

MARK'S GOSPEL

Introduction

Mark's gospel was almost certainly the first gospel to be written – Matthew and Luke both seem to borrow from Mark as regards both order and content and also an unknown source Q. So here for the first time the words and works of Jesus were remembered in a written form. Throughout his gospel Mark bears witness to the fact that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. I believe Mark writes mainly in order to call men to faith, it's a witness document.

Mark himself was not an eyewitness to the events he records, but he did travel quite a lot with Paul and was Peter's interpreter in Rome. According to church tradition (and an early document appended to the manuscripts of Mark) the gospel was written in Italy (probably in Rome). Traditionally the gospel has been dated between AD60 and AD65, but I disagree with that. Analysis of the scrolls from Qumran seem to show fragments of Mark dating from AD 50-55, and for me this makes much more sense as Luke's gospel was written before Acts, and it's hard to date Acts later than AD62-63.

As with all the synoptic gospels the material is order thematically rather than by date.

Mark doesn't talk about the birth of Jesus (as Matthew and especially Luke do) – I'm forced to the conclusion that he didn't consider it an important part of the gospel.

The term 'gospel' derives from an old English word 'godspel' – which means good news. However, the term wasn't first coined by Christians. Among the Romans it meant joyful tidings and was linked to the cult of emperor worship pagan celebrations of the emperor's birthday. The reports of such festivals were called "evangel" in the inscriptions and papyri of the Roman Imperial Age. A calendar inscription from about 9 B.C., found in Priene in Asia Minor, says of the emperor Octavian (Augustus): "the birthday of the god was for the world *the beginning of joyful tidings* which have been proclaimed on his account" (*Inscr. Priene*, 105, 40). This inscription is remarkably similar to Mark's initial line and it clarifies the essential content of an evangel in the ancient world: *an historical event which introduces a new situation for the world*. In this perspective the Roman would understand Mark's proclamation of Jesus the Messiah. Beginning with the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry, Mark announces Jesus' coming as an event that brings about a radically new state of affairs for mankind.

There is, however, another aspect to the meaning of "gospel." Mark's own understanding of what constituted "joyful tidings" drew heavily on the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, as the twofold citation of Ch. 1:2–3 makes clear. The explicit reference to Isaiah indicates that the gospel receives its proper interpretation only in the light of the coming salvation promised in the prophetic word. Especially in Isaiah the Hebrew terms signifying "good news" concern the announcement of future salvation, or of the time of salvation. In this context to proclaim salvation on God's authority is itself a creative act; in a sense it inaugurates the reality of which it speaks. This fact points up the difference between the biblical concept of joyful tidings and that found in the imperial cult. For the Roman an evangel was retrospective, a reflection of the joyous event which has already taken place. In the prophetic word there is a distinctively forward-looking eschatological perspective. The messenger of joy will announce the beginning of the time of salvation and thereby introduce it (cf. Isa. 52:7–10).

In keeping with this usage in Isaiah, Mark's opening verses center attention both on the earliest apostolic preaching about "Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God," and on the joyful tidings announced by Jesus himself (Ch. 1:14 f.). In the initial phrase of Mark's Gospel and the summary of Jesus' Galilean proclamation, the word "gospel" has not yet come to mean a written document. It refers to a living word of hope from the lips of an appointed messenger.

In Ch. 1:1 "gospel" is the technical term for Christian preaching, and the words which qualify it should be understood objectively, "the good news *concerning* Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." Mark's Gospel as a whole gives an interpretive account of the historical appearance of Jesus; it is concerned with his teaching far less than the other Gospels. Consistent with this "Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" in verse 1 should be understood as the content of Christian proclamation.

Mark 1:1-8

Mark emphasises that the good news regarding Jesus was inseparably bound up with the preparation provided by John the Baptist, whose ministry served to summon Jesus to the wilderness. The word "beginning" has biblical overtones which lend an awesome ring to the opening phrase, and serves to recall that it is God who initiates redemption on behalf of men. The coming of John signaled both the beginning of the joyful tidings of salvation and the intrusion of the rule of God.

The citation formula, "even as it is written in Isaiah the prophet," indicates that the proper context for understanding the gospel is the promise of future salvation found in the latter half of Isaiah. The citation which follows is a composite quotation from Ex. 23:20; Mal. 3:1 and Isa. 40:3, passages which evoke the image of the forerunner Elijah. The blended citation functions to draw attention to three factors which are significant to the evangelist in the prologue: the herald, the Lord and the wilderness. In the verses which immediately follow, the significance of each of these elements is emphasized by Mark, who sees in the coming of John and Jesus to the wilderness the fulfilment of the promised salvation of which the prophet Isaiah had spoken. In stressing the element of fulfilment at the beginning of his account Mark conforms the narrative to the apostolic preaching, in which the theme of fulfilment was of strategic importance.

John the Baptist was the most important figure to appear in Israel for 400 years – because they had no prophets during this time. Men clung to the hope that the "faithful prophet" would appear, the Prophet like Moses, whose coming would signal the events of the "last days" (Deut. 18:15–19; 1 Macc. 4:42–46; 14:41; 1QS ix. 11). The very fact of John's appearance was an eschatological event of the first magnitude, and signified that the decisive turning point in the history of salvation was at hand. It was John, the preacher of radical repentance, who initiated the messianic crisis. To speak of the gospel of Jesus is to speak of the good news which began with John.

John the Baptist may have been a member of the Essene sect at Qumran in his youth (we know from Luke that his parents were old so he could easily have become an orphan and this sect took in orphans), but his message differs radically from theirs even though they both centre on the wilderness and Isaiah 40:3.

From Mark's perspective, John is important not for his own sake but as the beginning of the unfolding drama of redemption which centers in Jesus of Nazareth. The brevity of his presentation of John serves to project into sharp relief two features of the Baptist's ministry

which were of special significance to him: (1) John's career was the result of divine appointment in fulfilment of prophecy; (2) John bore witness to the supreme dignity and power of the Messiah, whose coming was near.

Briefly and concisely verses 4–8 describe the Baptist's ministry. Mark focuses attention on three elements in John's ministry, each of which is related to the OT prophecies with which he has prefaced his Gospel: (1) John was a man of the wilderness; (2) he performed his ministry of baptism in the wilderness, and so prepared the way of the Lord; (3) he announced one greater than himself who was to come after him. Each detail of the five verses is related to one or more of these three emphases.

Those who heard John would not have failed to recognize the familiar prophetic call to repentance. But in response to his preaching John called for an action which was wholly novel—baptism in the Jordan River. It has been conjectured that John's baptism was derived from the Jewish practice of baptizing proselytes, or from the rites of initiation practiced at Qumran. No clear line of dependence can be shown in support of these theories. Baptism appears rather as a unique activity of this prophet, a prophetic sign so striking that John became known simply as "the Baptizer."

The absence of qualifying clauses makes it difficult to ascertain the exact nuance in the phrase, "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The biblical concept of repentance, however, is deeply rooted in the wilderness tradition.³⁷ In the earliest stratum of OT prophecy, the summons to "turn" basically connotes a return to the original relationship with the Lord. This means a return to the beginning of God's history with his people, a return to the wilderness. Essential to the prophetic concern with repentance in Hosea, Amos and Isaiah is the concept of Israel's time in the wilderness as the period of true sonship to God, a status into which the Lord is going to lead his people once again in a future time. Although there is no trace of this understanding in orthodox Jewish circles in the first century, the theology of the Qumran Community indicates that this strand of the prophetic tradition was kept alive in sectarian Judaism.³⁹ The correlation between the wilderness and repentance was not John's innovation and must have been understood by his contemporaries. John's call to repentance and his call to come out to him in the wilderness to be baptized are two aspects of the same reality. It is a call to renew sonship in the wilderness. The peculiar urgency in the call lies in the fact that the crisis of God's final act is close at hand.

The same correlation should be seen between baptism and the wilderness. The summons to be baptized in the Jordan meant that Israel must come once more to the wilderness. As Israel long ago had been separated from Egypt by a pilgrimage through the waters of the Red Sea, the nation is exhorted again to experience separation; the people are called to a second exodus in preparation for a new covenant with God. Both John's call to repentance and his baptism are intelligible as aspects of the prophetic tradition which expected the final salvation of God to be unveiled in the wilderness.

Repentance in John's proclamation is conditioned by the action of God, who is about to enter history in a definitive fashion. The opportunity and urgency for repentance lie in the fact that the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit is close at hand. As the people heed John's call and go out to him in the desert far more is involved than contrition and confession. They return to a place of judgment, the wilderness, where the status of Israel as God's beloved son must be re-established in the exchange of pride for humility. The willingness to return to the wilderness signifies the acknowledgment of Israel's history as one of disobedience and

rebellion, and a desire to begin once more. John's proclamation of the forgiveness of sins provides the assurance that God extends grace as well as judgment. It is in the context of judgment and grace that the people of Jerusalem and Judea go out to the wilderness to be baptized by John.

John's diet and clothing emphasise that he was a man of the wilderness. They also remind us of the prophet Isaiah. This identification is made explicit in chapter 9 (9:9-13).

John's message is telescoped to focus upon a single theme, the proclamation of a person still to come who will baptize the people with the Holy Spirit. In referring to this new Baptizer, whose dignity overshadowed his own, John avoided traditional messianic terms. The announcement is framed in accordance with Israel's expectation either of the eschatological coming of God himself or of his appointed representative. The formulation, "the Coming One," echoes Mal. 3:1 f.; 4:5 f. with its warning concerning the Lord who comes suddenly in sifting judgment, or Ps. 118:26 with its ascription of praise to "him who comes in the name of the Lord." The precise identity of the Coming One remained hidden, apparently, even from John. "To come after someone" is technical terminology for discipleship among the scribes and rabbis of the first century, and this usage is reflected in Jesus' summons to men *to come*, or *follow after* him (cf. Ch. 1:17). It is possible, therefore, that John is saying, "He who is coming is a follower of mine." Yet he affirms that he is not worthy of performing the most menial task, from which even the Hebrew slave was released, the removal of the master's sandals. In no stronger manner could the mystery and the dignity of the Coming One be emphasized.

The reference to the bestowal of the Spirit is appropriate to the wilderness context of John's proclamation. Isaiah describes Israel's trek in the wilderness as a march under the guidance of the Spirit of God (Isa. 63:11); it was the Spirit who gave the people rest in the wilderness (Ch. 63:14). As the first exodus had been a going forth into the wilderness under the leadership of God's Spirit, the prophet announces the second exodus as a time when there will be a fresh outpouring of the Spirit (Chs. 32:15; 44:3). With this concept in mind John calls the people to the wilderness in anticipation of the fulfilment of the prophetic promise. It is this note of anticipation which Mark emphasizes by reducing John's message to two statements, both of which point forward to something to come. They affirm that John is the forerunner of the Messiah (Ch. 1:7) and that his baptism is a preparation for the messianic baptism to come (Ch. 1:8).

Here John's re-creating the crisis with which John confronted Israel. We don't just need to know who John was historically we need to completely understand his mission.

verses 9-11

The baptism of Jesus. Jesus comes into the wilderness to be baptised by John. The reference to the Jordan links this with John's previous baptisms. In submitting to John's baptism Jesus acknowledges the judgment of God upon Israel. At the same time his baptism signifies that his mission will be to endure the judgment of God. Jesus comes to John as the true Israelite whose repentance is perfect. He *is* the beloved Son (his baptism doesn't make him God's son), but he comes to the wilderness because sonship must be reaffirmed in the wilderness. John's appearance in the wilderness, his call to repentance and his baptism signify that the time has come when God will execute a decisive judgment from which a new Israel will emerge. Jesus acknowledges this conviction which has roots in the prophetic tradition. He

comes to John as one willing to assume the brunt of this judgment. The bearing of its burden constitutes his mission.

Many had come to the Jordan to be baptized by John, but only in the instance of Jesus, in whom true submission to God was perfectly embodied, was the “coming up” from the water answered by a “coming down” from above. The cosmic significance of this event is indicated by the vision of the rending of the heavens, the descent of the Spirit and the testimony of the voice from heaven. Mark’s distinctive language echoes Isa. 64:1, where the prophet prays, “Oh that thou wouldst *rend the heavens*, that thou wouldst *come down*, that the mountains might quake at thy presence ...” The pattern had been established already in the first exodus that God could not come down until the people had been consecrated (Ex. 19:10 f.). For this reason Jesus expressed a vicarious confession of sin on behalf of the many. He walked into the waters of baptism in obedience to the Father’s will. He had consecrated himself in faith, even as every other man must do. But in this instance God came down, and there was striking attestation that sonship has been re-established through the one true Israelite whose repentance was perfect.

The divine response to Jesus’ acknowledgment of the judgment of God was the descent of the Spirit as a dove and the voice from heaven. Both of these elements are to be associated with the new exodus in the wilderness prophesied by Isaiah (Chs. 32:15; 44:3; 63:10–14). This prophecy is fulfilled in proleptic fashion in the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus. It was in the wilderness that Israel was first designated as son by God, and particularly the prophet Hosea pointed forward to a time when God would renew Israel’s sonship in the wilderness.⁵⁸ In Jesus this ancient promise finds fulfilment precisely because his pilgrimage into the wilderness was the only true exodus. Many went out to John but only Jesus understood that a return to the wilderness involved the determination to live under the judgment of God.

The analogy between the Holy Spirit and a dove must be understood within a frame of reference provided by the OT or post-biblical Judaism. Two interpretations commend themselves more than others. (1) The reference contains a veiled allusion to Gen. 1:2, where the brooding of the Spirit over the waters at creation suggested to Ben Zoma (*ca.* A.D. 90) the action of a dove. The descent of the Spirit signifies new creation, corresponding to the cosmic overtones in the rending of the heavens. A later tradition identified the Spirit in Gen. 1:2 as the Spirit of the Messiah, which would be withheld from Israel until the nation was prepared through repentance. Only rarely, however, did the rabbis identify the dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. (2) More frequently the rabbis refer to the dove as a symbol of the community of Israel,⁶¹ and this association may have been in Mark’s mind. At the moment of his baptism Jesus is the one true Israelite, in whom the election of God is concentrated. The descent of the Spirit “as a dove” indicates that he is the unique representative of the new Israel created through the Spirit.

In the voice from heaven God addresses Jesus as his unique Son, the object of his elective love. In this expression of unqualified divine approval there is recognition of Jesus’ competence to fulfill the messianic task for which he has been set apart. It is common to find in the pronouncement a reflection of Ps. 2:7 and Isa. 42:1, but it is not a quotation and it is legitimate to hear within it other echoes.

The declaration provides a unique appraisal of Jesus. The designation “Son” is enriched by the concept of the Servant of the Lord of Isa. 42:1, but the primary emphasis is upon sonship. In this context “Son” is not a messianic title, but is to be understood in the highest sense, transcending messiahship. It signifies the unique relationship which Jesus sustains to the

Father, which exists apart from any thought of official function in history: Jesus is God's unique Son. The first clause of the declaration (with the verb in the present tense of the indicative mood) expresses an eternal and essential relationship. The second clause (the verb is in the aorist indicative) implies a past choice for the performance of a particular function in history. The thought may be expressed in the formulation, Because you are my unique Son, I have chosen you for the task upon which you are about to enter. The relationship between the two clauses is exactly paralleled in the declaration of Ch. 9:7, where the pronouncement of the first clause, "This is my beloved Son," furnishes the ground for the second, "listen to him." Jesus did not *become* the Son of God, at baptism or at the transfiguration; he *is* the Son of God, the one qualified to bestow the Holy Spirit. The rending of the heavens, the descent of the Spirit and the declaration of God do not alter Jesus' essential status, but serve to indicate the cosmic significance of Jesus' submission to the Servant-vocation and affirm God's good pleasure in his Son. As such, the passage marks the high point of revelation in the prologue to Mark's Gospel and provides the indispensable background for all that follows.

Jesus' baptism must be seen from the aspect of his self-concealment. He was baptized as any other person who came to John. There is no indication in Mark that anyone other than Jesus understood the significance of that event. Only from the perspective of the resurrection, and the revelation that event made possible, is the reader of the Gospel able to enter into its meaning. A. Schlatter well expresses its theological significance: "He associates himself with sinners and ranges himself in the ranks of the guilty, not to find salvation for himself, not on account of his own guilt in his flight from the approaching wrath, but because he is at one with the Church and the bearer of divine mercy."

verses 12-13

Jesus was *driven* (sent not strong enough) out into the desert to be tempted. He went *at once* emphasising the connection between the events. The spirit forces Jesus more deeply into the wilderness. The references to 40 days recall Moses's stay on Mt Sinai and Elijah's wandering through the desert to Mt Horeb. Mark doesn't give a detailed account of the temptations. He doesn't even record Jesus's victory over Satan. I think that's because Mark sees temptation as going on throughout Jesus's life, so Jesus's whole life is a record of his temptations.

Mark also refers to the ministering angels. The motif of the angel who guides and helps Israel through the wilderness is prominent in many of the narratives of the first exodus. The closest parallel to the Marcan account, however, is provided by 1 Kings 19:5–7 where an angel supplies nourishment for Elijah in the barren wilderness. Mark's reference to a plurality of angels indicates that Jesus is sustained by the servants of God. There is no indication in Mark that the service of the angels is withdrawn nor that it serves to mark the termination of the temptation. As Mauser remarks, "Mark thinks of the temptation, the being with the animals and the service of the angels as continuous events in the course of which all the forces of God and Satan are simultaneously present." This is an appropriate description, for the Marcan account of the ministry of Jesus is dominated by his confrontation with demonic forces and the sustaining of temptation. Jesus' obedience to God is affirmed and sustained *in the wilderness*, the precise place where Israel's rebellion had brought death and alienation, in order that the new Israel of God may be constituted.

verses 14-20

Jesus calls his first disciples. It is significant that Jesus does not enter upon his own distinctive ministry until after John has been arrested. Mark's formulation suggests that Jesus is restrained by God from his ministry of proclamation until the Baptist is removed from the scene. His arrest indicates that the time has come for Jesus to act. Jesus enters into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God.

What is meant by the gospel is set out in verse 15. Jesus declares that the critical moment has come, God is beginning to act in a new and decisive way, bringing his promise of ultimate redemption to fulfilment. By His sovereign decision God makes this point in time the critical one in which all the moments of promise and fulfilment in the past find their significance in one awesome moment. In comparison with John's preaching, the distinctive note sounded by Jesus is the emphasis upon fulfilment.

What Jesus meant when he affirmed that the kingdom of God had drawn near is nowhere explicitly defined. The emphasis upon the "kingdom," however, links his proclamation to the self-revelation of God in the OT and stresses the continuity between the new and older revelation. In announcing "the kingdom of God," the accent falls upon God's initiative and action. The kingdom of God is a distinctive component of redemptive history. It belongs to the God who comes and invades history in order to secure man's redemption. The emphasis falls upon God who *is* doing something and who will do something that radically affects men in their alienation and rebellion against himself.

The kingdom may be proclaimed as near, if God's decisive action in its realization has already begun. John's ministry had centered upon the urgent demand for repentance because God was about to act decisively in bringing among the people "the Coming One." Jesus then proclaims that the kingdom has drawn near, and while his proclamation is veiled, Mark clearly understands that it is Jesus' own appearance which is the decisive event in the redemptive plan of God. The coming of the kingdom remains future, but it is certain precisely because God has begun to bring it to pass in the coming of his Son. The kingdom has drawn near, *spatially* in the person of Jesus who embodied the kingdom in a veiled way, *and temporally* because it is the only event which takes place prior to the end. In the person of Jesus men are confronted by the kingdom of God in its nearness. A faithful response to the proclamation of the gospel is imperative.

The summons to "repent and believe in the gospel" is not new, but a fresh reiteration of the word addressed to men through the prophets. But the note of urgency in the summons to repent is sharpened, for now the nature of the gospel is clearer than ever before. The brief parable of the fig tree preserved by Mark in Ch. 13:28 echoes Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom *has come near* and clarifies why the nearness of the kingdom imposes radical demands upon men: "When the branch becomes tender and the leaves are about to sprout, you know that the summer *has come near*"; i.e., the summer is *the next thing* that comes. Jesus' action in confronting Satan, sin, disease and death, and subduing nature is the sign that the end stands as the next act of God in man's future. Provision has been made for men to repent, but there is no time for delay. Only through repentance can a man participate with joy in the kingdom when it does break forth. Jesus accordingly calls men to radical decision.

In Jesus men are confronted by the word and act of God; he himself is the crucial term by which belief and unbelief come to fruition. Jesus proclaims the kingdom not to give content but to convey a summons. He stands as God's final word of address to man in man's last

hour. *Either* a man submits to the summons of God *or* he chooses this world and its riches and honor. The either/or character of this decision is of immense importance and permits of no postponement. That is what repentance is all about. The radicalness of Jesus' kingdom proclamation is well caught in the agraphon, "He who is near me is near to the fire; he who is far from me is far from the kingdom": Jesus himself, though veiled in the midst of men, becomes the crucial term by which men enter the kingdom of God, or exclude themselves from it. What he does is the work of God.

As the first act of the Galilean mission Mark reports the calling of Simon and Andrew to be fishers of men. Jesus found these brothers working as fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, elsewhere designated the Lake of Gennesaret or the Sea of Tiberias. The inland sea, which was twelve miles in length and six miles across at its widest point, provided a point of access between Galilee and Perea. There were many towns and fishing villages especially on the western and northern shores. The waters teemed with life, and when Jesus summoned the brothers they were casting their nets into the sea.

Jesus' word to Simon and Andrew was remembered for its vividness and urgency: "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." The call to come after someone implies discipleship because it is the disciple who breaks all other ties to follow his master as a servant. Yet far more than this was involved in the call to become "fishers of men." In the OT prophetic tradition it's God who is a fisher of men. The fishing metaphor was kept alive at Qumran and there it's the judgment aspect of the metaphor which was stressed. It is this understanding which provides the key both to the urgency in Jesus' summons of Simon and Andrew and to the radical obedience they displayed in responding to his call. The summons to be fishers of men is a call to the eschatological task of gathering men in view of the forthcoming judgment of God.

The immediate function of those called to be fishers of men is to accompany Jesus as witnesses to the proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom and the necessity for men to turn to God through radical repentance.

On this same occasion Jesus saw the sons of Zebedee, James and John, in their boat preparing the nets for another night's fishing. The terms in which they were called are not explicitly stated, but the intimate relationship of these two incidents indicates that they also are summoned to be fishers of men. The stress in Mark's brief report falls upon the sovereign authority in Jesus' call, and the radical obedience of James and John. So compelling is the claim of Jesus upon them that all prior claims lose their validity. Their father, the hired servants, the boat and the nets are left behind as they commit themselves in an exclusive sense to follow Jesus. The urgency in Jesus' call and the radical obedience of the fishermen pose the question, "Who, then, is this who calls?" The use of the fisher image in proximity to Jesus' proclamation summarized in Ch. 1:15 provides the answer; it is the eschatological Lord who calls. He summons men by an act of grace to serve as agents of the kingdom drawn near, who shall gather a people for judgment.

Jesus will make these disciples fishers of men. What they will become depends upon their following him.

Verses 21-28

Jesus now gives a new teaching – with authority. Apparently the four fishermen went with him – “they went”. Probably that’s where the fishermen lived, certainly it was a town by the lakeside. Mark concentrates upon a single Sabbath when Jesus’ synagogue teaching provoked the astonishment of the congregation. Mark isn’t really interested in explaining what it was that Jesus taught his real focus is on the *authority* of Jesus’s teaching and the response of the people to that teaching. Jesus’ word, presented with a sovereign authority which permitted neither debate nor theoretical reflection, confronted the congregation with the absolute claim of God upon their whole person. Jesus’ teaching recalled the categorical demand of the prophets rather than scribal tradition.

Within the synagogue there was a man possessed by an unclean spirit. His personality had been damaged to the point that the demonic power had usurped the center of his self, and spoke through him. The disturbance which Jesus brings was expressed in the excited response of this man, who sensed in Jesus a threat to his very existence. His cry of terror, expressed in verse 24, is laden with the language of defense and resistance. The demoniac does not confess the dignity of Jesus, but uses the accepted terms of opposition in the attempt to disarm him. The note of conflict implied is important, for the demonic power understands more clearly than the people the decisive significance of the presence of Jesus. In the question “What have we to do with you?” it is natural to find a reference to all of the demonic powers who shall be destroyed by Jesus. But it is also distinctly possible that the demoniac identifies himself with the congregation and speaks from their perspective: Jesus’ presence entails the danger of judgment for all present.

That the demonic powers possess a certain knowledge of Jesus’ identity is clear from the cry of recognition, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” The unclean spirit recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God, the Bearer of the Holy Spirit, and between the Holy Spirit and an unclean spirit “there exists a deadly antithesis that the demons know.” The people address Jesus as ‘Teacher’, ‘Son of David’ or ‘Master’ but the demons know he’s the ‘Son of God’ and they’re trying to gain mastery over him by using his real name.

Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit with the words, “Be silenced! Come out of him.” The defensive address of the demon was powerless before the sovereign command of Jesus. In contrast to contemporary exorcists, who identified themselves by name or by relationship to some deity or power, who pronounced some spell or performed some magical action, Jesus utters only a few direct words, through which his absolute authority over the demonic power that had held the man captive was demonstrated. The unclean spirit convulsed the possessed man, and with a loud shriek left him.

The silencing and expulsion of the demon is the proof of that judgment which Jesus has come to initiate. To have allowed the defensive utterance of the demon to go unrebuked would have been to compromise the purpose for which Jesus came into the world, to confront Satan and strip him of his power. As such, this initial act of exorcism in the ministry of Jesus is programmatic of the sustained conflict with the demons which is a marked characteristic in the Marcan presentation of the gospel.

The people were utterly astonished and alarmed at Jesus’ word. The same measure of authority with which they had been confronted in his teaching was demonstrated in the word of command to the demon. There had been no technique, no spells or incantations, no symbolic act. There had been only the word. It’s a new teaching with authority.

Verses 29-31

Jesus now heals Peter's mother in law. The account is told from Peter's viewpoint and Jesus isn't mentioned. There's a clear connection with the last incident in the synagogue indicating the healing occurred on the Sabbath. Probably the house shared by Peter and Andrew wasn't too far from the synagogue. Salvation had come to Peter's house in response to his radical obedience.

Verses 32-34

We now look at a healing of the sick in the evening. Again this is connected to the previous narratives by the time sequence, the reference to the door of the home of Peter and Andrew, and the detail of the silencing of the demons. The narrator seems excited – "they brought all that were sick"; "all the city was gathered at the door." The time was early evening and the Sabbath was just over. Twice in this passage (Ch. 1:32, 34) and in Ch. 6:13 a clear distinction is observed between general sickness and demonic possession. It is unwarranted to obscure such distinctions with the hypothesis that what was described in antiquity as possession by demons is identical with various forms of psychoses recognized today by the medical profession.

Jesus responded to the expectations of those who came, healing the sick and expelling the demons. The term "many," in the statement that Jesus healed "many that were sick," is used inclusively and is equivalent to the "all" of verse 32.

It is not adequate to read this narrative as a report of success in the initial phase of the Galilean mission. The people come to Jesus, not because they recognized his dignity and function but because it is rumored that a miracle worker has come in their midst. Jesus had come to preach repentance and the nearness of the kingdom but the people think only of relief from pain and affliction. They fail to perceive the significance of Jesus' conflict with demonic power. In compassion and grace Jesus extends to them authentic healing, but it is not primarily for this purpose that he has come. In the morning he withdraws from the village and the clamoring crowds.

Verses 35-39

Jesus decides to leave Capernaum. Again the story is told from Peter's perspective (don't forget that Mark was Peter's interpreter). The fact that Jesus left the village while it was yet dark and sought a solitary place where he prayed is interesting from two points of view. (1) To describe the site of prayer Mark uses a double term meaning literally "wilderness place." The description is inappropriate geographically, for the land about Capernaum was cultivated during this period. Its reference is to a place of solitude which in some sense recalls the wilderness. This is confirmed from the other two passages where this terminology occurs (Chs. 1:45; 6:31–33). These passages share certain formal characteristics with Ch. 1:35: in each instance reference to the wilderness-place is preceded by an account of Jesus' preaching and power; he then withdraws from the multitude which seeks his gifts, with the result that the people (in Ch. 1:35–37 their representatives) pursue him to the solitary place to which he has gone. These texts suggest that Jesus deliberately withdraws from the people to return to an area which has the character of the wilderness where he encountered Satan and sustained temptation. The nature of the temptation in each instance may be related to the clamor of the

crowds, who are willing to find in Jesus a divine-man who meets their needs and so wins their following. The people, however, have no conception of what it means to go out to the wilderness to bear the burden of judgment, as Jesus has done. He turns from their acclaim, returning to a place which recalls his determination to fulfil the mission for which he has come into the world. The passages which speak of “a wilderness place” thus refer back to the prologue to the Gospel, with its distinctive wilderness-theology.

(2) The second point of interest is the reference to Jesus’ praying. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus is seen in prayer only three times: at the beginning of the account, when his ministry is being defined (Ch. 1:35), in the middle after the feeding of the five thousand (Ch. 6:46), and near the conclusion when Jesus is in Gethsemane (Ch. 14:32–42). These three occasions have the character of a critical moment. The setting for Jesus’ prayer in each instance is night and solitude, for even in Gethsemane Jesus is quite alone in spite of the three disciples who are separated a short distance from him. The situation again recalls the wilderness when Jesus confronts the temptation of Satan, and is sustained by help from God. His strength is in prayer through which he affirms his intention to fulfil the will of God, which means his submission to the judgment of God on behalf of the many who return to the wilderness without understanding.

When the crowds returned to the house in the expectation of finding Jesus, Simon and those with him, presumably Andrew, James and John, sought for him. There is a note of reproach in the statement, “All are seeking for you,” which means, What are you doing here when you should be in the midst of the multitude who are clamoring for you? A very considerable impression had been made in Capernaum, and in the mistaken thinking of the fishermen it was this response which Jesus had sought to elicit.

Jesus’ answer indicates their failure to understand him or his mission. Acts of healing and expulsion of demons, as much as proclamation, entailed a disclosure of the nature of the kingdom of God and constituted a demand for decision. By his decision a person was qualified for participation in the kingdom or marked for judgment. The crowds that gathered in Capernaum had made their decision, but it could not be the appropriate one because it involved not repentance but attraction to Jesus as a performer of miracles. That is why Jesus interrupts the miracles to go elsewhere to proclaim “the gospel of God.” His purpose is not to heal as many people as possible as a manifestation of the kingdom of God drawn near in his person, but to confront men with the demand for decision in the perspective of God’s absolute claim upon their person.

Jesus travelled throughout Galilee which was full of large villages – Galilee was a very rich agricultural land and the villages according to Josephus all had 15,000 people or more. Jesus confronted them all with the absolute claim of God.

Verses 40-45

This little section deals with the cleansing of a leper. In Jesus’s time a whole variety of skin diseases were described as leprosy, including what we now call leprosy. But, whatever this man was suffering from life would have been miserable for him. He would have been subject to the Levitical rules “The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, ‘Unclean, unclean’. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation without the camp” (Lev. 13:45 f.). Rabbinic refinement of that Levitical legislation imposed many practical difficulties upon the leper, for even a chance encounter between the leper and the non-leper could render the non-leper unclean. Lepers were allowed

to live unhampered wherever they chose, except in Jerusalem and other cities which had been walled from antiquity. They could even attend the synagogue services if a screen was provided to isolate them from the rest of the congregation. In spite of these two provisions, however, leprosy brought deep physical and mental anguish for both the afflicted individual and the community in which or near which he lived.

This leper had evidently heard about Jesus's miraculous healing powers and came to him to be relieved of this terrible affliction.

Jesus is outraged at the ravages that disease has wrought on this man and in compassion reaches out and touches him. The touch of Jesus was significant from two points of view. From the perspective of the leper it was an unheard-of act of compassion which must have moved him deeply and strengthened him in his conviction he had not asked for help in vain. From the perspective of Jesus' relationship to the cultic and ritual system, it indicated that he did not hesitate to act in violation of its regulations – here he was making himself ritually unclean – when the situation demanded: “the ceremonial law gives place to the law of love when the two come into collision.” Jesus' touch and his sovereign pronouncement mean the same thing: “I will, be clean.” This was not a priestly pronouncement, as is made clear in verses 43–44, but a declaration that healing would follow immediately and completely. The text describes an instantaneous radical healing which was visible to all who met the man.

Jesus commanded the man two things. Firstly, to show himself to the priests and to offer the sacrifices the Law demanded – the procedure is set out in Leviticus 14:2-31, and secondly to be silent concerning his healing, but the man disobeyed this second instruction (we don't know if he obeyed the first) and this caused Jesus's evangelistic ministry to be compromised.

This was an important incident as it terminates Jesus's preaching tour of Galilean villages and provides a point of transition to the five conflict accounts which follow. The rabbis of Jesus's time said it was as difficult to heal a leper as to raise the dead. The cleansing of the leper indicates the new character of God's action in bringing Jesus among men. Salvation transcends cultic and ritual regulations, which were powerless to arrest the hold that death had upon the living, and issues in radical healing.

Chapter 2

The whole of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 are about Jesus's conflict with the Pharisees in Galilee. The Pharisees are offended by Jesus's action they said ‘he blasphemes’ (2:7), ‘he eats with publicans and sinners’ (2:16) and much more. The reaction of the scribes and the Pharisees calls forth a powerful reaction from Jesus.

Let's begin by looking at the authority to forgive sins which Jesus claimed, surrounding his healing of a paralysed man.

Verses 2:1-12

Here Jesus returns from the wilderness to Capernaum. Jesus' preaching was interrupted by the arrival of a small party of men who carried a paralyzed man on a mattress. It is impossible to say anything definite about the nature of the man's affliction beyond the fact that he was unable to walk. The determination of those who brought him to Jesus suggests that his condition was wretched. When they were unable to break through the crowd they ascended a stairway on the side of the house to the flat roof which they broke open in order to lower the man before Jesus. Jesus recognized this bold expedient as an expression of faith: the four clearly believed that he had the power to heal this man.

Jesus' response to their faith was the unexpected statement, "Son, your sins are forgiven!" The pronouncement was startling because it seemed inappropriate and even irrelevant to the immediate situation. Jesus obviously perceived that the man's greatest need was for spiritual healing. That's not to say that the man's sinfulness caused his sickness, Jesus never taught that, but he clearly badly needed a spiritual healing. Nevertheless, Jesus' pronouncement of pardon is the recognition that man can be genuinely whole only when the breach occasioned by sin has been healed through God's forgiveness of sins.

The scribes, who are introduced into the Marcan record at this point, were men who were schooled in the written Law of God and its oral interpretation. They were admitted to a closed order of legal specialists only after they were deemed fully qualified and had been set apart through the laying on of hands. They are mentioned frequently in Mark's Gospel but only once is the reference favorable (Ch. 12:28–34). As guardians of the teaching office they challenged Jesus concerning both his message and his refusal to submit to the *halakha*, the oral law, which the scribes regarded as binding in its authority.

The scribes who were present on this occasion were offended by Jesus' declaration. In the OT God alone can forgive sins, and later Judaism adhered scrupulously to this understanding. The Messiah would exterminate the godless in Israel, crush demonic power and protect his people from the reign of sin, but the forgiveness of sins was never attributed to him. Jesus proclaimed the remission of sins like a prophet (2 Sam. 12:13, "And Nathan said to David, 'The Lord has pardoned your sins' "). The scribes rejected this pretension to the prophetic office as so much arrogance. They sensed in Jesus' declaration of forgiveness an affront to the majesty and authority of God, which is the essence of blasphemy.

Mark introduces the offense of blasphemy early in his gospel and it would later become a basis for the accusation of Jesus before the Sanhedrin.

Jesus' pronouncement was clearly ambiguous. This ambiguity was consistent with the indirectness of revelation which characterized his ministry; there was both a revealing and a veiling of his dignity. In the declaration of verse 5 there was nothing which suggested his *personal* power over sin. The reaction of the scribes does not imply that they have understood otherwise. They object to Jesus' conviction that he can speak for God. Jesus did exercise the divine prerogative but in a veiled way that could be recognized unambiguously only after the resurrection.

Jesus sensed the sharp disapproval of the scribes and drew the attention of those present to it by addressing them with the pointed question, "Is it easier to say to a paralysed man 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say 'Arise, pick up your mattress and walk'?" Jesus' use of a counter-question in situations of debate recurs in other narratives (Mark 3:4; 11:30; 12:37), and appears to be characteristic of his response to conflict. It is important to appreciate its significance here. The scribes might think that a declaration of forgiveness is easier than one of healing, the efficacy of which would be open to immediate verification. This judgment seems to lie behind their contemptuous question, "Why does this fellow speak like this?" (verse 7). By use of a counter-question Jesus challenges their facile assumption that he has acted irresponsibly as a dispenser of cheap grace. It also prepares for the word of healing which demonstrates that forgiveness has actually been realized in the experience of the afflicted man. It is the declaration of forgiveness which is the more essential—and the more difficult—of the two actions.

Verse 10 constitutes a well-known *crux* in the interpretation of this pericope. Structurally, there is an awkward change of addressee in the middle of the verse. Jesus *appears* to be

addressing the scribes: “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”; the text, however, proceeds with the abrupt transition, “he says to the paralytic, ‘I say unto you ...’”

It’s surprising that Jesus calls himself the Son of Man so early in the gospel. In Mark Jesus’s identity is largely hidden until after he reveals himself to the disciples before he goes to Jerusalem.

This is the only place in the Gospel where the pardon of sins is associated with the Son of Man. Nowhere else in the Synoptic or apocalyptic tradition (other than the corresponding account in Luke 5) is it suggested that the Son of Man can forgive sins. It was only in the light of the resurrection that the primitive Church recognized unequivocally the full extent of Jesus’ authority. Jesus demonstrated in this incident that he was more than a prophet; the power manifested in the remission of sins and the healing of the paralyzed man belonged properly to him. The risen Christ still exercises the remission of sins on earth. The purpose of Mark’s commentary is to make the community of believers aware that they have experienced the messianic forgiveness of the Son of Man.

When Jesus caused the paralytic to walk before the eyes of his critics, they were forced to recognize that this declaration of forgiveness had been effective. The inter-relationship of forgiveness and healing is emphasized by the conclusion to the narrative: having received the forgiveness of God, the afflicted man receives healing. This is the nature of the salvation which Jesus brings. The healing of the paralytic was more than a display of mercy to a wretched man. The announcement and presentation of radical healing to a man in his entire person was a sign of the Kingdom of God drawn near. The paralytic experienced the fulfilment of God’s promise that the lame would share in the joy of the coming salvation (Isa. 35:6; Jer. 31:8). The demonstration that God had come near to his people was startling.

Verses 13-14

Jesus calls a tax collector. The call of Levi is presented in its barest essentials. Mark records his name, his occupation, the word addressed to him and his response. No attempt is made to identify him further. Moreover, when the evangelist records the names of those whom Jesus chose to be with him (Ch. 3:13–19), there is no reference to “Levi the son of Alphaeus.” These facts indicate that in Ch. 2:14 Mark is concerned to illustrate the radical character of Jesus’ call, and that it is the nature of the call, rather than the name of the one called, which is of primary importance.

Levi’s seat of customs was located at Capernaum, the first site of importance around the northern end of the Sea encountered by travellers from the territory of Herod Philip and from the Decapolis. Levi would be a Jewish tax official in the service of Herod Antipas. Such officials were detested everywhere and were classed with the vilest of men. The practice of leasing the customs duty of a district at a fixed sum encouraged gross oppression by tax officers anxious to secure as large a profit as possible. When a Jew entered the customs service he was regarded as an outcast from society: he was disqualified as a judge or a witness in a court session, was excommunicated from the synagogue, and in the eyes of the community his disgrace extended to his family.

In two inscriptions from Magnesia and Ephesus reference is made to “those who are concerned with the toll on fish.” Apparently fish were taxed in these Asian cities, and it is possible that a toll on incoming fish was collected in Capernaum as well. It is probable that

Levi knew the fishermen who accompanied Jesus. He may have also known Jesus, who spent considerable time in Capernaum. This would do much to explain his response to Jesus when he was called to discipleship.

The important thing about this story is Levi's immediate response to his call and his radical obedience to Jesus's brief summons. He just abandoned everything and got up and followed Jesus.

Verses 15-17

Jesus eats with sinners. It would seem that as a spontaneous expression of joy, Levi immediately threw a banquet for his fellow tax collectors and friends. The term 'sinners' is technical in this context for a class of people who were regarded by the Pharisees as inferior because they showed no interest in the scribal tradition. With the derisive epithet "the people of the land," the scribes often dismissed as inconsequential the common people who possessed neither time nor inclination to regulate their conduct by Pharisaic standards. They were particularly despised because they did not eat their food in a state of ceremonial cleanness and because they failed to separate the tithe. The designation "sinners" as used by the scribes is roughly equivalent to "outcasts." The joint expression "publicans and sinners" denotes well-known and despised classes among the people.

