is a concluding frame for 1:40–3:12, but it also contains the preparation of the boat in 3:9, so that it frames the ring composition of 3:13–35 as well.

34. For the symmetry between these accounts, see also Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark’s Literary Devices*, 163–66. We saw in note 23 above that insofar as the arrival at Bethsaida in 8:22 concludes the journey first undertaken in 6:45, Bethsaida seems to function symbolically as a marker of Gentile territory. Insofar as the blind man of Bethsaida is linked to Peter, however, a Jewish identity seems most appropriate (for this link, see Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark’s Literary Devices*, 164). According to John, however, Bethsaida was a town in which Jews and Gentiles lived side by side: it was the birthplace of Peter, Andrew, and Philip (Jn 1:44), and for that reason the Greeks whose coming to Jesus implies the coming of the hour for him to be glorified approach him through Philip (Jn 12:20–23). Is it possible, then, that the significance of Bethsaida in Mark 6:45 and 8:22 is precisely its status as a mixed community, on the north shore of the sea rather than its east or west?



## 4. BARTIMAEUS (10:46–52)

We arrive, at last, at the story of the blind man Bartimaeus. Where should we begin? First with a name, and then with its context. The name “Timaeus,” *Timaios*, is a Greek name—manifestly, conspicuously Greek. It is possible that Mark sees in it the possibility of a pun: the Greek root *tim-* means “honor”; the Aramaic or Hebrew root *tm* means “unclean.”<sup>35</sup> As it stands, however, the name itself is unambiguously Greek. The patronymic “Bartimaeus” is, just as strikingly, a Greek–Aramaic hybrid, which can only indicate some sort of assimilation to Jewish culture on the part of its bearer; we shall have to ask what sort of assimilation is in play. So much for the name, as it first strikes us.

4.1. *The Temple (9:33–11:26)*

What, then, of the context? Healing Bartimaeus is Jesus’ final act before beginning his entry into Jerusalem, an entry Mark has planned with great care. After the second prediction of the Passion, Mark brings Jesus back to Capernaum, where his public ministry began (9:33; cf. 1:21–39). He then brings him not to Judea as such but to “the district of Judea and across the Jordan,” that is, to the region centered on the Jordan where John had preached and Jesus had been anointed by the Holy Spirit (10:1, cf. 1:2–13). From there Jesus sets out anew (10:17); he is now going, we soon learn, “up to Jerusalem” (10:32). The steps of this journey up to Jerusalem are signaled by Mark’s repeated use of the word “way” (*hodos*: 10:17, 10:32, 10:46, 10:52, 11:8). This way eventually passes through Jericho, northeast of Jerusalem, and once Jesus and his disciples leave Jericho they are traveling with “a sizable crowd.” Hence when Bartimaeus follows Jesus “on the way” (10:52), he joins not only the disciples but this larger crowd as well. When Jesus arrives at “Bethpage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives” (11:1), he sends two disciples ahead to prepare his entry into the city by securing a colt for him to ride

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35. See the citations in Earle Hilgert, “The Son of Timaeus: Blindness, Sight, Ascent, Vision in Mark,” in *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack*, ed. Elizabeth Anne Castelli and Hal Taussig (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 191.

on (11:1–6). Despite this delay, there are still “many” on the way with him to rejoice in his arrival at the city (11:7–10).

As it would for any pious Jew, Jesus’ way up to Jerusalem culminates in a visit to the Temple: “He went into Jerusalem, into the temple” (11:11).<sup>36</sup> But he is not the only one bound for the Temple. Rather, the action of the crowds in cutting branches to strew on his “way,” and the cry “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” indicate that he, his disciples, and the larger crowd are all on pilgrimage to the Temple: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God and has enlightened us. Join in procession with leafy branches up to the horns of the altar” (Ps 118:26–27). We later discover the reason for the pilgrimage: the greatest of Jewish feasts, the Passover, is at hand. We can now see that when the son of Timaeus follows Jesus “on the way,” this formerly blind beggar of apparently Greek lineage is joining a joyful procession of Jewish pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, and above all to the Temple, to celebrate the Passover. That the son of Timaeus joins himself to the Jewish festival procession is further highlighted by Jesus’ earlier refusal to allow another Greek, the Gerasene, to accompany him back to Galilee.

When Jesus and his companions arrive at the Temple, however, they do not come as just one group of pilgrims among many. Mark works out the significance of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem and at the Temple by means of two intercalated stories: the inspection and purification of the Temple and the inspection and cursing of a fig tree. Jesus enters the Temple area and looks around briefly; “since it was already evening,” he retreats to Bethany (11:11). The next morning he sees a fig tree and, being hungry, goes over to look for figs despite the fact that they are not in season; when he finds none, he curses the tree (11:12–14). He then returns to and purifies the Temple, expelling from its precincts the whole commercial side of Temple worship (11:15–19). He explains his actions by quoting Isaiah and Jeremiah: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations. But you

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36. Deppe treats the Temple and the Cross as distinct, incompatible candidates for the destination of the way on which Bartimaeus follows Jesus (*The Theological Intentions of Mark’s Literary Devices*, 169n293). In fact, Jesus’ Temple action is inseparable from his death: see 13:1–2, 13:26 with 14:62; 15:37–39.

have made it a den of thieves" (11:17; Is 56:7; Jer 7:11). He again leaves the city in the evening (Mk 11:19). The next morning Peter notices that the cursed fig tree has withered, and Jesus responds with a teaching about faith and prayer (11:20–25), beginning thus: "Have faith in God. Amen I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it shall be done for him" (11:22–23).