The Pharisees and their scribes were the spiritual descendants of the *Hasidim* who had distinguished themselves by zeal for observance of the Law in spite of the repressive measures of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. They were deeply devoted to the Law and strictly governed their own life by the interpretation passed down in the scribal tradition. They criticized Jesus because he failed to observe the distinction between "the righteous" and "the sinners" which was an essential component of their piety. As a teacher of the Law he should have recognized that it was inappropriate for him to recline at table with the men gathered in Levi's house.

Jesus silenced their protest with a traditional proverb: "the healthy have no need of a physician, but rather the sick." With this maxim, which the Pharisees recognized as valid, Jesus implied that it was his responsibility to sit at table fellowship with excisemen and the despised common people. He is willing to adopt the scribal distinction between the righteous and sinners, but limits his own activity to the outcasts.

I see in this meal an anticipation of the messianic banquet in heaven. When Jesus broke bread with the outcasts, Messiah ate with them at his table and extended to them fellowship with God. Mark's interest in recording this incident lies precisely in the demonstration of forgiveness which it affords. It takes its place very naturally with the two preceding sections of the Gospel (Ch. 2:1–12, 13–14) as a sovereign demonstration of the forgiveness of sins. The meal was an extension of the grace of God and an anticipation of the consummation when Messiah will sit down with sinners in the Kingdom of God.

Verses 18-22

Jesus speaks about fasting.

Having exhibited Jesus' relationship to sin and sinners, Mark turns to the issues of fasting and observance of the Sabbath. In these next narratives it is evident that opposition to Jesus has become heightened and outspoken (Ch. 2:18, 24). It reaches a point of culmination in the decision to seek his death (Ch. 3:6). The issue of fasting may have been important to the

community within which Mark wrote since he brings together three statements of the Lord which have a bearing upon it.

In verse 17 Mark talks about the disciples of John and the Pharisees (the Pharisees as such didn't have disciples although individual scribes did) fasting. Under Jewish Law fasting was only obligatory on one day – the Day of Atonement. In this context it's a preparation for cleansing after repentance. However by Jesus's time fasting on Monday and Thursday each week had become traditional amongst the Pharisees. John's disciples were presumably fasting simply as an expression of their repentance.

The demand to know why Jesus's disciples do not fast is critical in intention; the unidentified questioners wish to expose the disciples of Jesus to their disadvantage. In all probability many of them had been disciples of John who were expected to maintain the discipline encouraged by their master.

Jesus, in typical debate fashion, poses a counter-question designed to center attention on the new situation created by his presence with the disciples. He replies: "Can the bridal guests mourn during the bridal celebrations?" The statement may be proverbial for any inappropriate action, since a wedding was a time of great joy and festivity, heralded by music and gala processions. To fast in the presence of the groom would be unthinkable. Although the image of the wedding feast was sometimes used by the rabbis to express the joy of the messianic era, neither in the OT nor in later Jewish literature was the Messiah represented as the bridegroom.⁶⁴ It is important to stress this fact, for it indicates that Jesus' statement would not have been recognized by his disciples or his adversaries as an explicitly messianic assertion. Jesus speaks of himself in an implicit, veiled manner because he has not yet spoken openly and in detail to his disciples about his distinctive mission (see Ch. 8:32). The messianic significance of this use of the bridal image was understood only later.⁶⁶ The central comparison between the wedding festivities and Jesus' disciples lies in *the joy which they possess in their master*. Jesus emphasizes this with his answer to the critical question. The reason for the fundamentally different position of his disciples is that "the bridegroom is with them," and in his presence they experience joy. Even on this veiled level of parabolic speech something significant is said: an expression of sorrow is inappropriate to the new situation which has come with Jesus' presence.

Jesus is both the center and the cause of the joy that his disciples experience. Yet this condition will not remain undisturbed. Jesus referred to a period when the bridegroom would be taken away and then his disciples would understand the meaning of sorrow.

Like the bridal metaphor, the sayings about the new garment and the new wine describe inappropriate actions (using valuable new cloth to mend a tattered garment; pouring fermenting new wine into worn-out damaged wineskins). In this context the meaning of these sayings is quite specific. If Jesus' disciples were to pursue the Pharisaic practice or continue to emulate the Baptist, they would be like people who put a new piece of cloth on an old garment, or who pour new wine into old skins. The practice of John's disciples was oriented to preparation for the coming of the Kingdom, especially in its aspect of judgment. That is why they fast. Jesus, on the other hand, came proclaiming that the time was fulfilled, and it is his presence which is the decisive element of fulfilment. The behavior of his disciples reflects the joyful certainty of the breaking in of the time of salvation. They experience the joy of the Kingdom because they belong to him.

Verses 23-28

Jesus has a controversy over the Sabbath.

The disciples' action in plucking grain in a field was legitimate. The Mosaic Law provided explicitly that "when you come into your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the ears with your hands, but you shall not bring a sickle into your neighbor's standing grain" (Deut. 23:25). The disciples' conduct came under the critical scrutiny of the Pharisees only because it occurred on the Sabbath. The action of plucking grain was interpreted as reaping, an act of work in violation of the Sabbath rest. Reaping on the Sabbath was formally prohibited by the Mosaic Law (Ex. 34:21), and of the 39 main categories of work forbidden on the Sabbath in the Mishnah, the third is reaping.

Among the scribes it was assumed that a teacher was responsible for the behavior of his disciples. For this reason the Pharisees address their protest directly to Jesus. They raise a question of *halakha*, of what is legally permitted or prohibited, perhaps with the intention of satisfying the legal requirement of a warning prior to prosecution for Sabbath violation.

Jesus's reply is a bit strange because (i) the text in Samuel doesn't say this incident took place on the Sabbath and (ii) at the time Ahimelech was high priest not Abiathar. As regards (i) it seems to have become the tradition by Jesus's time that this incident took place on the Sabbath. As regards (ii) it's either an error in the manuscript or it was inserted by Mark to show the section of Samuel where the text could be found. More generally, the fact that God does not condemn David for his action indicates that the narrowness with which the scribes interpreted the Law was not in accordance with the tenor of Scripture. Jesus argues that the tradition of the Pharisees is unduly stringent as regards details and exceeds the intention of the Law.

It's interesting that verse 27 follows an old commentary on Exodus. There is twice recorded in the Mekilta, the Tannaitic commentary on Exodus, the dictum of Rabbi Simeon ben Menasya (ca. 180 A.D.) that "the Sabbath is delivered over for your sake, but you are not delivered over to the Sabbath." The Mekilta indicates that Rabbi Simeon was remembered especially because of this striking pronouncement, but no more than the statement and its ground in Scripture is given. The fact that this statement is twice recorded, and that no attempt is made to deny or challenge its validity, is sufficient indication that there is nothing specifically "un-Jewish" about Jesus' pronouncement on the Sabbath. Verse 27 should be recognized, in the absence of clear evidence to the contrary, as an authentic pronouncement of Jesus expressing God's purpose in establishing the seventh day as a period of joy and refreshment. The divine intention was in no way infringed by the plucking of heads of grain on the part of Jesus' disciples. The pronouncement of verse 27 rounds off the pericope and constitutes its key point: the Sabbath was made for man's enjoyment.

In verse 28, we need to understand Jesus's true dignity – he is Lord of the Sabbath.

Chapter 3

Verses 1-6

The healing of the man with the withered hand forms the last of this first series of five conflict narratives. It takes its place at this point naturally by topical association with the previous incident and demonstrates that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. The high point of the incident lies less in the act of healing than in the conflict between Jesus and his adversaries, in which they are left silent before his sovereign word. It is striking that Jesus

takes the initiative in asking what is permitted on the Sabbath, and that his adversaries are silent before his question. This pattern recurs in the series of controversies which took place in Jerusalem: in Ch. 12:34 Mark notes that no one dared question Jesus further, while in Ch. 12:35 Jesus himself seizes the initiative in the concluding conflict narrative.

The healing may well have taken place in the synagogue at Capernaum, but we can't be sure, it could have been any of the Galilean towns. Conflict erupts over the healing of a man who is just a silent participant. Jesus's adversaries were convinced that he was a violator of the Sabbath, their attitude is well expressed by the statement of a synagogue ruler (Luke 13:14). It was an accepted principle that "any danger to life takes precedence over the Sabbath." The scribes, however, had determined precisely in which cases it was proper to speak of immediate danger to life, and to what extent aid could be granted. In none of the recorded healings which Jesus performed on the Sabbath would the scribes have agreed that there was any immediate threat to life. The presence in the synagogue of opponents who were scrutinizing Jesus' activity indicates that they were convinced of his ability to heal. They did not regard his capability as extraordinary but as a power he shared with others who did not exercise it on the Sabbath.

Jesus commanded the man with the withered hand to stand in the midst of the assembled congregation, and then posed to his adversaries a rhetorical question: "Is it permitted on the Sabbath to do good, or to do harm; to save a life or to kill?" Formulated in this way, the question demands an answer in terms of the *halakha* as determined in scribal study of the Law. The tradition clearly asserted that the Law was not opposed to the saving of life on the Sabbath.¹² The Pharisees refused to debate the *halakha* with Jesus. They were indignant because the healing of a paralyzed hand could wait until the next day. They understood that Jesus was not asking a theoretical question for the sake of halakhic refinement. The point at issue was "doing good" on the Sabbath now in the concrete instance of the man who stood in their midst.

Jesus did not mistake the silence of his opponents for consent that the man should be healed. He regarded them with an anger which expressed the anger of God. In their concern for legal detail they had forgotten the mercy and grace shown by God to man when he made provision for the Sabbath. When Jesus restored the man's hand he demonstrated what it means "to do good" and "to preserve life" on the Sabbath. Moreover, he provided a sign of the true observance and joy of the Sabbath. As Lord of the Sabbath Jesus delivers both the Sabbath and man from a state of distress.

The decision of the Pharisees to conspire with the Herodians to destroy Jesus is indicative of the seriousness of the conflict with authority which erupted in Galilee. The Sabbath controversies reported by Mark did not originate in subordinate departures from the scribal tradition, but were symptomatic of Jesus' entire attitude toward the oral law. Jesus refused to observe the traditional rules; he moved in grace toward sick individuals and healed them without regard to the day of the week. From the Pharisaic point of view Jesus' word and action totally undermined their interpretation of the Law, their piety and their actions. Jesus was not simply another scribe who advocated an independent opinion; he constituted a threat to true religion and ancestral tradition. When Jesus failed to submit to the scribal regulation of the Sabbath he broke the tradition, and authority confronted authority. It was inevitable that conflict should ensue, and that the Pharisees should seek to destroy Jesus.

In their opposition to Jesus they had the support of the Herodians, who are mentioned also in Ch. 12:13 in association with the Pharisees. Apart from one reference in Josephus, the Herodians are not mentioned in any other ancient source, a fact which indicates that they

were not a sect or an organized party. The word is of Latin formation (*Herodiani*), designating “adherents” or “partisans” of Herod; in Galilee this would mean Herod Antipas. Their name suggests a common attitude of allegiance to Herod in a country where large numbers of people chafed under his rule. In Josephus the term clearly denotes those who were sympathizers and supporters of the cause of Herod the Great.

The decision to destroy Jesus climaxes the conflicts in Galilee. God’s grace toward Israel, proclaimed and demonstrated through Jesus, will be rejected by the responsible leaders of the people. Their considered intention is an ominous sign, both for Jesus and for Israel. For Jesus it means that the passion already impinges upon him. This was inevitable from the moment he decided to submit to the Father and bear the brunt of the judgment upon the people. But Jesus now feels the sting of that decision with a new reality. It was ominous for Israel because it entailed the rejection of the Bearer of salvation. Jesus answered the question of what is permitted on the Sabbath by healing the man with the withered hand. Ironically, the guardians of the Sabbath determine to do harm and to kill. The decision points forward to the Passion, but it also contains the seed of self-destruction. The rejection of Jesus entails the rejection of life and redemption and leaves men prey to distress and death. This is the bitter fruit of that hardness of heart which provoked in Jesus both anger and godly sorrow.

Verse 7 on

From here to the middle of chapter 6 we’re dealing with the later stages of Jesus’s ministry in Galilee.

Verses 7-12

Withdrawal to the Sea of Galilee. This is representative of a return to the wilderness where Jesus’s mission began.

The account reminds us of Mark 2:13. The people from the several regions are attracted to Jesus because they believe he is a miracle worker. It is because they have heard of all that Jesus had done that they follow after him. They press toward him, hoping merely to touch him and be relieved of their sufferings. In their actions they resemble the crowds who followed Apollonius of Tyana or others like him who paraded as “divine-men” in the ancient world. They have no thought of an exodus into the wilderness that sonship may be affirmed, but openly seek physical healing from a man who appears to be endowed with more than natural power. They do not understand Jesus or his mission. In the press of the crowd which fails to understand the character of a return to the wilderness Jesus encounters renewed temptation and the power of Satan to blind men’s minds.

The presence of the demonic makes itself known in the cry of recognition on the part of the evil spirits. This aspect of Jesus’ experience by the sea displays the contrast and irony in the situation: the demons know that Jesus is the Son of God (verse 11); the multitude think only in terms of a miracle worker to whom they turn for selfish reasons (verses 8–10).

The several regions mentioned in verses 7–8 furnish a comprehensive designation for Israel and its immediate neighbors. Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem represent Israel proper, while Idumea, Transjordan and the region of the coastal cities Tyre and Sidon³³ constitute the southern, eastern and northwestern borders of the land. By twice referring to the “great multitude” (verses 7b, 8) the evangelist distinguishes between the Galileans who were native to the region and the crowds who had come from a distance. The several districts enumerated are important in the general scheme of the Gospel. In the course of the narrative Jesus is active in all the places specified in Ch. 3:7 f. with the exception of Idumea. His entrance into

Galilee is reported in Ch. 1:14. He visits the Transjordan in Ch. 5:1, the regions of Tyre and Sidon in Ch. 7:24, 31, the territories of Judea and Transjordan in Ch. 10:1 and enters Jerusalem in Ch. 11:11. The summary statement in Ch. 3:7 f. suggests that the Lord's astonishing authority awakened an active interest in his person over a wide area and that Jesus responded to this interest by visiting the districts from which the multitude came. Jesus' own outreach within and beyond Palestine proper anticipates and authenticates the Church's mission to the world.

The disciples have a small boat ready to protect Jesus from the crowds, nevertheless he heals many of them.

Among the crowd were demoniacs, unfortunate men possessed by unclean spirits whose behavior betrayed domination by a will alien to their own. The demons addressed Jesus as the divine Son of God in a futile attempt to render him harmless. These cries of recognition were designed to control him and strip him of his power, in accordance with the conception that knowledge of the precise name or quality of a person confers mastery over him. In this context "Son of God" is not a messianic title,³⁷ but a recognition of the true status of their adversary.

Jesus did not allow them to continue their useless clamor. With sovereign authority he strictly ordered them not to make him known. In this encounter authority confronted authority, and the unclean spirits were silenced.³⁹ At least two factors stand behind the rebuke of the demonic cry. (1) Jesus is the Son of God, the Bearer of the Holy Spirit, and between the Holy Spirit and the unclean spirits there exists a categorical antithesis that the demons must recognize. The confession which Jesus wished to elicit was not one which a demonic personality could provide. (2) More important, the disclosure of Jesus' divine Sonship by the unclean spirits violated the character of his self-revelation, in which there were elements of restraint and veiledness as well as disclosure.

Before Jesus' sovereign word of rebuke the demons were helpless; no formula of adjuration could strip him of his power. Nevertheless, the presence of the demons and their attempts to disarm Jesus confirm that the withdrawal to the sea provokes a confrontation with Satan. It is like a return to the wilderness where Jesus was tempted by the adversary of God. In the encounter with the demonic, Jesus affirms his Sonship and the decision to submit to the judgment of God.

Verses 13-19

Jesus left the crowds which had pursued him to ascend "the mountain" where he appointed twelve men to be his disciples. The evangelist shows no interest in the identification of the site; it is the withdrawal to the mountain which is itself significant for the interpretation of the narrative.⁴⁶ The mountain as a locus of revelation and redemptive action is familiar from the OT and is the essential background to the evangelist's understanding of significant moments in the mission and self-revelation of Jesus. The appointment of the Twelve marks the formation of the messianic fellowship and anticipates the extension of Jesus' mission through them (Ch. 6:7-13).

The account appears to focus solely upon Jesus and the Twelve. While it is possible to think of a larger company of disciples from whom Jesus appointed twelve to remain with him, there is in the record no necessary thought of a selection of some from among others. It seems preferable to hold that only twelve disciples were involved from the beginning. The call of Jesus simply denotes a summons, as elsewhere in the Marcan narrative. After this initial reference Mark's distinctive formulation for disciples of Jesus is "the Twelve."

The number twelve has a clear redemptive-historical significance. The Twelve represent in a new form the people of the twelve tribes, Israel. Through the choice of twelve disciples Jesus made visible his claim upon the whole people in their several divisions.

Jesus chose these twelve men for the specific purpose that they might be with him and that he might extend his mission through them. The promise of a future ministry is fulfilled initially in the mission of the Twelve to the Galilean villages (Ch. 6:7–13), but finds its wider significance in the apostolic mission after the resurrection. These two phases of mission were made possible through Jesus' free choice of these men and his preparation of them for their task. Their relationship to Jesus explains their existence and their authority.⁵³ Within the limits imposed by his structure, Mark devotes primary attention to the presence of the disciples with Jesus and their preparation for mission. Jesus' private instruction of the disciples is particularly prominent in the second half of the Gospel, but this facet of the mutual relationship between Jesus and the Twelve begins almost at once. *Being with Jesus* qualified the Twelve to bear witness to him and to participate in his distinctive ministry of proclamation and the overthrow of demonic power. The promise given to the Twelve is that they will share in the power of the Kingdom of God which breaks through to men with the coming of Jesus.

Mark then lists the 12. Many of those listed do not appear again in this gospel. Matthew is probably Levi (whose calling Mark had already recorded).

This calling of the 12 is a really important part of Mark's gospel. It anticipates the fulfillment of Jesus's ministry through them and they are also central to his ministry prior to the crucifixion. However, we mustn't forget that there were many other followers of Jesus who were important (Luke 8, 10 Mark 4).

Verses 20-30

Apparently Jesus's family believed that he was crazy at this point – for me their coming to believe after the crucifixion is one of the better pieces of evidence for the resurrection. However, the early church didn't like it and these words have been redacted in some early manuscript versions.

The home to which Jesus returned may have been the one owned by Simon and Andrew in Capernaum. The presence of an enthusiastic multitude clamoring for attention evokes the description of Ch. 1:29–37 and Ch. 2:1–2. The absence of leisure in which to eat is mentioned again in Ch. 6:31, following the return of the disciples from their mission, and it may have been a frequent occurrence.

The teachers of the Law accused Jesus of being demon possessed. The arrival of a delegation of legal specialists from Jerusalem suggests that the Galilean mission of Jesus had attracted the critical attention of the Sanhedrin. The scribes know that Jesus has a considerable following and that he possesses the power to expel demons. It is possible that they were official emissaries from the Great Sanhedrin who came to examine Jesus' miracles and to determine whether Capernaum should be declared a "seduced city," the prey of an apostate preacher. Such a declaration required a thorough investigation made on the spot by official envoys in order to determine the extent of the defection and to distinguish between the instigators, the apostates and the innocent.

The scribes bring two separate, but related accusations against Jesus: he is demon-possessed, and he casts out demons through collusion with the prince of the demons. The first accusation is repeated in the concluding statement "they were saying he was possessed by an unclean

spirit” (verse 30). Jesus answers the second charge directly with the parabolic language of verses 24–27; the pronouncement of verses 28–29 implies his answer to the first. These accusations were utterly serious and bordered on blasphemy.

The name “Beelzebub” occurs in no other Jewish writing, which may indicate that it was a passing colloquialism for a demon-prince. This is suggested both by the scribal reference to “the prince of demons” and by the general reference to possession by an unclean spirit in verse 30. By their accusations the scribes brand Jesus’ work as unlawful, and consign him to the category of a magician. The related charge of sorcery became widespread and is attested both in the Talmud and early Patristic literature.

Jesus addresses himself to the charge of collusion with Beelzebub through pithy proverbial sayings which expose the fallacy in the scribal accusation: Satan is not able to cast out Satan. By tacitly substituting “Satan” for “Beelzebub” Jesus brings the controversy within the perspective of his mission as a direct confrontation with Satan. His argument is cumulative in its force: If what you say is true there exists the impossible circumstance that Satan is destroying his own realm. For it is self-evident that a kingdom divided against itself will fall, while a household divided against itself cannot be established. If your accusation is factual, then Satan has become divided in his allegiance. This should mean that he has become powerless. *Yet this is clearly not so.* Satan remains strong, and this fact exposes the fallacy of your charge.

To this point Jesus has concentrated on the second charge. With verse 27 he directs himself also to the accusation that he is demon-possessed. Satan is the strong man whose strength is evidenced in the enslavement of men through sin, possession, disease and death; the demons are his servants in this destructive work. He is like a champion who exercises his sovereignty in the sphere of death. Only one who is stronger than he can enter into his realm, bind him and plunder his goods. This Jesus has done. The expulsion of demons is nothing less than a forceful attack on the lordship of Satan. Jesus’ ability to cast out demons means that one stronger than Satan has come to restrain his activity and to release the enslaved. The heart of Jesus’ mission is to confront Satan and to crush him on all fields, and in the fulfilment of his task he is conscious of being the agent of irresistible power.

Jesus affirms that all the sins of men are open to forgiveness, with one fearful exception. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit forever removes a man beyond the sphere where forgiveness is possible. This solemn warning must be interpreted in the light of the specific situation in which it was uttered. Blasphemy is an expression of defiant hostility toward God. The scribes were thoroughly familiar with this concept under the rubric “the profanation of the Name,” which generally denoted speech which defies God’s power and majesty. The scribal tradition considered blasphemy no less seriously than did Jesus. “The Holy One, blessed be he, pardons everything else, but on profanation of the Name [i.e. blasphemy] he takes vengeance immediately.” This is the danger to which the scribes exposed themselves when they attributed to the agency of Satan the redemption brought by Jesus. The expulsion of demons was a sign of the intrusion of the Kingdom of God. Yet the scribal accusations against Jesus amount to a denial of the power and greatness of the Spirit of God. By assigning the action of God to a demonic origin the scribes betray a perversion of spirit which, in defiance of the truth, chooses to call light darkness.

In this historical context, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit denotes the conscious and deliberate rejection of the saving power and grace of God released through Jesus’ word and act. This severe warning was not addressed to laymen but to carefully trained legal specialists whose task was to interpret the biblical Law to the people. It was their

responsibility to be aware of God's redemptive action. Their insensitivity to the Spirit through whom Jesus was qualified for his mission exposed them to grave peril. Their own tradition condemned their gross callousness as sharply as Jesus' word. The admonition concerning blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is not to be divorced from this historical context and applied generally. Mark emphasizes this by terminating the incident with a reference to the specific accusation that Jesus was possessed by an unclean spirit. The use of the imperfect tense of the verb in the explanatory note, "because *they were saying* that he is possessed," implies repetition and a fixed attitude of mind, the tokens of callousness which brought the scribes to the brink of unforgivable blasphemy.

Verses 31-35

The insertion of the passage about Beelzebub and blasphemy indicates a parallel between the attitude of the scribes and teachers of the law and the attitude of Jesus's family. This is the requisite background to Jesus' pronouncement concerning his true family. The arrival of Jesus' mother and brothers on the scene resumes the account suspended in verse 21. Jesus was seated within a house surrounded by his disciples and certain others who had pressed in to listen to his teaching (cf. verses 19b–20). When the family was unable to penetrate the crowd they sent for him and stood outside calling. From the fact that those within the house knew that it was Jesus' immediate family it is natural to think of a message passed through the crowd from one to another until it reached the Lord. It is impossible to know whether Jesus was aware of the specific purpose behind the insistent call of his family. He was undoubtedly alert to the unbelief of his brothers. He also knew from the Scriptures that there were occasions when pursuance of the will of God demanded severance of family ties.¹⁰⁵ This was his own experience and he had no hesitancy in calling men to abandon their homes and families in radical obedience to the gospel (Ch. 10:28–30). It is, therefore, not surprising that he failed to heed the call of his family. Those who sat before him felt compelled to call his attention to the persistent outcry, for in their thinking both the Law of God and common piety demanded that he respect the request of his mother.

Jesus seized upon the interruption as an occasion for teaching. The rhetorical question, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" focuses attention on the deeper issue involved in an authentic relationship to him. With a look which apparently took in those who sat closest to him, Jesus announced "Behold, my mother and my brothers." It is probable that the group indicated did not embrace more than the Twelve. The larger context stresses their special position as those who are with Jesus in obedience to his summons (Ch. 3:14). Their openness to God's action in sending Jesus bound them to him with ties more intimate than those achieved through physical relationship. By following Jesus the Twelve are marked off as those who do the will of God. Jesus' statement regarding the true family, however, looks beyond the Twelve to a larger company of men and women: "*whoever* shall do the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother." It is the performance of the will of God which is decisive in determining kinship with Jesus. In the new family which Jesus calls into being there is demanded the radical obedience to God which he demonstrated in his submission to the Father and which the disciples manifested in their response to his call. The one context which makes Jesus' word intelligible is that provided by the demands of the Kingdom of God which has drawn near in his person. Because the Kingdom is breaking in upon men there is a new urgency in the demand for obedience. At the same time this demand creates a fellowship in which the common pursuance of the will of God binds a man closely to Jesus and permits him to know another as brother, sister or mother.

Chapter 4

This is a series of parables teaching about the kingdom of God. This is the largest unit in this gospel devoted entirely to the teaching of Jesus. Included are three parables of growth: the sower (Ch. 4:3–8), the growth of the seed (Ch. 4:26–29) and the mustard seed (Ch. 4:30–32). It is not Mark's intention to present an exhaustive account of Jesus' parabolic teaching, but to illustrate its form and content. Each of the three reflects upon sowing, growth and harvest-elements which illumine the character of the Kingdom of God. Mark appears to have selected these parables and placed them at this point in his presentation to illustrate the character of the coming of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus.

Verses 1-20

This is recorded in all three synoptic gospels - in Luke's gospel chapter 8, in Mark chapter 4 and in Matthew chapter 13. I'm mainly going to look at Mark and Luke as Matthew's account is quite similar to Mark's.

Let's start by looking at the text from Luke's gospel:

"After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (Luke 8:1-8 NIV)

Both Mark and Luke make it clear that Jesus was addressing a crowd. Luke makes it clear that Jesus had other followers in addition to the 12 disciples. This is Luke's first mention of the disciples since they were called. I think this indicates that some of the people Jesus healed stayed with him forming a kind of community around him. Having these single women (they were almost certainly single or widows otherwise they probably wouldn't have had resources to dispose of) travelling around with a band of men would have been regarded as scandalous. It's interesting that in Luke's gospel Jesus apparently told AND explained this parable to a large crowd, not just his disciples whereas in Mark's gospel Jesus explains to the disciples alone - I think this latter is more likely, although the crowd were probably still around.

Mark's comments in verses 11 and 12 have given rise to much controversy:

"He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" (Mark 4:11-12 NIV)

but I think that they just mean that the nature of the kingdom of God will not become clear and be explained to those who (like the crowds) have not become believers and have not been called according to God's sovereign purposes.

According to the account in Mark's gospel this parable is of fundamental importance in understanding Jesus' teaching, Jesus says that failure to understand *this* parable will mean a failure to understand *all* parables. The parable has first position in Mark's gospel, but Luke squeezes it in. I know this parable of Jesus is usually called the Parable of the Sower, but I think that's misleading, because this story is really all about the different soil conditions that seed can be sown into and what happens to the seed as a result. There's nothing to indicate that the sower did anything different with the different batches of seed, or that anything was wrong with any of the seed, rather it was the different conditions which that seed encountered that were the determining factor. That's why I've called it the "Parable of the Sower and the Soils. Although, of course, Jesus has an important role here as the sower of the gospel and like the sower in the parable we have to sow the seed of the gospel everywhere, even on unpromising ground.

As we shall see the theme of this parable is about the authentic hearing and receiving of God's word:

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Luke 8:8);

"so that ... though hearing they may not understand" (Luke 8:10);

"those who hear" (in various forms, Luke 8:12, 13, 14, 15);

"consider carefully how you listen" (Luke 8:18); and

"those who hear God's word" (Luke 8:21).

In those days the farmer would sow his seed by what is called the broadcast method. He would carry the seed in a pouch at his side and as he walked through the tilled field he would toss it out onto the ground, scattering it liberally. It was then usually ploughed into the ground, but the parable doesn't mention that because it's not really relevant to the meaning of the story. In Jesus' parable the seed encounters different kinds of soil conditions: a path which would have been hard soil, rocky soil, a thorn patch and good soil. What happens to the seed is different in each of those four places.

When I was re-reading this parable to prepare for this morning I was reminded of a story that a colleague told me about "sowing" or investing his money in four different investment funds some years ago. Last December he went to see the fund manager to get a report on what had happened to his investments. "Well" the fund manager said to him, "there's good news and bad news". You'll remember that we invested a quarter of your money into a bank based fund – well it was always a solid performer in the past, but with the financial crisis times have been very hard for banks and so that investment is entirely gone. You'll also remember that we invested another quarter of your money into an alternative energy project making bio fuels, well that initially showed very strong returns, but I'm afraid that with the collapse in oil prices and the increases in the costs of grain and other raw materials they used the company became unprofitable and went bankrupt. Next we invested the third quarter of your money in mortgage backed securities, but people were greedy and bought houses they couldn't afford and so I'm afraid that they have become worthless. So what's the good news shouted my colleague. Well smiled the fund manager, we invested the last quarter of your money as venture capital into a start up company and they are doing incredibly well and I'm sure that with a little patience that investment will pay off fifty or even a hundred times over.

I'm sure you can see that my story loosely follows Jesus' parable, but let's go back to the original story.

Jesus teaches a large crowd by means of this parable – look at verse 4:

“While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable:” (Luke 8:4)

The parable likens the evangelistic teaching of Jesus to a Farmer sowing seed.

In verse 11 Jesus tells us that the seed in the parable represents the word of God:

““This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God.”

and in verses 12 to 15 He tells us that the different kinds of soils represent different reactions of people each hearing God’s word.

According to Jesus the first kind of soil was hard soil – look at verse 5:

““A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up.”

Jesus explains this in verse 12:

“Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”

So the parable is all about hearing – genuine hearing or superficial hearing. We’re all here today, so we’ve heard at least some of God’s word – I hope –, but do we really believe it. We’ve received the seed – but what’s happened to it in our lives? Has it really entered into our hearts and minds or are we hardened and closed to it, so that it never really gets a chance to germinate. This often happens if we’ve had a bad experience, an unmet expectation or a hurt, especially a really deep hurt. Those things can create a hardness in us so that we don’t let God’s word through. We all suffer pain and hurts – some of us more so than others. If you are hurting today, I’m really sorry, but don’t run from God, run to God – He’s the only one who can heal you and make you whole. Give your hurt to God and get better not bitter. A bitter life is a barren and wasted life, bitterness only prolongs and amplifies the pain.

This hardness and closed-ness to God can also be caused by pride when we think we can do it by ourselves, we think we don’t need any help from God. If we’re filled with pride this morning, let’s remember the old adage that pride comes before a fall and repent and turn to God before it’s too late. Hardness can also be caused by fear, perhaps a fear of what God might say to us or demand of us, but he will faithfully forgive us our sins if we turn to him in repentance and won’t demand of us more than we are able to give. If he does ask to do something in his service he’ll be with us every step of the way strengthening and supporting us.

So if your heart and mind have been closed to God, drop your defences, open your mind and let God speak to you. Don’t let the birds eat your seed. The seed of God’s word will bring you healing. As it says in verse 12, belief in this word will also bring you God’s salvation – eternal life with him.

Jesus said that the second kind of soil was rocky – look at verse 6:

“Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture.”

In the Middle East a lot of soil is very shallow with limestone rock only a few inches below the surface, so plants trying to grow in that soil can’t develop enough of a root system to support them, when the sun comes they wither.

Jesus explains the application of this in verse 13:

“Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.”

Some of us are like that. When we first hear God's word we receive it eagerly, but we don't develop our relationship with God, we don't root ourselves deeply in his word – the Bible. So when problems come we turn away from God and our faith dies. There are many who initially receive the word, but a year later there's no perceptible change in them, or their lives, and when problems come, when the heat is on, they fall away. If you've heard God's word but haven't put it into practice then most likely your faith will not last. You need to spend time each day with your Bible, to spend time each day in prayer. You need to spend time in fellowship with other Christians, perhaps in a home group. In summary you need commitment to God, his people and his word to develop your Christian roots.

The third kind of conditions the seed found was a patch of thorns – see verse 7:

“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants.”

This is explained in verse 14:

“The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.”

With people like that the seed lands and starts to grow. This growth lasts longer than that on rocky soil, but it doesn't bear fruit because it gets choked by what Jesus called “thorns”. He names these in verse 14 – worries, riches and pleasures. These things distract us and preoccupy our minds. But, you know riches and pleasures don't bring any lasting satisfaction – I see more unhappy people in Monaco, where material wealth abounds, than amongst the Tonga tribe in Zimbabwe, who are starving from lack of food and suffering political repression. Only God can fill the void within us and only in surrender to him and allowing him to show us the purpose he has for our lives will we find peace and freedom. But, we can't find God's purpose for us and our lives by watching TV or movies or playing sport. We've got to spend time with our Bible and in prayer. That doesn't mean that pleasures and the good things of this world have no place in our lives. God gave us all the good things of this world to enjoy. After all God gave us the ability to have fun and experience pleasure in the first place. But, God wants us to enjoy all these things in the way he intended – drink wine, but don't get drunk AND we must not let anyone or anything come before God in our lives. God won't accept our leftovers.

Those who are still listening carefully, may have noticed that I haven't mentioned worries yet. I believe it's no accident that Jesus put them first in his list. They can be the worst distraction. Fear can paralyse us. God doesn't want us to be afraid he wants us to trust in him to deal with our fears and worries. As John says in his first letter “perfect love casts out fear”.

These thorns that choke our faith are mainly a result of neglect in our lives – neglecting to spend time with God regularly, neglecting to read our Bible regularly and neglecting fellowship with our Christian brothers. That kind of neglect will allow the thorns to grow up all around us which will initially choke the spiritual joy out of us and finally kill off our faith entirely.

The remainder of the seed fell on good soil – see verse 8:

“Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.” When he said this, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Which Jesus explained in verse 15:

“But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.”

A 100 fold yield would have been incredibly good for a farmer in Palestine, so this is an indication of how great the blessing from hearing and receiving God's word really is. So these people not only hear the word of God but they retain it. They think about it and study it. They put it into practice and persevere with it. The result is a productive life and a productive life is generally happy and satisfying. What distinguishes these people from the others is not really the lack of problems, but that they yield a crop – they bear fruit.

If we want to make our lives really count, if we want our lives to be productive and fulfilled, then we must study God's word and spend time with him in prayer. As Jesus said in verse 8 of our reading - "He who has ears to hear, let him hear". We need an authentic and appropriate hearing of God's word which leads to a real and lasting faith. And we mustn't just be hearers of God's word, we must act on it, do something about it and let it make a real difference in our lives.

But don't be impatient. Remember that Jesus used an agricultural analogy, remember the kinds of words he uses 'mature' in verse 14, 'persevere' in verse 15. So we need to give our spiritual development time, it takes time for people as well as plants to grow and mature. That's a difficult concept in our society which demands instant gratification – but real satisfaction and real development take time. We demand an instant miracle – and God CAN do that, but it's not the way he usually works. He wants to test us, to develop our strengths and root out our weaknesses.

The question Jesus really wants us to ask ourselves is what kind of soil is in our lives? The evidence of that is in our fruit. Are we growing in our faith, is God changing us slowly from the inside, are we beginning to experience the lasting peace and joy that only he brings? If not we need to change our spiritual soil. The parable never blames the sower or the seed, it's the soil – our attitudes – which cause the difficulties.

We need to change our mental attitudes, the priorities in our lives and turn to Jesus, the only one who can heal us and make us whole and mature us to bear much fruit. That fruit can of course be many or all of the fruits of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (Galatians 5:22), but at this point in our Christian lives we need to put ourselves in the place of the sower and start to cast the seeds of God's word into the fields of untouched souls all around us. Remember that verse 4 says that the sower sowed *his* seed, not someone else's. God will give each one of us our seed to sow. We shouldn't necessarily try and copy what others are doing, we just need to follow God's leading. Maybe we'll sow seeds into the lives of others which will grow and blossom and be multiplied a 100 times or even more.

Verses 21-25

The more interesting features of Mark's formulation are the use of the definite article before "lamp" and the choice of the verb "come": "Does *the lamp come* for the purpose of being placed under the measure or under the couch? Does it not *come* for the purpose of being placed on the lampstand?" The use of "come"⁵⁴ is intriguing, precisely because lamps do not come but "are brought," and this more usual understanding is reflected in the rendering of the ASV and RSV. Mark's term at this point is wholly intelligible, however, if Jesus was speaking of himself as the lamp that has been kindled and that has come, in keeping with the mission pronouncements of Jesus which stress the purpose for his coming. It seems reasonable that Mark understood the simile in this way. Assuming this to be the correct understanding, the use of the article with "lamp" indicates to those who have eyes to see "the

lamp whose identity is known.” Mark’s placement of this parable after Ch. 4:11–20 suggests further that he has in view the secret of the Kingdom of God which is present in the person of Jesus, whose mission remains for many a veiled enigma. The reference throughout is to the mission of Jesus. The contrast that is drawn in verse 21 is between hiddenness—“under the bushel” or “under the couch”—and open manifestation—“upon the stand.” Verse 22, with its “secrecy” language, sustains this contrast and implies that there is something hidden now which shall later be unveiled; there is a secret which shall become known.

In the context of Jesus’ mission the parable means that just as a man would not kindle a clay lamp to conceal its light under a bushel-measure or under a dining couch, it should not be thought that God has brought near the Kingdom in the person of Jesus for the ultimate purpose of concealing his dignity. No, there will come a day when the veil is taken away and He will be known as the Bearer of the Kingdom in a disclosure which all will see.

The sayings which follow may have been suggested to Mark by the reference to the bushel measure in verse 21. They constitute the parable of the measure. They are introduced with the warning “take heed what you hear.” If addressed to the multitude,⁵⁹ they are an appeal for spiritual perception and appropriation of the word which Jesus proclaims. Precisely because there is going to be an unveiling which unravels the enigma and reveals the mystery, hearing with true perception is important *now*. The reason for the urgency in the appeal is expressed through two words traditional to Judaism, but which in this context have specific reference to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The first word indicates that hearing is now “the measure with which a man measures.” If this measure is rich and profound, if the word of proclamation is appropriated with eagerness and joy, in like measure a rich share will be received in the eschatological revelation of the Kingdom, and “even more shall be given.” The ultimate disclosure will result in a salvation far richer than a man can possibly anticipate even by faithful hearing and appropriation. The second word carries the thought one step further: what will ultimately be received in the Kingdom of God will depend upon that which a man possesses of it now. Present possession depends upon hearing, upon appropriation or rejection of the word of the Kingdom that has been scattered like seed. With respect to the man who through faith appropriates that word the saying shall be true which declares “he that has, to him shall (even more) be given,” where Mark’s passive indicates the full thought “shall be given *by God*.” But the man who, in hardness of heart, refuses the word shall experience that absolute loss described in the terms “and he that has not, even that (little) which he has shall be taken from him.” In this sense the unity of the mission of Jesus and the unveiling of the Kingdom will be seen: what one receives from the Sower will be received from the Judge in double measure.⁶² Only those who penetrate the mystery in the present will share in the glory which is yet to be revealed. Because God enters the world through the word of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, the matter of one’s response to Jesus is of ultimate seriousness. For this reason Mark introduces the parable of the measure with the solemn caution, Take heed what you hear!

Verses 26-29

The parable of the growth of the seed. The stress in the parable thus falls upon the sowing of the seed as a messianic work which unleashes mysterious forces which operate of themselves in the achievement of the sovereign purposes of God.

The parable clarifies the relationship between what was then seen of Jesus within the context of his mission and what may still be expected of him. His work was sowing; only after a certain lapse of time will there be the gathering of the harvest. The period between sowing and harvest, however, is not insignificant; for in that period *something happens*. In this

connection there occur some remarkable expressions. According to verse 27, the seed germinates and sprouts; it springs up and matures in a mysterious manner that goes almost unnoticed. This is the emphasis behind Mark's phrase "he knows not how." In verse 28 it is stressed that it is not by human intervention that the seed grows; the earth produces fruit "spontaneously." This does not mean that the sower abandons his work, nor that he is uninterested in what takes place, for this is not the point in the reference to his sleeping and rising. It means that the seed must be allowed its appointed course, as the process of growth and ripening advances toward a harvest that is approaching. The sower takes account of the growth of the seed, but he cannot fully understand it. His ultimate interest is in the purpose for which the seed was sown—the harvest; when the grain is ripened, he immediately sends forth the sickle into the grain. These expressions exhibit aspects of the mysterious manifestation of the Kingdom of God in history. It comes mysteriously, by God's initiative and appointment, without human intervention.