What is the significance of these intercalated stories?<sup>37</sup> In interpreting them, our first point of reference should be the quotations from Isaiah and Jeremiah, the juxtaposition of which is striking. The first quotation, from Isaiah, is drawn from a passage (Is 56:3–8) offering an eschatological vision in which not only will the "dispersed of Israel" be gathered back to Zion (56:8), but foreigners who join themselves to the Lord will be given "in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters" (56:5). The second quotation, in contrast, comes from a passage condemning those who take God's presence in the Temple for granted, acting as if the existence of the Temple in Jerusalem guaranteed God's protection regardless of how they themselves choose to live (Jer 7:1–15). The passage culminates with a promise that God will destroy the Temple and cast those who profane it out of his sight (7:14–15).

The juxtaposition of these two quotations presents us with a perplexing vision in which God promises simultaneously to fulfill the existence of the Temple, by making it a house of prayer for all nations, and to destroy it.<sup>38</sup> The authority with

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37. For further discussion, see Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 54–69. It is worth recalling that, as Deppe remarks, "a proper interpretation of Mark demands that one must separate the symbolic level from the historical without denying the results of either" (*ibid.*, 56).

38. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, The Anchor Yale Bible 27A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 782–3, 790–93, explores the tension between restoration and destruction, suggesting however that Mark presents the eventual destruction of the Temple as a consequence of the failure of Jesus' attempt to reform it. I want to suggest that the physical destruction of the Temple is not fundamentally a consequence of the Jewish rejection of Jesus; rather, it is required precisely by the eschatological fulfillment by which God's dwelling becomes a house of prayer for all nations. Deppe settles on destruction as opposed to cleansing (*The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 59), while recognizing that what is ultimately at stake is the fulfillment of Jewish institutions (*ibid.*, 67).

which Jesus acts to purify the Temple suggests that in some way the decisive moment envisioned by the two prophecies has arrived, and Mark uses the intercalated story of the fig tree to drive this point home. The time of fulfillment has arrived, whether the Jerusalem authorities realize it or not (11:18); and so the Temple, like the fig tree, will be destroyed. Yet somehow, at the same time, Jesus definitively cleanses the Temple, making it a house of prayer for all nations.

It is at least possible, however, that Jesus' explanation of what has happened to the fig tree addresses this tension. "Whoever says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it shall be done for him." Mark's intercalation of this story with Jesus' two visits to the Temple is sufficient to fix the reference of the phrase "this mountain": it is Zion, the Lord's holy mountain on which the Temple is built.<sup>39</sup> Through the faith of Jesus' disciples, Mark suggests, the Temple mount will be lifted up and thrown "into the sea." In 3:9–8:22, however, Jesus has transformed the sea from a site of demonic opposition to the kingdom to the means by which all the nations of the earth will be united in this kingdom. He himself has proclaimed the mystery of the kingdom while seated upon the sea. Mark, meanwhile, by having Jesus set out for Bethsaida but arrive there only by way of Tyre and Sidon and the Decapolis, has implicitly transferred this symbolism from the Sea of Galilee to the Great Sea, across which lie Greek and Rome.

At one level, then, the casting of "this mountain" into the sea is certainly the destruction of the Temple itself. Insofar as this is to be accomplished through the faith and prayer of the disciples, it signifies that the site of God's reign on earth has been displaced from the Temple to the community of believers, and that institutional Judaism will be powerless to prevent the growth and spread of this reign.<sup>40</sup> But this leads naturally to a

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39. For discussion, see Dane C. Ortlund, "What Does It Mean to Cast a Mountain into the Sea? Another Look at Mark 11:23," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 28, no. 2 (2018); Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 62–67. See also Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 785–86, 794.

40. Marcus suggests that Jesus' comments about faith and prayer (11:22–25) help to sketch a way of standing before the Lord that is not tied to a particular physical location (*Mark 8–16*, 789, 794–96). See also Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark's Literary Devices*, 65–67, 69.

deeper symbolism, on which the fall of the Temple is secondary to its fulfillment. On this level, the casting of the mountain into the sea is a dramatic, even violent, dislocation of the site of God's enthronement: from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth by means of the sea. It is an end only in the sense of being a fulfillment, an eschatological transformation of the place in which human beings encounter God.<sup>41</sup> Henceforth all the nations will be able to worship on God's holy mountain, for the mountain itself has gone forth from Jerusalem into the whole world.