Important elements in the parable are the certainty of the harvest in spite of the sower's temporary passivity *and* the germinal power of the seed as the pledge and guarantee of its maturation.

Verses 30-32 The Parable of the Mustard Seed

The mustard seed was well known to the Jews as the smallest seed. Unlike the previous parable, there is no real reflection upon the actual growth of the seed. All attention is focused upon the contrast between the smallest of the seeds and the tallest of the shrubs.⁷⁶ The Kingdom is not likened to the mustard seed, but to what happens to the mustard seed. The whole life picture, in which there is significant reflection on the beginning and the end of an action, provides the basis of the comparison. The reference to the birds of the air which find shelter in the branches of the mustard shrub may have a deeper significance,⁷⁸ but it seems more probable that they are part of the picture of the surprising character of the end when considered from the beginning. Though insignificant in its beginning, the matured result is the provision of strength and protection for those who come within its shade.

This parable is concerned with the enigmatic present manifestation of the Kingdom as embodied in Jesus' person. Its appearance may be characterized by weakness and apparent insignificance—but remember the mustard seed. The day will come when the Kingdom of God will surpass in glory the mightiest kingdoms of the earth, for it is the consequence of God's sovereign action. The mustard seed is the word of God proclaimed by Christ. This word possesses the power which one day will make all things new. When the glory of that manifestation breaks forth before men they will be as startled as the man who considers the tiny mustard seed and the mighty shrub.

Verses 33-34

Mark concludes his parables section with a statement that indicates he's just selected some parables from amongst many used by Jesus. Jesus taught the multitude through parables, but offered more detailed explanations to the disciples in private. Jesus is adopting his teaching to the level of understanding he finds in his audience.

Had Jesus spoken to the crowds in a direct manner they would have been forced to make a decision immediately. That decision could have expressed only unbelief and rejection. Jesus' adoption of the indirect address of the parable was accordingly an expression both of grace and of judgment. It was an expression of grace which allowed time for reflection on his

appeal to penetrate beneath his words to “the word.” It was an expression of judgment upon their lack of preparation to receive directly the word of the Kingdom of God.

Verses 35-41 Jesus Calms a Storm

This sounds like an eyewitness account – lot’s of detail including unnecessary detail.

From a small boat Jesus had been teaching the multitude lined up on the shore (Ch. 4:2). Now that evening had come he determined to cross over to the eastern side of the lake (probably in keeping with the principle expressed in Ch. 1:38, that his mission must be extended elsewhere). The disciples included among their number fishermen who were experienced sailors, and the multitude was soon left behind as their boat, with others along the shore, moved out into deep water. The Sea of Galilee, surrounded by high mountains, is like a basin. Sudden violent storms on the sea are well known. Violent winds from the southwest enter the basin from the southern cleft and create a situation in which storm and calm succeed one another rapidly. Since the wind is nearly always stronger in the afternoon than in the morning or evening, fishing was done at night. But when a storm arises in the evening, it is all the more dangerous. Such a storm struck as a fierce gust of wind came upon the lake, driving the waves over the sides of the boat, which was being swamped with water.

While the storm raged, Jesus lay sleeping in the stern upon the pillow that was customarily kept under the coxswain’s seat for those who were not involved in the actual sailing or fishing. The severity of the storm may be estimated from the fact that apparently even the experienced fishermen were terrified. They rudely awakened Jesus, and their cry carries a sharp tone of rebuke, “Teacher, are we to drown for all you care?”⁹³ Jesus rebuked the wind and the sea; the wind fell and there was a great calm. As suddenly as the storm had come it had subsided, subdued by Jesus’ sovereign command, “Peace, be still.”

The question of what was involved in the muzzling of the storm cannot be avoided. The God of Israel is the Lord of history and nature. His sovereignty was demonstrated in the stilling of the roaring sea⁹⁵ and the silencing of the howling wind. He is the personal, living God who intervenes in the experience of men with a revelation of his power and his will. He is the God who acts, not some pale abstraction.

Jesus subjects the storm to the sovereign authority of God.

Jesus rebuked the disciples for the lack of faith expressed in their terror and fear. This is the first in a series of rebukes (cf. Chs. 7:18; 8:17 f., 21, 32 f.; 9:19) and its placement at this point is important. It indicates that in spite of Ch. 4:11, 34, the difference is one of degree, not of kind, between the disciples who have received through revelation some insight into the secret of the Kingdom of God as having come near in the person of Jesus and the multitude who see only a riddle. The disciples themselves are still quite blind and filled with misunderstanding. When Jesus asks, “Do you not yet have faith?” he means specifically faith in God’s saving power as this is present and released through his own person. The failure of the disciples to understand this is expressed in their awe-inspired question, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Chapter 5

Verses 1-20

Again this sounds like an eyewitness account. Mark has not included the narrative in his Gospel merely because he delights in a well-told story. This account, more graphically than any other in the Gospels, indicates that the function of demonic possession is to distort and

destroy the image of God in man. The subordinate detail of the destruction of the herd of swine has bearing upon this fact. For this very reason Jesus could not avoid a significant confrontation with demonic possession. His sovereign authority and the quality of the salvation that he brings finds graphic illustration in this historic account.

It would normally take two hours or so to cross the lake, but it is impossible to know whether Jesus and the disciples arrived in the evening or morning. The point of arrival is indicated in a general way as the district of the Gerasenes, most probably in reference to a town whose name is preserved in the modern Kersa or Koursi.⁶ At the site of Kersa the shore is level, and there are no tombs. But about a mile further south there is a fairly steep slope within forty yards from the shore, and about two miles from there cavern tombs are found which appear to have been used for dwellings.

The man who was demon-possessed is elaborately introduced, perhaps in a manner reflecting the excited report of townsmen who had long been familiar with his existence. His dwelling in the midst of the tombs and the inability of chains and fetters to bind him is especially stressed, but every word emphasizes his pathetic condition. The people of the town undoubtedly felt that the man was mad, for his appearance and behavior conformed to the popular diagnosis of insanity. In accordance with the practice of the day they had attempted to bind him by chains to protect themselves from his violence. When this proved to be futile, they had driven him off to wander restlessly in the wild hill country and to dwell in the subterranean caves which served as tombs and dwellings for the poorest people of the district.⁸ At intervals during the night and the day he would be seen among the tombs or on the mountains, wildly shrieking, cutting his flesh with sharp stones, attempting to destroy himself and bring to an end the torment of an unbearable existence. In the several features of the description the purpose of demonic possession to distort and destroy the divine likeness of man according to creation is made indelibly clear. The attitude and actions of the people of the town were an added cruelty based on popular misunderstanding. But ultimate responsibility for the wretchedness of the man and the brutal treatment he had endured rested with the demons who had taken possession of the center of his personality.

The demons are fully aware of Jesus's divine origin. A multitude of them have taken possession of the man.

The reference to the herd of swine grazing on the mountainside is not strange in a narrative which takes place in the Decapolis, with its predominantly Gentile population. It is simply another indication of the pagan environment. The demons made a specific request to enter into the swine, and when Jesus complied, the demons left the man and entered their new hosts. In panic the herd rushed down the slope into the sea and drowned. This element in the narrative has invited special attention and varied conjectures, which need not be reviewed here. What must be seen above all else is that the fate of the swine demonstrates the ultimate intention of the demons with respect to the man they had possessed. It is their purpose to destroy the creation of God, and halted in their destruction of a man, they fulfilled their purpose with the swine.

The drowning of the swine was not an unforeseen consequence in Jesus' concession; it was the express purpose which lay behind the request of the demons. Accordingly, the question why Jesus allowed them to enter the swine must be faced. The answer would seem to have two elements. First, Jesus recognized that the time of the ultimate vanquishment of the demons had not yet come; his encounter and triumph over the demonic does not yet put an end to Satan's power. It is the pledge and the symbol of that definitive triumph, but the time when that triumph will be fully realized is yet deferred. It must await the appointment of God.

Therefore, Jesus allows the demons to continue their destructive work, but not upon a man.²³ The second element is related to this: Jesus allowed the demons to enter the swine to indicate beyond question that their real purpose was the total destruction of their host. While this point may have been obscured in the case of the man, there was the blatant evidence in the instance of the swine. Their intention was no different with regard to the man whom they had possessed.

The herdsmen who had tended the swine fled the scene and hastened to the town and the small hamlets surrounding it to report the loss to the owners. As a result people came quickly together to see what had happened. By a series of three participles Mark emphasizes the features which must have gripped the attention of those who came: they saw Jesus and the man who had been possessed seated, clothed and restored to wholeness of mind. Mark adds with emphasis, “the one who had been possessed by the legion.” The man whom neither chains nor men could restrain was sitting in a docile manner before Jesus; he who had terrified others as he ran naked among the tombs was now clothed; the one who had shrieked wildly and behaved violently was now fully recovered. So radical was the transformation that the townspeople were stunned and frightened.

They seem to be afraid to have someone of Jesus’s power amongst them. However the man who was exorcised wants to be a disciple of Jesus. Jesus refuses his request and tells him to go back to his family.

It is striking that no restriction is placed upon the man by Jesus, in contrast to the injunctions to silence found in other instances of healing. The accent falls upon apprehension of the divine action and declaration in a manner which anticipates the primitive Christian mission rather than upon secrecy and silence. This may be due to the fact that the man was a Gentile and his proclamation is confined to a predominantly Gentile area. It is, nevertheless, an exception to the more usual pattern observed by Jesus in Galilee. It should also be observed that the object of the man’s declaration was not the person of Jesus directly, but *what Jesus had done* in restoring him to wholeness. Thus in the midst of the Gentiles, the God of Israel was glorified through the proclamation of what Jesus had accomplished.

The story was remembered in the tradition because of the dramatic evidence it offered of the purpose of demonic possession and of the full deliverance brought by Jesus. It declared that the victory of Jesus over evil forces is a reality in which the liberating power of the Kingdom of God is manifested in an extension of the saving mercy of God.

Verses 21-24

The narrative of the radical healing of Jairus’ daughter is presented in two parts (Ch. 5:21–24, 35–43) which are separated by the account of the healing of the woman who had lived with a hemorrhage for twelve years. The two incidents may have become associated in this way merely because there was an interruption to the journey which proved disastrous for the young girl. But it is possible that Mark saw more in this association: the healing of a woman who has lived with the impingement of death anticipates the healing of a girl who has actually experienced death. The structural device of intercalating one incident within another is paralleled by other instances in which Mark uses the device of anticipation. The detail with which Mark recalls the woman with the hemorrhage indicates that his concern extends beyond the mere passage of time. The healing experienced by the woman is itself a reversal of death and a pledge of the raising of Jairus’ daughter.

Jesus returned to the western shore of the lake, perhaps to Capernaum, and a multitude gathered around him while he was yet by the Sea. No indication is given whether the crowd

came together as soon as he arrived or after an extended period of time; it is simply the first fact that Mark records, offering a contrast to Jesus' experience on the eastern shore where the inhabitants urged him to depart. All of the interest is focused upon Jairus³⁷ and his urgent appeal to Jesus. He may have had contact with Jesus previously, since as synagogue-ruler he was a lay official responsible for supervision of the building and arranging the service. His request that Jesus should come and lay hands in healing upon his daughter reflects a common practice of the day.³⁹ What was unusual was his confidence that if Jesus would come, his daughter's life would be saved. Jesus went with him, followed by the crowd. Mark's reference to the fact that they were pressing all around him prepares for the following account of the woman who touched Jesus in order to be healed.

Verses 25-34 deal with the woman with the hemorrhage

The woman who unobtrusively touched Jesus had experienced a flow of blood for a period of twelve years. It is common to think of chronic hemorrhaging from the womb, but from Mark's description it is not possible to know the cause for her loss of blood.⁴⁴ She had consulted a number of physicians, had endured a wide variety of treatments, and had spent all of her money in a desperate attempt to better her condition. All this was in vain; in fact, her condition grew worse. Her existence was wretched because she was in a constant state of uncleanness and would be generally shunned by people since contact with her rendered others unclean. What she had experienced from the doctors may be estimated from the Talmud, which has preserved a record of the medicines and treatments applied to an illness of this nature.⁴⁶ None of these remedies had benefited the woman. Having heard reports of the healing power of Jesus, she determined her course of action. Despite her ritual uncleanness she entered the crowd behind him and reached out to his garment. The desire to touch Jesus' clothing probably reflects the popular belief that the dignity and power of a person are transferred to what he wears. On this understanding, her touch combined faith with quasi-magical notions which were widespread in that day.

The intense conviction that if she could only touch Jesus' garments she would be made whole was undoubtedly part of "the whole truth" which the woman declared before Jesus (verse 33). She may have known that others had touched him and had been made well (cf. Ch. 3:10; 6:56). At the moment she had fulfilled her intention she experienced the cessation of her hemorrhage, and knew that she had been healed.

Concurrent with the moment of healing, Jesus knew that "power" had gone forth from him. This unusual expression, which occurs only here in Mark's Gospel, must be interpreted from the context of "the power of God" in the Scripture. Power is a constitutive element in the biblical concept of the personal God. Jesus possesses the power of God as the representative of the Father. Nevertheless, the Father remains in control of his own power. The healing of the woman occurred through God's free and gracious decision to bestow upon her the power which was active in Jesus. By an act of sovereign will God determined to honor the woman's faith in spite of the fact that it was tinged with ideas which bordered on magic.

Jesus' question "Who touched my garments?" seemed pointless to the disciples since he had been jostled and touched by a host of individuals. Their impatience with the Lord reflects an awareness that their immediate mission was to assist a girl who was dying, and delay could be fatal. It also betrays that they had no understanding of what had taken place. Certainly not every contact with the person of Jesus resulted in a transmission of power. Involved in the situation was not a unilateral event in which touch released power, but a mutual event in which the personal relationship between Jesus and the woman released power. Jesus, therefore, could not allow the woman to recede into the crowd still entertaining ideas tinged

with superstition and magic. He stopped and looked intently upon the people surrounding him in order to see who⁵⁰ had touched him with an expectation of salvation.

With fear and trembling the woman acknowledged all that had happened. Her action in making herself known indicates both courage and gratitude, and it is here that the accent should fall rather than upon her fear. Mark places all of the emphasis upon the fact that she knew she had experienced the healing of her person. With awe, and only partial understanding of what had taken place, she declared the truth to Jesus.

Jesus' insistence that the woman identify herself, together with his gentle correction of any erroneous ideas she may have had, calls attention to the essential aspect of her experience. It was *the grasp of her faith* rather than her hand that had secured the healing she sought. Her touch had brought together two elements—faith and Jesus—and that had made it effective. Power had gone forth from Jesus to the woman for the precise reason that she sought healing *from him*. The woman's faith that Jesus could make her well expressed an appropriate decision with respect to his person.

The final words spoken to the woman, "Go in peace," are a traditional valediction, but here are informed by her entire experience. The peace with which she departed signified more than release from agitation over a wretched existence or from fear of recrimination for having touched Jesus. It was the profound experience of well-being which is related to salvation from God. When Jesus declares, "Be whole from your affliction," he confirms that her healing was permanent and affirms his active participation with the Father's will to honor the woman's faith.

Later tradition embellished the Gospel account, seeking to answer the questions asked by generations of people. In the Greek tradition the anonymous woman was given the name Berenice, while in the Coptic and Latin tradition she received the related name Veronica. Eusebius states that she was from Caesarea Philippi, and that by the door of her home there was erected on a high stone a copper statue of a woman kneeling, her hands outstretched before her, entreating one purported to resemble Jesus. At the feet of the male figure a "strange sort of herb" is said to grow on the column which possessed medicinal powers against a wide variety of diseases.⁵⁵ In this way the evangelical tradition was embellished. What was not appreciated was that the woman had experienced an aspect of salvation in anticipation of the more radical healing to be experienced by the daughter of Jairus. From Mark's perspective, the entire incident is a call for radical faith.

Verses 35-43 the healing of Jairus's daughter

The healing of the woman with a chronic hemorrhage resulted in a delay which was catastrophic for Jairus's daughter. A party from the home informed the synagogue official that his daughter had died; any further disturbance of Jesus was futile. Jesus heard what they said but deliberately ignored its import. His response, "fear not, only believe," was a call for intense faith. Jairus had exercised faith when he came to Jesus in the confidence that he could save his daughter. He had witnessed the healing of the woman which demonstrated the relationship between faith and divine help. But he was now asked to believe that his child would live even as he stood in the presence of death. Such faith is radical trust in the ability of Jesus to confront a crisis situation with the power of God.

Jesus would not allow any of those who had accompanied him to continue with him except the father and the three disciples who sustained a more intimate relationship to him, Peter, James and John. The seriousness of the situation demanded that only those whom Jesus chose as witnesses should know what really took place.

Arriving at the house Jesus saw that preparations had been made already for the funeral. The minstrels and professional mourners were performing their duties as the first part of the mourning ceremony. The wailing consisted of choral or antiphonal song accompanied by handclapping. Since even the poorest man was required by common custom to hire a minimum of two fluteplayers and one professional mourner in the event of his wife's death,⁶² it is probable that one who held the rank of synagogue-ruler would be expected to hire a large number of professional mourners. It was necessary to remove the mourners from the girl's room. Jesus rebuked their noisy tumult and declared, "the child is not dead, but is sleeping." His statement is ambiguous,⁶⁴ and could allow the interpretation that the girl was in a state of very deep unconsciousness that is to be distinguished from death itself. Jesus demonstrated his mercy to the girl at a highly critical moment when he healed her. It is certain, however, that this is not Luke's understanding of what took place because he speaks of resuscitation. It is probable that Mark intended his account to be understood in the same way.⁶⁷ Jesus' statement means that in spite of the girl's real death, she has not been delivered over to the realm of death with all of its consequences. Mourning is inappropriate because she experiences a sleep from which she will soon awake.

The mourners were absolutely certain that the girl was dead, and responded to Jesus' words with scornful laughter. The fact that wailing and tears could be exchanged so quickly for laughter indicates how conventional and artificial the mourning customs had become.⁶⁹ Jesus cast the scoffers out of the house, and allowing only the parents of the girl and his three disciples to accompany him, entered the room where the young girl lay. Taking hold of her hand he spoke the Aramaic words *Talitha cumi*, "Little girl, arise." The girl rose up and walked about, for she was already a "young daughter" according to Jewish classification.

The retention of Aramaic formulae in Marcan healing contexts (Chs. 5:41; 7:34) has led to the conjecture that, analogous to pagan custom, the early Christians commonly believed in the efficacy of esoteric utterances composed of foreign or incomprehensible words. There is no support for this proposal either in Mark or in the subsequent tradition. The evangelist retains Aramaic with translation in other contexts unrelated to healing. Moreover, there is no evidence that "Talitha cumi" or "Ephphatha" were ever used by Christian healers as a magic spell.⁷³ Their presence in the narrative reflects a faithfulness to the tradition that Jesus had actually spoken these words on specific occasions.

The unpreparedness of the parents and the disciples for what they had witnessed is expressed with emphatic language. There was, apparently, no doubt in their minds that they had stood in the presence of death. God had intervened so dramatically they were left speechless with utter amazement.

Mark records that Jesus strictly charged those present not to disclose to others what had happened. This injunction to silence has attracted particular attention, for it is alleged to be impracticable. It was widely known that the girl had died; it would be impossible to keep her in isolation for an extended period of time. Accordingly, William Wrede and others have found in Ch. 5:43 strong confirmation that the secrecy phenomena in the Gospel is a theological construction for which Mark himself is responsible.

It is clear, however, that this context lends no support to the theory of secret messiahship, as Wrede conceived it. Fundamental to the narrative is the remarkable disclosure of Jesus' authority made to the parents of the girl and the disciples. These five received the privilege of a special revelation which they were not to share with others. The secret is, accordingly, "a witnessed secret" which is to be kept from others whom Jesus had excluded. The accent of the narrative alternates between disclosure of the messiahship and veiling. Special motivation

for the injunction to silence may be found in the rank unbelief of those who had ridiculed Jesus with their scornful laughter. It is clear throughout Mark that Jesus revealed his messiahship only with reserve. It is appropriate to this consistent pattern of behavior that he was unwilling to make himself known to the raucous, unbelieving group that had gathered outside Jairus' house. He did not permit them to witness the saving action by which the girl was restored to her parents, and he directed that it should continue to remain unknown to those outside. He recognized that the responsibility of the parents in this regard could not continue indefinitely. When the child appeared in public the facts would speak for themselves. The parents could, however, withhold what had happened and thus fulfill the intention of Jesus.⁷⁷ Before it was known that the girl was yet alive, the purpose for which the charge had been given would have been fulfilled; Jesus would have departed and could no longer be subject to ostentatious acclaim.

There is a fine human touch in Mark's final note, that in the midst of the excitement and confusion Jesus realized that the girl would need food.

The resuscitation of Jairus' daughter is both a deed of compassion and a pledge of the conquering power of Jesus over the combined forces of death and unbelief, in which the Kingdom of God was disclosed as a saving reality. It is precisely in deliverance from death that the salvation which Jesus brings finds its most pointed expression.

Chapter 6

Verses 1-6

Jesus left Capernaum and travelled southward into the hill country until he came to the village where he had spent his youth and the early years of his maturity. While Mark does not name Nazareth, he has earlier indicated that this was the village from which Jesus came, and it is undoubtedly in view under the phrase "his own country." Jesus returned to Nazareth as would a rabbi, accompanied by his disciples. The reference to the disciples is important, for during this period Jesus had been concerned with their training in preparation for the mission which Mark reports in Ch. 6:7-13.

On the sabbath day Jesus attended the synagogue and was given the opportunity to expound the reading from the Torah and the Haftarah, the Law and the prophetic portion. The entire congregation³ was astonished at his teaching, which prompted questions concerning the source of his doctrine and wisdom and of the power which had been exhibited elsewhere in miracles of healing and exorcism. It is possible that the people entertained the dark suspicions voiced earlier by the Jerusalem scribes (Ch. 3:22). Jesus had not been schooled in rabbinic fashion but had been trained as a manual laborer. His immediate family were well known to the villagers, who judged that there was nothing extraordinary about them that would have led them to expect something unusual from Jesus. What was the source of his wisdom, and who had empowered him to speak and act with such authority? To these questions two answers lie close at hand: the source was God, or it was demonic. Their first impressions of astonishment shaded off to resentment when they recalled Jesus' earlier vocation and standing in Nazareth. Not knowing the source of his wisdom, they find his office as a teacher offensive. In spite of what they heard and saw they failed to penetrate the veil of ordinariness which characterized this one who had grown up in the village.

The rhetorical question, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" deserves careful attention both to the text and its meaning. Significant strands of the Marcan textual tradition agree essentially with the Matthean formulation: "Is this not the son of the carpenter? Is not his mother called Miriam?" (Mt. 13:55). Moreover, against the allegation of Celsus that Jesus

was only a carpenter Origen answered forthrightly that in none of the Gospels accepted by the Church was Jesus himself designated a carpenter.⁶ While the textual question is so complex that equally competent interpreters have adopted differing points of view, it seems preferable to adopt the text of the uncials in which Jesus is designated “the carpenter, the son of Mary.” The variant reading was apparently conformed to the text of Matthew in the interest of the virgin birth and perhaps to avoid the attribution of a menial trade to Jesus when to do so in the Graeco-Roman world would be to invite scorn.⁸ The Marcan text as it stands is derogatory. “Is not this the carpenter?” means, Is he not a common worker with his hands even as the rest of us are? The additional phrase “the son of Mary” is probably disparaging. It was contrary to Jewish usage to describe a man as the son of his mother, even when she was a widow, except in insulting terms. Rumors to the effect that Jesus was illegitimate appear to have circulated in his own lifetime and may lie behind this reference as well.¹¹ The rhetorical question of the people indicates that they know Jesus only in a superficial way. They find no reason to believe that he possesses the anointment of God.

Jesus responded with an aphorism to which there are numerous parallels in Jewish and Greek literature. The comparison of his experience to that of the prophets who were dishonored among their own people is ironical.¹³ It anticipates his ultimate rejection by Israel and at the same time recalls Ch. 3:20–21, 31–35 when Jesus’ family and kinsmen expressed the opinion that he was insane and attempted to halt his activities forcibly.

In the presence of gross unbelief Jesus restricted his activity to the healing of a few sick individuals. It is not Mark’s intention to stress Jesus’ *inability* when he states that he could perform no miracles at Nazareth. His purpose is rather to indicate that Jesus was not free to exercise his power *in these circumstances*. The performance of miracles in the absence of faith could have resulted only in the aggravation of human guilt and the hardening of men’s hearts against God. The power of God which Jesus possessed could be materialized in a genuinely salutary fashion only when there was the receptivity of faith. Unbelief excluded the people of Nazareth from the dynamic disclosure of God’s grace that others had experienced.

Apparently Jesus had not anticipated the reaction of the people. The statement that he “marvelled” is the sole instance when Mark uses this verb of Jesus. It vividly suggests the degree of resistance he encountered in Nazareth. In Ch. 6:5–6a Mark draws attention not to the limits of Jesus’ power but rather to the privations which result from unbelief.

In the Marcan outline the rejection at Nazareth is intimately related to the subsequent mission of the Twelve (Ch. 6:7–13). The tension between faith and unbelief permeates both accounts. Moreover in Ch. 6:11 there is a distinct indication that the disciples will also experience rejection. By situating these two incidents at this point in his Gospel the evangelist shows that unbelief is the context in which the Christian mission advances and that rejection is an experience common to the Lord and the Church. This point had immediate relevance for his own hard-pressed community. It is probable that he recognized in the juxtaposition of rejection and mission a pattern confirmed in the rejection of Jesus by the nation, climaxed by crucifixion and resurrection, which created the apostolic mission.

Verses 6-13 the mission of the 12 in Galilee

It is difficult to be certain whether Mark intended the reference to Jesus’ itinerant ministry to be intimately associated with the rejection at Nazareth or the commissioning of the Twelve. As a succinct summary statement of the activity of Jesus, verse 6b is able to stand upon its own, without close association with either context. A connection with Ch. 6:1–6a would suggest that as a result of the rejection at Nazareth Jesus entered upon an extended tour of the

Galilean villages. While the commissioning of the Twelve is the next event reported, that development has no necessary relationship to the village ministry. On the other hand, if verse 6b is tied to Ch. 6:7–13 it indicates that as a result of his tour Jesus determined to extend his ministry yet further through the direct commissioning of the Twelve. The text of Mark is intelligible on either reading, and both have found support. This is the third tour of the Galilean villages reported by Mark (cf. Ch. 1:14, 39).

With the commissioning of the Twelve Mark reaches a point for which he has carefully prepared. The call to be fishers of men (Ch. 1:16–20) points forward to the election of Levi (Ch. 2:14), and then of the Twelve, who are set apart in terms of a specific promise (Ch. 3:13–19). They will be sent forth to preach and will be given authority to expel demons. Since their election the disciples had been with Jesus and had shared his experiences. Private instruction (Ch. 4:11, 34) and exposure to his power over demonic possession, sickness and death (Ch. 5) had prepared them for more direct involvement in his ministry.

Jesus authorized the disciples to be his delegates with respect to both word and power. Their message and deeds were to be an extension of his own. The commissioning of the Twelve has a rich background in the juridical practice of Judaism, which recognized the official character of actions performed by authorized individuals. Reduced to its simplest form, the law acknowledged that “the sent one is as the man who commissioned him.” This formulation lies behind the mission of the Twelve, who are sent forth as “appointed representatives” of Jesus in the legal sense of the term. Their return to Jesus and the report concerning all that they had taught and done in fulfilment of the commission (Ch. 6:30) is consistent with this legal background. The fulfilment of a commission by pairs of messengers is attested elsewhere in Judaism.²⁷ The division of the Twelve into groups of two conforms their mission to the Mosaic provision that the truthfulness of a testimony is to be established “by the mouth of two witnesses.” There is in the context no thought of the creation at this time of a permanent office, but rather the fulfilment of a specific commission.²⁹ This is an important consideration; it signifies that the instructions which Jesus gave to the disciples do not have a general and permanent validity. They are relevant to this particular commission. The insistence that the disciples take neither food nor money, but depend wholly on hospitality, is a matter of special authorization within limits which were both local and temporary.

The specific terms of the commission demanded of the disciples a rigorous commitment to total dependence upon God for food and shelter. While the minimum requirements for the journey—staff and sandals—were permitted, they were to take nothing else. Bread, the beggar’s bag, the smallest coin in the belt, or a second tunic to keep out the night chill were all excluded.

The disciples were instructed to accept the hospitality which was offered. Whenever a home was opened to them they were to stay there until they departed from the village. They were not to dishonor the home by accepting more comfortable provisions offered by another host.

The clear intimation that the disciples would experience rejection injects an ominous note into the charge. There would be villages where no hospitality would be offered and where their word would not be tolerated. In this situation they were to shake the dust from their feet, as a testimony and warning to the villagers, and go elsewhere. This instruction is intelligible in the light of Jewish practice. It was the custom of pious Jews who had travelled outside of Israel to remove carefully from their feet and clothing all dust of the alien lands in which they had travelled. By this action they dissociated themselves from the pollution of those lands and their ultimate judgment. An analogous action on the part of the disciples would declare that a village was pagan in character. It would provide warning that the disciples had fulfilled

their responsibility and that those who had rejected the mission would have to answer to God.³⁷ The removal of dust from the feet belongs to the category of symbolic realism; it is a prophetic act designed to provoke thought on the part of the rejecting villagers. The mission of the disciples has a selective character. Their presence in a town or village determines which of the inhabitants are open to the word of the Kingdom which they bear. Should they wipe the dust from their feet and break communication with a village they consign it to judgment. This provision indicates that the coming of the disciples, like that of Jesus himself, had the character of sifting and gathering the true people of God.

In obedience to their commission the Twelve proclaimed the gospel through their word and deed. Their message and the exercise of power confirm the representative character of their mission. They preach the message of repentance which Jesus had proclaimed; they cast out demons and heal the sick because these activities had characterized his ministry. Their coming to a village brought healing and salvation in the most comprehensive terms *because they were his representatives*. Jesus had commissioned them and they came in his name. What Jesus did in his own power as commissioned by God, the disciples did in his power.

The essential element in the mission is the intrusion of the Kingdom of God “with power.” The expulsion of demons is clearly distinguished from the anointing of the sick,⁴² but both actions were visible functions of the Kingdom. They declared that it was God’s intention to apply salvation to man in his wholeness. The focus upon the words and works of Christ anticipates the character of the more permanent mission the disciples received by the appointment of the risen Christ.

Verses 14-16 speculations about the identity of Jesus

If the connection with Ch. 6:6–13 may be pressed, it was the mission activity of Jesus and the Twelve throughout Galilee which brought to Herod’s attention popular reports concerning Jesus. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and Malthace, was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from his father’s death in 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. His total disregard for Jewish sensitivity was displayed not only in his marriage to Herodias, but in the selection of an ancient cemetery as the site for his capital, Tiberias. By this choice Herod virtually excluded Jewish settlers, for residence in the city would render them perpetually unclean in terms of the ritual law. The royal title had been denied to Antipas by Augustus. Goaded by the ambitious Herodias, it was Antipas’ request for the title of “king” which officially led to his dismissal and exile in A.D. 39.⁴⁸ Mark’s use of the royal title may reflect local custom, or it may be a point of irony. Herod had modeled his court after the imperial pattern, and it is possible that the irony of designating him by a title he coveted, but failed to secure, would be appreciated in Rome where his sentence had been sealed.

Accepting the indefinite plural as the original reading, it was the people who recognized in Jesus’ ministry the powers of the Age to Come released through resurrection. On this understanding, verses 14–15 refer to three popular estimates of the person of Jesus: he is John the Baptist, or he is Elijah, or he is one of the other prophets. The people view Jesus in the perspective of a prophet; their only question concerns his identity. Herod had been informed concerning the prophet who was exciting the aspirations of the people within his district, and had formed his own opinion.

The three popular estimates of Jesus constitute one of the earliest attempts to explain the enigma of his person and work. The conviction that Jesus is John risen from the dead comes from a group of people who had no direct experience with Jesus or the Baptist, since they did not know that Jesus was a contemporary of John and had been baptized by him. Because

Jesus had not begun his ministry in Galilee until after the imprisonment of John (Ch. 1:4), the people had a distinct impression of succession rather than of contemporaneity. They understood the new proclaimer in terms of a more recent and, to them, better known figure, the prophet John. If they had even heard that Jesus was baptized by John they could not possibly have identified him with the Baptist. John is not known to have performed any miracles during the course of his ministry (Jn. 10:41, “John did no sign”), and it was the element of power in Jesus’ ministry which led them to believe that John had risen from the dead. The resurrection permitted the powers of the new age to be channeled through him. The opinion that John has returned from the dead in the same body he had possessed before his execution sheds light on the popular conception of the resurrection and indicates that the people had no knowledge of Jesus prior to his ministry in Galilee. They think of him as one who appeared suddenly upon the earth a short time after the Baptist’s death. The identification of Jesus with John, through whom the ancient gift of prophecy had been affirmed after so long a silence, appears to interpret Jesus as the promised eschatological Prophet whose word would herald the last days.⁵³

The opinion that Jesus is Elijah identifies Jesus with “the Coming One” announced by John (Ch. 1:7). It probably reflects the conviction of the Baptist’s followers. Although he left the identity of the one mightier than himself unnamed, John had defined his function in terms which pointed unmistakably to “the Messenger of the Covenant,” the prophet Elijah, in the closing paragraphs of Malachi (Chs. 3:1f.; 4:5f.). John must have been responsible for communicating to his followers that Jesus was Elijah, as promised in the prophetic word. The identification of Jesus as the precursor to “the great and terrible day of the Lord” was a response of faith which stands in contrast to the popular opinion that Jesus was John risen from the dead.

The third estimate is to be distinguished from the second by its reference to Jesus as an ordinary prophet, not one like Elijah whose coming is an ominous portent of the end. He is one more prophet in the succession of prophets who have spoken and acted for God in Israel’s history. If the reading supported by the “Western” text (“he is one of the prophets”) is correct, however, Jesus is identified with one of the ancient prophets who has returned for a new and final phase of ministry. This understanding is only a variant form of the previous two: Jesus is the eschatological prophet. The name of the returning prophet is not provided, since the people thought alternately of Elijah, Moses, Enoch or Jeremiah.

Herod, disturbed by an uneasy conscience disposed to superstition, feared that John had come back to haunt him. This judgment presupposes that Jesus was unknown to the tetrarch until after John’s death. He felt that in Jesus he was confronted with the Baptist once more, but now returned from the grave with the result that magical powers were at work in him. The reference to Herod’s execution of John serves to introduce the extended account of the Baptist’s death in Ch. 6:17–29. It also indicates Herod’s sense of his responsibility for John’s death, which was brought home to him in a pointed way by the popular rumors stimulated by the activity of Jesus. In Jewish thinking resurrection is the prelude to judgment, and the terror of judgment may be caught in Herod’s statement, “John, whom I beheaded, is risen.”

Verses 17-29 the beheading of John the Baptist

The Gospel of Mark contains two “passion narratives,” the first of which reports the imprisonment and death of John the Baptist. The detailed narration of the circumstances resulting in the death of John stands in sharp contrast to the brief description of his mission in Ch. 1:4–8. It is probable that the present narrative reflects a special source which circulated

among the disciples of John. It is included here by Mark both to clarify the statements in Ch. 6:14, 16 and to point forward to the suffering and death of Jesus.

The historical integrity of this narrative has been seriously challenged. Alleged differences between Mark and Josephus, the presence of motifs which recall the conflict of Elijah with Jezebel or the story of Esther, and the improbability of a princess degrading herself by performing a sensuous solo dance at a royal banquet furnish the base for critical objection. On the other hand, between Mark and Josephus there are positive points of agreement. Both writers note the offensive adulterous union of Herod with Herodias, the fact of a daughter born of Herodias' first marriage who would have been of the age demanded by the Marcan narrative, the influence of Herodias on her weak husband, and the death of John by beheading. The differences which are alleged to exist between Mark and Josephus concern (1) the name of the first husband of Herodias, (2) the reason for John's execution and (3) the place of his imprisonment and execution.

(1) Josephus states that Herodias' first husband was Herod, the son of Herod the Great and Mariamne II, and half-brother to Antipas. Mark identifies this man as Philip. There is no necessary discrepancy between the two accounts since nearly every son of Herod the Great bore the name "Herod" as a family designation (e.g. Herod Archelaus, Herod Philip, Herod Antipas, and the grandson Herod Agrippa). Josephus' failure to provide the personal name of this man should not obscure the fact that he was given a second name. It is common to suppose that "Philip" can only mean Herod Philip, the son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra, who was tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis. But the tetrarch and the husband of Herodias were the sons of different mothers and there is no firm reason why they could not have received the same name. The full name of Herodias' first husband is unknown, but no evidence exists that it was not Herod Philip. Moreover, no detail in Mark's narrative lends support to the supposition that his reference is to the tetrarch Philip.

(2) Josephus' report that Herod imprisoned and executed the Baptist because he feared a political uprising to which John might give leadership is thoroughly understandable. The territory of Antipas included the narrow strip designated Perea, which bordered on the Nabatean Kingdom. His marriage to Herodias had required the repudiation of a former wife, the daughter of Aretas IV of Nabatea. It is clear, therefore, that John's proclamation of the unlawfulness of Herod's adulterous union could be interpreted as a call to insurrection which threatened the tetrarch from within his province as seriously as did the incensed Nabateans to the east of his province. It should be remembered that Josephus was writing some sixty years after the event for a Roman public who would find in Antipas' desire to suppress a potential public disturbance merely the action of a Roman patriot. Mark, whose interests are very different from those of Josephus, stresses the scheming of Herodias. This emphasis is thoroughly consistent with what Josephus has reported at length concerning the active role played by women and their intrigues in the conduct of Herodian affairs. There is no sufficient reason for doubting the historical accuracy of the Marcan narrative on this account.

(3) Josephus states that Herod sent John to Machaerus, the southern tip of Perea tangent to the northeast corner of the Dead Sea. The proximity of this area to the Judean wilderness where John seems to have concentrated his mission lends strong probability to the correctness of this detail. Mark does not say where John was imprisoned. Because "the first men of Galilee" were present at the banquet, and Jesus' presence in Galilee is the occasion for Herod's disturbed thoughts, it is natural to think of Tiberias in Galilee, the tetrarch's capital. There is nothing in Mark; however, which demands Galilee as the scene of John's imprisonment, and it is proper to read Mark through the eyes of Josephus at this point, placing the scene of the action in Machaerus.

It is possible that Mark incorporated details in the narrative which would call to mind the Elijah-Jezebel conflict, for it is clear that Jesus later identifies John as Elijah. The parallels with Esther are those which are normal in the depiction of an oriental court scene. The final objection, that it is wholly improbable that a Herodian princess would debase herself by dancing before the company of men assembled by the tetrarch, loses its force when consideration is given to the moral depravity of Antipas and Herodias. It is clear from the Marcan narrative that there was calculation on Herodias' part to achieve her will; the dancing of her daughter was a crucial element in her plan, and was probably arranged by Herodias herself. The objections to the historical integrity of the Marcan narrative are not substantial and should be set aside. There was no disciple of John present to report the details of what had taken place, but it was inevitable that what happened would first be whispered about, and then take shape in a popular report. Mark narrates what was being said at that time.

Going back to the text, John has denounced the unlawful royal marriage. Not even the royal house was exempt from his call to radical repentance. Herod's motives for arresting the Baptist appear to have been mixed. John's preaching was politically explosive. The powerful Nabatean forces across Herod's border posed a definite threat to his security, and the tetrarch could not afford to have the provincials also inflamed against him. Nevertheless, he recognized that John was a man of God and sought to keep him in protective custody against the vindictive intentions of his wife. Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus (the son of Herod and Mariamne), and the niece of Antipas. She was near her fortieth year at the time of her second marriage.⁶⁹ Her union with Antipas was adulterous and shocking because the Mosaic Law clearly prohibited marriage to a brother's wife while the brother was yet alive (Lev. 18:16; 20:21). This flouting of the Law in high places could not but call forth the stern denunciation of the wilderness prophet.

It is impossible to know whether John had addressed the royal court directly or not. It seems clear, however, that just as the weak Ahab had blurted out his troubles to Jezebel, Antipas had not concealed from Herodias what John was saying. The prophet's charge infuriated her. She nurtured a sustained grudge against John and desired to silence his disturbing accusation in a manner that had ample precedent in the Herodian annals—arranged "accident" or execution. Antipas would not permit this, for he had a superstitious fear of John whom he recognized as a righteous and holy man. The imprisonment of John was thus a compromise measure; it silenced his proclamation to the people, but could be rationalized as a protective measure against the whims of his wife. More weak than cruel, Herod listened to John with an undeniable fascination. John's word left him perplexed, and in anguish. Yet he found a strange pleasure in the authoritative preaching of this holy man, whose stringent life gave added power to his probing word. Too weak to follow John's counsel, he nevertheless had to listen.