We can now return to the role of Bartimaeus in Mark's narrative. Mark has, we have seen, been thinking deeply about the place of the Greeks within the kingdom of God. He knows that in order for them to occupy this place, the Jewish particularity of the Temple in Jerusalem will have to yield to a new way of standing before the Lord on his holy mountain, and that he must present the eventual destruction of the Temple not merely in terms of divine retribution but also in terms of the eschatological fulfillment that will enable the Greeks to take up their place before the Lord. In view of this, it is not too much to assume that his presentation of Jesus' ascent to Jerusalem, along with a large crowd of pilgrims on their way precisely to worship in the Temple, unfolds in view of what will happen when Jesus arrives there.

This is the context, I suggest, in which we should place the Greek lineage that Mark implies for the blind beggar in calling him the son of Timaeus. We have seen that in opening the eyes of the blind man of Bethsaida, Jesus demonstrates his ability to open the eyes and hearts of Peter and of the other Jewish disciples who accompany Jesus along the whole way from Galilee to Jerusalem. At the eleventh hour, nearing the end of the way, he opens the eyes of the blind man of Jericho, whose lineage is Greek. He thus demonstrates his ability to open the eyes of Greek as well as Jew. When this Greek, the son of Timaeus, joins the throng of Jewish pilgrims on their way to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, we begin to glimpse the eschatological fulfillment of the Temple itself and of God's covenant with the Jews as a whole: "And foreigners who join themselves

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41. It would be difficult, however, to make a conclusive argument for this suggestion, given that in the case of the Gerasene pigs and in that of the millstone of Mark 9:42 immersion signifies simply destruction.

to the Lord, . . . them I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer, . . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Is 56:6–7).

#### 4.2. *The son of Timaeus and the son of David*

I have chosen to begin with context, context, and more context, in order to prepare the ground for a richly symbolic reading of the name “the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus.” It is now time to turn to the story of Bartimaeus itself. Our task is to examine the evidence that in Mark’s intention, the blind man of Jericho represents the Greeks not simply by having a Greek father, but by signifying the promise and peril of Greek culture as a whole. That is, we must examine the evidence that the name “Timaeus” is a direct and deliberate reference to Plato’s dialogue of that name. The story begins thus:

And as he was departing from Jericho, with his disciples and a sizable crowd, the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting beside the way. And having heard that it is Jesus the Nazarean, he began to cry out and to say, “Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me.” And many rebuked him, that he should be silent; but he kept crying out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” (10:46–48)

Mark introduces the main character of this story—and he is indeed the main character; the narrative focus is squarely on him—as “the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar.” Several things are striking about the first part of this phrase, in which Mark first names not the beggar himself but his father, and then translates the patronymic phrase from Greek into an odd Greco-Aramaic hybrid.<sup>42</sup> First, it is strange that the man’s parentage is important enough to be given in two languages. The patronymic “Bartimaeus,” after all, can hardly be understood as a given name; it works better as a joking nickname given to a man with a Greek father who had taken up with Jews. Second,

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42. It is striking that the beggar is named at all, although the indirect naming through a relative does seem to follow a pattern: no one healed by Jesus in Mark’s gospel is named directly, but we do hear of Simon’s mother-in-law (1:30) and of Jairus’s daughter (5:22).

van Iersel and Nuchelmans show that the order in which Mark gives the two patronymics is directly opposed to his otherwise invariant practice in dealing with foreign words and phrases. This second point, which ought to carry considerable force, can be specified precisely.<sup>43</sup>

Mark's gospel is written in Greek for an audience that, in its author's estimation, requires a clear and immediate explanation for Hebrew and Aramaic words, for Greek terms referring to distinctively Jewish practices, and for a few other terms whose reference might not be immediately clear. To take just the most relevant cases, there are six other places in Mark in which a word or phrase is given both in Aramaic or Hebrew and in Greek. The pairs are *Boanerges* / *huiioi brontēs*, "sons of thunder" (3:17); *talitha koum* / *to korasion . . . egeire*, "little girl, arise" (5:41); *korban* / *dōron*, "an offering" (7:11); *ephphatha* / *dianoichthēti*, "be opened" (7:34); *Golgotha* / *Kraniou Topos*, "Place of the Skull" (15:22); and *elōi elōi lema sabachthani* / *ho theos mou ho theos mou, eis ti egkatelipes me*, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34). In these six locations Mark establishes a clear pattern: the Aramaic or Hebrew word comes first, followed by a Greek equivalent introduced in one of two ways: at 5:41, 15:22, and 15:34 he uses *ho estin methermēneuomenon*, "which is translated"; at 3:17, 7:11, and 7:34 he uses the simpler *ho estin*, "which is" or "that is." In four additional cases, he uses the shorter formula to introduce explanations for Greek terms, two of which are terms for distinctively Jewish practices.<sup>44</sup>

In introducing Bartimaeus, however, Mark leads with the Greek phrase *ho huios Timaiou*, "the son of Timaeus." This makes the half-Aramaic translation, "Bartimaeus," quite unnecessary for Mark's intended audience, and so reinforces the suggestion that its addition is a matter of emphasis rather than explanation. Yet this is not enough: although the order indicates that "Bartimaeus" is emphatic by showing that it is not explanatory, this emphasis could have been achieved by either order, and

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43. See van Iersel and Nuchelmans, "De zoon van Timeüs en de zoon van David," 108.