While Herodias had been restrained from executing her wrath upon John for a period of time, an appropriate occasion presented itself when Herod celebrated his birthday with a banquet for the leading courtiers and men of his province. The narrative seems to imply that she was biding her time, but that she deliberately sent her daughter into the feast to dance, in order to induce Herod to grant her desire. This understanding offers the most plausible explanation for Salome's dance.

The terms describing the guests at the banquet are of special interest: "his great men, his commanders of battalions, and the first persons of Galilee." The first term, which occurs only here in the Gospels, is appropriate to an oriental environment; Tacitus uses it of the barons of

Armenia who resisted the Roman incursions, while in the context of Belshazzar's feast it designates the petty lords of the monarch. In Mark the "great men" are the inner circle of the tetrarch's government. The second term has distinctly Roman overtones, *chiliarch* being the usual equivalent to the Latin *tribunus militum*, designating "commanders of a thousand." The term is appropriate to Herod's tetrarchy, where his hosts would be only at battalion strength. A second Roman term occurs in verse 27, which in conjunction with the present reference indicates the court and administration of a petty Jewish prince who patterned his establishment after the imperial model. The leading men of Galilee are presumably Herod's courtiers, men of substance who possessed both the leisure and inclination to accompany him to Machaerus whenever Antipas was resident there.

Josephus identifies the name of Herodias' daughter as Salome. She was later married to the tetrarch Herod Philip, who was considerably older than she was, and after his death in 34 A.D. to another Herodian named Aristobulus. She was, apparently, in her middle teens at the time of her infamous performance.⁷⁵ That she was not yet married seems clear from the fact that she was still under the influence of her mother; certainly no prince would have permitted his wife to perform artistically before the company of assembled men. The dance was unquestionably lascivious, designed to captivate and further the ends of the dancer. It appears to have had its origins not in a Semitic context but in a distinctly Hellenistic one. The performance pleased both Herod and his guests, perhaps precisely because it was the princess who danced. They had undoubtedly seen professional dancers in the past, but Mark seems to stress that it was actually the daughter of Herodias who performed. In a boisterous manner appropriate to the feast and the presence of his chief men, Herod invited the girl to specify what her reward should be, sealing his words with an oath. The invitation, together with the formulation, "unto the half of my kingdom," recalls especially the words of Ahasuerus to Esther (Esth. 5:3, 6). It is clear, however, from parallel references that Herod is employing a proverbial reference for generosity which Salome understood was not to be taken prosaically. Generosity suited the occasion, and would undoubtedly win the assent of his guests.

If the supposition that Salome danced at the instigation of her mother is correct, Herodias had not fully revealed her intention. She had merely instructed her daughter to perform in such a manner as to win Herod's approval. When Salome asked what she should claim for herself, Herodias responded with a bluntness and promptness which betrays calculation—the head of John the Baptist. She had waited for this moment. Now that it had come she found it satisfying. Her request in no way shocked Salome, who hastened back at once to Herod to demand the head of John. The grim detail "on a platter" seems to be her own, an expression of black humor inspired by the banquet yet in progress.

The request of Salome, expressed with arrogance and malice, immediately sobered Antipas. Only moments before he had revelled in boisterous conviviality; now he experienced the deepest grief. Herod was filled with conflicting feelings. He was reluctant to grant the request but finally decided that he had no other choice since he had sealed his invitation with an oath in the presence of his great men. As had to happen,⁷⁹ Herod gave the order that the girl's demand was to be honored.

The designation for the guardsman charged with the execution transliterates the Latin form *speculator*. The *speculatores* were a well-known division of the imperial guard at Rome. These soldiers served as a police force, and in the pages of Tacitus tend to figure in moments of military intrigue. The use of the Latin term for the guardsman ordered to execute John is appropriate to the context, and offers further illustration of Herod's attempt to pattern his

court after the imperial administration. John was beheaded in the dungeon of the fortress, and in due course the head was presented on a platter, first to Salome, and then to her mother.

Verses 30-44 Feeding of the five thousand

At the conclusion of their mission to the Galilean villages the disciples returned to Jesus. He had commissioned them to be his emissaries (Ch. 6:7–13), and it is appropriate to this circumstance that they should report to him how they had fulfilled their commission. The designation of the Twelve as “the apostles,” which occurs only here in Mark’s Gospel, has specific reference to the mission they have just undertaken. In this context the term is descriptive of the disciples’ function rather than an official title, and could be rendered “missionaries.” It was in consequence of their mission of preaching and exorcism in Galilee that the Twelve were designated “apostles,” i.e. those who had been sent forth and empowered by Jesus.

The mission activity of the Twelve had caught the attention of large numbers of people, who pursued after the disciples even as earlier they had sought the benefactions of Jesus. Mark conveys the impression of one group following another as he reports that “many were coming and going,” with the result that the Twelve had no leisure to eat. Jesus’ directive to withdraw to a wilderness-place signifies more than a deserved rest after strenuous labor. What is in view is the concept of rest within the wilderness. Mark indicates this by repeating the expressions “a wilderness-place apart” in verses 31 and 32. The site toward which the disciples set sail cannot be identified with any degree of certainty; but this was not important to the evangelist. What was significant was the character of the place to which Jesus and his disciples withdrew, and this is sufficiently indicated by the descriptive phrase “wilderness-place.” That God provides rest for his people within the wilderness is a recurring theme in the Scripture.⁸⁹ It was the literal rest of the wilderness generation led by Moses and Joshua which became the type of the final rest promised to the people of God in a second exodus in the preaching of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The ancient hope of rest within the wilderness is to be fulfilled as Jesus gathers his disciples to a wilderness-place that they may be by themselves. The disciples and the multitudes who pursue them prove to be the people of the new exodus. The presence of Jesus and the provision of God will give to this time of withdrawal the character of rest within the wilderness.

The second introductory unit is thematically united to the first by wilderness motifs. Its purpose is to indicate that the withdrawal of the multitude from the several Galilean villages to the wilderness where they experienced Jesus’ compassion was the direct result of the mission activity of the Twelve. By accenting the relationship of the multitude to the disciples (“they saw *them*, and they recognized *them* and they ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of *them*”) Mark shows that the provision of rest in the wilderness was the ultimate intention behind the disciples’ commission by Jesus.

The comparison of the people to “sheep not having a shepherd” is an allusion to Num. 27:17 and Ezek. 34:5. In the context of both of these passages, Mark’s statement belongs to the wilderness theme. In Num. 27:17 Moses prays that the Lord will appoint a leader to take his place prior to his death in the wilderness lest the people “be as sheep which have no shepherd.” It is significant that God appointed as shepherd Joshua, whose name in the Septuagint is “Jesus.” In Ezek. 34 the shepherd image is also associated with the wilderness. There is no shepherd for the sheep, but God promises the coming of a faithful shepherd, “my servant David” (Ch. 34:23), who will establish a covenant of peace, causing the people to “dwell securely in the wilderness” (Ch. 34:25). In verse 34 Mark proclaims Jesus on the background provided by these passages: he is the one appointed by God to be the leader of

the people in their exodus into the wilderness; he is God's servant David who provides rest for the people in the wilderness. These theological notes are not extraneous to Mark's presentation. They provide the indispensable background for understanding the feeding narrative which follows. The multitude who pursue Jesus and the disciples are representative of Israel once more in the wilderness. There they experience the compassion of the Messiah, who teaches them "at length" concerning the Kingdom of God.⁹³ In the carefully constructed twofold introduction to the feeding narrative it is the wilderness motif which exhibits the deeper significance that Mark found in the events he records. The time of rest in the wilderness has come when the Son of God establishes meal-fellowship with his people.

The account of the feeding of the multitude on the shores of Lake Gennesaret possesses a particular significance in the framework of Mark's Gospel. Its elaborate introduction (Ch. 6:30–34), the extended dialogue with the disciples (Ch. 6:35–38), as well as subsequent references to this occasion (Chs. 6:52; 8:17–21) and its sequel in the feeding of the four thousand (Ch. 8:1–10), show that the evangelist regarded this event as crucial for understanding the dignity of Jesus. Its position in the Marcan framework after the account of Herod's feast juxtaposes the sumptuous oriental aura of the Herodian court with the austere circumstances in which Jesus satisfied the multitude with the staples of a peasant's diet. In spite of the tetrarch's pretensions to royalty, the people are as leaderless as sheep who possess no shepherd. In contrast to the drunken debauchery of the Herodian feast, Mark exhibits the glory of God unveiled through the abundant provision of bread in the wilderness where Jesus is Israel's faithful shepherd.

The extended conversation of Jesus with his disciples concerning bread is the distinctive element in the Marcan account of the feeding of the multitude. Jesus, in contrast to the circumstances depicted in all of the other miracles, appears deliberately to create the situation in which the people must be fed. His instructions to the disciples to feed the people and to count their reserves of bread signify unambiguously that the food had to be provided through the disciples, not from the multitude. Jesus knows from the beginning what he will do and the exchange with the Twelve moves toward a well-defined end. His instructions to the disciples, which perplex and baffle them, are intended to lead them to understanding. The Twelve, however, display an increasing lack of understanding; their attitude of disrespect and incredulity declares that the conduct of Jesus is beyond their comprehension. This dialogical structure of the Marcan account gives to it a particular tone and provides the basis for the criticism that the disciples did not understand because their hearts were hardened (Ch. 6:52).

In Judaism it was a stringent rule that nothing should be eaten without thanking God before and after the meal. On this occasion Jesus performed the duty of the host in pronouncing the blessing over the loaves and the fish. Mark's sequence of words describes the characteristic procedure at ordinary Jewish meals¹⁰³ and indicates that Jesus faithfully followed the accepted form: he took the bread in his hands, pronounced the blessing, broke the bread into pieces and distributed it. The only deviation from normal practice was that while praying Jesus looked toward heaven rather than downward, as prescribed. This is not an ordinary meal, and it is proper to see in Jesus' prayer not only the customary praise and thanksgiving but a reliance upon the Father for the extraordinary power necessary to meet the people's need. The object of the blessing pronounced was not the loaves and the fish, but "the Lord," since every prayer before a meal began with the blessing of the name of God: "Praise unto thee, O Lord our God, King of the world." The continuation of the prayer depended on the nature of the food involved; in the case of bread, blessing was invoked on God, "who makes bread to come forth from the earth."¹⁰⁵ This recognition that the bread was God's provision was confirmed by those who were present with their "Amen." In the act of blessing God the

few loaves and fish were consecrated to the service of the Kingdom. The actual fact of the miracle is not recounted and cannot be described. Whether the bread increased in the hands of Jesus or in the hands of the disciples who distributed it was not considered important in the tradition. Here the Kingdom of God was functioning. The God who gave manna in the wilderness and who made startling provision for his servants Elijah and Elisha now gives to the people their daily bread, visibly and yet in a hidden manner.

The text is emphatic that the loaves and fish were miraculously increased. In sharp contrast to the deficiency of funds and the scarcity of food at hand Mark poses “all” who “eat and are filled” with much left over, in spite of the vast size of the gathering. In contrast to a sacramental meal in which the people receive only a morsel, Mark emphasizes that their hunger was fully satisfied. When they returned to the wilderness in response to the mission of the Twelve the Galileans met the Lord who “opens his hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing” (Ps. 145:16). Reflecting the traditional respect for bread as the gift of God, it was a regulation that scraps which had fallen upon the ground during a meal were to be gathered. The fragments were collected in the small wicker baskets¹⁰⁹ that every Jew carried with him as a part of his daily attire. Each of the disciples returned with his basket full. The quantity of the remaining fragments witnesses to the fulness of the meal and confirms the satisfaction noted in verse 42. The arrangement of the multitude in table companies and field groups would permit a quick estimation of the number present. Five thousand men was an immense gathering since large neighboring towns like Capernaum and Bethsaida had only 2000–3000 inhabitants each.

The miracle took place before the multitude, but there is no indication in the Marcan text that they had any realization of what was taking place. The simplicity of the meal Jesus provided is congruous with his general reluctance to perform miracles and give signs; there was nothing extraordinary in the peasants’ fare which would call attention to itself. The messianic meal remained hidden from the thousands. The event is intended to be revelatory to the disciples alone. They are the ones who prompt the action, who bring the loaves and fish, who distribute the meal and who gather the fragments. In contrast to their usually passive stance Jesus actively involved them in the total proceeding. His extended discussion with them prior to the event baffled them, while his wordless disclosure of his divine power through the event exceeded all understanding. In the eyes of the people Jesus remained an enigmatic prophetic teacher (cf. Ch. 6:14 f.), but he should have been recognized by the disciples as the Son of God at whose disposal are all of the riches of his Father. The people fail to perceive who Jesus is and they do not understand him. The disciples do not understand him although they were given an abundant opportunity to see his glory. That is why they alone are reproved for their hardness of heart and their failure to grasp the meaning of the miracle of the loaves in the subsequent narrative (Chs. 6:52; 8:17–21).

It is appropriate to see in the feeding of the multitude a fresh affirmation of the promise that the Messiah will feast with men in the wilderness (Isa. 25:6–9). The austerity of the meal, however, is more reminiscent of the manna in the wilderness than of the rich fare promised for the eschatological banquet. Moreover, the absence of an enduring relationship between Jesus and the people indicates that the fellowship which they shared was essentially that which exists between a host and his guests. The meal was eschatological to the degree that the people experienced rest in the wilderness and were nurtured by the faithful Shepherd of Israel, but it pointed beyond itself to an uninterrupted fellowship in the Kingdom of God. In the center of the event stands Jesus, who creates the situation and arranges everything that pertains to the meal. He orders the camp in their groups, takes and breaks the bread and divides the fish, and through his hands the miracle unfolds for those who have eyes to see. If

the crowd has been described as sheep without a shepherd, Jesus is presented as the Shepherd who provides for all of their needs so that they lack nothing.

Verses 45-52 Jesus Walks on Water

This is the second occasion on which Jesus demonstrated his sovereignty over the water and wave (the first being the stilling of the storm in chapter 4). Here his whole person is involved as he walks across the water. On both occasions the disciples fail to understand who Jesus is and experience stark fear and amazement. The incident is more firmly welded into the context than most of the paragraphs belonging to the Galilean ministry. The dismissal of the crowd, the hurried departure of the disciples under constraint, and the reference to the loaves in verse 52 inseparably link the narrative with the feeding of the multitude. When the third person plural of the narration is transposed to the first person plural of direct discourse the section reads like the excited report of one of the Twelve who had experienced terror upon seeing the Lord of the Sea.

The abruptness with which Jesus constrained the disciples to return to their boat and directed them to Bethsaida Julias in the territory of Herod Philip suggests a crisis which is unexplained in the Marcan narrative. Perhaps the crowds wanted to proclaim Jesus king by force after he fed them in the wilderness. Jesus refused to be the warrior-Messiah of popular expectations.

This analysis is confirmed when the reference to Jesus in prayer is seen in the context of Mark's structure. The evangelist speaks of Jesus' withdrawal to a solitary place for prayer after the excitement of the sabbath activity in Capernaum (Ch. 1:35–39), after the miracle of the loaves (Ch. 6:45 f.), and following the Last Supper (Ch. 14:26–42). In each case it is night and Jesus finds himself in a moment of crisis prompted by the enthusiasm of the crowds or the impending passion. On this occasion it was the threat inherent in irresponsible excitement which prompted Jesus to retreat from the people. As at the beginning of his ministry (Ch. 1:12 f.), Jesus' presence in the wilderness provoked the renewal of temptation: refusing the acclaim of the multitude he gave himself to a long period of solitude in order to affirm his obedience to the Father.

By the time Jesus had finished praying it was the dark hours before dawn and the disciples were well out to sea. The observation that the boat was on the sea and Jesus was alone on the land seems labored until it is seen as an element in a recurring pattern in Mark. Whenever the master is absent from the disciples (or appears to be so, as in Ch. 4:35–41), they find themselves in distress. And each time they experience anguish it is because they lack faith (Chs. 4:35 ff.; 6:45 ff.; 9:14 ff.). This is clearly the case in this episode where the physical exhaustion of the disciples was aggravated by stark terror when they encountered what they believed to be a night spectre. Mark's notice indicates that the crowd has dispersed and brings into focus the principals in the drama which unfolded on the sea.

The reason that Jesus came to the disciples across the rough sea about 3:00 A.M. was that he had seen his disciples exerting themselves against a strong wind which blew presumably from the north or north-east and drove them off their course. Because the text stresses that Jesus' coming to the disciples was the direct result of his perceiving their distress, the explanation that "he meant to pass by them" seems enigmatic, if not alien to the context. Among the several proposals that have been offered three are worthy of serious consideration. (1) The words record the impression that the disciples had at that time that the spectral figure intended to pass by them. The complex of verses 48–50 becomes intelligible when transposed into the first person: "He meant to pass by us, but when we saw him

walking upon the sea we thought it was a ghost, and cried out; for we all saw him and were terrified.” (2) The several modern translations, which create the impression of an independent and more or less isolated statement, fail to represent Mark’s intention. The text should be rendered, “for he intended to pass their way.” The initial particle is to be understood in an explicative sense rather than as a coordinating conjunction; it introduces a subordinate clause clarifying why Jesus came walking on the water. Verse 48 thus forms a composite whole: when Jesus saw that the disciples were wearing themselves out, he already felt the desire to reveal his presence to them by passing their way. This proposal is grammatically feasible and introduces cohesion and balance into the account. (3) For Mark the event is a theophany, a manifestation of the transcendent Lord who will “pass by” as God did at Sinai before Moses (Ex. 33:19, 22) or on Horeb before Elijah (1 Kings 19:11). The text simply uses the language of theophany familiar from the Septuagint. It is possible that the evangelist intends his readers to recognize an allusion to Job 9:8, 11: “he walks upon the waves of the sea ... If he goes by me, I will not see him, and if he passes by me, I will not recognize him.” In this instance the divine appearance occurred for the very purpose of being seen. In wonderful fashion Jesus put his authority at the disposal of the disciples and passed by to assure them of his presence with them.

The disciples reacted to Jesus’ appearance with terror, convinced that they had encountered a water spirit. The popular belief that spirits of the night brought disaster is illustrated by a tradition preserved in the Talmud: “Rabbah said, Seafarers told me that the wave that sinks a ship appears with a white fringe of fire at its crest, and when stricken with clubs on which is engraven, ‘I am that I am, Yah, the Lord of Hosts, Amen, Amen, Selah,’ it subsides.” When Jesus perceived the terror of the disciples he allayed their fears and corrected their delusion with a summons to courage. The emphatic “I” in verse 50 is ambiguous. It can be understood as a normal statement of identity (“it is I, Jesus”), but it can also possess deeper significance as the recognized formula of self-revelation which rests ultimately on the “I am that I am” of Ex. 3:14. Not only the immediate context of the walking upon the water but the words with which the emphatic “I” is framed favor the theophanic interpretation. The admonitions to “take heart” and to “have no fear” which introduce and conclude the “I am he” are an integral part of the divine formula of self-revelation (e.g. Ps. 115:9 ff.; 118:5 f.; Isa. 41:4 ff., 13 ff.; 43:1 ff.; 44:2 ff.; 51:9 ff.). In the darkness, when the disciples are deceived by their eyes, Jesus affirms his identity with the words “I am he; fear not.” But the emphatic overtone should not be missed and is confirmed by the evangelist’s continuation in verse 51f.

Jesus assured the disciples with his word and his presence. When he joined them in the boat the wind suddenly died down. Since the abatement of the wind may be ascribed to natural causes it is unnecessary to find here an additional demonstration of Jesus’ sovereignty. The disciples, however, were utterly astonished. They were undoubtedly physically drained from their rowing against a strong head-wind and emotionally drained from their experience of terror. They had no categories for understanding Jesus’ presence with them in the boat. Mark alone explains that they had failed to understand about the loaves and that their hearts were hardened (verse 52; cf. Ch. 8:17). The disciples certainly realized that the multitude had been fed with five loaves and two fish, but they had failed to grasp that this event pointed beyond itself to the secret of Jesus’ person. Because they were not truly open to the action of God in Jesus they had missed the significance of the miracle of the loaves for them, and saw only “a marvel.” That is why they displayed not confidence and joy in Jesus’ unexpected presence but faithless panic. Mark’s concluding explanation is important in three respects: (1) it indicates that some events in Jesus’ ministry are “parabolic” in that they provide the key to other events.¹²⁵ If the disciples had understood the miracle of the loaves they would have recognized Jesus’ identity as the sovereign Lord who walks upon the waves of the sea. (2)

The problem of understanding is not intellectual, but existential; it is a matter of faith. The disciples did understand Jesus' incidental instructions and they understood that the multitude had been fed. But their confused reaction to Jesus indicates that they failed to recognize that God was acting in history through him. Their misunderstanding reflects unbelief. (3) The disciples' reaction to Jesus' *actions* (as well as his teachings) throughout Mark's Gospel is characterized by non-understanding. In tracing this lack of understanding to "hardness of heart" Mark indicates that at this stage in Jesus' ministry the disciples are not essentially different from his opponents, who also fail to recognize his unique character and exhibit hardness of heart (cf. Chs. 3:5; 10:5).

The proper framework for understanding this unusual episode is provided by the OT. There the power of the Lord over seas and rivers, storms and wind, is repeatedly proclaimed. As the creator of the sea God subdues it and treads upon the waves in demonstration of his majesty. Because he is the Lord men do not need to be afraid no matter how the sea may rage or the wind blow. Jesus' appearance on the Sea of Galilee must be appreciated as a reality and a sign that the living God has come nearer to men in the revelation of the Son. Jesus had no intention of simply passing by his disciples in a display of enigmatic glory. His walking upon the water proclaimed that the hostility of nature against man must cease with the coming of the Lord, whose concealed majesty is unveiled in the proclamation "I am he." At an early date this episode was interpreted as a pledge of Christ's aid; it provided the martyrs with the assurance of Jesus' saving nearness to all who believe and obey him.

Verses 53-56 Healing

The account of healing in the region of Gennesaret is the evangelist's summary of Jesus' activity just prior to his departure for the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon (Ch. 7:24). It is tied to its context as the natural sequel to the account of the storm at sea which subsided when Jesus joined his disciples in the boat (Ch. 6:51). Although the disciples had rowed toward Bethsaida, a short distance from the northeast corner of the lake, the strong head-wind appears to have driven them severely southward. The fertile plain of Gennesaret extended for about three miles between Capernaum and Tiberias along the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, and in the first century was thickly populated.

Though the people were not expecting Jesus, he was immediately recognized. He was well known from his ministry at Capernaum and reports of his healing power had penetrated the entire region (cf. Ch. 1:28). The presence of Jesus created an immense excitement. Mark's picture of the people hastening from place to place as reports of his presence were received, carrying their sick on mattresses, graphically conveys the impression of a determined effort to seize an unexpected opportunity for healing. The healing of a paralyzed man who had been carried to Jesus on a mattress (Ch. 2:1-12), as well as of others who had been brought to him (Ch. 1:32-34), undoubtedly had been the subject of bazaar conversation in many towns and cities and created the climate of expectation which greeted Jesus in Gennesaret.

Whenever Jesus entered villages, cities or hamlets the report that he was coming had preceded him. He found the sick assembled in the marketplace or any open space where they could be carried in anticipation of his arrival, convinced that if they could only touch the fringe of his garment they would be restored to health. The statement that as many as touched him were healed is to be understood in the light of Mark's treatment of this mutual relationship between Jesus and the afflicted in Ch. 5:25-34. What was involved was not simply material contact with Jesus' clothing, but the touch of faith. At the same time, this vignette is reminiscent of other crowds which had clamored to touch Jesus in a feverish mood of excitement bordering on hysteria (see on Ch. 3:7-10) and recalls an earlier situation when

Jesus found it necessary to avoid towns and cities altogether (Ch. 1:45). The works of Jesus appear to be an epiphany of divine power and the people treat him as a miracle worker or divine man whose power is released through touch. In this connection the absence of any reference to preaching or teaching activity is significant. The people are not prepared for Jesus' proclamation of the word, and the public ministry interrupted in Ch. 6:31 has not been resumed. They understand only that power is channeled through his person. Jesus patiently bears with their limited insight and graciously heals those who reach out to him from the bed of affliction.

Chapter 7

Verses 1-8 Conflict with the Pharisees over defilement

Jesus' teaching differed fundamentally from that of the Pharisees on essential points of common piety. This has already been illustrated with respect to sharing table-fellowship with outcasts (Ch. 2:15–17), fasting (Ch. 2:18–22) and Sabbath observance (Ch. 2:23–28), and is now exhibited in regard to ritual defilement. This significant category extended beyond various washings to the distinctions between ritually clean and unclean foods and the vast complex of dietary laws. The reference to the Jerusalem scribes recalls the sharp conflict that was instigated by their charge that Jesus exercised the power of Beelzebul and was himself a possessed man (Ch. 3:22–30). It serves notice that far more is involved in the exchange between the scribes and Jesus than a rabbinic debate in which alternative decisions will be preserved and made the subject of further consideration. The eating of bread without proper concern for the removal of ritual defilement was merely the immediate occasion for this confrontation. Its ultimate occasion was Jesus' evident disregard for the whole structure of oral tradition which examined virtually every aspect of personal and corporate life and sought to regulate it in a manner consistent with the Law under conditions often vastly different from those in which the Law was first handed down. In areas where the Law was silent the tradition was vocal, drawing the conclusions felt to be implicit in the mandates of the written code. The result was a vast legal complex, oral in form but definite in formulation, which was entrusted to the scribes, the recognized interpreters of the Law, and was regarded as binding upon all Israel.

Aware that most of his readers will not understand the technical nature of the scribal charge nor its background in Jewish practice, Mark provides a simple definition of defilement and a thumbnail sketch of Pharisaic practice. The evangelist has been criticized for ascribing Pharisaic practice to "all the Jews," since the common people, the so-called "sinners" (see on Ch. 2:15), certainly were not careful about ritual washings. In generalizing his explanation Mark was following accepted Jewish practice in describing Jewish customs to a Gentile audience. A close parallel is provided by the Letter of Aristeas § 305: "And as the custom of *all the Jews*, they washed their hands and prayed to God." The same distinctions in practice which were current in first-century Judaism could be observed in the second century B.C. when this document was composed, but were not considered relevant to the issue under discussion.

The biblical mandate that the priests had to wash their hands and feet prior to entering the Tabernacle (Ex. 30:19; 40:13) provided the foundation for the wide-spread practice of ritual washings in Palestinian and diaspora Judaism. At least as early as the second century B.C. many Jews voluntarily assumed the purity laws of the priests and regularly washed their hands before morning prayer. The accompanying benediction was designed not for the priests, but for laymen: "Blessed be Thou O Lord, King of the universe, who sanctified us by thy laws and commanded us to wash the hands."¹¹ The custom of washing the hands before

eating bread was also grounded in priestly practice, in the conviction that daily food should be eaten as if it were priestly food. By the third century A.D. the eating of bread without washing was strongly condemned, and this seems to have been a tendency already evident in Jesus' day. The Pharisees surpassed the priests in their zeal to safeguard themselves from ritual defilement and were strong proponents of "the priesthood of all believers" in the sense that they considered the priestly regulations to be obligatory for all men. It is important to appreciate the concern to sanctify ordinary acts of life which lay behind this extension of priestly regulations to the laity. Its finest intention was the demonstration that all Israel was devoted to God and the Law, and the fulfilment of the injunction: "You shall be holy to me" (Lev. 20:26). The Pharisees were convinced that the strict discipline of human conduct was the necessary prelude to the true acknowledgment of God as sovereign.

To restore Levitical purity after defilement it was necessary to cleanse by water, and Mark refers to the most common act of cultic cleansing, the washing of the hands, which was formally required only before the consumption of bread. The washing was accomplished by pouring water on the hands,¹⁵ and this fact excludes all suggestions of immersing the hands from Mark's reference in verse 3. The evangelist correctly specifies that a *handful of water* was required. The position of the hand was cupped, with the fingers flexed to allow the water to pass between them so as to reach all parts of the hand. By cupping the hand the entire hand could be washed with a very small quantity of water.¹⁷ A distinction was maintained between this type of washing, sprinkling, and bathing or the immersion of the hands up to the joint of the fingers, and apparently it is this third category of ablutions to which reference is made in verse 4 in connection with food purchased in the marketplace. Up to this point Mark's statements are factual and accurate. It is probable that a tone of irony is intended, however, when he makes a sweeping reference to the oral tradition ("and many other things there are, which they have received to hold") and concludes his catalogue with reference to the "washing of cups and pots and copper vessels." There may be here a certain justifiable impatience with the mass of detail which was later codified in the Mishnah tractate *Kelim* (Vessels), but it has the effect of exposing the oral law to ridicule. Mark's final remark serves to broaden the issue from the washing of hands to cultic cleansing *per se*.

The sentence begun in verse 2a is completed in verse 5. Ostensibly the issue raised by the Pharisees and their scribes was the failure of certain of the disciples to observe the purity laws. The crucial element in the question as formulated, however, concerns walking according to the tradition of the elders. The binding character of the decisions handed down by honored Jewish teachers of the Law was an essential component in Pharisaic thinking. It was Jesus' failure to support the validity of the oral law which made him an object of concerted attack by the scribes. The question posed is clearly a challenge to Jesus himself, and in his response, no reference is made to the disciples. The deeper intention behind the question of eating with defiled hands is suggested by a passage in the Mishnah: "But whom did they place under a ban? Eleazar ben Enoch, because he cast doubt on (the tradition of the Elders concerning) the cleansing of hands."

The question of the scribes receives a twofold answer. An immediate reply is provided by the pointed citation of Isa. 29:13, introduced with the ironic comment "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites!" This quotation is directly applied to the scribes and Pharisees in verse 8. A second answer is provided by the pregnant saying addressed to the crowd in verses 14 f., which exposes the deeper issue of the source of defilement which remains unaffected by cultic cleansing.

The quotation differs slightly in form from the Septuagint text and may have been drawn from a florilegium of prophetic passages used in Rome. It is probable that Jesus himself cited the Hebrew text or the Targum currently used in the synagogue. It has often been held that the charge of abandoning the commandment of God for the tradition of men (in verse 8) depends for its validity upon the Greek text where it differs from the Hebrew. This is clearly not the case. The Massoretic text contrasts formal lip-service to God with devotion from the heart and concludes, “this fear of me is a commandment of men which has been taught (to them).” This is certainly relevant to the larger issue of the oral tradition which was diligently handed down to each generation of the Pharisees. It implies that even the concern to sanctify all of life, which is presupposed in the assumption of the priestly purity laws, rests less upon *the commandment* above all others, the love of God with the whole heart (Deut. 6:4; cf. Mk. 12:28–34), than upon a tradition which has been received and passed on as an expression of formal piety. This gives pointedness to the charge of hypocrisy which emphasizes the contradiction between what a man seems to be in the opinion of his peers and what he is before God. In the outward appearance of their piety the Pharisees were impeccable since they scrupulously observed numerous prescriptions and commandments. It was, nevertheless, a lie because they had not surrendered themselves to God.

Jesus’ sharp rebuttal sets in radical opposition the commandment of God and the halakhic formulations of the scribal tradition. Theoretically, the oral law was a fence which safeguarded the people from infringing the Law. In actuality it represented a tampering with the Law which resulted inevitably in distortion and ossification of the living word of God. The exaggerated reverence with which the scribes and Pharisees regarded the oral law was an expression of false piety supported by human precepts devoid of authority. Jesus categorically rejects the authority of the oral law.

Verses 9-13 The Conflict Between Commandment and Tradition

Jesus’ counter-charge that the scribes and Pharisees have abandoned the commandment of God in their zeal to observe the oral tradition does not stand unsupported. The charge is reaffirmed in verse 9 with biting irony and is then illustrated concretely with reference to the conflict between the fifth commandment and the position of the elders on the sanctity of an oath. The scribes had referred deferentially to the oral law as “the tradition of the elders” (verse 5); Jesus cited Isaiah in support of his claim that it deserved to be designated “the tradition of men” (verses 7–8), an example of human cleverness. He now baldly labels it “your tradition” and affirms that in order to establish it God’s commandment is nullified. Jesus refused to permit his adversaries to invoke against him a tradition which was capable of violating the Law of God.

The theoretical foundations of oral law were traced backward through a chain of tradition extending from the elders and the men of the Great Synagogue to the prophets and Joshua to Moses himself. Jesus, therefore, cites Moses against the developments in legal casuistry which were an essential component of the scribal tradition. The fifth commandment is cited in both its positive and negative formulations in almost literal agreement with the Septuagint text of Ex. 20:12a (= Deut. 5:16a) and 21:16. The second text indicates the seriousness of an offense against parents: the death penalty was decreed for those who cursed their parents or treated them with contempt.²⁷ In spite of Moses’ unequivocal affirmation of filial responsibility, the effect of the scribal tradition on the binding character of an oath, even when uttered rashly, was to prohibit compliance with the commandment.

Qorban is a technical term within the priestly tradition of the OT (its use is limited to Lev., Num. and Ezek.) where it always denotes an offering made to God. In Mark’s explanatory

note the term “gift” is a technical designation for an oblation precisely as in the Greek text of Lev. 2:1, 4, 12f. A fine contemporary parallel to the use of *qorban* in Mark has been provided by a recently recovered Jewish ossuary inscription: “All that a man may find-to-his-profit in this ossuary (is) an offering to God from him who is within it.” The importance of this inscription is that it preserves the formula in its completeness and furnishes a concrete example of how the formula was used. It indicates that Jesus was referring to a dedicatory-formula which was commonly used by Jews in the last centuries B.C. and well into the Christian era. The basic purpose of the formula was to place a ban on something, reserving it for sacred use and withdrawing it from profane use by another person. The vow creates a prohibition with regard to an object and fixes upon it the character of an offering dedicated to God. This did not necessarily mean that the object declared *qorban* had actually to be offered to God; it signified rather that it was withdrawn from its intended use and was no longer available for a particular individual “as if it were an offering.” In the hypothetical situation proposed by Jesus, if the son declared his property *qorban* to his parents, he neither promised it to the Temple nor prohibited its use to himself, but he legally excluded his parents from the right of benefit. Should the son regret his action and seek to alleviate the harsh vow which would deprive his parents of all of the help they might normally expect from him, he would be told by the scribes to whose arbitration the case was submitted that his vow was valid and must be honored.³⁰ Jesus’ statement that the scribes do not allow him to do “anything” for his parents is not extreme. The renunciation of all profitability extended beyond financial support to such practical kindness as assistance in the performance of religious duties or the provision of care in sickness.

The scribes sought to satisfy God’s legal claim; the recognition of the validity of a vow fulfills the letter of the commandment in Num. 30:1f. If, on the basis of a vow, the claims of God must be upheld even in opposition to those of a man’s parents, that is because God’s claims are fundamentally higher than man’s and must be given precedence. This argument acquires special force if *qorban* in this case signifies a genuine transference of parental claims to God and the transfer of property to the Temple. But Jesus categorically rejects the practice of using one biblical commandment to negate another. This interpretation of Num. 30:1f. seized upon the letter of the passage in such a way as to miss the meaning of the Law as a whole. It is in this context that the citation of Isa. 29:13 is particularly intelligible. For Jesus this is God’s own judgment on the scribal attempts to satisfy his legal claim. The quotation indicates that Jesus is not so much attacking a particular scribal practice as he is showing that the scribes cannot properly honor God. In their concern for the fulfilment of the letter of Scripture they forget that the Law was provided not for its own sake but to benefit men. It is an expression of God’s covenant faithfulness as well as of his righteousness and in no circumstance was obedience to one commandment intended to nullify another. The fault lay not in the commandments but in an interpretive tradition which failed to see Scripture in its wholeness. Jesus implicated the scribes who stood before him in this indictment when he referred pointedly to “your tradition, which you have delivered.” They are not merely passive guardians of an inherited tradition but have had an active and responsible role in shaping and transmitting the oral law. The case of the *qorban* vow, Jesus adds, is not an isolated example, but one of many which could be cited where the intention of Scripture had been obscured by the scribal tradition.

Verses 14-23 True Defilement

Jesus’ demonstration of the contradiction between the halakhic tradition and the scriptural commandment was designed to shame and silence his adversaries. The question asked by the scribes and Pharisees in verse 5 receives a more direct reply in the teaching of verses 14b–15.

Essential to a biblical consideration of defilement and cleansing is the question of the source of defilement and it is this deeper issue which Jesus now exposes through a single pregnant statement addressed to the crowd. The solemn call to attentive hearing recalls the summons of Ch. 4:3 and has its ultimate background in the prophetic call to hearing which provides the setting for the revelation of the word of God. It indicates that what follows is of revelatory significance and that it demands careful reflection.

With a mode of expression calculated to provoke thought, Jesus sets in radical opposition material purity and moral purity. The meaning of the first half of the riddle was intelligible in the light of the controversy with the scribes: a man is not defiled by what he eats, even when his hands are not properly washed. The second half, however, remained enigmatic, for it stands without an immediate context. The principle that uncleanness comes from within and not from without is grounded in the biblical teaching concerning the heart as the source of all spiritual and moral conduct,⁴⁰ but this was not apparent to the crowd or to the disciples. The implications of Jesus' teaching that nothing external to men defiles were to have far-reaching consequences for the Church, which Mark spells out in the light of further revelation in verse 19b. Here, however, Jesus' expression is general and enigmatic. It did not abrogate the Mosaic laws on purification or erase the distinctions between clean and unclean and declare them invalid. It rather attacked the delusion that sinful men can attain to true purity before God through the scrupulous observance of cultic purity which is powerless to cleanse the defilement of the heart. It is this latter emphasis which is stressed in the exposition to the disciples in verses 17–19a.

It is in the nature of a pregnant saying that its tenor is not immediately apparent. The pattern of public teaching in parabolic speech and private interpretation to the disciples was characteristic of Jesus' ministry according to Ch. 4:33f., and Mark frequently designates "the house" as the place of revelation (Chs. 9:28, 33; 10:10). In view of the character of the riddle in verse 15 an inquiry by the disciples was quite natural. Their lack of understanding, however, indicates that in spite of their privileged relationship to Jesus they are not fundamentally different from the crowd. The failure of the disciples to understand Jesus' mighty acts and teaching is particularly emphasized in this section of the Gospel (Chs. 6:52; 7:18; 8:14–21) and is traced to hardness of heart.

The new element in Jesus' interpretation is the specific reference to "the heart." In Semitic expression the heart is the center of human personality which determines man's entire action and inaction. This key to the statement in verse 15 was already available in the citation of Isa. 29:13: "This people honors me with their lips, but *their heart* is far from me." Jesus now makes this explicit when he traces the source of defilement to the heart, and shows that in an ultimate sense "food" and "the heart" have nothing to do with each other. The relevance of this explanation to the question posed in verse 5 is apparent: fulfilling the dictates of the oral law on cultic purity does not alter the heart of man with its warring impulses: the minutiae of the tradition are powerless to remove the pollution from the heart, the source of defilement in the actions of men. Jesus has no intention of denying that the purity laws occupy a significant place in the Mosaic code (Lev. 11:1–47; Deut. 14:1–20) or of detracting from the dignity of men who suffered death rather than violate the Law of God governing unclean foods (1 Macc. 1:62 f.). Rather he presses home the recognition that the ultimate seat of purity or defilement before God is the heart.

The form of the concluding verses deserves careful attention. The elliptical expression in verse 19b ("cleansing all meats") is almost certainly an interpretative comment of the evangelist which drew out the implications of Jesus' statement. Verse 20 introduces an

indirect, rather than a direct quotation and represents Mark's paraphrase of what Jesus said. The possibility of catechetical influence on the arrangement of verses 21–22 is clear and is suggested by the symmetrical arrangement of the list in its present form: the general category "evil thoughts" is followed by six nouns in the plural denoting evil acts and six nouns in the singular denoting moral defects or vices. These combined features support the hypothesis that in verses 19b–23 there is another example of a word addressed to the Christian reader of the Gospel. It represents Mark's interpretation of the word and explanation of Jesus.

The Church vacillated in its attitude toward the Jewish food laws and did not resolve this issue without anguish and controversy (Gal. 2:11–17; Rom. 14:14; Col. 2:20–22). The question of table-fellowship with Hellenistic Christians and even of the admission of Gentiles to the Church hinged upon the decisions which were taken with regard to cultic purity. The thrice-repeated vision which Peter received in Joppa, with its sharp admonition, "What God has cleansed you must not call common," had a decisive influence on the Church's recognition that the purity laws had fulfilled their function and were abolished (Acts 10:9–16; 11:2–18; 15:7–29). The ancient ritual prescriptions were only a sign of a more profound interior purification: that which God has purified (Acts 10:15). In the light of this further revelation to Peter (which offers the closest parallels in vocabulary to the language of defilement in Mk. 7) it could be seen that Jesus' statement in verse 15 called into question not only the voluntary assumption of the priestly purity laws but the whole ritual system. "This he said, cleansing all meats" is Mark's comment to his readers in Rome, some of whom may have continued to find this conclusion difficult (cf. Rom. 14:14). It expresses the implication of Jesus' teaching, but not what he actually said at the time.