44. The four cases are: "unclean, that is, unwashed, hands" (7:2); "two lepta, that is, a penny" (12:42); "the palace, that is, the praetorium" (15:16); "the day of preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath" (15:42).

so does not explain the order we have. Why has Mark chosen to reformulate a Greek patronymic in Jewish terms, rather than the other way around?

We can reformulate this question in terms that connect it with our earlier reflections on Mark's treatment of Greeks and the kingdom of God. Why, in introducing Bartimaeus, has Mark chosen to make the direction of cultural assimilation point from Greek culture to Jewish rather than from Jewish to Greek? This question is, of course, a clearer way of noting that he cannot have been crafting an explanation for his intended audience. It also suggests, however, a comparison with Jesus' ministry to the Gerasenes and to the Syrophenician woman. In both these cases, we have seen, Mark's narrative requires of the Greeks who encounter the power of Jesus that they accept the decisive role of Jewish life and culture in bringing the kingdom of God to fulfillment. The narrative expresses this demand quite sharply, by destroying a herd of pigs despite knowing that Jesus will soon declare all foods clean, and by directing at the Syrophenician woman a Jewish division of the world into children and dogs.

I want to suggest that the same dynamic is at work in the story of Bartimaeus. If we follow the story a bit further, we find the following:

And stopping, Jesus said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take courage, arise, he is calling you." But he, casting away his cloak, sprang up and came to Jesus. And answering him, Jesus said, what do you want me to do for you? The blind man said to him, *rabbouni*, that I might see [*anablepsō*]. (10:49–51)

Not only does Mark translate the Greek "son of Timaeus" into Aramaic; he also presents Bartimaeus as addressing Jesus in Aramaic, as *rabbouni*. Matthew and Luke, neither of whom names the blind man (in Matthew there are two men), both have the Greek *kyrie* (Mt 20:31, 20:33; Lk 18:31).<sup>45</sup> In light of his treatment

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45. Even given the choice of Aramaic (or perhaps Hebrew), *rabbouni* is distinctive. It occurs in the New Testament only here and in Jn 20:16, on the lips of Mary Magdalene when the risen Jesus has made himself known to her by speaking her name; elsewhere both Mark and John use only *rabbi*. Strictly speaking the words are interchangeable, both meaning "my master" in the sense of "teacher," but in both gospels the choice of *rabbouni* is so exceptional



of the Gerasenes and the Syrophenician woman, it seems reasonable to suppose that Mark is, essentially, circumcising Timaeus. He is giving this man, introduced as a Greek, a home within Jewish culture before leading him up to the Temple to worship.<sup>46</sup> To quote Isaiah more fully: “And foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, to become his servants—all who keep the sabbath without profaning it and hold fast to my covenant, them I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house” (56:6–7). This does not imply, we have seen, that Greeks must keep the whole Torah in order to follow Jesus: Jesus has already declared all foods clean, and he is about to announce in veiled terms the painful dislocation of the holy mountain to which foreigners must come. The point, as in the earlier stories, is that the God now calling the Gentiles is precisely the God of the Jews.

As van Iersel and Nuchelmans point out, however, the work of the phrase “the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus” is not done.<sup>47</sup> It comes into new light when we reach the blind man’s first cry to Jesus: *huie David Iēsou, eleēson me*, “son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me.” Although we are no longer dealing with a translation, the order “son of David, Jesus” is in its own way nearly as strange as the order “the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus.” A moment later Bartimaeus cries out again: “son of David, have mercy on me.” Once again, comparison with Matthew and Luke can help us register the oddness of Mark’s first formulation. Matthew’s two invocations are both *kyrie, huios David* “Lord, Son of David,” although some manuscripts omit “Lord” in the first. Luke’s parallel those of Mark, but the first reads as we would expect: *Iēsou, huie David*, “Jesus, son of David” (18:34).

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that it is likely to be deliberate. Specifically, it may connote greater authority on the part of the one so addressed: Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 760.

46. This might be read as provocative in the manner of the two earlier stories. Assuming that Bartimaeus is Greek, and taking into account the frequent hostility between Judaism and Hellenism in the first century, calling the son of Timaeus “Bartimaeus” might have been something like introducing an American whose father’s name was, say, Jason, as “Jasonovic” during the height of the Cold War.

47. Van Iersel and Nuchelmans, “De zoon van Timeüs en de zoon van David,” 112–13.

The order “son of David, Jesus” makes perfect sense, however, if it is intended to create a parallel between Bartimaeus and Jesus in which the clear focus is on the lineage of each: the story is not simply about the healing of a blind beggar, or even about the healing of a blind beggar who is also a Greek. It is, we begin to see, about an encounter between the son of Timaeus and the son of David. Within this encounter, Mark’s decision to place the name “Timaeus” in a position corresponding to that of the crucial name “David” requires us to think more closely about the Greek name and its possible significance. The best way to make sense of this juxtaposition, however, is to suppose that the name “Timaeus” is a deliberate reference to the title character of the text that stands at the center of Hellenistic claims to wisdom in the first century: Plato’s *Timaeus*.