Mark does not linger on this insight but develops Jesus' explanation at the point where he had placed the emphasis—upon the heart as the center of the whole inner life and source of human action. The structure of the exposition follows the pattern of verses 18–19 where the substance of verse 15a was repeated (verse 18b) and then explained (verse 19a). Similarly, the substance of verse 15b is repeated in verse 20, followed by the explanation (verses 21–23). The source of true defilement in men is the human heart, and the tragedy of man's having to sin reaches its demonic fulfilment in man's wanting to sin. There is no heart in which this radical evil has failed to take root. The catalogue of sinful acts and dispositions which flow from the heart is thoroughly Jewish in character. At the head of the list is "evil thoughts" which stand behind the evil actions of men. Fornication is a broad term covering all acts of sexual immorality; it is wider than adultery, which presupposes the breach of the marriage bond, and "licentiousness," which carries the nuance of open immorality.⁴⁷ Theft, murder and adultery occur side by side in the decalogue and in Hos. 4:2. "Acts of coveting" may include deeds committed in lust since this word is frequently associated with other terms denoting sexual sins. "Wickedness" appears to be a general term denoting acts of deliberate malice. "Deceit" implies the components of cunning and treachery. "An evil eye" is a Semitic expression for stinginess (Deut. 15:9; Ecclus. 14:10; 31:13) or for that grudging jealousy with which a man looks upon the possessions of another. "Railing" can refer to "slander" (as in the RSV) directed toward a man, but in the OT it always describes an affront to the majesty of God, and a more accurate translation would be "blasphemy." "Pride" carries the nuance of arrogance which expresses itself in self-approbation. "Foolishness" describes the dominant disposition of the man who is morally and spiritually insensitive; he does not know God and he does not wish to know him. These acts and dispositions, Jesus affirms, are what defile a man and they have their source in a heart which is in open rebellion against God.

This explanation places the question of defilement and purity on a fundamentally different plane than that presupposed by the scribes and Pharisees. By this interpretation Jesus does not

alleviate the demand for purity but sharpens it. The requirement of cultic purity possessed an inner value and justification as a symbol pointing beyond itself to God's demand for spiritual and moral purity. The capacity for fellowship with God is not destroyed by material uncleanness of food or hands; it is destroyed by personal sin. With this fundamentally biblical insight the older ritual concept of purity is transcended. At the same time every human attempt to manipulate the law and to make it manageable and complimentary to human self-complacency is shown to be useless and impious. It reduces men to the category of those who seem to honor God at the very moment their heart is removed from his judging and saving action. The focus upon the desperate need for the renewal and cleansing of the human heart lends to the entire discussion the character of a messianic sign.

Verses 24-30

This little story called the Canaanite Woman in our reading from Matthew's gospel is also referred to by Mark as the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30). The two descriptions are really trying to refer to the same thing, the woman was a gentile woman of Canaanite ethnic origin from the region of Tyre and Sidon. These were the main Canaanite port towns in the region generally referred to as Phoenicia. When the Israelites had invaded the Promised Land, the Canaanites inhabited the coastal region of Israel including the area of Tyre and Sidon. Sidon was about 25 miles North of Tyre and Tyre was itself about 25 miles from Jesus's usual haunts in Galilee. The Canaanites were a cultured race and the first known alphabet comes from Canaanites working for the Egyptians in the mines of Sinai around 3,000 BC. However they were a pagan people who focussed on a veneration of the dead in the form of household gods and goddesses and also worshipped many other gods – for example Baal and Asherah. Since the Jews came into the Promised Land a thousand years before Jesus's time the Jews and the Canaanites had been bitter enemies.

In our reading, Jesus has apparently withdrawn to a remote area, Matthew never says that Jesus entered the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon or even sought contact with the local people. This isn't a mission to the gentiles, it's more in the nature of a retreat. In this retreat he somehow meets the Canaanite woman, who has come out to seek him – he doesn't go to a gentile house. She clearly has some prior knowledge of Jesus and who he is and reaches out to him across the twin divides of race and gender – she's both a gentile and a woman and rabbis didn't talk to either women or gentiles.

The story deals with the Canaanite woman asking for a healing for her daughter – although it's interesting that she doesn't say have mercy on my *daughter*, but rather have mercy on *me*. The mother was clearly in pain and distress. It's one of very few stories of Jesus providing healing to non-Jews – indeed I can only think of two others, the healing of the servant of the centurion in (Matthew 8:5-13) and the exorcism performed by Jesus in the Decapolis (Matthew 8:28-34). Of course, Jesus did also provide miraculous provision to non-Jews in the feeding of the four thousand (Matthew 15:29-38) – but that wasn't a healing. At first sight the gentile issue seems to present a problem, because Jesus is initially reluctant to grant The Canaanite woman's daughter a healing even though he displayed no similar reluctance to heal the centurion's servant.

The woman wasn't in any way demanding a reward for merit, she was asking for grace. She addresses Jesus very respectfully as 'Lord' and 'Son of David'. She asks for a healing for her daughter, although she doesn't tell us how old her daughter is, she says her daughter is terribly demon possessed. She's saying that her daughter is in a bad state.

The disciples wanted to send this woman away, and it's clear that they regarded her as a nuisance – she kept shouting after them. She's persistent. There's an implication that the disciples are asking Jesus to grant the woman's request and so get rid of her.

In v24 Jesus tells the woman that his mission is to the lost sheep of Israel. Jesus never went out into the gentile world, he was addressing the Jews and spent all his time in Galilee and Judea.

The woman humbles herself and kneels before Jesus saying Lord help me – notice that she says help me rather than help my daughter she's suffering.

Jesus's answer to the woman's plea appears harsh, especially when he likens gentiles to dogs – which were unclean animals almost as despised as pigs. Jesus is saying quite strongly that his mission is to Jews and not Gentiles.

The woman accepts what Jesus is saying and agrees with him in her words in v27, but she gives a feisty response. If gentiles are dogs then let them have their due – the crumbs from the table. After all dogs have a right to be fed. She's saying that gentiles have their place too and whilst Jesus's main obligation may be to feed the Jews, the gentiles can eat the scraps that fall from the table.

Jesus then completely reverses his position and applauds the boldness of her refusal to accept defeat. Jesus tells her that her great faith has resulted in him granting the healing she requested – not just a healing for her daughter but a healing for the woman as well, *let it be unto you as you desire*. It's another healing at a distance, just like that of the centurion's servant we spoke of a moment ago. It's interesting that both these healings at a distance, the only ones we know of, both involve gentiles. Perhaps it was to avoid Jesus having to enter a gentile house, but we don't really know.

Many Christians have difficulty with this story (especially Matthew's version), they see Jesus's attitude as being dismissive or downright rude and they don't like him referring to gentiles as dogs – but actually Jesus is just playing hard to get to test the woman's faith. He's setting this woman a tough test not putting her down. Jesus draws out and develops the woman's faith and his strategy works. Apart from the healing of the centurion's servant we've already referred to, this is the only time in Matthew when faith is described as 'great'. Jesus often uses the same strategy of drawing out and developing faith with us. Also Jesus's ultimate mission very much included the gentiles, but his earthly ministry was directed almost exclusively towards the Jews.

In later tradition this account was retold and embellished. The mother was given the name Justa and her daughter received the name Berenice. Mark, however, reduces the story to its bare minimum and presents this episode as an example of true faith toward the person of Jesus. While the scribes and Pharisees forget the reality of life in their attachment to casuistry and the disciples remain dull and hard-hearted (Ch. 7:1–23), a Hellenistic woman shows a profound confidence in Jesus and is not disappointed in her expectations.

Verses 31-37

The episode of the healing of a man with defective hearing and speech is recorded only by Mark. The significance the evangelist finds in this incident is apparent when the account is seen in its larger context. In Ch. 6:31–7:37 Mark has presented a cycle of tradition which

includes the feeding of the multitude, the encounter with Pharisaic unbelief and acts of healing. With Ch. 8:1 a new cycle is introduced, which follows a similar pattern, climaxed by the confession of Ch. 8:27–30. The recognition of this parallel in structural arrangement sheds light on the function of Ch. 7:31–37 in the Marcan outline. It serves to bring the first cycle of tradition to a close on a doxological note. The focus of the entire account is on the confession that Jesus does all things well.

31 The Phoenician republic of Sidon was located on the coast some twenty miles north of Tyre. Jesus apparently journeyed northward to the district of Sidon and then turned southeastward through Philip's territory toward a point on the eastern shore of the Lake of Galilee within the region of the Decapolis. The route followed is only vaguely indicated and cannot be retraced now, but it may have been designed to preclude the necessity of entering Galilee. Jesus remained in territory with strong Gentile associations. The location of the episode in the Decapolis, however, proves nothing as to the participants since there were sizeable colonies of Jews in nearly all of the cities. It is difficult from the text to determine whether the crowd which approached Jesus was Jewish or Gentile in complexion.

32 A crowd brought to Jesus a man with defective hearing and speech. He was deaf and had a speech impediment so severe he could not articulate his words. He apparently suffered from a spasmodic condition of the tongue which can extend to the facial muscles as well. If the man had been born deaf and mute he would not have learned to speak and would possess no concept of language. This was not the situation. He had become deaf later in life apparently as a result of disease or injury and could speak only with great effort. Mark's use of an extremely rare word to describe the man's speech defect is almost certainly an allusion to Isa. 35:5f. which celebrates God as the one who comes in order to unstop the ears of the deaf and to provide song for the man of inarticulate speech. The fulfilment of the prophecy was expected in the Days of the Messiah in the exegetical tradition of the rabbis. By means of the biblical allusion Mark provides his readers with a sign that the promised intervention of God took place in the ministry of Jesus. The reference points forward to the confession of faith in verse 37.

The request for the laying on of hands (cf. Chs. 5:23; 6:5) indicates the presence of Jews or of Gentiles who were familiar with this Jewish practice in connection with blessing and healing. The great surprise exhibited by the people when the afflicted man spoke clearly suggests that they had not expected healing, but had brought the man to Jesus for his blessing.

33–35 Jesus took the man aside from the crowd in order to establish contact with him. He regarded the personal relationship between himself and the sick to be of supreme importance, and in this instance all of his actions are intelligible in the light of the necessity of communicating with a person who had learned to be passive in life. Through touch and the use of spittle Jesus entered into the mental world of the man and gained his confidence. He stretched open his ears and made it clear to him that he wished to make his tongue alive with his own life. Jesus prayed with him and for him and openly expressed the strong emotion he seems to have always felt in the presence of the ravages of demonic possession and disease. This sequence of actions indicated to the man that he was to expect healing from the one who stood before him. The act of healing itself was accomplished with the word of liberation addressed not to the defective auditory organs but to the man as a whole person: "Be opened."

The results of Jesus' actions are simply described: the ears were opened, the tongue was loosened, and the man began to speak clearly. The loosening of the tongue followed immediately upon the opening of the ears. There are parallels in Hellenistic texts to the statement that "the tongue was loosened" which have prompted the suggestion that this

affliction was due to demonic possession; Jesus liberated the man from the fetters of the demon responsible for his severe condition. There is nothing in the Marcan text, however, to support this proposal and it is better to regard the phrase as a figurative description of the cure. Mark has stressed Jesus' encounter with the demonic throughout the first half of the Gospel and it can be presumed that he would have stated that the man was possessed by a deaf and dumb spirit if this were the case.

The healing did not consist in the fact that the man spoke, but that he spoke without defect. His command of language confirms that he had not been born deaf and dumb. His normal speech formed the surprising contrast to his former stammering.

36–37 Jesus' repeated injunctions to be silent concerning what had taken place were immediately disregarded; those who had witnessed the healing were exuberant and engaged in kerygmatic activity (cf. Chs. 1:45; 5:20). The parallel with Ch. 1:44 f. is particularly close since the violation of the injunction is described in both places as "proclamation," the technical designation for preaching the gospel. The identical language in Ch. 1:44 f. and Ch. 7:36 suggests that the purpose of the injunction was to avoid a recurrence of the situation which developed subsequent to the healing of the leper when the presence of crowds in each town clamoring for Jesus' healing touch hindered his movement and interrupted his preaching mission. It was apparently Jesus' intention to remain in the region of the Decapolis for a period of time and he did not wish to be regarded as a Hellenistic wonder-worker.

The narrative concludes with a confession of faith which focuses on the messianic significance of the incident. In their excitement the crowd generalized the healing, perhaps with reference to what they had previously heard (cf. Chs. 3:8; 5:20) and was now confirmed by what they had seen. But Mark intends an allusion to Isa. 35:5f. The choral exclamation of the crowd is the response of faith which recognizes in all the works of Jesus the promised intervention of God.

Chapter 8

Verses 1-10 The Feeding of the 4,000

Well this story sounds a lot like the account of the feeding of the five thousand recorded in chapter 6 of Mark's Gospel – which we skipped over in this sermon series on Mark – and indeed some commentators have supposed that because of the similarities there was really only one feeding event. I totally reject that idea, because in Mark 8:19-20 Jesus' words make it absolutely clear that there were two separate events. Mark clearly understood and explains that there were two entirely separate occasions on which Jesus fed a multitude.

So as we study the events from our gospel reading together, you can find the main passage on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be projected on the screen.

Let's begin our study of this passage by looking at verses 1-3:

"During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.'" (verses 1-3)

The opening words "during those days" make it clear that the events of our reading are linked with Jesus' time in the Decapolis (Mark 7:31-37). The Decapolis – which is Greek for ten cities – was a federation of ten cities with a Greek character in Northeastern Palestine occupying the whole region of Bashan and Gilead. Mark doesn't specifically say that this

event took place in Greek or Gentile territory, but the opening words do seem to locate it in Gentile territory on the East side of the sea of Galilee, so the crowd was very likely a mainly Gentile assembly. Indeed I think that's probably why Mark included both the account of Jesus feeding the five thousand, who were mostly or entirely Jews, and this feeding of four thousand, who were probably largely Gentiles.

In describing the crowd Mark uses a rare and intensified form of the word translated 'been with me' by the NIV - *prosmenein*, which implies a special adherence and commitment to Jesus. The crowd has not just been coincidentally present but intentionally with him and for the long period of three days. This is an unusually positive description of a crowd in Mark and the 'three days' implies a long and extensive teaching ministry. If I'm correct in thinking that this was largely a Gentile crowd, then Jesus finds a reception among Gentiles that he has not found among Jews. We're being prepared for the fact that Jesus is not just for the Jewish nation but for all mankind.

In the story of the feeding of the five thousand the disciples raise the issue of a need to feed the people, here Jesus raises this issue himself and says that he has compassion on the people because they have nothing to eat. In fact the Greek used here implies that Jesus has really deep emotions about the crowd and their plight. Mark says that Jesus 'called his disciples to him' – a phrase that Mark often uses when Jesus is about to intervene. The detail Mark adds that 'some of them have come a long distance' fits well with the austere and rugged geography of the Decapolis region, which had fewer towns and settlements than did the western Galilean side of the lake. Certainly it was no place to be without provisions; as Jesus says, in this condition 'they will collapse on the way.'

Let's move on to look at verse 4:

"His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?" (verse 4)

The apparent perplexity of the disciples here is one of the main reasons that some commentators believe that this event is just another description of the earlier feeding of the five thousand, but I don't think this really presents us with any difficulty. Firstly, it was probably some months after the feeding of the five thousand that these events took place and secondly, the disciples were probably reluctant to presume that Jesus would again perform a miraculous multiplication of the available food as he had done on just one single earlier occasion. Thirsting after miracles was a sign of Jesus' opponents not his disciples as we shall see when we look at verses 11-13. The translation of this verse 4 is going to be important for us in a moment and we need to note that the disciples statement could be better translated: "For who is able in this remote region to satisfy [Greek *chortazein*] these [people] with bread?"

Let's continue with verses 5-8:

"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied. Afterwards the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over." (verses 5-8)

Perhaps the number of loaves available – seven – is symbolic, but I don't really think so. Mark is rarely given to using symbolic descriptions and meanings. Unlike the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus personally seats the crowd rather than having the disciples do so.

Assuming that the crowd was largely Gentiles, the blessing of God's name before the distribution of the bread would have been a novel action for many of them. This may explain the rather unusual pronouncement of thanksgiving over fish in verse 7. The pronouncement of blessing over bread was the normal Jewish practice for beginning a meal, but the blessing of God's Name prior to the distribution of the fish was not normal practice and seems to have been intended to teach the people to thank God for their daily food. The offering of praise and thanksgiving acknowledges that the multiplied food is the gracious provision of God.

Verse 8 tell us that this gracious provision of God through the person of Jesus 'satisfied' [Greek *chortazein*] the people. That brings us back to verse 4 where the same Greek word *chortazein* is used and you'll remember I said it could have better been translated 'satisfy'. So in verse 4 the disciples asked how the people could be satisfied and in verse 8 we have our answer – Jesus can satisfy them. And he can still satisfy us today. Indeed Jesus is the only person or thing which can ever completely satisfy us – and he will satisfy us if we just turn to him in faith. Turn to Christ in faith and receive the bread of life which satisfies our souls.

Let's conclude the feeding story with verses 9 and 10:

“About four thousand men were present. And having sent them away, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.” (verses 9-10)

The NIV says that about four thousand 'men' were in the crowd, but actually the Greek doesn't really imply that this was just a count of the men in the crowd – unlike the Greek used in describing the feeding of the five thousand in Mark chapter six where the implication is that there were five thousand men in the crowd, plus no doubt women and children. So the crowd we've been reading about today was probably much smaller than the crowd which Jesus had miraculously fed on an earlier occasion – but that in no way detracts from the miraculous nature of Jesus' provision for them.

From the early church fathers onward the church has rightly perceived that in the feeding of the four thousand Jesus brings saving bread to the Gentiles, as he brought it earlier to the Jews in the feeding of the five thousand. The journey to the Gentiles, starting in chapter 7 that we talked about earlier, shows us that the Gentiles are not beyond the reach of salvation and that they are more receptive to it than the Jews. Like the book of Jonah, this story reveals that supposed Gentile outsiders are in fact surprisingly receptive to the word of God in Jesus.

The journey of Jesus to Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis proves that, although the Gentiles are ostracized by the Jews, they are not ostracized by God. Jewish abuse and insults against the Gentiles does not reflect God's attitude towards the Gentiles. There is a lesson here for the people of God in every age, that their enemies are neither forsaken by God nor beyond the compassion of Jesus. On the contrary, the Gentiles, like others “a long distance” away, are the objects of Jesus' compassion. The difference between the Jews' response to the Gentiles and Jesus' response can be seen in Mark's concluding phrase, “And [Jesus] sent them away.” The Greek word for “send away,” *apolyein*, can mean either “to dismiss”, to “get rid of”; or “to release”, to “liberate.” The first, get rid of, is the Jewish response; the second, to liberate, is Jesus' response. Jesus satisfies the hungry outcasts and liberates them.

Verses 11-13

Let's look at the final three verses of our reading; 11-13:

“The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, “Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it.” Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side.” (verses 11-13)

This little encounter is so significant that the Pharisees' demand for a sign from Jesus is recorded in all four gospels. The Greek of verse 11 is actually quite antagonistic towards Jesus, leaving no doubt of the Pharisees' opposition to him. They're not trying to test him in any fair or objective sense, they're trying to discredit him.

Behind the demand for a sign was the prior, firm conviction that Jesus' authority was demonic in origin, his works an expression of black magic (see Mark 3:22). The Pharisaic expectation of “a sign from heaven” is echoed by Paul's statement that: “Jews demand miraculous signs” (1 Corinthians 1:22). In Jewish thought, true prophecy was corroborated by the fulfilment of what a prophet predicted (Deuteronomy 18:22). A Jewish commentary on Deuteronomy 18 runs: “If a prophet begins to prophesy, listen to him if he does a sign and miracle; but if he does not do them, do not hear him.”

The sign requested by the Pharisees is not simply a request for a miracle, because in the Synoptic Gospels a “sign” is not a miracle, nor is a miracle called a sign. Only John's gospel refers to miracles as signs. Moreover, Jesus has already done many miracles which the Pharisees must have known about. The word Mark normally uses for “miracle” (Greek *dynamis*) is absent here. Rather, the Pharisees request “a sign (Greek *sēmeion*) from heaven,” that is, a confirmation of Jesus' ministry from God himself, an “outward compelling proof of divine authority.” They reason that if Jesus is working in God's name, then God should divinely authorize his work.

In verse 12 Jesus groaned in his spirit (again the Greek is stronger than the NIV translation) and says there will be no sign. He categorically denies the Pharisees' request. Israel's disobedience in the wilderness in Moses' day (Deuteronomy 32:5-20) has been carried down to Jesus' day. Jesus isn't denying the Pharisees a sign because of the Messianic secret, he's performed plenty of miracles in public, rather it's because of their wilful disbelief. In the Synoptic Gospels the demand for “signs” is itself a sign of attempting to gain by empirical means what can only be gained by faith and trust. It is the false prophet who seeks to deceive by signs and wonders (Mark 13:22). Jesus forsakes signs, because: “to force the evidence upon his audience would make a faith response by its very nature impossible.” Faith that depends on proof is not faith, but only veiled doubt.

I love my wife, but I can't prove it to you here and now today. Love can't easily be empirically proven. Faith also, just like love, cannot easily be proven; it can only be demonstrated over time by trust and active commitment. Let's demonstrate our faith in Christ by our commitment and obedience to Him. At the end of our story, the Pharisees turn and walk away; but the disciples follow Jesus into the boat. Eduard Schweizer draws an insightful conclusion from this closing description, he says: “faith comes when one steps into the boat with Jesus and does not prefer to remain in safety on the shore.”

So what about you, have you demonstrated your faith by stepping into the boat with Jesus. Have you committed yourself to him in faith and trust. Let's all climb aboard and embark on a voyage with our Lord and Master that will take us not across the Sea of Galilee but across the ocean of the rest of our lives until Christ brings us safely to the far shore of the kingdom

of heaven where we shall spend the rest of eternity in the place he has prepared for us. All aboard the Jesus boat whilst there's still time – don't get left behind.

Verses 14-21 Failure to Understand

14–15 The reference to the one loaf within the boat ties these verses to the preceding account where Jesus returned to the lake, leaving the Pharisees standing on the shore. The sequence of developments seems to be clear. In the abrupt departure the disciples had forgotten to take bread with them. Jesus chose this opportunity to caution his disciples about “the leaven of the Pharisees” because he wanted them to hear his warning while the impact of the encounter reported in Ch. 8:11f. was fresh. When the disciples interpreted Jesus’ words as an indirect reproach for their failure to bring provisions and began quarreling concerning whose responsibility it was to procure bread, he reproached them for their failure to understand. The intimate connection between Ch. 8:14–21 and the preceding verses determines the context for the interpretation of verse 15.

The metaphor of leaven turns on the ability of a minute amount of yeast to impregnate the material with which it is mixed with its own fermentation. In both Jewish and Hellenistic circles leaven was a common metaphor for corruption. In this context the reference draws upon the Jewish understanding of leaven as the evil will and its expression. The disciples are warned against the evil disposition of the Pharisees who ask for a sign when their judgment has already been passed. The reference to Herod is intelligible if Dalmanutha (Magdala?) was in the neighborhood of Tiberias where Antipas had his capital. In Ch. 6:14–16 Herod had betrayed a hostile interest in Jesus, and a tradition not recorded by Mark indicates his own desire to see a sign (Lk. 23:8). The figure of leaven thus describes the disposition to believe only if signs which compel faith are produced. In contrast, Jesus’ warning constitutes a fresh call to faith and understanding apart from signs.

16 The disciples heard only a reference to bread. They discovered their lack of provisions and began quarreling about whose irresponsibility accounted for this situation. The overt reference to the Pharisees and to Herod was simply ignored. The dispute among the disciples, which indicated how completely they were absorbed in their temporal preoccupations, was the immediate occasion for Jesus’ sharp condemnation of the lack of understanding in men whose privileged position should have led them to perceive the truth of his person and the importance of hearing his word.

17–18 Jesus’ rebuke is expressed in a series of sober questions which focus on the persistent blindness displayed by the Twelve (cf. Chs. 4:13, 40; 6:52; 7:18). Repeated exposure to Jesus’ teaching and mighty works had not led to reflection on their significance but to a basic insensitivity and dullness. Mark does not attribute the severity of the rebuke to the failure of the disciples to grasp the allusion to a sign-oriented disposition in verse 15, but to their failure to perceive the meaning of Jesus’ presence with them. The indignant questions concerning hardness of heart and blindness of disposition echo the description of Israel in prophetic literature (Jer. 5:21; Ezek. 12:2; Isa. 6:9 f.) and are related to the distinction between the crowd and the Twelve in Ch. 4:11 f. There those who are “outside” were contrasted with the disciples who listen to Jesus’ word. Here the Twelve appear to be no better than the crowds who profit from Jesus’ miracles without reflection and who seek his teaching without applying it to themselves.

19–20 By question and answer Jesus leads the disciples back to the two feedings of a multitude. The numbers are precisely given and the types of baskets used on each occasion to collect the fragments are carefully distinguished. The disciples remembered the facts perfectly and responded to Jesus’ questions without hesitation. Nevertheless, they failed to

understand the significance of what had taken place before their eyes. They were no different from the unseeing crowd! It is this harsh reality of their existence that Jesus calls to their attention with his reference to the feeding of the five thousand and of the four thousand.

The two multiplications of the loaves were recalled by the quarrel concerning bread. At the same time they indicate that Jesus' mighty works (as well as his teaching) were parabolic in the sense that they pointed beyond themselves to the secret of his own person. The feedings are thus not mentioned in compensation for the refusal to provide a sign, as if they were a kind of sign themselves. The concept of signs presupposes the existence of categories according to which a judgment may be passed, but there are no traditional categories which can grasp the feedings. The reference to the loaves thus calls into question the desire to think in terms of signs and reinforces the teaching of verse 15. The broken fragments of bread force attention upon the presence of Jesus as that which has meaning for men. It is this fact which the contrast between the demand for a sign and the miracles of the loaves seeks to make precise.

21 The pointed climax indicates that the disciples have not yet understood the secret to which Jesus' works pointed. The introductory words, "and he was saying to them" are an indication of paraphrase or sharp reduction of what Jesus said in order to focus on the most salient point. The word which follows is addressed to the Christian audience of the Gospel as well as to the disciples. What they should understand from the miracles of the loaves is the secret that Jesus is none other than the Messiah and Lord. It is tempting to find a veiled reference to this in the language of verse 14b: Jesus is the one true loaf that is with the disciples in the boat. The repeated question concerning understanding (verses 18, 21) indicates that the didactic goal of Jesus' ministry to the disciples has not been attained and points forward to the miracle of understanding which leads to the confession of Ch. 8:27–30.

Verses 22-26 Opening Blind Eyes

The crossing reported in Ch. 8:13 brought Jesus and the Twelve to the capital of the district of Gaulanitis, Bethsaida Julias, situated on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee in the territory of Herod Philip (cf. Ch. 6:45). This was one of the large sites on the lake which had the size of a city but the organization of a village, and Mark's designation of it as such in verse 23 is precise. There a number of persons brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch the man in healing.

23–25 It is difficult to be certain why Jesus led the blind man out of the town. It was not his usual procedure to isolate himself from a congregation of people when healing or exorcising unclean spirits (Chs. 1:23–28; 3:1–5; 9:14–27), and he does not do so on a later occasion when he restored the sight of Bar-Timaeus (Ch. 10:46–52). Moreover, in all of the redactional summaries where Mark speaks of healing and exorcism he indicates the presence of crowds around Jesus (Chs. 1:32–34; 3:7–12; 6:53–56). If it is proper to speak of a tendency in Mark, the sphere of miracle is public rather than secret. The three exceptions to this general observation derive, apparently, from a set of circumstances inherent in the situation itself. This is certainly true in Ch. 5:35–43 where Jesus excludes the scornful, unbelieving group of professional mourners from the revelation of his life-giving power. In Ch. 7:33 the removal of the man from the crowd was an important action in establishing communication with an individual who had learned to be passive in society. This may provide the key to Ch. 8:23 as well. When Jesus took the blind man's hand and led him outside the city he established a personal relationship to him that was an important element in the man's confidence that his cure could be expected from Jesus. Beyond this, the restoring

of sight to a blind person among the mixed population of Bethsaida would have led to the type of false veneration that Jesus constantly avoided (Ch. 1:35–39, 45; 3:7–9; 6:45).

The application of spittle to the eyes and the laying on of hands in healing have significant parallels in Jewish practice and in the Gospel (see on Chs. 6:5; 7:33). By these actions Jesus entered into the thought-world of the man and established significant contact with him. The report of the healing, however, contains three elements which are without parallel in the evangelical tradition: (1) Jesus' question if his action has been effective ("Do you see anything?"); (2) the explicit reference to only partial healing ("I can actually see people, but they look to me like trees—only they're walking!"); (3) the laying on of hands a second time, resulting in complete restoration of sight ("I see everything clearly—even at a distance"). These features distinguish this incident of healing from all of the others and suggest that the man's sight was restored only gradually and with difficulty. It is impossible to recover the larger context of the situation which would shed light on many questions prompted by these unique features.

The reference to men like trees walking indicates that the man had not been born blind. Persons blind from birth do not have an exact idea of objects and cannot properly visualize a tree. On the other hand, optical images become modified as blindness continues, and the visualization of men under the form of trees indicates that the man had been blind for a long period of time. The vivid progression from verse 24 to verse 25 expresses something of the man's excitement and intense involvement in the dynamics of his recovery of sight, and stresses the completeness of the restoration.

26 The instruction to go home (cf. Chs. 2:11; 5:19) was reinforced with the admonition, "Do not (first) go into the town." It is common to find here a further instance of an injunction to silence (cf. Chs. 1:44; 5:43; 7:36), and this is made explicit in certain strands of the textual tradition which report the instruction, "Say nothing to anyone in the town." If this represents a valid interpretation of the intention behind the instruction, it is appropriate to find here a precaution Jesus found necessary because on other occasions spectacular healings had actually led to an interruption of his planned ministry (Ch. 1:44 f.). The statement occurs, however, without qualification in a narrative which displays unique traits and it is perilous to insist that the purpose behind Jesus' final instruction must conform to his apparent intention on other occasions.

Like making the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak, the restoring of sight to the blind was the promised action of God (Ps. 146:8; Isa. 29:18; 35:5). In this regard Ch. 8:22–26 invites comparison with Ch. 7:31–37 where the theological point that the promised intervention of God has taken place in the ministry of Jesus is established by an allusion to Isa. 35:5f. and a confession of faith (Ch. 7:32, 37). Both of these accounts are preserved only by Mark and it is almost certain that he regarded them as forming a pair. He has placed them in parallel positions in relation to the two feeding miracles and both concern healings promised in Isa. 35:5–6. The relationship between these distinct episodes is underlined by striking linguistic agreements in the opening two verses of each account where the situation is described. After that the accounts diverge and display equally striking differences which arise not only out of the situation but from the language and structure of the units themselves. To cite only two examples, there are no biblical allusions in Ch. 8:22–26, and there is no counterpart to the confession of faith in Ch. 7:37. These "omissions" are apparently deliberate to force the recognition that the healing of Ch. 8:22–26 comes under the rubric of Isa. 35:5 provided in Ch. 7:31–37, and finds its appropriate conclusion only in the confession of faith recorded in Ch. 8:27–30. This supposition finds confirmation from the conversation with the disciples which immediately precedes the healing of the blind man. In Ch. 8:18 Jesus speaks of the blindness and deafness of the Twelve who continue to show themselves

insensitive to his person and word. An action as radical as the literal unstopping of deaf ears and loosening of a bound tongue and the opening of blind eyes was required to lead them to understanding and confession. That action was precipitated by Jesus' extension of grace to a deaf man with defective speech in the Decapolis and to a blind man outside of Bethsaida, and Mark has underscored this fact by linguistic and structural arrangement. In this context the confessions of Ch. 7:37 and Ch. 8:29 acquire a deeper significance for the Christian community for which Mark prepared the Gospel: in both passages they recognize their Lord. In Ch. 7:37 they sing a hymn to Christ who has done all things well, making the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak; in Ch. 8:29 they recognize the Messiah who has just opened the eyes of the blind.

Verses 27-30 The Recognition of the Messiah

Read Matthew 16:16

Mark has placed at the center of his narrative the recognition that Jesus is the Messiah. The pivotal importance of this moment is indicated by the fact that already in the first line of the Gospel the evangelist designates Jesus as the Messiah. Yet between Ch. 1:1 and Ch. 8:29 there is no recognition of this fact in spite of a remarkable sequence of events which demanded a decision concerning Jesus' identity. By arrangement and emphasis Mark indicates the crucial significance which he finds in the events which clustered around the sojourn in the territory of Herod Philip. Jesus' display of extraordinary power astonished his countrymen and provoked the question of the source of his authority and wisdom, but his true dignity remained unrecognized (Chs. 1:27; 2:7; 6:2). His association with sinners and disregard for accepted conventions of piety so scandalized the guardians of an inherited tradition that they could think only in terms of the demonic (Chs. 2:15–20; 3:22–30; 7:1–5). The recognition of the demons communicated nothing to the bystanders but frenzied opposition to Jesus (Chs. 1:24 f.; 3:10 f.; 5:7 f.). The disciples raised the question of Jesus' identity but found no categories by which they could understand him (Ch. 4:41; 6:51 f.), and failed to penetrate the veiledness which characterized his words and works (Ch. 8:17–21). By weaving these several strands of the tradition together in the first half of the Gospel, Mark creates a climate of tension which can be resolved only by the recognition of Jesus' dignity. The pointed question of Ch. 8:21, "Do you not understand?" cries for the answer provided in Ch. 8:29, "You are the Messiah."

The central importance of Peter's confession in the Marcan structure is confirmed by the sharp change of tone and orientation which it introduces. If there had been earlier indication that Jesus would be taken away from the disciples (Ch. 2:20) or that his adversaries determined to destroy him (Ch. 3:6), they remained veiled allusions to what appeared to be a distant event. In direct response to Peter's declaration, however, Jesus spoke of the necessity of his passion with a directness which scandalized the disciples (Ch. 8:31–33). The distinctive theology of the cross and resurrection implied by this announcement dominates the remainder of the Gospel. The recognition that Jesus is the Messiah is thus the point of intersection toward which all of the theological currents of the first half of the Gospel converge and from which the dynamic of the second half of the Gospel derives. In no other way could Mark more sharply indicate the historical and theological significance of the conversation in the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi.

27 Jesus led his disciples some 25 miles north from Bethsaida (Ch. 8:22) to the district of Iturea dominated by Caesarea Philippi, the residence of Herod Philip. The capital was located at the source of the Jordan River on the slopes of Mount Hermon in a region famed for its beauty and fertility. When the area was first given to Herod the Great by Augustus he built a

temple in honor of the emperor near a grotto consecrated to the Greek god Pan. In 3 B.C. Philip rebuilt the neighboring village of Paneas as his residence and named the new city in honor of Caesar. The area was thus dominated by strong Roman associations, and it may be theologically significant that Jesus' dignity was first recognized in a region devoted to the affirmation that Caesar is lord. Here Jesus questioned his disciples concerning what was popularly being said concerning him. In Mark the questions of Jesus frequently lead to a new teaching (cf. Chs. 9:33; 12:24, 35). The purpose of this question was to prepare for the more personal question of verse 29 and the radically new teaching of verses 31ff. Moreover, in the Gospel the term "men" is usually shaded to mean those from whom revelation remains veiled (Chs. 1:17; 7:7f.; 9:31; 10:27; 11:30) as opposed to the disciples who have been extended special grace. The double question of verses 27 and 29 thus permits a sharp differentiation between the inadequate opinions of "men" and the affirmation of faith uttered by Peter.

28 The response to Jesus' question indicates that the truth concerning his dignity and function remains veiled from the people. In Ch. 6:14 f. the same popular opinions were presented in the same order. While it is important to distinguish between these points of view, they are equally inadequate. The conviction that Jesus is John or Elijah indicates that he is nothing in himself but only the eschatological realization of a more recent or more distant past event. The affirmation that he is an ordinary prophet fails to distinguish between Jesus and the messengers of God who had appeared so many times throughout Israel's history. All three opinions assign to Jesus only a preparatory role and deny to him the definitive role associated with consummation and the achievement of salvation.

29 By question and response the contrast between those who perceive and acknowledge Jesus' messianic dignity and those who know him only in an inadequate way is clearly presented. The fact that Jesus led the disciples to this affirmation of faith is significant. He elicited the open avowal of his messiahship at this time because it was imperative to define the dimensions of his messianic ministry and to set forth what this would require of his followers.

The declaration that Jesus is the Messiah was made by Peter, whom Jesus had set apart for a decisive future role in building up the people of God when he bestowed upon him his new name (Ch. 3:16). Here, as later, he functioned as the spokesman for the Twelve (cf. Chs. 9:5; 10:28; 11:21; 14:29). In Mark Peter's confession is given in its simplest, most direct and moving form. The basic meaning of "Messiah" is passive, "the one anointed by God." It implies divine election and appointment to a particular task and a special endowment of power for its performance. In the OT the royal, priestly and prophetic offices are associated with an anointing with oil which symbolized consecration to God's service and enjoyment of the divine protection (e.g. Ex. 29:7, 21; 1 Sam. 10:1, 6; 16:13; 1 Kings 19:16; Ps. 105:15; Isa. 61:1 ff.). The expectation of a future anointed leader was grounded in the promise of a faithful ruler from David's line (cf. 2 Sam. 7:14-16; Isa. 55:3-5; Jer. 23:5; 4 Q Patriarchal Blessings i. 3-4, "the righteous Messiah, the Branch of David"). In later Judaism the term "Messiah" became increasingly fluid in the emergence of a variety of messianic projections; the concept of a Davidic Messiah was only one strand of expectation among many. The thought of a special relationship to God and to the people of God, however, remained dominant. In the first century the crucial question concerned the function of messiahship, and it was precisely at this point that Jesus' teaching concerning his own function stood in radical opposition to contemporary expectations.⁶⁶ Peter's confession recognized that Jesus was the appointed agent of God whose coming marks the fulfilment of the divine promise and the realization of Israel's hopes. Of the deeper and more costly dimensions of messiahship, however, he had no intimation.

30 False and narrow hopes clustered about the designation “Messiah” in the first century, and Jesus showed a marked reluctance to use this title himself (cf. Ch. 12:35–37; 14:61f.). He clearly knew himself to be “the anointed of the Lord” but his destiny was to be fulfilled along lines other than those projected for the royal figure of popular expectations. Peter’s affirmation was an exultant expression of faith. The subsequent narrative, however, indicates that it was also a reflection of a profound misunderstanding (Ch. 8:31–33; 10:35ff.). The disciples as yet had no way of knowing what conception Jesus had of his messianic vocation and it was imperative that they should not be allowed to fill the content of the term with their own dreams. Peter’s words were correct in themselves, but his conception was wrong, and Jesus sternly charged them to tell no one about him, precisely as he had done earlier when the demons identified him (Ch. 1:25; 3:12). The explanation for this injunction is provided immediately in verse 31, where Jesus begins to define what it means for him to be the Messiah.

Verses 31-33 Jesus Predicts His Death

With verse 31 an entirely new orientation is given to the Gospel. This change is defined by the explicit and new teaching concerning the necessity of Jesus’ passion and by a sharp change in tone. In the Marcan structure, Jesus’ prophecy of his rejection and suffering is his response to Peter’s confession of faith. The following section is entirely dominated and structured by this solemn pronouncement, which is repeated twice more (Chs. 9:31; 10:33f.). In no other Gospel do the three cardinal announcements of forthcoming humiliation have as structured a function as they do in Mark. They furnish the framework, the tone and the subject of Chs. 8:31–10:52. The primary purpose of this section is to explain what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah and what it requires to be identified with him. In the movement of the Gospel it serves to bring Jesus near Jerusalem where his suffering will be accomplished. Throughout this section there is sustained emphasis upon the journey to Jerusalem. Already in Ch. 8:27 Jesus and the Twelve were “on the way” among the villages of Caesarea Philippi; in Ch. 9:30 they make their way through Galilee, stopping briefly in Capernaum (Ch. 9:33); by Ch. 10:1 they have entered Judea near the lower Jordan; when interrupted by a wealthy man they are again “on the way” (Ch. 10:17), but not until Ch. 10:32f. is the destination of the journey announced: “we are going to Jerusalem.” The meaning of the journey to Jerusalem is defined by the repeated announcements of Jesus’ passion: he goes to Jerusalem to fulfill his messianic destiny. He leads his disciples in the way of the cross by instructing them concerning the necessity of his sufferings and of the requirement this imposes upon them.