#### 4.3. *The philosopher and the evangelist*

The first centuries before and after the birth of Jesus saw the beginning of a long process of philosophical synthesis and consolidation, leading to the emergence in the third century AD of what we now call Neoplatonism as the dominant philosophical tradition of late antiquity. At the beginning of this process, the end of a long battle between the Academy and the Stoa made Stoic ideas about virtue and providence available to thinkers whose Platonic roots inclined them strongly against the materialism of the Stoics and toward a search for transcendent first principles. The emergence of a significant Neopythagorean tradition helped fuel the development of this new or rather “middle” Platonism; indeed, the ideas of the Neopythagoreans are sometimes hard to distinguish from those of the middle Platonists. The result was a philosophical tradition that was, it can be argued, more adequate to the religious needs and aspirations of its adherents than its predecessors had been. The *Timaeus*, valued by both Platonists and Pythagoreans, was the central text of this tradition during the century of Jesus and Mark. The title character of the dialogue, moreover, a Pythagorean philosopher from Locri in southern Italy, was generally held to have been a real person, the author of a short work that was thought to have been Plato’s source for the *Timaeus* but is in fact a much later epitome.

Plato's *Timaeus* is a theological cosmology that presents the visible world as the joint product of two causes. The first and most important of these is a divine figure, the Demiurge or Craftsman, who is completely good and therefore wishes the visible world to be as good as it can be. The second is "necessity," that is, the constraints and limitations imposed on the Demiurge by the matter of which the world is composed. Working from a perfect and unchanging intelligible model, the Demiurge bestows order and beauty on the world by joining it to the soul that he fashions for it, rendering the world living and intelligent. He also fashions immortal human souls, which are then united with bodies prepared for them by subordinate gods who are themselves works of the Demiurge. The task of the embodied human soul is to overcome the disorderly motion within itself that results from embodiment, bringing order and beauty to its bodily life and so, when this life is over, returning to the heavenly dwelling from which it came. The sense of sight is particularly important to this task: by contemplating the orderly motions of the heavens, the soul is prompted to seek the invisible sources of the visible world, that is, to philosophize. Philosophy, the love of wisdom, is the proximate source of all genuine human goods and the path by which the soul achieves its end.

Considering Plato's *Timaeus* in relation to the gospel of Mark, we may well find it intriguing that the sense of sight plays such an important role in Plato's dialogue—a dialogue that was, to repeat, the premier theological text for educated Greeks of the first century. For the moment, however, we must focus on the basic plausibility of the suggestion that Mark should have been concerned with the *Timaeus* at all. This question has two parts, which concern the accessibility of the dialogue to the evangelist and the interest of the evangelist in the dialogue. The second question requires more thought, and I would like to address it first.

There are various degrees to which we might think of Mark as engaged with Plato's *Timaeus*; here are three. First, we might think that Mark had a broader interest in Hellenistic philosophy as a propaedeutic for the Gospel or as a means of presenting the Gospel to the Greeks. Second, we might think that Mark had encountered some or all of the *Timaeus* in particular, or had learned through conversation of one or more passages or themes from the dialogue, and was drawn by the fact that it included a

discussion of blindness and sight. Third, we might think that Mark knew of the *Timaieus* by reputation only, and referred to it as emblematic of Greek culture without really engaging either the text or its themes. In reading the story of Bartimaeus, then, it is essential to be clear about the level of engagement required by the claim that Mark's naming of the blind man of Jericho is a reference to Plato's dialogue. The first and strongest level of engagement is clearly not required, and this is just as well, for there is no evidence whatsoever to support this view of Mark, and all the evidence one could want to show that he is not a philosophical thinker at all. Nor is the second level of engagement required. It is certainly more plausible than the first, but defending it would require specific textual connections of a kind that we have not yet found. Our final task will be to return to this possibility, and to examine the evidence that has been proposed. In fact, however, the suggestion that Mark is referring to Plato's dialogue requires only the third level of engagement, the weakness of which sets a relatively low bar for its defense. For the moment, therefore, I will suggest only that this weakest level of engagement is plausible.

The plausibility in question emerges from the context I have already sketched, the implications of which may be summed up as follows. First, Mark is deeply engaged with the place of Greeks, that is, Gentiles, in the kingdom of God proclaimed and inaugurated by Jesus. Second, in keeping with his typical mode of expression, he communicates his teaching concerning the Greeks by telling particular stories of Jesus that carry a universal meaning through their rich use of symbols, to which he draws our attention through narrative detail and through the juxtaposition of related stories. Third, the Greek lineage that Mark assigns to the blind man of Jericho symbolically joins the Greeks to the crowd of Jewish pilgrims going up to the Temple, thus indicating that when Jesus enters and purifies the Temple the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations" (56:7).

More briefly, the rich use of symbols that we find in Mark must have required considerable reflection on his part, and there are good reasons to think that in telling the story of the blind man of Jericho, he was looking for an adequate symbolic expression of the terms on which Greeks might come to stand

with Jews before the Lord on his holy mountain. It is hard to imagine a better symbol than the cry with which the son of Timaeus, understood as heir to the Greek search for wisdom, addresses the heir to God's promise to Israel: "Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me. *Rabbouni*—my master—I want to see."

Is it likely that Mark should have had the resources to select this symbol—that he should have been aware of a Platonic dialogue called *Timaeus*, or of a shadowy ancient philosopher of this name? The answer seems to be that if an author writing in Greek in the late first century had encountered any serious prose work at all, that work is likely to have been the *Timaeus*. This point has been argued above all by Heinrich Dörrie and David Runia. Concluding a survey of the reception of the *Timaeus* from Plato to Philo of Alexandria, Runia writes,

It would be a serious mistake . . . to conclude that the *Timaeus* was only read and studied by professional philosophers or students of philosophy. The very fact that it was regarded as the "Platonists' Bible" meant that its influence inevitably filtered down to men of letters and even those who had received only a smattering of learning. Indeed the *Timaeus* was the only Greek prose work that up to the third century AD every educated man could be assumed to have read.<sup>48</sup>

All this suggests two conclusions. First, for an author concerned with proclaiming a fundamentally Jewish religious message to Greeks of the first century, the juxtaposition of Jesus and Timaeus would have proved quite natural once it had been suggested. Second, a single conversation about the Jewish God with an interested and reasonably educated Greek would have been sufficient to suggest it. Because of the iconic position occupied by the *Timaeus*, a reference to it would have been meaningful even in the absence of any intention to engage with the philosophical content of the dialogue.

We may conclude that if Mark was sufficiently concerned with the evangelization of the Greek world not only to have

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48. David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the "Timaeus" of Plato* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1986), 57. See Runia's discussion for citations to previous work, including that of Heinrich Dörrie. See also van Iersel and Nuchelmans, "De zoon van Timeüs en de zoon van David," 115–19.

reflected on it in his gospel but also actually to have spoken with Greeks about Jesus—and about their own beliefs and hopes—then he is quite likely to have encountered Plato’s *Timaeus* at least in conversation. Moreover, the use of this dialogue or of the legendary Pythagorean Timaeus of Locri as a symbolic reference to the Greek search for wisdom is quite in keeping with Mark’s use of symbolically loaded stories to present Jesus’ ministry as extending to the whole Greek or Gentile world. We can exclude such a reference only by excluding the possibility that Mark’s aspiration to include the Greeks within the scope of his gospel stopped short of any real engagement with the cultural challenges posed by this inclusion—by supposing, in other words, that Mark’s inclusive aspirations were marked by a profound lack of interest in listening to those whom he desired to include.

#### 4.3. *The beggar, the bystanders, and the cloak*

If we do suppose that the Greek aspiration to wisdom appears in Mark’s gospel by way of the name “Timaeus,” three narrative details can attract our attention in a new way. The symbolic value of these details, it seems to me, is less certain than the basic cultural reference involved in the name “Timaeus.” They belong to a rich and meaningful encounter with the story, in which the reader, confident of its basic symbolism, places its details within the context of this symbolism without knowing exactly how much was intended by the author.

First, we have seen that Bartimaeus addresses Jesus as “son of David.” We should also note, however, that this is the first reference to Jesus’ Davidic lineage in Mark’s gospel. Only after the Greek Bartimaeus hails Jesus as the son of David do the Jewish crowds take up this theme as Jesus enters Jerusalem: “Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come” (11:10). That Mark should place this title on the lips of a blind beggar, the Greek son of Timaeus, seems to indicate a prophetic role for this mysterious figure. He has not yet encountered Jesus except by reputation, and he is told only that the one passing by him on the way is Jesus the Nazarean, and yet he hails Jesus as the one in whom God’s promise to David is fulfilled. We shall soon find additional evidence for this interpretation. Attributing a prophetic

role to a blind man, however, places us within the reach of an established Greek theme, that of the blind poet such as Homer or the blind seer such as Tiresias.<sup>49</sup> In the context of Mark's story, this theme would appear not simply as a contrast between physical and spiritual sight, but as presenting a partial spiritual sight within the context of a larger blindness. Bartimaeus receives the insight to address Jesus as the son of David, and precisely because of this insight he acknowledges his blindness and asks for healing. This interplay of spiritual blindness and sight echoes the earlier double healing of the blind man of Bethsaida and reminds us of the partial and ambiguous vision that characterizes Jesus' Jewish disciples at the time of his encounter with Bartimaeus. Given the equivalence of the titles "Messiah" and "son of David," in fact, Bartimaeus seems to demonstrate the same partial understanding of Jesus that we have already found in Peter—whose partial vision, we have seen, is symbolically anticipated in the healing of the blind man of Bethsaida.