The fact that Jesus’ solemn declaration is repeated three times within a section entirely devoted to the mystery of the sufferings of the Messiah and his people indicates its crucial importance for the theology of Mark. The three cardinal pronouncements constitute the first of three movements in a programmatic pattern. The confession of Ch. 8:29 was a moment of revelation and insight. Nevertheless, the disciples failed to understand the significance of Jesus’ messiahship, and Mark underscores this failure after each of Jesus’ affirmations of his rejection and humiliation: Peter rebuked him (Ch. 8:32); the disciples did not understand, and were afraid to ask, and reasoned who was greater (Ch. 9:32ff.); they were amazed and afraid, James and John asked for the places of honor in his glory, and the others were indignant (Ch. 10:35–37, 41). On each of these occasions Jesus called the Twelve to authentic discipleship involving humility, service and suffering (Chs. 8:34–38; 9:33–37; 10:38–45). The parallel themes of Jesus’ suffering in fulfilment of the will of God, misunderstanding, and the call to true discipleship exhibit emphases which Mark regarded as so essential for his community to understand that he made them the heart of his Gospel.

The change of tone is stressed by the evangelist as well as by the tradition he incorporates. In Ch. 4:33f. Mark stressed that parabolic, veiled speech characterized Jesus' ministry before the people ("And with many such parables he was speaking the word to them, to the degree that they were able to hear it"). The veiled reference to Jesus' death in Ch. 2:20 offers an example of his parabolic speech. In Ch. 8:32, however, Mark states "and he was speaking the word openly (and with frankness)," in reference to the unmistakable note of rejection and violent death in Ch. 8:31. Moreover, in Ch. 8:34 Jesus calls the crowd and speaks to them in the same forceful, open terms he addresses to the disciples (in contrast to Ch. 7:14–15, 17–23). This openness is theologically significant within the larger context of Jesus' messianic self-revelation in the Gospel of Mark. It points beyond Jesus' hiddenness, which reaches its climax on the cross, to his revealed glory. In the cross and resurrection of Jesus the secret of the Kingdom is thoroughly veiled as well as gloriously revealed. Mark exposes this tension, which is inherent in the gospel, through the reaction of the disciples to Jesus' sober teaching throughout Chs. 8:31–10:52.

It was imperative for Jesus to teach the disciples what it means to acknowledge that he is the Messiah. That teaching is provided in verse 31. Jesus' statement regarding his impending death and resurrection is a prophetic utterance. Its intention, like that of most of the OT prophecies, was not to record history in advance but to provide certainty that when these events took place they represented what God had planned and fulfilled. The full import of prophecy cannot be grasped until after the event. That solemn pronouncement, however, has a function beyond the information it conveys concerning Jesus' passion. It follows immediately on verse 30 as the explanation of the stern command not to speak to anyone concerning Jesus' identity. It was not necessary that the people recognize that he is the Messiah until after he had fulfilled his messianic vocation through death and resurrection (Ch. 9:9; 13:9f.; 14:9; cf. Ch. 4:21–23). This is the only time in Mark that an injunction to silence is explained and it provides the key to all of the previous injunctions to silence. The necessity of the passion in obedience to the will of God accounts for the so-called secrecy phenomena in the Gospel. The "messianic secret" is God's intention to provide salvation through a suffering Savior who is identified with the people by his free decision to bear the burden of judgment upon human rebellion. The repeated injunctions to silence throughout the Gospel of Mark are an expression of Jesus' fidelity to the divine plan of salvation. That plan, though announced in Scripture, was unrecognized in Israel. The function of Jesus' prophetic declaration in verse 31 is to make clear what the disciples could have known had they possessed the thought of God as expressed in Scripture (verse 33). The close association of Ch. 8:31–33 with the declaration of Ch. 8:29 indicates that confession in itself is insufficient to establish Christian faith. Jesus had to lead the disciples beyond messianic confession to an awareness of the dimensions of messiahship as defined by the revealed will of God.

31 In his response to Peter's confession Jesus neither accepted nor refused the designation "Messiah." He spoke of "the Son of Man" who could anticipate suffering and rejection issuing in violent death and resurrection, and this disclosure, which is described as new teaching, dominates the remainder of the Gospel. It is generally recognized that "the son of man" is not a genuine Greek idiom, but a literal translation of the Aramaic *bar-nash/bar nasha'*. This expression was in common use, both as a noun (= man) and as a substitute for the indefinite pronoun (= someone, anyone, a certain one) in early as well as in later stages of the development of the Galilean dialect. In a recent fresh examination of the total corpus of early Palestinian Aramaic, G. Vermès has offered conclusive evidence that the idiom sometimes functioned as a circumlocution for "I." It occurs with this meaning primarily in sentences containing an allusion to humiliation, danger or death, although use of the idiom in reference to one's self was sometimes dictated by humility or modesty.⁸⁰ Geographically, the

idiom is Palestinian-Galilean, and it is well attested in the earliest strata of Galilean Aramaic (represented by the Palestinian Pentateuch Targum, the Jerusalem Talmud and Genesis Rabba). This has important bearing on Ch. 8:31. It indicates that it was not necessary that the disciples should have recognized in Jesus' usage of "the son of man" any more than the circumlocution for "I." The explicit reference to humiliation would account for the indirect idiom. Only in the light of Jesus' subsequent teaching concerning the enthronement and judging function of the Son of Man (Chs. 8:38; 13:26; 14:62) was it possible to recognize an allusion to the mysterious figure of Dan. 7:13f. to whom God appointed celestial glory, dominion over all nations and an everlasting kingdom. Peter's strong protest was not because he recognized a reference to Dan. 7 or realized the unspeakable incongruity between the transcendent majesty of the Son of Man and Jesus' prophecy of suffering. It was rather the incongruity between "Messiah" (Ch. 8:29) and Jesus' affirmation which accounts for his reaction. This illustrates the ambiguity of the idiom which made it singularly appropriate to express the tension between concealment and revelation in Jesus' ministry.

Mark clearly understands and intends the old biblical context of Son of Man as defined in the vision of Daniel 7. Even in this first prophetic announcement of his coming suffering Jesus made a veiled allusion to his own identity as the transcendent Son of Man. But in this context Son of Man receives a deep paradoxical meaning; the man of transcendent glory goes the way of suffering and his hidden majesty will be revealed only after his rejection by the leaders of Israel and his violent death. The designation is thus appropriate to a comprehensive theology of history extending from glory (Dan. 7:13f.) through humiliation (Mk. 8:31) to glory (Mk. 8:38). "Son of Man" occurs fourteen times in the Gospel of Mark. Its significance to the evangelist, as Jesus' own self-designation, deserves special attention. It is useful to distinguish four categories of text:

Son of Man in Mark

A	Ch. 2:10	The authority to forgive sins
	Ch. 2:28	The Lord of the Sabbath
B	Ch. 8:31	Prophecy of the Passion
	Ch. 9:31	Prophecy of the Passion
	Ch. 10:33f.	Prophecy of the Passion
C	Ch. 9:9	Resurrection
	Ch. 9:12	Sufferings
	Ch. 10:45	His life is a ransom for the many
	Ch. 14:21	Goes (to death)
	Ch. 14:21	Betrayed

	Ch. 14:41	Betrayed
D	Ch. 8:38	Will come in glory
	Ch. 13:26	Will come on the clouds
	Ch. 14:62	Will come on the clouds

The two texts of Group A represent the sole use of Son of Man in the first half of the Gospel and have been shown to represent Mark's use of this designation to indicate the theological significance of an incident for his Christian reader. The six texts of Group C are allusions to the three prophetic announcements of the passion in Group B. The remaining passages (Groups B and D) consist of three cardinal texts announcing Jesus' suffering balanced by three texts promising his parousia in glory. The close formulation between the three texts in each series indicates the importance of this teaching, both historically, at the level of Jesus' ministry to the disciples, and existentially, at the level of the evangelist and his community. There can be no understanding of the gospel (or of the Gospel of Mark) apart from an appropriation of these separate, but related, phases of Jesus' ministry on behalf of the people of God. In the Gospel of Mark there exists a reciprocal relationship between these two series of texts. The open announcement of coming suffering which is made possible by the recognition that Jesus is the Messiah liberates the messianic glory which had remained veiled even in the presence of Jesus' extraordinary works (Ch. 9:1–9). The tension between concealment and openness in the self-revelation of God's Son is thus exhibited in the texts of Groups B and D. Only the eye of faith can perceive the identity between the broken figure upon the cross and the transcendent majesty of the enthroned Son of Man whose coming consummates history and initiates universal judgment.

This paradox indicates how intimately these six cardinal texts are related to "the messianic secret." The nerve-center of the secret is the necessity of the passion in the plan of God. But the manifestation of the glory of the Son of Man is also an integral part of the design for redemption. The incisive promise, "you will see," repeated three times (Chs. 8:38–9:1; 13:26; 14:62), can only refer to an open and definitive unveiling of what God has kept concealed. Only then will it be recognized by all men that the glorious Son of Man entered into his triumph only through rejection and abject humiliation. This is central to Mark's theology, and to the structure of his Gospel. The texts of Groups B and D are complementary: on three occasions Jesus solemnly announces the necessity of his passion, and on three occasions he affirms in awesome fashion the glorious manifestation of the Son of Man.

Reflection upon Ps. 110:1 and Dan. 7:13f. exercised profound influence upon the formulation of the texts referring to Jesus' enthronement and coming in majesty. It is more difficult to detect the influence of Dan. 7 on the prophecies referring to the sufferings of the Son of Man. In connection with these texts, however, there is an insistence that the key is provided by Scripture (Chs. 9:12; 14:21 "as it is written"; Ch. 8:31 "must," because it is God's announced will). There can be no proper grasp of Mark's theology apart from a recovery of the texts of Scripture to which reference is made. The extent of the biblical nuances can be shown only in a careful examination of the individual passages themselves. It is clear, however, that the prophecies of the passion reflect an identification of the Son of Man with the suffering Servant of the Lord as set forth in Isa. 52:13–53:12. A rich range of texts informed Jesus' understanding of his messianic vocation, but the suffering and atoning

work of the Servant appears to have provided the matrix for his reflection upon his mission. Mark does not have to develop this tradition; it already existed in the churches⁸⁵ and he presupposes it when he builds the traditional sayings about the destiny of the Son of Man into the heart of his Gospel.

Jesus' interpretation of "Messiah" in terms of a theology of suffering is an index to his realism as well as his awareness of the Father's will. The scribes regarded him as blasphemous (Ch. 2:7) and demonic (Ch. 3:22–30); the legal provisions against men deemed "heretics" or "seducing prophets" were explicit; the murder of John the Baptist indicated the destiny of God's appointed messengers (Ch. 6:17–29; cf. Ch. 12:2–8). The Scriptures were explicit that the Servant of the Lord experiences rejection, stark humiliation and death on behalf of the people of God. These several strands of prophecy and experience are drawn together in the solemn declaration that the Son of Man must suffer many things.

The necessity, under which Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection stand, belongs to the mysterious divine work of judgment and salvation in the last time. The statement that the Son of Man *must* suffer many things points to the overruling purpose of God and reflects Jesus' conviction that the intention revealed in Scripture attains its fulfilment in the shame of the crucifixion as well as in the triumph of the resurrection. The disciples may behold in Jesus' submission to the divine will the perfect human response to the regal claims of God. If the formula "suffer many things" stands under the influence of Isa. 53:4, 11 it is equivalent to "bear (the sins of) many" (cf. Ch. 10:45). In the light of Isa. 53, Jesus' humiliation is an obedient suffering in execution of a divine commission. The extent of this humiliation is defined in terms of rejection and violent death. Jesus asserts that he will be made the object of the testing wisdom and insight of the Jewish authorities, and will be rejected. An allusion to Ps. 118:22 is confirmed by Ch. 12:10, where Jesus quotes the passage about the rejected stone precisely before the high priests, scribes and elders (cf. Ch. 11:27; Acts 4:11). The reference to these three prominent classes of men who together constituted the Sanhedrin indicates the totality of the failure to recognize Jesus and stresses that all of the leaders of Israel must equally assume responsibility for the rejection of the Son (cf. Ch. 14:64). The general term "and be killed" implies a violent death (cf. 1 Thess. 2:14) but provides no hint of crucifixion. The form that Jesus' death would assume was not apparent until the crisis of the conflict with authority in Ch. 15. The precise nature of the humiliation and its inscrutable paradox were only very gradually revealed to the disciples.

Jesus' prophecy announced not only suffering and death, but victory and vindication expressed through resurrection (cf. Ch. 9:9, 31; 10:34; 14:28). In Isaiah the final triumph of the Servant is presented as a triumph over death itself (Isa. 52:13; 53:10–12), and this assurance is reflected in Jesus' reference to his own resurrection after three days. The fundamental OT passage on resurrection in the first century, however, was Hos. 6:1 f. Hosea spoke about the national revival by God of a contrite and repentant Israel: "Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn, that he may heal us; he has stricken, and he will bind us up—after two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him." By the first century the passage had come to be interpreted eschatologically of the consolation of Israel in the last days, sealed by resurrection. This interpretation is reflected in the Targum read in the synagogue in connection with the call to repentance in preparation for the Day of Atonement:

"They will say: Come, and let us return to the service of the Lord; for he who has smitten us will heal us; and he who has brought ruin upon us will give us rest. He will revive us on the days of consolation which are about to come; On the day of the resurrection of the dead he will raise us up and we shall be revived before him."

Reflection upon this interpretation of Hos. 6:2 also may have informed Jesus' conviction concerning his resurrection "after three days." While there is some evidence that "after three days" can be regarded in a Semitic context as equivalent to "on the third day" (Gen. 42:17f.; 2 Chron. 10:5, 12), it is probable that Jesus' reference to three days was an indefinite expression for a short period of time. A conviction, grounded upon Scripture, was that "the Holy One, blessed be he, does not leave his own in distress for more than three days." The reference to resurrection already points forward to Ch. 8:38 where Jesus warns the people of the Son of Man's enthronement as eschatological judge. The opposition and rejection experienced at the hands of Israel's leaders will be overturned in startling fashion.

32–33 When the disciples looked back upon Jesus' statement they were amazed at the openness with which he had spoken to them. Even in private discourse he had never spoken as clearly concerning his mission and destiny as he did on this occasion. Mark's term for open speech denotes an outspokenness that conceals nothing. The comment that Jesus was speaking the word openly indicates the decisive character of this incident in the context of Jesus' persistent use of veiled, parabolic speech (Ch. 4:33f.). Peter's reaction shows that it was impossible to miss what Jesus intended to say, even though the divine necessity for his suffering appeared inconceivable.

Mark describes Peter's impetuous action in sharp terms, employing the same strong vocable used throughout the Gospel in connection with the silencing of the demons: he *rebuked* Jesus (cf. 1:25; 3:12). How difficult it was to reconcile the designation "Messiah" and suffering is well illustrated by the Targum to Isa. 53, where the positive statements are interpreted to refer to King Messiah but the sufferings to the people. The rebuke indicates that Jesus' declaration was radically new and that the disciples were totally unprepared to receive it: a rejected Messiah was incompatible with Jewish convictions and hopes. Peter's reaction was therefore understandable but presumptuous, and it is not allowed to stand.

The presence of the other disciples, who undoubtedly shared Peter's conviction that Jesus was wrong, necessitated a sharp and open rebuke. Jesus called them to witness that he resolutely refused the temptation represented in Peter's words. It had been appointed by God that the Messiah was to achieve victory over the forces of evil in the world through the shame of the cross. The suggestion that he should refuse the passion may be construed as a temptation coming from Satan himself who desires to thwart the divine plan of salvation (cf. Chs. 1:12 f.; 3:23ff.). The sharpness of the rebuke stems from the suggestion of disobedience to God's will and the frustration of a course of events which will lead to the enthronement of the Son of Man, the achievement of the salvation of his elect, and the judgment of the world (Ch. 8:38). Jesus, therefore, unmasks the source of Peter's thought and commands him to return to his rank as a true disciple. His response to Jesus' solemn prophecy betrayed no higher level than that characteristic of unregenerate human nature. An inability to accept a suffering Savior involves the refusal of the will of God, whose sovereign disposition of the problem of sin and human rebellion fails to conform to the niceties of human expectations (cf. Isa. 55:8f.). Jesus shows no inclination to justify the ways of God to men. He simply affirms that the way of the cross is the will of God.

Verses 8:34 – 9:1 Requirements for Following Jesus

This section consists of a group of short, pungent sayings which concern personal commitment to Jesus in circumstances which require courage and sacrifice. They appear to have been brought together in the tradition or by the evangelist through catchword association. They reflect similar formulation and vocabulary. Mark includes this unit, which concerns essential requirements for being a follower of Jesus, because of a strong pastoral concern for his own people. Here he speaks beyond the historical situation in Jesus' ministry

to a church harassed by persecution, their ranks decimated by the subtle as well as more overt pressures exerted against Christians in imperial Rome. Mark shows that this situation is quite normal. Jesus had called his own disciples to the realization that suffering is not only his destiny but theirs. The humiliation of the Messiah, announced in Ch. 8:31, is the mysterious prototype of that of the Christian. But even as Jesus spoke of death followed by resurrection, his followers may look beyond a pagan tribunal to the tribunal of the Son of Man where loyalty to Jesus will be honored with vindication. This unit amounts to a call for complete and confident identification with Christ.

34 The reference to the crowd is sudden and unexpected (cf. Ch. 7:15; 8:1), but serves a vital function in the narrative. By calling the crowd Jesus indicates that the conditions for following him are relevant for all believers, and not for the disciples alone. This had important implications for the Christians in Rome and elsewhere. It indicated that the stringent demand for self-renunciation and cross-bearing extends not only to Church leaders but to all who confess that Jesus is the Messiah. It was the Lord's intention that those who follow him should not be detached observers of his passion, but men who grow in faith and understanding through participation in his sufferings. Only in following on the way to the cross is it possible to understand either the necessity of Jesus' humiliation or Jesus himself. The common address of these sober words to the crowd and the disciples recognizes that there is no essential difference between them when confronted with the sufferings of Christ: both alike have very human thoughts uninformed by the will of God (Ch. 8:33), and it was imperative for them to know what it means to follow Jesus. Precisely in following on the way to the cross the distinction between a privileged group and those outside (Ch. 4:11) disappears. "Following" in this context does not possess the technical meaning of "discipleship," but refers to that common commitment to Jesus which distinguishes all Christians from those who fail to recognize him as God's appointed Savior.¹⁰²

Jesus stipulated that those who wish to follow him must be prepared to shift the center of gravity in their lives from a concern for self to reckless abandon to the will of God. The central thought in self-denial is a disowning of any claim that may be urged by the self, a sustained willingness to say 'No' to oneself in order to be able to say 'Yes' to God. This involves a radical denunciation of all self-idolatry and of every attempt to establish one's own life in accordance with the dictates of the self. This demand is reinforced and intensified by the horrifying image of a death march. Bearing the cross was not a Jewish metaphor, and Jesus' statement must have sounded repugnant to the crowd and the disciples alike. The saying evokes the picture of a condemned man going out to die who is forced to carry on his back the cross-beam upon which he is to be nailed at the place of execution.¹⁰⁴ By the time Mark prepared his Gospel this had become cruel reality, both for Jesus and the Church. Jesus' words were a sober caution that the commitment for which he asked permitted no turning back, and if necessary, a willingness to submit to the cross in pursuance of the will of God. His followers must be prepared to die, for they share in the same veiledness that permits his own humiliation. The call to follow Jesus, which recapitulates the action in which self-denial and cross-bearing are to be manifested, provides a vivid reminder that suffering with the Messiah is the condition of glorification with him (Rom. 8:17).

35 This statement, which exposes the ambivalent concept of life, follows meaningfully the call to disown self and to be prepared to sacrifice life itself in verse 34. The irreplaceability of life, which is considered elemental for earthly existence, is shown to be the crucial issue in reference to eternal existence. Jesus' words envision men before a court where denial of association with him will bring release while affirmation of "Jesus and the gospel" issues in martyrdom. He thoroughly appreciates the frailty of human life threatened by death, but warns that the man who seeks to secure his own existence by denial of his Lord

brings about his own destruction. Paradoxically, the man who yields his life in loyalty to Jesus safeguards it in a deeper sense. The contrast between ordinary human life and life as the expression of the eschatological salvation which Jesus provides in verse 35b indicates the irony in the alternation between “save” and “suffer loss” in verse 35a. It defines an opposition corresponding in sharpness to the distinction between eternal loss and salvation. Jesus’ pregnant statement deals realistically with the concrete, existential character of the dynamism of life. The theology of life affirmed is grounded in the paradox that a man can guarantee that dynamism only by sacrificing it.

The context in which denial or confession is determinative of life is “Jesus and the gospel.” The absoluteness of Jesus’ claim upon the allegiance of man to his own person was affirmed unequivocally here for the first time. Prior to this it was possible to hear a call for commitment to his message, but now the locus of commitment is Jesus himself. The identity between Jesus and the message is underlined by the reference to suffering for the gospel, which is found only in Mark, and may have been added by the evangelist as an explanatory comment with particular relevance to the Christians in Rome. In the second half of Mark “the gospel” always denotes the message announced by the Church, of which Jesus is the content (Chs. 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9), precisely as in Ch. 1:1. Mark knew experientially that for the gospel men abandoned their goods (Ch. 10:29) and gave their lives (Ch. 8:35). It is possible that he has preserved an early Christian slogan, “for Christ and the gospel,” for which believers suffered and overcame.

36–37 In developing the thought of the supreme value of life in its deepest sense, Jesus employed language drawn from commercial life: profit, gain, loss, give in exchange. A comparison of values is the proper setting for a consideration of profit and loss. Corresponding to the advantage gained—the whole world—is the payment which must be forfeited—authentic life. But the ledger involves values which cannot really be compared. The loss even of ordinary human life is in no way compensated by winning the world; how much more is this true of eternal life! The pointed rhetorical questions of verses 36–37 suggest reflection on Ps. 49:7–9, where the Psalmist is speaking of men “who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches”: “Truly no man can ransom himself, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of his life is costly and can never suffice that he should continue to live on forever, and never see the Pit.” The absurdity of the man who secures his own life (verse 35a) in preference to participation in the salvation provided by God (verse 35b) emphasizes the fateful consequences of denying Jesus, even when human life is at stake. When a man has forfeited eternal life, he experiences absolute loss, even though he may have won the approval of the whole world with his denial of Jesus and the gospel.

38 Each of Jesus’ successive statements reinforced the irony of verse 35a, that the man who gains his life through denial of Jesus and the gospel suffers infinite loss. The character of the loss is now defined with reference to the final judgment which has been committed to the Son of Man. Verse 38 is parallel in structure to verse 35 and complementary in intention. It returns to the situation envisioned in verse 35 and carries it to its final consequences. The motive for denial of Jesus and his words is shame born out of an anxiety for one’s life and a basic unwillingness to be made an object of contempt in the world. Ashamed of past association with the Lord, the decision to seek approval from the world rather than from him exposes the Lord himself to contempt. This defines the seriousness of denial in terms of its immediate consequences for the world before whom Jesus and the gospel must be confessed. The world is defined qualitatively as “an adulterous and sinful generation,” an expression colored by the strictures of the prophets against idolatry (cf. Isa. 1:4, 21; Ezek. 16:32; Hos. 2:4). Denial confirms the world in its idolatrous character and approves the unfaithfulness to

God expressed in its rejection of Jesus and of those who display uncompromising loyalty to him.

Denial, however, entails ultimate consequences for the man who is ashamed of Jesus, for the Son of Man will expose him to contempt when he comes to execute the final judgment. Jesus' veiled reference to his future role is appropriate because of the presence of the crowd. This is the only occasion when Jesus used the designation "Son of Man" publicly prior to his arraignment before the High Priest, where he spoke in circumstances of the utmost veiledness (Ch. 14:62), and his reserve is consistent with the messianic veiledness throughout his ministry. The critical opinion that Jesus spoke of the Son of Man as a person distinct from himself reflects a failure to perceive the eschatological and literary parallelism in this statement, in which an element of the first clause is introduced in a different manner in the second clause. In verse 38a Jesus refers to himself in the first person; in verse 38b he refers to himself by the designation most appropriate to the glory of the parousia when he will come for judgment. The statement receives its pregnant significance precisely because Jesus and the Son of Man are the *same* person, and the denial of Jesus entails the denial of the final Judge himself. For this startling reason the criterion for a man's acceptance or rejection before the Son of Man is his loyalty or disloyalty to Jesus now. The judgment of those who range themselves against Jesus is the corollary of the vindication and salvation of those who have faithfully followed him. The underlying irony in the situation depicted derives from the veiledness which characterized Jesus' earthly ministry: he is one of whom men may be ashamed, but he will be openly revealed as the one who possesses the glory of his Father.

The reference to the Father's glory and to the accompanying train of angels (cf. Ch. 13:26f.) serves to set Jesus' entire ministry in a doxological perspective. Jesus was sent to reveal the glory of God in a world whose intoxication with its own glory is well expressed in the thought of gaining the world (Ch. 8:36). He can accomplish his mission only if his own glory means nothing to him and the Father's glory means everything. For Jesus this required submission to the contempt and shame of the cross. But God does not fail to recognize his self-renunciation and cross-bearing, and the hour comes when the Son of Man is exhibited glorified by the Father for whose sole glory he lived and died. This had immediate relevance for the persecuted and justly frightened Christians in Mark's congregation. In Jesus' own commitment to the Father they possessed a paradigm for their commitment to him and to the gospel. The sober words of Ch. 8:34–38 represented not theoretical reflections but the law of life by which Jesus gauged his own conduct in a world hostile to God. His vindication and coming triumph provided assurance that they would share in his glory if they held fast their commitment to him (cf. Ch. 13:9–13).

Chapter 9

1 The introductory formula, "and he was saying to them," indicates that Jesus' solemn affirmation is the conclusion to a larger discourse of which only the most salient point has been preserved (see on Ch. 2:27). Ch. 9:1 serves an important function in the structure of Chs. 8:34–9:1. The call to responsible commitment (Ch. 8:34) is followed by the contrast between a man who secures his own existence through denial and one who is killed because of his unwavering confession of Jesus and the gospel (Ch. 8:35). The statements which follow explore the consequences of denial (Ch. 8:36–38), but refer only by implication to those whose commitment will lead to their death. Absolute allegiance to Jesus demands response, and this is provided in Ch. 9:1. In context, Jesus' prophecy is a word of comfort addressed to those who heed his call to follow him in spite of the cost involved. The

Semitism “taste death” alludes to the harsh reality of violent death contemplated in Ch. 8:35b; men who are faithful to Jesus and the gospel will lose their lives. But they are given the assurance that this anomalous situation is for a determined period of time and they shall see an open manifestation of God’s sovereignty “with power.” The solemn introduction with which Jesus prefaces his words, “Amen, I say to you,” guarantees their truthfulness. His promise is grounded upon absolute certainty.

It has been shown that in the Gospel of Mark the Kingdom of God and the person of Jesus are so integrally bound together as to be inseparable. This has important bearing on Ch. 9:1. The concept of “the Kingdom of God come with power,” like the concept of the Son of Man coming with glory (Ch. 8:38), has a strictly Christocentric orientation. It refers to an event which provides an open manifestation of Jesus’ dignity. Jesus’ solemn affirmation expresses from a different perspective the fundamental surprise enunciated in Ch. 8:38: the ambiguity of the situation in which God’s sovereignty may be questioned, his anointed emissary treated with contempt, and his people exposed to shame will be resolved in a revelation of definitive power. Essential to both Ch. 8:38 and Ch. 9:1 is the contrast between concealment and revelation which expresses the tension between the hidden character of Jesus’ earthly ministry and his manifestation in glory and power at the consummation. The function and the perspective of these two passages, however, is not the same. Ch. 8:38 served to warn those who choose to stand with the world in its contempt for Jesus that his apparent weakness and openness to humiliation will be reversed in an awesome manifestation of his glory as the eschatological Judge. The function of Ch. 9:1, with its reference to “the Kingdom come with power,” is to provide certainty that the Son of Man will indeed come with glory, and that those who now share his sufferings will also share in his exaltation. Its reference is to an event sufficiently near that certain individuals present will be privileged to see a manifestation of the sovereignty of God in a triumphal unveiling of Jesus’ dignity.⁴ Nothing short of this can satisfy the expectation prompted by Jesus’ promise, which is intended to strengthen the people of God for their coming ordeal. The tension of their own “hiddenness” in a world which seeks to lead them to denial and which heaps abuse upon them when they are steadfast is acute, and requires an open manifestation of God’s sovereignty.

The immediate sequel to Jesus’ solemn promise is the account of the transfiguration (Ch. 9:2–8). This indicates that Mark understood Jesus’ statement to refer to this moment of transcendent glory conceived as an enthronement and an anticipation of the glory which is to come. It is instructive to compare 2 Peter 1:16–18, which speaks of “the power and the parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Peter made known to his churches the power *that was to be revealed* at Jesus’ coming in terms of the glory *which had been revealed* in the transfiguration. This expresses precisely the relationship between Ch. 8:38 (parousia) and Ch. 9:1 (transfiguration). The transfiguration was a momentary, but real (and witnessed) manifestation of Jesus’ sovereign power which pointed beyond itself to the parousia, when he will come “with power and glory” (Ch. 13:26). The fulfilment of Jesus’ promise a short time later (Ch. 9:2) provided encouragement to the harassed Christians in Rome and elsewhere that their commitment to Jesus and the gospel was valid. The parousia is an absolute certainty. The transfiguration constituted a warning to all others that the ambiguity which permits the humiliation of Jesus and of those faithful to him will be resolved in the decisive intervention of God promised in Ch. 8:38.

Verses 2-8 The Transfiguration

In Mark, the transfiguration is a dramatic indication of the resplendent glory which belongs to Jesus as God’s unique Son. As a revelation of the concealed splendor of the Son of Man, the event points forward to the advent promised in Ch. 8:38, when Jesus’ status as the eschatological Judge will be manifested to the world. The episode provides a personal and

preliminary revelation that he whom the disciples follow on a way marked by suffering and humiliation is the Son of Man whose total ministry has cosmic implications. Ch. 9:2–8 serves as a prelude to Chs. 14:1–16:8 and corresponds in function to Isa. 52:13–15 in relationship to Ch. 53:1–12: it offers assurance that despite apparent abandonment by God, Jesus is the Lord’s Servant who prospers in the task he has been sent to accomplish. The revelation of Jesus’ mysterious, transcendent dignity serves to confirm Peter’s acknowledgment that Jesus is the Messiah (Ch. 8:29), and Jesus’ own prophecy of his impending passion and vindication (Ch. 8:31). The event is oriented toward the disciples (Ch. 9:2 “before *them*,” 4 “appeared to *them*,” 7 “This is my beloved Son: listen to him”) to strengthen them in their commitment and to prepare them for the sufferings which they must share.

The theory that the transfiguration is a misplaced account of a resurrection appearance of the Lord continues to find support in spite of the solid objections which have been marshalled against such an interpretation.¹⁵ It is necessary to recognize in the narrative the presence of details which ground the event in history: the precise time reference (Ch. 9:2), the designation “Rabbi” and the proposal of verse 5. Mark clearly believed that he was reporting a factual event which had primary significance for the disciples as a disclosure of Jesus’ transcendent sonship. While the language used to describe the event was supplied from the vocabulary of theophany in the OT and in Jewish apocalyptic, the actual content of the revelation finds its closest parallel in the witness of the heavenly voice at Jesus’ baptism with its attendant cosmic overtones (Ch. 1:9–11). There is room for discussion concerning the form of the event (i.e. it is possible that the disciples saw a vision of Elijah and Moses and heard the heavenly voice within the scope of that vision) but the transfiguration as an entity must be regarded as an act of revelation for which God was responsible.

The desire to find the Feast of Tabernacles implicitly in the background of the transfiguration account is based on details within the text, especially the reference to the “booths” in verse 5. The Feast of Tabernacles, like the Passover, had come to have significant reference to the final deliverance promised by God. The several elements in the account, however, can be traced back to the reports of Moses’ ascent to Sinai and his vision of the glory of God (Ex. 24:12–18); a more decisive influence seems to have been exerted upon the narrative from this tradition rather than from any other. The transfiguration scene develops as a new “Sinai” theophany with Jesus as the central figure.

2–3 The precise temporal reference (“after six days”) is unusual in Mark and indicates that the evangelist attached special importance to this episode. The six days appear to refer back to the whole complex of teaching which followed Peter’s affirmation of Jesus’ messianic dignity, and more particularly to the solemn promise of Ch. 9:1. The unveiling of Jesus’ glory in the presence of the three disciples corresponds to the assurance that *some will see*. The transfiguration is presented in the terminology of a theophany which reveals the powerful coming of the Kingdom of God. Understood in this light, the precise time reference in verse 2 recalls Ex. 24:16f. where six days designates a time of preparation for the reception of revelation. Mark evidently regarded Jesus’ announcement of his approaching suffering as the preparation required for witnessing the disclosure of Christ’s true character. In this way the suffering and glorification of Jesus are as intimately associated at the beginning of the narrative as at its close when Jesus speaks of the Son of Man as an object of contempt (Ch. 9:12). The choice of Peter, James and John to see the transfiguration corresponds to the privileged relationship these three disciples shared with Jesus on other occasions (Chs. 5:37; 13:3; 14:33) and served to qualify them as witnesses to the event after Jesus’ resurrection (Ch. 9:9). The “high mountain” recalls the theophanies on the mountain of God (Sinai, Ex. 24; Horeb, 1 Kings 19) where Moses and Elijah received a vision of the glory of God. In the choice of location Jesus was not merely seeking solitude. In order to bring the feeling and

thoughts of the disciples closer to the significance of the hour he used the evocative significance of the mountain in the wilderness tradition of the OT.

Before the eyes of his most intimate disciples the human appearance of Jesus was perceptibly altered in accordance with the splendor of the transfigured world. For a brief moment the veil of his humanity was lifted and Jesus' body presented itself in the form of tenuously material light. In the OT the glory of God is always conceived as shining brilliance or bright light. The reference to the glistening character of Jesus' clothing reflects this concept and the language of apocalyptic where the image of radiance and resplendent light is borrowed to describe the glory of the Messiah. As a revelation of the hidden quality of Jesus' life the transfiguration was an anticipation and guarantee of an eschatological reality: the glory of the Consummator. The disciples thus saw a disclosure of the mystery of the parousia (Ch. 8:38), when there will be a vindication of the glory of God superseding all previous revelations of that glory, at Sinai or elsewhere.

4 It was appropriate that Jesus, whose work was inaugurated in the wilderness at his baptism and whose way through the desert was directed by the Spirit (Ch. 1:9–13), should be accompanied in this moment of high revelation by the eminent prophets of the wilderness who stand by his side to testify to his character and mission. Jesus is the one in whom the promise of the second exodus becomes a reality. Moses appears as the representative of the old covenant and the promise, now shortly to be fulfilled in the death of Jesus, and Elijah as the appointed restorer of all things (Chs. 1:2f.; 9:11). The stress on Elijah's presence at the transfiguration indicates that the fulfilment of "all things" has arrived (Ch. 9:12). The transfiguration is the prelude to the passion, and Elijah is there to testify to the ultimate importance of the impending events in an historical sequence which culminates in consummation. The presence of Elijah with Moses thus has eschatological significance in the specific sense that they proclaim the coming of the end.

5–6 Peter's impulsive response is in keeping with his character and the numinous nature of the incident. He recognizes two of the most eminent figures in the history of revelation and feels that it is good that he and the sons of Zebedee are present so they can serve Jesus and his heavenly attendants. His proposal to build three tabernacles evidently rests upon a misunderstanding of the significance of the situation. The desire to erect new tents of meeting where God can again communicate with men implies that Peter regards the time of the second exodus as fulfilled and the goal of the sabbath rest achieved. He is anxious to find the fulfilment of the promised glory now, prior to the sufferings Jesus had announced as necessary. His comment reflects a failure to appreciate that the transfiguration was only a momentary anticipation of the glory of the consummated kingdom. The blessings of the new age, which will be shared by *all* the people of God (Ch. 13:26f.), cannot be secured until Jesus has accomplished the sufferings which are integral to his appointed task, culminating in his death. Mark's explanatory comment indicates that the three disciples were quite unable to grasp the messianic significance of what they had witnessed. The direct involvement of God in sending Moses and Elijah and the character of the glory of Christ were tokens of the eschatological judgment announced in Ch. 8:38. The fear that the disciples manifested is understandable in this context. At the same time, the occurrence of the transfiguration between Jesus' announcement of his approaching passion (Ch. 8:31) and the conversation with the disciples on the way down the mountain (Ch. 9:11–13) indicates that Peter's words in verse 5 reflect the same erroneous concept of God's intention as his response in Ch. 8:32. The way through the wilderness has not been terminated by the disclosure of Jesus' unique glory.

7 The response of God to Peter's proposal discloses the real significance of this event. The appearance of a cloud enveloping Jesus, Moses and Elijah served to distinguish the witnesses from the participants in the unveiling of Jesus' parousia glory. This prepared the disciples to hear the solemn admonition addressed to them. The theophany is depicted in the language of the OT where the cloud is frequently the symbol of God's presence and protection (e.g. Ex. 16:10; 19:9; 24:15f.; 33:1). It is particularly significant that the correlation of the cloud and the voice is limited to the exodus accounts of the Pentateuch, as in the instance of the theophany on Sinai (Ex. 24:16). The cloud is God's tabernacle, the pavilion which both reveals and conceals his glory. The one whom God hides within his pavilion bears a special relationship to him (Ps. 29:5). In the case of both Moses and Elijah the epiphany of the glory of God served to vindicate their mission during their respective ministries in the wilderness. This is also the function of the cloud and the heavenly voice on this occasion. When Jesus began his mission in the wilderness of Judea the voice of God declared him to be the beloved Son, the object of his elective pleasure (Ch. 1:11). Now on the wilderness mountain the voice is heard again, reaffirming the Father's approval and confirming Jesus' dignity as the transcendent Son, although he has assumed the role of the rejected, suffering Servant of Isa. 53. Jesus' obedience to his messianic vocation is vindicated by God, precisely at the point where Jesus has announced what obedience entails (Ch. 8:31). The presence of the cloud and the solemn declaration of the voice affirm the same truth: Jesus is the unique Son of God who enjoys the unbroken presence and approval of the Father.

The spoken content of the revelation deserves careful attention. The first clause affirming Jesus' unique filial relationship to God provides the immutable ground for the solemn admonition in the second clause. Because Jesus is God's only Son the disciples are exhorted to hear and obey him. The stress upon Jesus' present status as the Son of God indicates that the transfiguration is more than an enacted promise of future glory. The unchanging fact of his transcendent sonship is the constant presupposition of his words, which reveal the will of God. The command "listen to him," which reinforces this insight, contains an allusion to Deut. 18:15 and serves to identify Jesus as the eschatological Prophet like Moses to whom Israel must listen because he is the final bearer of the word of God. The exhortation has bearing upon all of Jesus' words, but has particular relevance to the new instruction Jesus had been giving to his followers concerning the necessity of his sufferings and of their participation in his humiliation. There can be no doubt that Mark intended his congregation in Rome to take this word to heart.

8 When the cloud lifted, Moses and Elijah had vanished. Jesus alone remained as the sole bearer of God's new revelation to be disclosed in the cross and resurrection. Moses and Elijah had also followed the path of obedience, but having borne witness to Jesus' character and mission, they can help him no more. The way to the cross demanded the submission of the Son and Jesus must set out upon it alone. The transfiguration, however, has disclosed a new aspect of God's truth: Jesus is himself the new Tabernacle of divine glory. His word and deed transcend all past revelation. This was the truth with which the disciples were confronted when they realized they were once again alone in the presence of Jesus.

Verses 9-13 The Coming of Elijah

The terse conversation during the descent from the mountain was provoked by Jesus' instruction to tell no one what had taken place until after his resurrection. The clear implication of this statement is that the period of concealment is to be followed by a time of open proclamation when his status as the transfigured Son and eschatological Judge is to be announced to all (cf. Chs. 13:10; 14:9). This exhortation is of special interest, however, because it is the only instance in the Gospel where Jesus sets a limit to the silence enjoined.

William Wrede seized upon this injunction and found in it the keystone to Mark's theological attempt to explain why Jesus had remained unrecognized as the Messiah during his earthly career. What Wrede failed to perceive was the intention behind the injunction, which must be viewed within the larger context of Chs. 8:29–9:13. The fundamental misunderstanding of Jesus' messianic vocation reflected in Ch. 8:29–33 is still evident in Ch. 9:6–10. Peter is deeply impressed with Jesus' stature as the Messiah and the transfigured Son of God, but he and the other disciples find the necessity of the passion completely incomprehensible (Chs. 8:32 f.; 9:5 f., 30, 32). Jesus prohibits the telling of what they had seen and perceived because their enthusiasm was based on a superficial preconception of what messiahship and sonship signifies. Jesus' injunction in verse 9 is actually a challenge to perceive and proclaim the exalted Son of Man within the context of his historical ministry marked by suffering and rejection, culminated by death on the cross. The unaltered presupposition of Jesus' reference to his resurrection from the dead is the theological necessity to accept the passion in all of its dimensions. Within the will of God Jesus can be the exalted, resurrected Son of Man only as he is the suffering, rejected Son of Man (Ch. 9:12b). The reference to his resurrection is appropriate because this event is already a first realization of the majesty of the Son of Man at his parousia. The reality of his exaltation as the transfigured Son, however, can be appreciated only when the significance of his sufferings has been grasped. The response of the disciples in verse 10 implies that Jesus' resurrection will itself be the precondition for the disciples to understand this fact.