Second, if Bartimaeus represents those Greeks who seek entry into the kingdom, then the bystanders who attempt to quiet him can be taken to represent Jewish disciples who have misgivings about the place of Gentiles in the kingdom.<sup>50</sup> We should not, however, oversimplify their role in the scene. In rebuking Bartimaeus and telling him to be silent (*epitimōn . . . hina siōpēsē*), they rewrite in reverse Jesus' first encounter with an unclean spirit at the outset of his ministry (1:21–28). In that encounter the possessed man "cried out" (*anekraxen*), "What have you to do with us, Jesus the Nazarean? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (1:24). Jesus then rebuked (*epetimēsen*) the spirit, commanding it to be quiet (*phimōthēti*): he will reveal the mystery of his identity only on his own terms. Similarly, when Bartimaeus is told that "Jesus the Nazarean" is passing by, he begins to cry out (*krazein*) to the son of David. At this, "many" rebuke and attempt to silence him, but their attempt fails: Jesus responds to the title given him by Bartimaeus by calling the blind man to join him on the way.

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49. Van Iersel and Nuchelmans, "De zoon van Timeüs en de zoon van David," 108–09, 112, 119–20; cf. Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 763.

50. Van Iersel and Nuchelmans, "De zoon van Timeüs en de zoon van David," 120–21.

This parallel suggests quite firmly that Mark indeed thinks of Bartimaeus as a prophetic figure, moved to cry out by a more-than-human power.

Third, when Jesus calls Bartimaeus, he leaps up, “casting away his cloak” (*apoballōn to himation autou*). The language does not indicate merely a temporary removal but a permanent rejection or loss. Given that Bartimaeus is a beggar, it seems likely that in describing him as casting away his cloak Mark means to present him as leaving behind his only shelter, his home, so as to follow Jesus.<sup>51</sup> Given that he is a beggar, however, his “cloak” (*himation*) must be of the roughly woven sort called a *tribōn* or *tribōnion*; and a *himation* of this poor sort, it so happens, was not only the simple garment of the poor man, but also the symbolic garb of the philosopher.<sup>52</sup> If the name “son of Timaeus” is indeed a reference to Plato’s dialogue or to its title character, then in point of fact, at least, the *himation* of Bartimaeus, which he leaves behind in order to follow Jesus, is a philosopher’s cloak.<sup>53</sup> Thus read, this detail would complete the paradoxical picture of a Greek whose attempts to see have left his essential blindness untouched, but who receives from beyond himself a second sight, which leads him to place in the Jewish son of David his hope of learning to see at last.

##### 5. BLINDNESS AND SIGHT IN PLATO

As noted above, in order to recognize Mark’s reference to the *Timaeus* or to Timaeus of Locri it is not necessary to suppose that he was directly familiar with the text of the dialogue. Nor, for that matter, is it necessary to suppose that he is deliberately drawing on the Greek tradition of blind poets and seers, or that the cloak cast aside by Bartimaeus is, even secondarily, a philosopher’s cloak. Given the basic reference, however, the supporting

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51. *Ibid.*, 110, 121.

52. None of this excludes the baptismal imagery that has sometimes been found in the scene (Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 765); rather, the baptismal act of putting aside one’s old garments, and thus one’s old way of life, would simply acquire another layer of meaning.

53. Cf. Lathrop, *Holy Ground*, 32.



details acquire a measure of plausibility. Is it similarly plausible that Mark is in dialogue with the Platonic text itself? Gordon Lathrop has identified a single passage from the *Timaeus* as a possible site for such a dialogue. His reading shows that if Mark did not have this passage in mind, then his reference to the *Timaeus* is rather more fortunate than he imagined.

Lathrop begins with the structure of the *Timaeus*, arguing that the long speech of its title character is divided into two main parts (27d5–47e2 and 47e3–92c9). The passage he has identified for comparison with the story of Bartimaeus is the culmination of the first part. Similarly, Lathrop suggests, the major division within Mark's narrative occurs when Jesus enters Jerusalem, and the story of Bartimaeus occupies the final position in the first part.<sup>54</sup> Nothing I want to say depends on the alleged structural parallel; indeed, I am inclined to think it unlikely that anything at all about the structure of Mark's gospel is due to the structure of Plato's *Timaeus*.<sup>55</sup> The passage itself, however, is worth considering. It concerns the relation between philosophy and the sense of sight, a connection that by the time of Mark had become a commonplace among Platonically inclined philosophers and that Mark might have been able to associate with the *Timaeus* even without direct familiarity with the text.<sup>56</sup> It reads thus,

Let us conclude, then, our discussion of the accompanying auxiliary causes that gave our eyes the power which they now possess. We must next speak of that supremely beneficial function for which the god gave them to us. As my account has it, our sight has indeed proved to be a source of supreme benefit to us, in that none of our present statements about the universe could ever have been made if we had never seen any of the stars, sun or heaven. As it is, however, our ability to see the periods of day-and-night, of months and of years, of equinoxes and solstices, has led to the invention of number, and has given us the idea of

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54. *Ibid.*, 27–28, 30.

55. Beyond his identification of the one intriguing passage from the *Timaeus*, a good deal of what Lathrop says strikes me as rather fanciful.

56. See, for example, Philo of Alexandria, *On the Creation*, chap. 17. Philo takes a different approach to the passage now at issue, affirming Plato's claim that philosophy is the most perfect good to be found in human life and then identifying philosophy with the Jewish way of life as a whole.

time and opened the path to inquiry into the nature of the universe. These pursuits have given us philosophy, a gift from the gods to the mortal race whose value neither has been nor ever will be surpassed. I'm quite prepared to declare this to be the supreme good our eyesight offers us. Why then should we exalt all the lesser good things, which a non-philosopher struck blind would "lament and bewail in vain"? Let us rather declare that the cause and purpose of this supreme good is this: the god invented sight and gave it to us so that we might observe the orbits of intelligence in the universe and apply them to the revolutions of our own understanding. For there is a kinship between them, even though our revolutions are disturbed, whereas the universal orbits are undisturbed. So once we have come to know them and to share in the ability to make correct calculations according to nature, we should stabilize the straying revolutions within ourselves by imitating the completely unstraying revolutions of the god.<sup>57</sup>

There is, at minimum, a basic structural similarity between this passage and the story of Bartimaeus. Both passages turn—the Platonic explicitly, the Marcan implicitly but no less crucially—on a distinction between bodily and spiritual sight. Moreover, their divergent understandings of spiritual sight involve just the contrast that Mark's reference to the *Timaeus* highlights in the first place: the contrast between the Greek claim to wisdom embodied in Plato's *Timaeus* and the Christian claim that wisdom comes from following Jesus along his way to the Cross.

In addition to the basic distinction between two kinds of sight, the Platonic passage makes two specific claims that are directly relevant to the story of Bartimaeus. First, *Timaeus* claims that philosophy is not only the supreme good to come to us through the sense of sight but also "a gift from the gods to the mortal race whose value neither has been nor ever will be surpassed." To an early Christian striving to bring the Gospel to the Greek world, this is about as direct as a challenge can be. Second, *Timaeus* assumes that "a non-philosopher struck blind would 'lament and bewail in vain'" the lesser benefits that derive from sight. In making this assumption, however, *Timaeus* offers the Christian author a perfect rebuttal to his first claim: if one should

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57. Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 46e6–47c4.

appear who, unlike Timaeus, can indeed restore sight to the eyes of the body, this power would support the claim to a wisdom by comparison with which philosophy itself is blind. Here we might recall the question addressed by Jesus to the scribes of Capernaum early in Mark's gospel: "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'?" (Mk 2:9). In Capernaum bodily healing was the sacrament of spiritual healing; outside Jericho, the restoration of bodily sight is a sacrament of wisdom. At the same time, it would be a serious mistake to claim that this response to Plato is the main point of Mark's story. The central issue is not the status of Greek philosophy but rather the status of the Greeks themselves within the kingdom of God.

Was Mark in fact familiar with this passage from the *Timaeus*? If we accept that he is referring to the *Timaeus* in the first place, it is certainly possible. Moreover, appreciating the contrast between the two passages does not require introducing extraneous themes into our reading of Mark: Greek culture claims for itself the clearest vision that a human being can attain; Mark responds that such vision is partial at best, and that the best it can manage is to respond to an inspiration of the Jewish God, so as to beg his Jewish son for the gift of sight. We shall never know for certain what Mark read; we can say only that if he had not read these lines, then his choice of the *Timaeus* as a symbol of Greek culture was happier than he realized.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Let us conclude with a brief review. It is certain that Mark is deeply concerned with the place of the Greeks in the kingdom of God, and that he expresses this concern through the symbolic or sacramental value that he attributes to Jesus' actions in the Decapolis and in Tyre. Within the story of Bartimaeus, it is reasonably clear that the blind beggar is of Greek lineage, that the arresting word order within the phrases "the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus" and "son of David, Jesus" has been chosen for the purpose of juxtaposing the son of Timaeus with the son of David, and that this implies a reference to Plato's *Timaeus*. This reading of the story places it alongside those of the Gerasene demoniac and

the Syrophoenician woman as three cases in which the power of Jesus is extended to the Greeks, on condition that they recognize the decisive role of God's revelation to the Jews in the call that is now being extended to them. This theme finds its fulfillment when the Greek Bartimaeus follows Jesus up to the Temple, fulfilling the eschatological prophecy of Isaiah that "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." To maintain this reading of the story of Bartimaeus, it is not necessary to suppose that Mark is more generally interested in Greek philosophy, or even that he is directly familiar with the text of the *Timaeus*. It is possible, but not necessary, to see several further narrative details as enriching its basic symbolism in specific ways. It is also possible, though not necessary, to see Mark as rebutting the claim of the *Timaeus* that philosophy is the greatest gift that will ever come to human beings from the gods. □

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