10 The disciples obeyed Jesus' injunction, but were puzzled concerning its meaning. It can be assumed that they were thoroughly familiar with the concept of the resurrection of the dead as the climactic event of the last day (cf. Chs. 6:14, 16; 12:18–27). What perplexed them was what this rising from the dead of the Son of Man could mean. This is explicit in the textual tradition supported by Caesarean and Western manuscripts, where the precise form of Jesus' reference in verse 9 is repeated in verse 10, and it is the necessary implication in the text followed by the ASV or RSV as well. The disciples' real question is, What have death and resurrection to do with the Son of Man? They possessed no categories by which they could distinguish between Jesus' statements concerning his resurrection and those concerning his parousia, and the relationship between these two distinct events remained obscure. Jesus' reference to his death and resurrection after three days may have led them to expect a duplicate of Elijah's experience of translation (cf. Ch. 8:31 with 2 kings 2:17), or some similar experience of exaltation following humiliation. The place of Jesus' passion and death, together with his resurrection, was the unexpected and incomprehensible middle term between the present and the magnificent future assured by the transfiguration. What bothered the disciples specifically, then, was the phrase "from among the dead," together with the implication that time would yet remain before the consummation for the proclamation of what they had seen.

11 The disciples' question concerning Elijah is relevant at this point in the discussion. The presence of Elijah at the transfiguration (Ch. 9:4f.), as well as Jesus' reference to the resurrection, suggested that the consummation was imminent. But if this is true, where is Elijah who must prepare the people for the searching judgment of God (cf. Mal. 3:1f.; 4:5f.; Ecclus. 48:10)? It is probable that this question actually masks an objection to Jesus' announcement of his suffering and death, for the restoration Elijah is to effect just prior to the end makes messianic suffering unnecessary.

The reference to scribal teaching sheds light on a polemic use of the biblical teaching concerning the return of Elijah before the day of the Lord to discredit the impression created by Jesus' authoritative word and deed. In the earliest sources the primary task of Elijah is to prepare the people of God for the reception of salvation through repentance. An early

tradition, however, links the prophet's return with the restoration of the flask of anointing oil (*Mekilta* to Ex. 16:33), and this conception is presupposed in the later scribal objections to Jesus' messiahship as expressed by Trypho in Justin's famous *Dialogue*: "The Messiah—if he has indeed been born and exists anywhere—is unknown and does not even know himself, and has no power, until Elijah comes to anoint him and make him known to all" (*Dial.* 8, 4; cf. 49, 1; Jn. 7:27). If this is the general scribal concept to which the disciples refer, it serves to reinforce their objection to Jesus' tacit allusion to his death in verse 9. The appearance of Elijah with Jesus upon the mountain of transfiguration could only be the anticipated return. What room for sufferings remains?

12 Jesus acknowledged that the affirmation that Elijah must come first and restore all things was certainly correct (cf. Mal. 3:23 LXX=4:5f. M.T.). The fact that the Scripture also affirms that the Son of Man must experience suffering and rejection, however, indicates that Elijah's task as the restorer cannot signify what the disciples apparently believe it to mean. The reference to the sufferings of the Son of Man is undeniably abrupt, but serves to qualify the facile assumptions of the disciples as well as the scribes and responds to the more fundamental, unexpressed question concerning the necessity for suffering which lies hidden in the question of verse 11. In verse 9 Jesus had spoken of his resurrection from the dead; his suffering and rejection is introduced in verse 12b by way of explanation. The allusion to Isa. 53:3, where the Servant experiences rejection and is treated as an object of contempt, reinforces Jesus' insistence that his sonship is misunderstood unless it is perceived that his exaltation is inseparably bound up with his humiliation. The response to the disciples' question concerning Elijah by a further question concerning the rejection of the Son of Man has a deeper intention, however. Basic to Jesus' understanding of Elijah's function is the restoration through repentance promised in Mal. 4:6, and fulfilled in the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist. Verse 12b serves as a warning that the sufferings of John and his shameful rejection do not disqualify him from fulfilling the role of Elijah nor do Jesus' sufferings discredit him as the transcendent Son of Man.

13 Jesus' veiled affirmation implicitly identifies John the Baptist as the eschatological messenger promised in Mal. 4:5f. John is the Elijah sent by God because he fulfilled the function expected of Elijah, leading the people to renewal through repentance and forgiveness. His sufferings at the hands of Herod and Herodias (Ch. 6:14–29), which are indicated by an idiomatic expression denoting absolute and arbitrary power (cf. 2 Macc. 7:16), strengthen the identity of John with Elijah, who in his own ministry was harassed by a wicked woman and a weak king (1 Kings 19:2, 10). The startling character of this identification needs to be appreciated. The secret of Jesus' messianic vocation, conditioned by suffering as well as exaltation, leads to the disclosure of John's vocation as Elijah.³⁶ That the identification is not made explicit is consistent with the restraint Mark has exercised elsewhere when dealing with Jesus' identity. Thus in Ch. 1:2–8 the Baptist's resemblance to Elijah is simply suggested without comment and his ministry is placed under the rubric of Mal. 3:1 rather than Mal. 4:5f. The failure of the disciples to understand Jesus' teaching about his own sufferings (Chs. 8:32f.; 9:6, 10, 11, 32) undoubtedly extended to their comprehension of the sufferings of Elijah as well. John's identity, like that of Jesus himself, remains hidden until after the resurrection. Paradoxically, the vindication of John's ministry comes through his death and the violation of every human right. He participates in God's sovereign purpose which triumphs in apparent defeat. John's obscurity and ignominious death express all the ambiguity and suffering of Christian existence in the interval before the parousia. In this sense, John provides an example for the persecuted Christians in Rome. What *they* (Antipas and Herodias) did to him, *they* (men hostile to God) will do to men whose allegiance to Jesus and the gospel is unwavering (Ch. 13:9–13). The significant point, however, is that he

suffered as Elijah and his ministry demonstrated that the fulfilment of “all things” was at hand. The ambiguity between his true dignity and his hiddenness in the world will be resolved only at the parousia when the people of God will be vindicated by the Son of Man who shared their sufferings and rejection. The reference to Elijah’s sufferings thus underscores the point made in verse 9: glory comes only after humiliation.

Verses 14-29 The Healing of a Possessed Boy

Mark’s account of this incident is vivid and detailed: verses 14b–16, 21–24 and 26–27 have no parallel in Matthew or Luke. The impression conveyed is that the episode has been reported from the point of view of one of the disciples who returned with Jesus from the mountain. The return from the glory of the transfiguration to the reality of demonic possession serves to reinforce the theme that Jesus enters into his glory only through confrontation with the demonic and the suffering this entails (cf. Ch. 9:19). The relationship between Ch. 9:2–13 and Ch. 9:14–29 corresponds to that between Jesus’ baptism, with its theophanic note, and the trial in the desert where he confronted Satan (Ch. 1:9–13). The stress upon the powerlessness of the disciples is an element not found elsewhere in the evangelical tradition, but this is closely related to their failure to understand Jesus or the power released through him. The episode exhibits the disaster which occurs when men from whom the power of faith may be expected are proven to be void of power when it is needed. The healing of the possessed boy demonstrates what faith expressed through prayer could have accomplished, even though Jesus was absent from the disciples. There are pastoral overtones throughout the account, which has pointed relevance for the community of Rome, which felt itself to be powerless and defeated in the absence of the Lord at a critical moment in its own experience.

14–15 The scene at the base of the mountain is vividly sketched. The dispute, in which the disciples, the scribes and certain of the by-standers were taking part, had so engrossed the crowd that they had not seen Jesus and the other three men approaching. The presence of the scribes may indicate witnesses sent out by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem to gather evidence against Jesus, who was suspected of misleading the people. The prescribed procedure, which demanded a thorough investigation by official envoys, offers an explanation for the presence of scribes from Jerusalem at other points in Jesus’ ministry (Chs. 3:22–30; 7:1–5). If this supposition is correct, the dispute undoubtedly concerned not only the failure of the disciples but the more basic question concerning their authorization to attempt an exorcism.

Verse 15 has the character of a marginal note, presenting Mark’s comment on the fact reported: in seeing Jesus, the people were astonished. The astonishment of the crowd was occasioned by the presence of Jesus, rather than by any particular aspect of the event (such as his unexpected arrival at a critical moment). In the Gospel expressions of fear and astonishment serve to emphasize the revelatory content and christological significance of many incidents. The evangelist wishes to stress that the person of Jesus himself provokes astonishment (cf. Ch. 10:32). This is the only instance where the respectful salutation of Jesus, presumably with the word of greeting “peace to you,” by the multitude is reported. It is appropriate to the notice that the people were astonished when they saw him.

16–18 Jesus’ question was probably addressed to the scribes, who had taken advantage of his absence to embarrass the disciples still further. He was answered, however, by a man from the crowd—the one who was most deeply concerned—the father of a possessed boy who had brought his son to Jesus for healing. His respectful address “Teacher,” which carries the same nuance as “Rabbi” in Ch. 9:5, together with the emphatic declaration “I brought my son to you,” indicates an expectation of deliverance based upon conviction. Without

answering the question of verse 16 directly, he explained the situation which had erupted in the intense dispute between the disciples and the scribes.

The description of the destructive energy released at unexpected intervals by the demonic spirit indicates the seriousness of the boy's condition. Violent convulsions, foaming at the mouth, involuntary gnashing of the teeth, rigidity followed by utter exhaustion, resemble the symptoms of the major form of epilepsy. The reference to a dumb and deaf spirit (Ch. 9:17, 25) implies that the child's situation was aggravated by an inability to speak or hear. What was involved, however, was not simply a chronic nervous disorder but demonic possession. The violence of the seizures, and the reference to repeated attempts to destroy the youth by hurling him into a fire or water (Ch. 9:20, 22, 26), indicate that the purpose of demonic possession is to distort and destroy the image of God in man. That this destruction should be heaped upon a child only serves to indicate how radical the issue is between demonic power and Jesus, the bestower of life (Ch. 9:27).

The father had appealed to the disciples to exercise the power known to belong to Jesus because the principle basic to discipleship was that "the messenger of a man is as the man himself." In Jesus' absence the disciples stood in his place and were regarded as he is. It was therefore legitimate to expect that they possessed the power of their master. For their part, the disciples had good reason to believe that they could cast out the demon because they had been commissioned to expel demons in the context of their mission, and they had been successful (Ch. 6:7, 13). They undoubtedly tried in various ways to heal the boy, but they were inadequate to the resistance they encountered. They possessed the power of God only in personal faith, but during Jesus' absence an attitude of unbelief and self-confidence, based on past success, had exposed them to failure. Their inability appears to have shaken the father's confidence in Jesus' ability to do anything (cf. Ch. 9:22 "if you can"). He appealed for Jesus' help directly only after another violent convulsion, and then with doubt and hesitation.

19 Jesus' poignant cry of exasperation is an expression of weariness which is close to heart-break (cf. Chs. 3:5; 8:12). This is brought into sharp relief when his exclamation is seen to be a personal word addressed to the disciples, who alone had failed at the crucial moment. Although they had been privileged to be with Jesus and possessed the charism of healing, they had been defeated through unbelief when they stood in his place and sought to exercise his power. The lack of faith and hardness of heart reproved on other occasions (Chs. 4:40; 6:50, 52; 8:17–21) continued to characterize the disciples and betrayed a costly failure to understand the nature of their task and of the relationship that they must sustain to Jesus. The qualitative overtones in "unbelieving generation" suggest that the disciples remain indistinguishable from the unregenerate men who demand signs but are fundamentally untrue to God (Ch. 8:12, 38). The rhetorical questions, "how long shall I be with you? how long shall I bear with you?" express the loneliness and the anguish of the one authentic believer in a world which expresses only unbelief. The opposition expressed between "I" and "you" in these statements is seen in its true character only when it is recognized that what God says of his relationship to faithless Israel (cf. Isa. 63:8–10), Jesus now says of his relationship to the future community of faith. It is a measure of Jesus' infinite patience that he continues to instruct the Twelve and prepare them for the day in which they will stand in his place and continue his work (Chs. 3:14f.; 9:28f.; 14:28; 16:7).

20–22 The antipathy between Jesus and the demonic realm is evident in the violence of the seizure the boy experienced when he was brought before the Lord. By reducing the son to complete helplessness the unclean spirit betrayed his malicious intent to destroy the child and his utter contempt for Jesus. It is evident that the Lord was deeply moved. His question concerning the length of time the boy had been subject to such attacks shows his deep humanity and concern, for the source of the question is compassion. The father was deeply

alarmed and saw in this new convulsion one more incident in a series of near-fatal seizures which could only end in disaster if help was not forthcoming. His distress is well expressed in the desperate cry, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us, and help us.” At the same time, his words contain a concealed accusation against the powerlessness of the disciples, which has led him to doubt Jesus’ ability to offer real assistance to his son.

23–24 Jesus seized upon the father’s words at the point where they were most tempered with doubt: “if you can.” Verse 23 can be paraphrased, “As regards your remark about my ability to help your son, I tell you everything depends upon your ability to believe, not on mine to act.” By this reversal of intent, Jesus indicates that the release of the man’s son from possession is not to be a response to the conditional “if you can,” as if his power were something to be elicited through challenge. What is to be tested in the arena of experience is not Jesus’ ability, but the father’s refusal to set limits to what can be accomplished through the power of God. In its struggle with temptation, faith must always free itself from the disastrous presumption of doubt, in the certainty that with God nothing is impossible (Ch. 10:27), and that his majesty becomes most visible when human resources have become exhausted. Jesus thus calls for that faith which bows its head before the concealed glory of God (cf. Chs. 5:36; 11:23f.). The parallel in expression between Ch. 9:23 and Ch. 10:27 indicates that through faith the believer shares in the sovereign rule of God and therefore, either actively or passively, experiences miraculous power. In this instance, healing is to be the response to radical faith in Jesus, through whom the power of God is released.

The father’s response indicates that he understands Jesus’ words in this light, for he immediately relates the solemn declaration concerning faith to himself. His cry expresses humanity and distress at being asked to manifest radical faith when unbelief is the form of human existence. At the same time that he affirms his faith, he associates himself with the rebuke addressed to the disciples: this generation is always unbelieving. The ambivalence in his confession is a natural expression of anxiety in the earnest desire to see his son released, but it is also a candid plea for help at that point where his faith is ready to fail. The exchange between Jesus and the father established the personal relationship necessary for the accomplishment of the release.

25–27 The statement that Jesus acted because he saw that a multitude was rapidly gathering is consistent with the reserve he exercised on other occasions when exorcising malignant spirits. The reference to the crowd, however, is puzzling. It is natural to think of the crowd mentioned in verse 14, although there has been no mention of withdrawal from the people, as in Chs. 7:33; 8:23. It is possible that others began to converge upon the spot as word of Jesus’ presence spread. The reference, however, must remain obscure. The release was effected through Jesus’ authoritative word. The expression of the command both positively and negatively served to make it clear that the attacks were now to be a thing of the past. The double rebuke of the unclean spirit may have been prompted by the display of contempt for Jesus exhibited in the severe convulsion reported in verse 20. That malicious action was repeated at the moment of exorcism with such violence that the boy took on the appearance of a corpse—so much so that most of the people said he was dead. The expression “became as one dead” implies that he was not dead, although there was clearly room for discussion concerning this (cf. Ch. 5:39–42). But the accumulation of the vocabulary of death and resurrection in verses 26–27, and the parallelism with the narrative of the raising of Jairus’ daughter, suggest that Mark wished to allude to a death and resurrection. The dethroning of Satan is always a reversal of death and an affirmation of life. There is a nuance in this instance, however, which must be appreciated. There appears to be a definite heightening of demonic resistance to Jesus which can be traced in the sequence Ch. 1:23–27—Ch. 5:1–20—Ch. 9:14–29. In this instance the disciples are powerless before the

demon's tenacious grip upon the child and Jesus is successful only by the costly means of death and resuscitation. The healing of the possessed boy thus points beyond itself to the necessity of Jesus' own death and resurrection before Satan's power can be definitively broken.

28–29 These verses have the character of an epilogue to the account, which ends with verse 27. Without the epilogue, the theme of the powerlessness of the disciples would remain incomplete and unexplained. A withdrawal to a house where Jesus may be questioned in private by the disciples is recorded in Chs. 4:10; 7:17; 9:28 and 10:10, and on each occasion these conversations provide supplementary teaching reserved for the disciples alone. In the house Jesus emphasizes the theological point of an incident. In this instance the final conversation relates to the central theme of the unit, for the epilogue qualifies the faith of verse 23 as the faith that prays.

In response to the inevitable question of why they had failed, Jesus explained to the disciples that such malign evil spirits can be expelled only by a full reliance upon the unlimited power of God expressed through prayer. This response contains at least the implicit criticism that the disciples had failed because they had not acted in prayer and sincere faith. The stress that prayer alone is efficacious, however, is striking because in Judaism the recitation of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4–6), and of Psalms 3 and 91 was considered a powerful agent against evil spirits. In the early Church the efficacy of fasting was championed and this emphasis has left its mark upon almost the entire manuscript tradition of verse 29. Jesus, however, spoke only of prayer as the source of faith's power and the means of its strength. The disciples had been tempted to believe that the gift they had received from Jesus (Ch. 6:7) was in their control and could be exercised at their disposal. This was a subtle form of unbelief, for it encouraged them to trust in themselves rather than in God. They had to learn that their previous success in expelling demons provided no guarantee of continued power. Rather the power of God must be asked for on each occasion in radical reliance upon his ability alone. When faith confronts the demonic, God's omnipotence is its sole assurance, and God's sovereignty is its only restriction. This is the faith which experiences the miracle of deliverance.

Verses 30-32 The Second Major Prophecy of the Passion

The re-entrance into Galilee marks a return to familiar territory, but the public ministry which had stirred the province was not to be resumed. This was simply the first leg of the journey from the territory of Herod Philip through Galilee and Perea to Jerusalem. The subject of the brief section covering the return to Galilee (Ch. 9:30–50) is Jesus' instruction of the Twelve, first concerning his destiny, and then their responsibility toward one another and toward men of faith beyond their immediate circle. Jesus' intention that his presence in Galilee should be unrecognized reflects not only the desire to instruct the disciples without interruption but a sense of compulsion to press toward Jerusalem where his messianic mission is to be fulfilled.

31 The three prophecies of the passion are distinct in narrative setting and formulation, and should be regarded as separate utterances. The second major prophecy differs from the first (Ch. 8:31) in not speaking of a divinely imposed necessity, but of a fact so certain it can be described as accomplished ("is delivered"). It is also briefer in formulation, referring to abandonment to the will of men, violent death and resurrection. The stress on suffering and rejection is absent, perhaps because these aspects of Jesus' humiliation were re-emphasized in Ch. 9:12b. The element which is new is the notice that the Son of Man will be delivered up (or handed over) into the hands of men (cf. Ch. 14:41). "To deliver up" or "hand over" is an important concept in the context of lawsuits and in the Jewish theology of martyrdom. More

than simply the coming of an individual into another's power, the term connotes the actual fulfilment of God's will as expressed in Scripture. Particularly in martyrdom, God is the one who permits (or hinders) the handing over in fulfilment of his deeper purposes. "Into the hands of men" reinforces the concept of abandonment, as is evident in Jer. 33 (M.T. 26):24 where the full phrase occurs: "given over into the hands of the people to be put to death." After the betrayal by Judas and Jesus' arrest, it was natural to associate the terminology of "handing over" with that act of treachery (cf. Chs. 3:19; 14:41). The background of the term in Scripture, however, indicates that the thought is more profound: Jesus will be delivered into the hands of men by God, and what takes place on the level of historical occurrence has ultimate significance because it centers in the eschatological action of God. The precise wording of verse 31 may have been influenced by Isa. 53:6, 12 (LXX), where the expiatory death of the Servant is prominently in view. Jesus' statement indicates that God's redemptive will provides the key to understanding his passion.

32 The failure of the disciples to understand Jesus' meaning (cf. Ch. 9:10) and their fear of discussing it with him combine to suggest their apprehension and Jesus' essential loneliness on the way to Jerusalem. They cannot penetrate his meaning, and they are afraid to do so because they suspect that to know more would be painful. The text of verse 31 is not obscure, but Jesus may have used an ambiguous Aramaic expression which can mean exaltation or crucifixion. This may explain both the fear of the disciples to inquire more precisely concerning his meaning and their readiness to be preoccupied with questions of precedence in Jesus' Kingdom (Ch. 9:33f.; 10:35–37).

Verses 33-37 Who's the Greatest

The instruction given to the disciples "in the house" in Capernaum extends through verse 50. It consists of a group of sayings which appear to have been built up primarily through catchword-association, in which one saying is linked to another through a related expression. Ch. 9:38–42 seems to have been joined to Ch. 9:33–37 through the recurring phrase "in my name" (verses 37, 38, 39, 41). The warning against offending "one of these little ones" in verse 42 was prompted by association with "one of these little children" in verse 37, while the formulation "whoever shall offend ... it were better for him" in verse 42 attracted the sayings concerning the offending hand, foot and eye where the symmetry in phrasing is particularly evident (verses 43, 45, 47). The reference to the unquenchable fire of hell in verse 48 served to recall the proverb that everyone shall be salted with fire (verse 49), which is itself linked to the final thoughts by the key word "salt." The series of catchwords and recurring phrases were aids to memorization and it is probable that teaching given historically on several occasions was brought together for catechetical purposes. At the same time, there is an appropriateness to the material in this context which must be recognized. The unity of Ch. 9:33–50 is imposed through the Semitic device of *inclusio*, in which there is a return to the beginning of a section at its conclusion. The final word in verse 50 ("Be at peace with one another") has pointed relevance to the strife reported in verses 33f., while the material introduced within the section has direct bearing on the missionary character of the Twelve—and of the Church.

33–34 When Jesus asks a question of the disciples, his intention is to provide new teaching (cf. Ch. 8:27, 29, 31). The direct question concerning the heated discussion on the way to Capernaum proved embarrassing to the disciples. It was difficult to be honest that the point of the dispute had been who was the greatest among them. Their silence recalls the silence of Jesus' adversaries before his pointed question in the synagogue at Capernaum (Ch. 3:4). The question of greatness could be posed from the vantage point of understanding, as in

Logion 12 of the Gospel of Thomas: “The disciples said to Jesus, We know that you will go away from us. Who is it that will then be great over us?” In Mark, however, the dispute over greatness indicates the degree to which the disciples had failed to understand Jesus’ solemn affirmation concerning his abandonment to the will of men (Ch. 9:31f.). It also shows how impregnated they were with the temper of their own culture where questions of precedence and rank were constantly arising.

35 The question of precedence was resolved on the authority of Jesus: he who wishes to be first must determine to be the servant of all. This surprising reversal of all human ideas of greatness and rank is a practical application of the great commandment of love for one’s neighbor (Ch. 12:31; Lev. 19:18) and a reaffirmation of the call to self-denial which is the precondition for following Jesus (Ch. 8:34, where the formulation “whoever wishes to come after me” is parallel to “whoever wishes to be first” in Ch. 9:35). The order of life for the disciples in their relationship to each other is to be the service of love. By transforming the question of greatness into the task-orientation of service, Jesus established a new pattern for human relationships which leaves no occasion for strife or opposition toward one another. The disciples’ thoughts were upon the period of glory, when questions of rank seemed appropriate (cf. Ch. 10:35–37); Jesus redirected them to his insistence that the way to glory leads through suffering and death. The point of suffering is here located in the service to be accomplished, where service means specifically sacrifice for others. The disciples cannot order their relationships as they please but are to recognize in one another men under whom they place themselves as servants. Jesus thus decided their question in a way which is in keeping with his proclamation of his own messianic vocation (cf. Ch. 10:43–45). This was clearly recognized in Polycarp’s exhortation to the men whose task was to discharge the office of servants in the church at Philippi: “Likewise must the deacons be blameless ... walking according to the truth of the Lord, who was ‘the servant of all’ ” (*ad Phil.* 5:2).

36–37 Taking an illustration from life, Jesus set a young child from the home among the ambitious disciples. The taking of the child into his arms recalls Ch. 10:13–16, where Jesus’ love for children is evident. His action on this occasion, however, introduces an enacted parable. The child is set before the Twelve as an example of *discipleship*, and the fact that the same Aramaic word means “child” and “servant” lends to his presence the character of a dramatized play on the affirmation in verse 35. The disciples are to identify themselves with children and become “the little ones” who have no basis for pretensions to greatness. The statement that to receive a little child is equivalent to receiving Jesus (verse 37a) must, therefore, be interpreted of the disciples. This is confirmed by the vocabulary of the formulation and by the immediate context. “Receive” must be understood in the same sense this word has in Ch. 6:11, where it refers to the welcome extended to the disciples because they come as Jesus’ representatives. The mission context of Ch. 6:7–13 provides the key to verse 37 where “the child” comes in Jesus’ name, as his representative. “The child” only represents Jesus if he has been sent by him, in accordance with the legal principle that the emissary of a man is as the man himself. Because he comes in Jesus’ name, invested with his authority, he is to be received. The vocabulary of hospitality appears in verse 41 as well, where Jesus speaks of the cup of water extended to the disciples because they come “in the name of the Messiah.” In verse 42, a follower of Jesus is in view when he speaks of “one of these little ones who believe in me,” and the image of the child is once more invoked. There is thus a clear progression in thought in verses 35–37: the admonition to become “the servant of all” in verse 35 is reinforced by the parabolic action of verse 36. But with the admonition to fulfill the disciple’s vocation by becoming “one of these children” is linked the assurance of identification with Jesus. The Lord says, in effect, whoever receives you, receives me and the Father who sent me (verse 37). This provision lends to the servant’s task the greatest

dignity. At the same time Jesus associates himself with the posture of the servant, in anticipation of the startling declaration of Ch. 10:45.

Exorcism Through Jesus's Name

The assurance that a special and intimate relationship exists between Jesus and the Twelve (verse 37) prompted John to call Jesus' attention to an unsuccessful attempt to prevent an unauthorized use of his power and name by an anonymous exorcist. This is the only time when Mark calls attention to John alone. It is striking, however, that after each of the three major prophecies of the passion the evangelist inserts the response of one of the three disciples who were closest to Jesus: Peter (Ch. 8:32f.), John (Ch. 9:38), and James, with John (Ch. 10:35–37). Mark shows in this way that even the most privileged of the disciples failed to understand what the passion signified for their life and mission. The use of the first person plural ("we saw ... we forbade him ... not following us") indicates that John was speaking for all of the disciples.

What had disturbed the Twelve was the exercise of Jesus' power and name by a stranger who had not been authorized to do so. He was not even a member of Jesus' company; yet he had refused to listen to the disciples when they sought to restrain his activity. John's complaint is significant, for it reveals an awareness that only the Twelve had been commissioned by Jesus and were authorized to act in his name, i.e. as his representatives and with his power. The irony of John's disclosure, at this point in the narrative, is that in Ch. 9:14–18 the disciples themselves had been powerless in a situation involving demonic resistance to exorcism. The action of the Twelve toward a stranger who was effective in exercising Jesus' power only points to their own ineptness and lack of understanding (cf. Num. 11:27–29, where Joshua wishes to forbid the unauthorized exercise of the gift of prophecy). The Twelve had an unduly narrow perspective toward the work of God. The man had grasped that an essential dimension of Jesus' mission was the confrontation and defeat of Satan. The use of Jesus' name (i.e. "I command you to come out in Jesus' name!") shows an awareness that it was Jesus who ordered the action, which was accomplished by his sovereign will. In the light of the experience of Jewish exorcists who misused Jesus' name, without understanding (Acts 19:13–16; cf. Mt. 7:21–23), it is necessary to affirm that the name of Jesus discloses its authentic power only when a man joins Jesus in faith and obedience to the will of God. The fact that Jesus' power was active in the man, bringing release to men who had been enslaved to demonic possession, marks him as a believer. His action was an effective witness to the imminent Kingdom of God.

39–40 Jesus opposed the narrow exclusivism of the Twelve with an open and generous spirit. The disciples' action was an abuse of their authority, for they had presumed to speak for Jesus where they had no competence. Qualifying the prohibition "Do not forbid him" is the recognition that a mighty work was being done and that Jesus' name was being proclaimed. The proverbial statement "he will not lightly speak evil of me" entails subtle humor, to which there are formal parallels in Jewish sources. With this remark Jesus gently contrasts the effectiveness of the unknown exorcist with the ineffectiveness of the Twelve. Concurrently, it expresses the important point that the use of Jesus' name involves a recognition of his authority. It was not necessary to be a direct follower of Jesus to share in a conflict which has cosmic dimensions; opposition to Satan unites the man to Jesus in his distinctive mission (cf. Ch. 3:27). The real ground of the prohibition is provided in the epigrammatic statement in verse 40. The sharp recognition of only two sides ("against us" and "for us") radicalizes the demand to welcome participation in the mission, even from unexpected quarters. If anyone is working for the cause to which Jesus and the Twelve are committed, he cannot work against it at the same time.

41 The reference to the person who gives a drink of water to a disciple on the ground that he belongs to Jesus concretely illustrates the principle of verse 40 and indicates how wide is the range of participation in the mission which Jesus envisions. The offering of a cup of water to quench the biting thirst induced by the burning heat of the eastern sun is an act of hospitality (cf. verse 37) as well as an example of the humble service commended to the disciples in verse 35. It becomes a significant act when the drink is offered to a man *because he is a disciple and belongs to Jesus*. This statement presupposes the same frame of reference integral to verse 37, that the emissary of a man is as the man himself, and what is done to the emissary is done to the one who sent him. Jesus thus recognizes that the cup of water is extended to himself, and that this act of kindness is actually a token of faith and obedience. That is why he solemnly promises that the one who declares himself “for us” by this tangible action will not lose his reward. He will have a place in the Kingdom of God with the disciples and with Jesus, with whom he has identified himself in this small way. The reference to “his reward” carries no thought of deserving or of merit, for there is no way in which a cup of water may be conceived as *meriting* participation in the Kingdom. It serves rather to stress God’s awareness of all who share in the extension of Jesus’ work, and to emphasize that there are no distinctions between “trivial” and “important” tasks. There is only faith and obedience, shown in devotion to Jesus, and wherever these qualities exist they call forth the approval of God.

42 The relationship of verse 42 to the larger discussion introduced by John’s reference to an unknown exorcist in verse 38 is not generally recognized. It receives no support from the parallel in Mt. 18:15, the paragraphing in the critical editions of the text or in any modern translation of the Scripture. There is, nevertheless, good reason to believe that in Mark’s intention verse 42 provides the final comment on the disclosure that the disciples had tried to prevent a man from exorcising demons in Jesus’ name. The warning against causing “one of these least ones” to stumble in their faith follows naturally upon verse 41, with which it shares an introductory “whoever” clause (“Whoever gives to you a cup of water ... And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe on me to stumble ...”). The explicit reference to those who believe in Jesus looks back upon the concrete action described in verse 41, and presumably in verses 38f. as well. The stern warning has immediate relevance for those who had sought to prevent the exercise of faith in Jesus’ name, and corresponds in severity to the word addressed to Peter when he sought to turn Jesus from the path of obedience (Ch. 8:33). Verse 42 performs the same function as Ch. 8:33: it serves to expose a grievous misconception and by graphic language to impress the seriousness of the matter indelibly upon the disciples’ hearts.

In verse 37 Jesus had designated the disciples as “the children” who were to be received in his name. Here the designation “the little ones” is extended to other followers whose allegiance to Jesus is no less exemplified in their own spheres of labor (exorcism, hospitality) than is true of the Twelve. The description points to the secret that they bear a concealed or future dignity because they believe in Jesus and act in his name. The parallel designation underscores the irony that those who are to be received because they belong to Jesus (verse 37) should be the occasion of causing to fail in their faith others who equally belong to him. In such an eventuality, Jesus implies, the punishment incurred will be so severe it would have been better for a man if he had been drowned before he could have committed so grievous an offense. The graphic reference to the millstone around the neck and being cast into the sea would not have been lost upon the disciples, who undoubtedly had heard of the punishment inflicted by the Romans in Galilee on some of the leaders of the insurrection under the early Zealot leader, Judas the Galilean (cf. Acts 5:37).

The Requirements of Discipleship

These verses constitute a call to concrete obedience which renews the radical demands of discipleship enunciated in Ch. 8:34–38. In contrast to verse 42, where Jesus spoke of causing someone else to fall away from him, these stern warnings relate to the ensnaring of oneself in sin. The issue remains the same, however. In the specific context, the offense is in the question of decision for the Kingdom of God, which cannot be divorced from the person of Jesus himself and the exercise of faith. It is particularly important to appreciate the eschatological framework of Jesus' words concerning radical self-punishment of an offending member of the body. The sharp contrast between departure (or, being cast) into hell and entrance into life (or the Kingdom) presupposes the situation of the final judgment in which the decision of God (or the Son of Man, cf. Ch. 8:38) concerning each man is irreversible and entails eternal consequences.

It was not a Palestinian custom to refer to an abstract activity but to the specific member of the body which is responsible for it. For this reason, Jesus speaks of the offending hand, foot and eye, all members which have highly important functions to fulfill. They characterize a man concretely as one who acts and who is responsible for his actions. The representation of the members as the acting subject ("if your hand leads you to offend") belongs to the realism of Jewish thought. The radical demand that the hand or foot should be hacked off or the eye plucked out if they expose a man to the danger of final rejection juxtaposes the relative value of physical life with the absolute value of that authentic, imperishable life which is bestowed by God alone. Jesus did not hesitate to call for the renunciation of possessions (Ch. 10:21), family (Ch. 10:28f.) and of life itself (Ch. 8:34f.) if these things stood in the way of following him; here he demands the complete sacrifice of the sinful activity of the member. This was not a demand for physical self-mutilation, but in the strongest manner possible Jesus speaks of the costliest sacrifices. For the sake of the unconditional rule of God the members of the body must not be placed at the disposal of sinful desire. The sinful member must be renounced in order that the whole body be not cast into hell. Conversely, concern for the preservation of a hand, a leg or a foot must not lead a man to denial of the sovereignty of God or his allegiance to Jesus. This thought found heroic exemplification in the history of Jewish martyrdom (e.g. 2 Macc. 7:2–41, where the sacrifice of limbs and life is accepted in order to be true to God and to receive life from his hand) and was to play a crucial role in the martyr Church as well. Whatever in one's life tempts one to be untrue to God must be discarded, promptly and decisively, even as a surgeon amputates a hand or a leg in order to save a life.

What is designated "life" in verses 43 and 45 means specifically "life with God," as the parallel with "the kingdom of God" in verse 47 indicates. In the related context of Ch. 10:17–31, this reality is qualified as "eternal life" (Ch. 10:17, 30). In contrast with entrance into life Jesus speaks of "departure into hell, to the unquenchable fire" (verse 43). The final phrase does not appear in verses 45 and 47; it may represent Mark's explanation of the word "Gehenna," which would be unfamiliar to Gentile readers, on the basis of Isa. 66:24 (cited in verse 48). In Jewish sources Gehenna was associated with the eschatological fires of hell and conveyed an image of extreme horror. Entrance into hell indicates spiritual ruin in the starkest terms. This thought is reinforced with the citation of Isa. 66:24 in verse 48, which speaks of the punishment of the sin of rebellion against God. As the final word of the prophecy of Isaiah the passage was thoroughly familiar to the disciples as a vivid picture of a destruction which continues endlessly. The contrast drawn between spiritual life and spiritual death in Ch. 8:35–37 is here redrawn in concrete, tangible terms to sharpen the issue of radical obedience in the context of costly sacrifice.

49 This brief logion, which is preserved by Mark alone, speaks of a different kind of fire—the fire of purification. While verse 48 applies to the rejected, verse 49 has reference to

those who are true to God in a hostile world. The thought of the sacrifice of an offending member of the body (verses 43–47) is here carried a step further: every disciple is to be a sacrifice for God (cf. Rom. 12:1). In the OT the Temple sacrifices had to be accompanied by salt (Lev. 2:13; Ezek. 43:24; cf. Ex. 30:35). The salt-sacrifice metaphor is appropriate to a situation of suffering and trial in which the principle of sacrifice cultivated with respect to the individual members of the body is now severely tested. The disciples must be seasoned with salt, like the sacrifice. This will take place through fiery trials (cf. 1 Peter 1:7; 4:12), through which God will purge away everything contrary to his will. Understood in this way, Jesus' word is a challenging pronouncement on suffering which shed light on the experience of the Church in Nero's Rome. Its preservation in "the teaching manual" of a community facing persecution is fully intelligible.

50 The reference to salt in verse 49 supplies the dominant note for verse 50. Here, however, the associations of salt are no longer cultic, but domestic. Two observations on Palestinian life furnish the background to Jesus' pithy comments. The maxim that "the world cannot survive without salt" (Tractate *Sopherim* XV. 8) is a vivid reminder that salt was a necessity of life in the ancient world because it preserved food from putrefaction. On the other hand, Pliny the Elder had already observed that the salt from the Dead Sea can lose its savory quality and becomes insipid (*Hist. Nat.* 3, 31, 34). Jesus' words presuppose these two truths. The logion concerning salt, however, must be interpreted by the context, which sets forth the demanding requirements of discipleship. The disciples have an eschatological responsibility toward men in a world which is subject to the judgment of God. Jesus warns them that they can lose that salt-like quality which can mean life for the world. Here salt typifies that quality which is the distinctive mark of the disciple, the loss of which will make him worthless. This can only be his allegiance to Jesus and the gospel (cf. Ch. 8:35, 38). The exhortation to guard their salt-like quality in order to be at peace with one another has direct bearing on the situation of strife which provoked the conversation in verses 33ff. What is to set one man apart from another is not distinctions of rank or worth, but the quality of "saltiness." Strife is resolved and peace restored when men recognize in one another a common commitment to Jesus and the gospel, and to the servant's vocation.

Chapter 10

Verses 1-12 Divorce

Mark's account of the Galilean ministry is terminated with Ch. 9. From this point forward the narrative moves swiftly and relentlessly toward its inevitable climax in Jerusalem. Verse 1 is a summary passage, reporting a further stage in the journey toward the Judean capital and the resumption of a public ministry. From Capernaum (Ch. 9:33) Jesus came into southern Palestine. The order in which the provinces are listed (Judea and Perea) suggests that he went south across the mountains of Samaria into Judea, following the ordinary route for pilgrims on their way to the Holy City (cf. Lk. 9:51–53). At some point he crossed over the Jordan into Perea, which was part of the territory of Herod Antipas. The itinerary marks a return to the Jordan region where John the Baptist had conducted his ministry and had suffered imprisonment and martyrdom. If Jesus had been associated with John for any length of time it is possible that in coming to southern Judea and Perea he was returning to an area and people he knew well. His reputation in these areas is attested by Ch. 3:8, although it is not clear whether it was established by direct knowledge or report. In both Judea and Perea Jesus began teaching crowds of people once more, resuming a public ministry which had been discontinued some time before he left Galilee (Ch. 9:30). This aspect of his ministry was

concluded when Jesus went up to Jerusalem, by way of Jericho, for the Passover, or perhaps the Feast of Tabernacles (see Ch. 10:46–11:10).

2 On the question of the lawfulness of divorce the Pharisees and their scribes (and perhaps the majority of the Jewish people) were agreed: divorce was permitted in accordance with the provisions of Deut. 24:1. The only point of real dispute concerned the interpretation of the phrase “something shameful” in Deut. 24:1, which constituted the grounds upon which divorce was to be permitted. From the beginning of the first century variant opinions had polarized into two camps. The followers of Shammai argued that something morally shameful was in view, particularly adultery, but also a failure to observe the Jewish law which prescribed great reserve for a wife. The followers of Hillel argued that in addition to any moral fault, anything which caused annoyance or embarrassment to a husband was a legitimate ground for a divorce suit. It seems likely, however, that far more than this rabbinic dispute was in the background of the question posed in verse 2. The question was hostile in its intention, as Mark indicates by the qualifying phrase “tempting him,” and this larger context of temptation is very important to the passage as a whole. The question of the lawfulness of divorce and remarriage had been the immediate occasion for John the Baptist’s denunciation of the conduct of Herod Antipas and Herodias (Ch. 6:17f.) and had led to his violent death. In Perea Jesus was within the tetrarch’s jurisdiction. The intention behind the question, apparently, was to compromise Jesus in Herod’s eyes, perhaps in the expectation that the tetrarch would seize him even as he had John. The cooperation between the Herodians and the Pharisees, first mentioned in ominous terms in Ch. 3:6 and reiterated in Ch. 12:13, may be a part of the historical situation presupposed in the narrative.

3–4 Jesus cut across the casuistry of the Jewish legal tradition with a direct appeal to the Law (cf. Ch. 7:1–23; 10:17–20). In asking what Moses *commanded* it is evident that Jesus was calling for positive instruction (perhaps specifically the instruction of Gen. 2:24). His questioners answered with an exception and a permission, summarizing Deut. 24:1: Moses permitted divorce providing a certificate of divorce was given to the wife. This provision assumes the practice of divorce and describes a right to which a wife is entitled: she is to be given a bill of divorce which authenticates her release from the marriage contract and affirms her right to remarry. The Mosaic provision was made for the contingency of divorce, but did not in itself determine whether that contingency was right or wrong. Its primary function was to provide a degree of protection for the woman who had been repudiated by her husband.⁹

5 Jesus’ forceful retort is a denunciation of human sinfulness which serves to clarify the intention of the Mosaic provision. In Deut. 24:1 divorce is tolerated, but not authorized or sanctioned. When Jesus affirmed that Moses framed the provision concerning the letter of dismissal out of regard to the people’s hardness of heart, he was using an established legal category of actions allowed out of consideration for wickedness or weakness. What is involved is the lesser of two evils, and, in this instance, a merciful concession for the sake of the woman. Jesus’ purpose is to make clear that the intention of Deut. 24:1 was not to make divorce acceptable but to limit sinfulness and to control its consequences. This had direct bearing on the question of the lawfulness of divorce posed in verse 2. The Mosaic provision in Deut. 24:1–4 was in reality a witness to the gross evil which arose from, or even consisted in, a disregard of the creation ordinance of marriage as set forth in Gen. 1:27; 2:24. The situation that provided the occasion for the permission of divorce was one of moral perversity which consisted in a deliberate determination not to abide by the will of God. Such stubborn rebellion against the divine ordinance is the essence of hard-heartedness. The calloused attitude which could be taken in regard to divorce is well illustrated by the counsel of a respected teacher, Joshua ben Sira (ca. 200 B.C.): “If she go not as you would have her go,

cut her off and give her a bill of divorce” (literally “cut her off from your flesh,” a reflection on the phrase “they shall be one flesh” in Gen. 2:24) (Ecclus. 25:26). Jesus’ judgment regarding hard-heartedness presupposes the abiding validity and obligation of the original divine institution of marriage, and the force of his pronouncement here, and in the following verses, is to obliterate the Mosaic tolerance. In this abrogation of the divorce tolerated under Moses there is applied a stringency which raises jurisprudence to the level of the intrinsic requirement of the Law of God.

6–8 The appeal to the creation narrative lifts the discussion to a higher plane by relating it to the purpose of God with regard to marriage. The citation of Gen. 1:27 and 2:24 does not reflect an arbitrary decision as to God’s will but entails an appeal over against legislation based upon fallen history to the true nature of human existence as it was revealed from the beginning of the creation. The Mosaic permission was a departure from the creation ordinance and from the practice to which it obligated men. The original constitution of the race as male and female is the basis of marriage.¹³ The creation of the two sexes is resolved in unity through marriage, as instituted by God. It was recognized in certain strands of the scribal tradition that Gen. 2:24 commits both husband and wife to mutual fidelity and forbids adultery. The deduction drawn by Jesus in verse 8b (“so then they are no longer two, but one flesh”) affirms the indissolubility of marriage against a husband’s repudiation of his wife. The significant aspect of Jesus’ teaching at this point is that the interdiction of divorce is subservient to the proclamation of the unity of marriage, expressing a reaction against the frequently low esteem of women, even in Judaism.

9 Jesus’ final pronouncement grounds the sanctity of marriage in the authority of God himself. This is consistent with the biblical perspective, which never considers husband and wife alone but always in the presence of God, subject to his commands and aided by his grace. God intended that the purpose of marriage should be unity and that the obligations of marriage should be taken seriously. The decisive “No” to divorce provides the required safeguard against human selfishness which always threatens to destroy marriage. It also warns that the man who dissolves a union sanctioned by God inevitably stands under the divine judgment. This warning has in view the husband, rather than a judicial authority, since in Jewish practice divorce was effected by the husband himself. Behind this solemn prohibition there is a deep concern for personal relationships. Jesus does not envisage marriage as it is at times but as it can and should be—a call to fidelity, peace and love. The conclusion to the public discussion shows that this has not been a rabbinic discussion concerning the interpretation of the Law, but an authoritative teaching, astonishingly different from that of the scribes (cf. Ch. 1:22). The prophetic character of the teaching implies a veiled, messianic proclamation of the Kingdom drawn near in the person of Jesus himself. The disciples are shown that even the ordinances of the Law are not to be followed blindly but are to be carefully considered in the light of the highest standards which Scripture exemplifies. In this historical and geographical context, Jesus’ pronouncement confirms the bold testimony of John and condemns equally Antipas and Herodias.

10–11 In the subsequent discussion with the disciples Jesus declared without qualification that a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. The use of the word “adultery” directs the disciples back to the absolute command of God (Ex. 20:14) and clarifies the seriousness of the issue. The new element in this teaching, which was totally unrecognized in the rabbinic courts, was the concept of a husband committing adultery against his former wife. According to rabbinic law a man could commit adultery against another married man by seducing his wife (Deut. 22:13–29) and a wife could commit adultery against her husband by infidelity, but a husband could not be said to commit adultery

against his wife. The unconditional form of Jesus' statement served to reinforce the abrogation of the Mosaic permission in Deut. 24:1. This sharp intensifying of the concept of adultery had the effect of elevating the status of the wife to the same dignity as her husband and placed the husband under an obligation of fidelity.

12 The right of a wife to divorce her husband was not recognized by Jewish law and even in Roman law was a relatively recent development near the end of the Republic (*ca.* 50–40 B.C.). If the reading supported by the Western and Caesarean families of texts is correct, Jesus did not speak of divorce in verse 12, but of desertion and remarriage. The woman who deserts her husband to marry another man is as guilty of the sin of adultery as the man who divorces his wife and remarries. This was a pointed judgment upon the conduct of Herodias, who had deserted her husband Philip to marry Antipas. The fact that she had sent her former husband a letter of separation did not alter the sinful, adulterous character of her action. The historical context of Jesus' statement and its vindication of the Baptist's denunciation of this adulterous union (Ch. 6:17f.) was apparently lost to view in later strands of the textual tradition. The form of the text found in the ASV, RSV, which presupposes that a wife possesses the ability to divorce her husband, may represent an adaptation of Jesus' statement to the legal situation which prevailed in Rome and elsewhere in the Empire. This was a logical extension of the principle set forth in Ch. 10:11–12. The change brought verse 12 into parallel structurally with verse 11 and had immediate relevance for the Gentile churches.

Verses 13-16 Blessing the Children

The account of Jesus blessing the children furnishes an appropriate sequel to the pronouncements on the sanctity of marriage in Ch. 10:2–12. Although the circumstances are sketched in the barest possible manner and all references to time and place are absent, the situation is clear: children were brought to the Master in order to request his blessing for their future life. Jesus' subsequent action in taking the children into his arms suggests that quite young children were involved. The terms employed by Mark in describing the initial action, however, are ambiguous: the verb may mean "bring" without implying the idea of carrying (cf. Ch. 7:32; 11:2, 7), while in Ch. 5:39–42 the same descriptive term, a young child, is used of a girl of twelve years. Although it is natural to think that the children were brought by their mothers, the masculine gender of the pronoun in the statement that the disciples rebuked *them* points rather in the direction of their fathers, or even to children themselves, the older ones bringing the younger ones to Jesus. This latter idea tends to be confirmed by verse 14, where the prohibition "Do not forbid *them*" has clear reference to the children. It is not said why the disciples sought to interfere and considered children unimportant to him. Their action was actually an abuse of their authority and stems from that same lack of perception which had led them to interfere with an unknown exorcist who was exercising the power of Jesus' name effectively (see on Ch. 9:38). And, significantly, it called forth the same solemn prohibition: "Do not forbid" (Ch. 9:39).

14 The reference to Jesus' indignation at the disciples' rebuff of the children is confined to Mark's account alone. The suggestion of impatience and irritation is strengthened by the sharp staccato effect of the positive and negative commands regarding the children, achieved by asyndeton: "Let the children approach me; do not prevent them" (without an intervening connective). The disciples' attempt to turn the children aside because they were unimportant is one more instance of a persistent tendency to think in wholly human, fallen categories which Jesus had rebuked on earlier occasions (Chs. 8:33; 9:33–37). The Kingdom of God belongs to children, and to others like them who are of no apparent importance, because God has willed to give it to them. That is why these children are to be given access to Jesus, in

whom the Kingdom has drawn near (see on Ch. 1:15). Unlike adults, who do not want anything to be given to them, children are comparatively modest and unspoiled. The Kingdom belongs to such as these because they receive it as a gift. The ground of Jesus' surprising statement is not to be found in any subjective quality possessed by children but rather in their objective humbleness and in the startling character of the grace of God who wills to give the Kingdom to those who have no claim upon it.

15 This solemn pronouncement is directed to the disciples, but has pertinence for all men confronted by the gospel because it speaks of the condition for entrance into the Kingdom of God. The demand that a man become as a little child calls for a fresh realization that he is utterly helpless in his relationship to the Kingdom. The Kingdom is that which God gives and that which a man receives. Essential to the comparison developed in verse 15 is the objective littleness and helplessness of the child, which is presupposed in verse 14 as well. The Kingdom may be entered only by one who knows he is helpless and small, without claim or merit. The comparison "receive ... as a little child" draws its force from the nature of the child to take openly and confidently what is given. The unchildlike piety of achievement must be abandoned in the recognition that to receive the Kingdom is to allow oneself to be given it.²⁸ Jesus is emphatic that the man who does not receive the Kingdom now, simply and naturally as the children received him, will not enter into it when it is finally established in the consummation. What is specifically in view is the reception of the gospel and of Jesus himself as the one in whom the Kingdom has come near (see on Chs. 8:35, 38; 9:1).

16 Jesus' final action was as significant as his words. His genuine love of children, and the tenderness expressed in taking them into his arms and blessing them through prayer and laying on of hands, can only be properly appreciated within the context of the calloused attitudes toward children that still prevailed within Hellenistic society in the first century. A papyrus dated Alexandria, June 17, 1 B.C., contains a letter of instruction from a husband to his expectant wife, who he supposes may have had her child: "if it was a male child, let it live; if it was a female, cast it out." Jesus' action in honoring the children offered concrete illustration that the blessings of the Kingdom are freely given. In context, the bestowing of the blessing constituted a fresh reiteration of the call to true discipleship and obedience to the intention of God.

Verses 17-27 Riches and the Kingdom of God

Mark appears to regard Ch. 10:17–31 as a single unit expressing the essence of Jesus' teaching concerning entrance into the Kingdom of God. This unit occupies a crucial position in the Marcan outline. It follows Ch. 10:13–16, where entrance into the Kingdom is defined as the gift of God bestowed upon those who acknowledge their helplessness in relationship to the Kingdom. It precedes the third major prophecy of the passion, which sharpens the demand to follow Jesus on the way to the cross. Within this context the major emphases of Ch. 10:17–31 are brought into focus. The call to self-denial in order to follow Jesus, sounded earlier in Ch. 8:34–38 and Ch. 9:33–37, is repeated in verse 21. The demand imposed upon the man who wishes to enter the Kingdom (cf. Ch. 9:42–50) is heightened, and the utter impossibility of attaining the Kingdom through human achievement is underscored in verse 27. The incident of the wealthy man who sought out Jesus in order to learn the requirements for securing eternal life provides the setting for a startling proclamation of the demands and the nature of the Kingdom.

It is customary to subdivide the unit between verses 22 and 23, and this paragraphing is reflected in most editions and translations of the text. It is clear, however, that Jesus' statement regarding the danger of riches is a direct comment on the rejection of the call given

in verse 21 and furnishes the necessary sequel to the encounter of verses 17–22. An attractive proposal is that the incident should be regarded as extending through verse 24a, the comment of Jesus in verse 23 together with the note of astonishment in verse 24a terminating the report. The subsequent section, verses 24b–27, would be in the nature of an appendix joined to the incident because of its appropriateness to the situation. This would explain the essential repetition of verse 23 in verse 24b and the repeated statement that the disciples were amazed (verse 24a, verse 26a). While the question regarding the rewards of discipleship is appropriate to this context and may have been prompted historically by the refusal of Jesus' call, verses 28–31 are easily detachable from verses 22–27 and may be considered independently.

17 Behind this recorded incident, with its vivid details, there stands the remembrance of a concrete encounter with Jesus which has left its mark on the tradition. The eager approach of a man while Jesus was setting out on his way, his kneeling posture, the formal address together with the weighty character of his question—all suggest deep respect for Jesus and genuine earnestness on the part of the man himself. He came to consult Jesus as a distinguished rabbi and showed him the deference reserved for revered teachers of the Law. In the OT and subsequent Judaism only God is characteristically called “good,” although it was possible to speak in a derived sense of “the good man” (e.g. Prov. 12:2; 14:14; Eccl. 9:2; Mt. 12:35). The designation of Jesus as “good teacher,” however, is virtually without parallel in Jewish sources and should be regarded as a sincere tribute to the impression he had made upon the man, whether “good” be understood to signify “kind,” “generous,” or some other quality of goodness. The question concerning the inheritance of eternal life, which has formal parallels in early Jewish material,⁴² places the discussion which follows in an eschatological perspective. The form of the question (“*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*”) implies a piety of achievement which stands in contrast to Jesus' teaching that a man must *receive* the Kingdom (or life) as a gift from God in his helplessness (Ch. 10:15). In the light of verse 20, the man evidently thought that there were conditions to be fulfilled beyond those set forth in the Law.

18–19 Jesus responded by directing attention away from himself to God, who alone is the source and norm of essential goodness. The apparent repudiation of the epithet “good” only serves to radicalize the issue posed by the question of verse 17. The inquirer's idea of goodness was defined by human achievement. He undoubtedly regarded himself as “good” in the sense that he was confident that he had fulfilled the commandments from the time he first assumed their yoke as a very young man; now he hopes to discover from another “good” man what he can do to assure eternal life. Jesus' answer forces him to recognize that his only hope is an utter reliance upon God, who alone can bestow eternal life. The referral of the question to God, bowing before the Father and giving him the glory, places Jesus' response within the context of the lordship of God. In calling in question the man's use of “good,” Jesus' intention is not to pose the question of his own sinlessness or oneness with the Father, but to set in correct perspective the honor of God. He took seriously the concept of the envoy which stands behind the formulation of Ch. 9:37, and desires to be known only in terms of his mission and the one who sent him.

The appeal to the commandments serves to reinforce this emphasis and responds more directly to the question, What must I do? Jesus' response echoes the OT teaching that the man who obeys the Law will live (e.g. Deut. 30:15f.; Ezek. 33:15 and often). With the exception of the prohibition of fraud, which appears to be an application of the eighth and ninth commandments, the requirements cited are drawn from the Decalogue (Ex. 20:12–16; Deut. 5:16–20). They clearly and incisively focus upon relationships with others as the discernible measure of a man's reverence for God and obedience to his mandates. Jesus does

not accept as good any other will than the will of God revealed in the Law. His affirmation of the commandments is a demand for obedient action which recognizes both the sovereignty of God and the existence of the neighbor.

20–21 The impulsive reply of the man indicates that he had made the Law the norm of his life and that he was confident that he had fulfilled its demands perfectly. “From a youth” has reference to a boy’s twelfth year when he assumed the yoke of the commandments and was held responsible for their performance (cf. *M. Berachoth* II. 2; Lk. 2:42). From that time forth he had observed “all these.” Yet his question to Jesus suggests that behind a façade of security there was a heart which had lost much of its security. Concerned with the dimensions of his own piety, he had lost his delight in God with the result that he lacked the approval of God. Nevertheless, there was an earnestness in the man which Jesus recognized. The response of verse 21 is not intended to shame him by exposing the real depth of the commandments but is an expression of genuine love for him. The one thing he lacks is the self-sacrificing devotion which characterizes every true follower of Jesus. For this reason Jesus invites him to follow him now and to experience the demands of life and the Kingdom with the Twelve. Keeping the individual commandments is no substitute for the readiness for self-surrender to the absolute claim of God imposed through the call of the gospel. Jesus’ summons in this context means that true obedience to the Law is rendered ultimately in discipleship. This man will achieve the perfect observance of the Law when he surrenders himself and follows Jesus. Self-surrender implies a renunciation of his own achievement and the reception of messianic forgiveness through which a man is released to stand under the Law and to offer the obedience of love.

The specific form of the sacrifice Jesus demanded of this man is not to be regarded as a general prescription to be applied to all men, nor yet as a demand for an expression of piety that goes beyond the requirements of the Law. The command to sell his property and to distribute the proceeds to the poor was appropriate to this particular situation. The subsequent reduction to poverty and helplessness would dramatize the fact that man is helpless in his quest for eternal life, which must be bestowed as the gift of God. Scribal legislation prohibited the giving away of all one’s possessions precisely because it would reduce a man to poverty. Nevertheless, Jesus’ call for resolute sacrifice in order to do the will of God does not exceed that which the Law requires nor that which he himself had voluntarily assumed. The assurance of “treasure in heaven” reflects an idiom that was current in Judaism,⁴⁷ which allowed Jesus to enter the thought-world of his contemporaries. Here, however, it is stripped of its customary associations of merit (as if selling one’s property and giving the money received to the poor will *earn* a significant reward), since the promised treasure signifies the gift of eternal life or salvation at the revelation of the Kingdom of God.

The deepest answer to the question of verse 17, however, lies not in the command to sell all but in the call to follow Jesus. Jesus separated persons from their normal historical existence (cf. Chs. 1:16–20; 2:14; 3:13f.) in order to introduce them to a new quality of existence based upon fellowship with himself. This means that the command to follow Jesus is an invitation to lay hold of authentic life offered as a gift in his own person. Jesus’ demand is radical in character. He claims the man utterly and completely, and orders the removal of every other support which could interfere with an unconditional obedience. The terms defined by Jesus clarify what following signifies (cf. Ch. 10:28), and indicate that Jesus himself is the one answer to the man’s quest for life.

22 The response to Jesus’ call is vividly described: the man’s face fell, etched with disappointment and sorrow because he possessed great estates. For the first time Mark indicates that the man was rich. His tragic decision to turn away reflects a greater love for his possessions than for life (cf. Ch. 4:19). What accounts for the rich man’s failure is the call of

the Kingdom of God with its demand for resolute self-denial (cf. Ch. 8:34). The refusal of the call only serves to accentuate the greatness of the renunciation demanded and the uniqueness of the Twelve as those who had abandoned everything in order to follow Jesus. The conclusion to the interview with Jesus indicates that in the case of this man the Law had not yet fulfilled its function, for its historical task is to bring man's satisfaction with this world to an end and to quicken within him a thirst for righteousness and life.

23–25 Jesus' comment on the difficulty encountered by the rich in entering the Kingdom of God draws its force from the refusal of this particular rich man to abandon everything and to follow him. This action demonstrated how easy it was to become so attached to wealth that even an earnest man forgets what is infinitely more important. Jesus' warning implies that only in meeting the demand for radical sacrifice and following is entrance into the Kingdom secured, reinforcing the specific instruction of verse 21. In Judaism it was inconceivable that riches should be a barrier to the Kingdom, since a significant strand of OT teaching regarded wealth and substance as marks of God's favor (e.g. Job 1:10; 42:10; Ps. 128:1–2; Isa. 3:10 and often). If a related strand of the tradition recognized the poor as the special objects of God's protection (e.g. Deut. 15:7–11; Prov. 22:22f.), the possession of wealth permitted generous gifts to those in need. This aspect of personal and public concern was one of the three major pillars of Jewish piety (almsgiving, fasting and prayer). The affirmation of verse 23 was shocking precisely because it entails the rejection of the concept of merit accumulated through the good works accomplished by the rich, which was presupposed in contemporary Judaism. There is no mark of God's special favor in possessions, nor in the lack of them. The peculiar danger confronting the rich, however, lies in the false sense of security which wealth creates and in the temptation to trust in material resources and personal power when what is demanded by the Law and the gospel is a whole-hearted reliance upon God.

When the disciples expressed their surprise, Jesus repeated his solemn warning in an absolute form: how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God. The repetition of this sober affirmation is calculated to provoke careful reflection on the part of every man confronted with the call of the gospel. In verse 25, however, Jesus states that it is impossible for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. The reference to the camel and the needle are to be taken literally, for the disciples' reaction in verse 26 stems from a statement of real impossibility. The camel was the largest animal found on Palestinian soil. The violent contrast between the largest animal and the smallest opening expresses what, humanly speaking, is impossible or absurd.

26–27 The disciples were more bewildered than before. They understood that the manner in which Jesus spoke of the rich in fact blocks the way for *any* man to achieve entrance into the Kingdom, and they were frightened by this implication. Their anxious question is eschatological in nature: Who will be found in the Kingdom? Jesus' response in verse 27 provides the key to the sober declarations in the immediate context and to the gospel he proclaimed. Salvation is completely beyond the sphere of human possibilities; every attempt to enter the Kingdom on the basis of achievement or merit is futile. Yet even the rule of the impossibility of entrance into the Kingdom for the rich is limited by the sovereign action of God himself. The ability and the power to effect deliverance reside in God alone (cf. Rom. 8:7). "Eternal life," "salvation," or "entrance into the Kingdom" describe a single reality which must be bestowed as his gift to men. The conclusion to the account rejoins the beginning in directing attention to the ability and goodness of God, and constitutes the basis for the renewal of a theology of hope.

Verses 28-31 Costs and Rewards of Discipleship

Peter often acted as the spokesman for the Twelve and he did so on this occasion (cf. Chs. 8:29, 32; 9:5; 11:21). His affirmation recalls the invitation extended in verse 21 and was perhaps prompted by it. In contrast to the refusal of Jesus' call by a man who valued his wealth above eternal life, they had abandoned everything in order to follow Jesus (Ch. 1:16–20; 2:14). There appears to be a note of self-congratulation in this announcement. It reflects the same tendency to think of the honors that will be received in the Kingdom before the nature of the mission has been understood that was encountered in Ch. 9:33 (cf. Ch. 10:35–37). Nevertheless, Peter's declaration shows that he has understood Jesus' words in the absolute sense they bear in verse 21.

29–30 Jesus' response defines Christian existence in terms of promise and persecution, and history as the interplay of blessedness and suffering. The contrast between the present age and the age to come is thoroughly Palestinian in character and expresses the tension between promise and fulfilment in the life of faith. The frank recognition of the loss that allegiance to Jesus and the gospel may entail (cf. Ch. 13:12f.) is conditioned by the promise that all that is lost in one society (verse 29) will be regained a hundredfold in the new society created by the dynamic of the gospel (verse 30). This reassurance is addressed to any man who suffers loss for Jesus and the gospel. God takes nothing away from a man without restoring it to him in a new and glorious form. Jesus' reference to the new family which will compensate for the loss sustained in one's own family finds its preparation in Ch. 3:31–35. The omission of a reference to the father in verse 30 is undoubtedly intentional since God himself is the head of the new spiritual family (cf. Ch. 11:25, "Your Father in heaven"). Over against the blessings of the new society stands the sharp realism in the reference to persecution, which clarifies what identification with Jesus and the gospel entails (Ch. 8:34f.; cf. Ch. 4:17). This has pointed relevance to the church in Rome where suffering for the name of Christ became the reality and norm of Christian experience (cf. 1 Peter 4:14, 16). Paradoxically, the first part of Jesus' promise (fellowship with other believers) found its deepest realization within the context of the persecution through which the Church became identified as the suffering people of God. The promise of eternal life in the age to come looks beyond the conflicts of history to the triumph assured through radical obedience to the will of God.

31 The final statement, with its antithetic parallelism obtained through the inversion of its clauses, is a piece of "floating tradition" which occurs in other contexts as well (Mt. 20:16; Lk. 13:30). In the Marcan context it is clearly eschatological and speaks of the reversal of every earthly gradation of rank in the age to come. It is difficult, however, to determine whether it is intended to confirm the promise which Jesus has just given to the Twelve (verse 30), or as a warning against the presumption voiced in the outburst of verse 28. It is perhaps better to regard it as a powerful summation of Jesus' teaching concerning the nature of discipleship as service, on the analogy of Ch. 9:35. If the disciples thought that they would enter the Kingdom because they had left everything behind, or considered discipleship a matter of giving up possessions now in order to receive a reward later, Jesus shattered these false conceptions. What he demanded was a total, radical commitment to himself, sustained in the act of following him faithfully. In return he gave the Twelve the responsibility to accept the consequences of commitment, supported by his presence and the promise of God.

Verses 32-34 Jesus Prophecies his death for the third time

Each of the three major prophecies of the passion is set within the context of the journey, but now for the first time Jerusalem is named as the destination where Jesus will accomplish his mission. Jerusalem was the holy city set upon a hill, and it was normal to speak of "going up"

to Jerusalem and the Temple. There is a note of solemnity in the vivid picture of Jesus walking before his frightened disciples, inflexible in his determination to do the will of God (cf. Isa. 50:7f.). The action of Jesus walking ahead of the Twelve corresponds to rabbinic custom, but far more than this is involved. The description anticipates the action of the Risen Lord promised in Chs. 14:28; 16:7, and evokes the image of the powerful Savior who leads his people with purpose and direction. The person of Jesus is central in the scene sketched in verse 32a. What awakens amazement and terror in the disciples who follow is not the recognition that the road leads to Jerusalem nor an awareness of what will be accomplished there, but Jesus himself. The power of the Lord, who holds in his hands his own destiny as well as that of the people of God, is manifested for Mark and his readers in the awe and dread which characterize those around him (cf. Ch. 9:32).

The solemn announcement concerning Jerusalem, and the suffering and vindication to be experienced there, is elaborately introduced. The notice that Jesus “took again the Twelve” simply means that he gathered the disciples around him to make precise the purpose of the journey, which had been disclosed earlier in less specific terms (Chs. 8:31; 9:12, 31). On each occasion the Twelve alone were the recipients of this prophetic instruction.

33–34 Of Jesus’ three prophecies of his suffering and death, the third is the most precise. Its relationship to the earlier utterances and to the course of events reported in the Passion Narrative may be seen in the following table:

	<i>Ch. 8:31</i>	<i>Ch. 9:31</i>	<i>Ch. 10:33–34</i>	<i>Passion Narrative</i>
(1) Delivered to the chief priests and scribes	—	(X)	X	Ch. 14:53
(2) Sentenced to death	(X)	—	X	Ch. 14:64
(3) Delivered to the Romans	—	—	X	Ch. 15:1, 10
(4) Mocked, spit upon, scourged	—	—	X	(Ch. 14:65); Ch. 15:15–20
(5) Executed	X	X	X	Ch. 15:20–39, 44
(6) Resurrected	X	X	X	Ch. 16:1–8

The greater detail in the third prophecy and its close correspondence with Jesus’ subsequent experience have led many commentators to affirm that the formulation has been shaped by the Passion Narrative itself. This judgment is by no means necessary. Jesus was aware of the balance of power among the various authorities in Palestine and could calculate precisely the procedure which would be followed in carrying out a sentence of death. The more precise details in verse 34 are actually enumerated in the inverse order in which they occur in Ch. 15:15–20; moreover, there has been no attempt to conform the vocabulary of the prophecy to the fulfilment (see Ch. 15:15). It is far more likely that the form of the prophecy indicates

Jesus' reflection on such OT texts as Ps. 22:6–8, where the righteous Sufferer is cruelly mocked, and Isa. 50:6, which speaks of scourging and spitting as the tokens of contempt to which the righteous Servant is exposed. It is appropriate to see in verses 33–34 a further revelation of sufferings which Jesus will assume in fulfilment of his messianic vocation.

The new element in the prophecy is the sharp distinction between Jesus' condemnation by the Jewish authorities and the execution of the sentence of death by the Gentiles, who are mentioned for the first time in the context of the passion (cf. Acts 3:13). Delivery to the Gentiles reveals that Jesus will be held in contempt by his own countrymen, for the Gentiles are the last people to whom the Messiah of the people of God should be handed over. The actions defining his humiliation are carried out by the Gentiles. Mockery (cf. Ch. 15:20) and spitting (cf. Ch. 15:19) are forms of derision to which Jesus will be exposed, while the scourging (cf. Ch. 15:15; cf. Jn. 19:1) is more closely related to his violent death, in accordance with the Roman law that scourging always accompanied a capital sentence. Nothing is said of crucifixion, but this could be presupposed under the circumstances of Roman jurisdiction.⁶⁸ In Jerusalem, as nowhere else, Jesus will fulfill his mission. Beyond the abject humiliation disclosed in the sober terms of verse 34 lies the assurance of vindication through resurrection.

Verses 35-45 Rank Precedence and Service

Ch. 10:32–45 is structurally parallel with Ch. 9:30–37. The second and third major prophecies of the passion (Ch. 9:30–32; Ch. 10:32–34) are both followed by an exposure of the presumption of the disciples (Ch. 9:33f.; Ch. 10:35–37) and by Jesus' instruction concerning humility and service (Ch. 9:35–37; Ch. 10:42–45). This incident reveals that in spite of Jesus' repeated efforts since Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi to inculcate in his disciples the spirit of self-renunciation demanded by the cross, the sons of Zebedee have understood his intention very superficially. Their ambitious request brings discredit upon them, while the indignation of the other ten disciples reflects a similar preoccupation with their own dignity. The pronouncement of Jesus concerning the servant vocation of the Son of Man, who seals his service with the sacrifice of his life for the many, goes beyond the instruction given to the disciples in Ch. 9:35–37, and brings the question of rank, precedence and service into profound pastoral and theological perspective.

35–37 In the request of James and John the misunderstanding which attended each of the previous prophecies of Jesus' suffering asserted itself in a blatant form. The disciples had failed completely to grasp the significance of Jesus' teaching that he would be treated with contempt and be put to death. The request of the sons of Zebedee for places of honor in the glory of the Son of Man immediately follows Jesus' announcement that they were going to Jerusalem and after three days the Son of Man will rise. The enthusiasm reflected in the sweeping terms of verse 35, and the form of the petition in verse 37, in the context of approaching the royal city, show that the brothers regard Jesus as the eschatological Lord who goes to Jerusalem to restore the glory of the fallen throne of David. The question of rank, involving an inflated understanding of their own position, is best explained in the context of royal messiahship. The request may be for the places of honor at the messianic banquet⁷⁷ or for the positions of eminence and authority at the parousia, when Jesus is enthroned as the eschatological judge (see Chs. 8:38; 13:26). The place of honor is the seat on the right, and next to it, the seat on the left (cf. 1 Kings 2:19; Ps. 110:1; 1 Esdras 4:29; Eccles. 12:12; Josephus, *Antiquities* VI. xi. 9). The announcement of Jerusalem as the goal of the journey suggested that Jesus' glory was imminent (cf. Ch. 9:1).

38–39 Jesus' response is as sharp as the probing questions in Ch. 7:17 or Ch. 8:20. Taking account of what immediately follows, the sense appears to be as follows; you do not know that in requesting to participate in my glory you ask at the same time to share my painful destiny, an indispensable condition of my glorification. It must be stressed that the question of verse 38 calls for a negative reply. The sufferings and death which await Jesus, expressed by the two images of the cup and baptism, belong to the unique messianic mission of the Son of Man. Verse 38 expresses an impossibility, and not the requisite condition for association with Jesus' glory. Jesus' pointed question contains at least an implied condemnation of the proud pretensions of James and John. Their desire to share the messianic glory of Jesus, without taking account of the distance which separates them from their Master, is insensitive that this would entail participation in his sufferings and in his messianic death for the salvation of men.

In interpreting the enigmatic language of the cup and baptism it is crucial to recognize that these images do not bear the same significance when applied to Jesus and when applied to the disciples. The cup and baptism signify that Jesus in his passion will be the voluntary sacrifice for the sins of men; when applied to the disciples in verse 39 these images suggest their moral participation in Jesus' passion.

To share someone's cup was a recognized expression for sharing his fate. In the OT the cup of wine is a common metaphor for the wrath of God's judgment upon human sin and rebellion,⁸¹ and this understanding was kept alive into the first century. The total ruin which the cup represents is willed by God and constitutes a divine judgment. In interpreting verse 38 it is necessary to see the cup as a designation of judgment. Jesus boldly applied to himself the image of the cup used by the prophets to threaten the enemies of God with his divine vengeance. The cup which Jesus must drink has reference to divine punishment of sins which he bears in place of the guilty (cf. Chs. 10:45; 14:24). The reality which the image represents is expressed in Isa. 53:5: "he was wounded because of our sins, bruised because of our iniquities; *the chastisement which gives us peace has been upon him*, and it is by his sufferings that we are healed."

The image of baptism is parallel to that of the cup. In popular Greek usage the vocabulary of baptism was used to speak of being overwhelmed by disaster or danger, and a similar metaphorical use of submersion is present in Scripture.⁸⁵ The texts of the OT, however, do not demonstrate that to be submerged signified submission to a fearful death, and it is this which is required in the context. Apparently Jesus called his passion a baptism (cf. Lk. 12:50) because he and the disciples were familiar with John's rite of repentance, which he called "baptism" and set in an explicit context of God's judgment upon human sin. Jesus understood that his baptism expressed his solidarity with sinful men and signified his willingness to assume the burden of the judgment of God (see on Ch. 1:2–11). The baptism which he anticipates is his death upon the cross in fulfilment of his messianic vocation. Applied to Jesus, the images of the cup and baptism signify that he bears the judgment merited by the sins of men (cf. Ch. 14:36; 15:34). While informed by the OT motifs, the primary key for interpreting the parabolic language of verse 38 is Jesus' messianic task.

In verse 39 the two images are paradoxically applied to James and John. They indicate that the brothers will participate in the sufferings of Jesus (cf. 1 Peter 4:13). There must be a solidarity between the Son of Man and his disciples, and this is expressed not only by their grateful acceptance of his protection and favor, but also by their following his example of humility and service, if necessary to the extent of death. The description of discipleship implied conforms to Ch. 8:34–38. The reference, however, is neither exclusively nor necessarily to martyrdom, for the image of baptism is not found in this sense in Christian literature until the turn of the second century. Rather Jesus prophesies that the sons of

Zebedee, like himself, will endure great tribulation and suffering for the gospel (cf. Acts 12:2; Rev. 1:9).

The two brothers are confident that they are prepared to share Jesus' destiny, even in reference to suffering if this is the necessary prelude to glory. Their naïve reply only serves to indicate that they were as incapable of understanding the full import of Jesus' reference to his cup and baptism as they were of grasping the real significance of his prophecy of the passion.

40 Jesus' denial of the right to set men on his right or left hand is consistent with his refusal to accept even the appearance of an arbitrary authority. His prerogatives are limited by his submission to the Father, and Jesus frankly admitted this (cf. Ch. 13:32; Acts 1:7). The appointment of the places of honor is the Father's prerogative, and James and John are only given the assurance that these will be assigned to those who have been prepared by him.

41–44 The other ten disciples were indignant because they were jealous of their own dignity and fearful lest the two brothers should secure some advantage over them. Their insensitivity to the seriousness of the moment links them with James and John, and suggests the cruel loneliness with which Jesus faced the journey to Jerusalem. It also indicates the degree to which selfish ambition and rivalry were the raw material from which Jesus had to fashion the leadership for the incipient Church.

In seeking to impress the truth of Ch. 9:35 on the Twelve, Jesus contrasted the conduct of Gentile rulers with the submission to service and sacrifice which is appropriate to discipleship. It is probable that his most direct contact with the expression of power and authority by the petty rulers of Palestine and Syria and the great lords of Rome was through the coins which circulated in the land. To cite only two examples, the denarius that was used for paying taxes (cf. Ch. 12:16) portrayed Tiberius as the semi-divine son of the god Augustus and the goddess Livia; the copper coins struck by Herod Philip at Caesarea Philippi showed the head of the reigning emperor (Augustus, then Tiberius) with the emperor's name and the inscription: "He who deserves adoration." There is biting irony in the reference to those who give the illusion of ruling (cf. Jn. 19:11) but simply exploit the people over whom they exercise dominion. In their struggle for rank and precedence, and the desire to exercise authority for their own advantage, the disciples were actually imitating those whom they undoubtedly despised.

Jesus consciously opposes to the order of earthly rule the vocation of the servant. The synonymous parallelism between verses 43 and 44 identifies the household servant and the slave as men whose activities are not directed toward their own interests but to those of another. The order of life for the common dealings of the disciples is to be love expressed in the form of service. This transforms the question of rank and greatness into the task of service: only by service does one become great. On the other hand, high rank ("first," "greatest") deserves recognition in the community when it is rooted in the service which Jesus commands (cf. Ch. 9:35). The Twelve are summoned to become the compassionate community and to recognize that the performance of an act of compassion as an expression of pure devotion to Jesus is at one and the same time worship and service (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19; 2 Cor. 4:5; Gal. 5:13; 1 Peter 5:3).

45 The reversal of all human ideas of greatness and rank was achieved when Jesus came, not to be served, but to serve. He voluntarily veiled his glory as the Son of Man (cf. Chs. 8:38; 13:26; 14:62) and assumed the form of a slave who performed his service unto death because this was the will of God (cf. Phil. 2:6–8). In verse 45, which subsumes verses 43–44, the death of Jesus is presented as his service to God and as a vicarious death for many in virtue of which they find release from sin. Each of the components of this highly compressed saying is significant. The formulation "The Son of man came ..." places the entire statement

in the context of Jesus' messianic mission (cf. Ch. 2:17). The service in which the royal will of the Son of Man is displayed is fulfilled in his giving of himself. In a Jewish frame of reference this expression was characteristically used of the death of the martyrs (e.g. 1 Macc. 2:50; 6:44; Mekilta to Ex. 12:1). In this context it expresses the element of voluntariness or self-sacrifice in the death of Jesus who offers himself in obedience to the will of God. His death has infinite value because he dies not as a mere martyr but as the transcendent Son of Man.

The ransom metaphor sums up the purpose for which Jesus gave his life and defines the complete expression of his service. The prevailing notion behind the metaphor is that of deliverance by purchase, whether a prisoner of war, a slave, or a forfeited life is the object to be delivered. Because the idea of equivalence, or substitution, was proper to the concept of a ransom, it became an integral element in the vocabulary of redemption in the OT. It speaks of a liberation which connotes a servitude or an imprisonment from which man cannot free himself. In the context of verse 45a, with its reference to the service of the Son of Man, it is appropriate to find an allusion to the Servant of the Lord in Isa. 53, who vicariously and voluntarily suffered and gave his life for the sins of others. The specific thought underlying the reference to the ransom is expressed in Isa. 53:10 which speaks of "making his life an *offering for sin*." Jesus, as the messianic Servant, offers himself as a guilt-offering (Lev. 5:14–6:7; 7:1–7; Num. 5:5–8) in compensation for the sins of the people. The release effected by this offering overcomes man's alienation from God, his subjection to death, and his bondage to sin. Jesus' service is offered to God to release men from their indebtedness to God.

The thought of substitution is reinforced by the qualifying phrase "a ransom *for the many*." The Son of Man takes *the place* of the many and there happens to him what would have happened to them (cf. Ch. 8:37: what no man can do, Jesus, as the unique Son of Man, achieves). The many had forfeited their lives, and what Jesus gives in their place is his life. In his death, Jesus pays the price that sets men free. The sacrifice of the one is contrasted with those for whom it is made, in allusion to Isa. 53:11f. In rabbinic literature, and even more strikingly at Qumran, "the many" is a technical term for the elect community, the eschatological people of God. The majestic figure of the Son of Man is linked here with the community which will be vindicated and saved in the eschatological judgment because Jesus goes to his death innocently, voluntarily and in accordance with the will of God. This corresponds perfectly with the main thought of Isa. 53. The ultimate meaning of Jesus' vicarious suffering and his giving himself as a ransom, however, can be understood only from the reality of his life, death and resurrection as narrated in the Gospel. In Mark there is complete correspondence between the ransom saying and the death of Jesus. Because Jesus' will is synchronous with the will of God he must die in the place of guilty men (Ch. 8:31, 33). This is what it means for him to offer his life as a ransom for the many.

This painful and glorious destiny of the Son of Man is something unique to his mission and in a definite sense is incommunicable: only he can accomplish this service. Nevertheless, his submission to the servant's vocation is here proposed as an example to the Twelve, who are summoned to pattern their lives after the humility of the Son of Man. Jesus' sacrifice of his own glory is the ground of a renewal of life to self-sacrificial obedience. The disciples were to experience this power of his death in themselves. That John, the son of Zebedee, ultimately understood Jesus' intention is clear from 1 John 3:16: "He laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."

Verses 46-52 The Faith of Blind Bartimaeus

The incident involving the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, is the last of the healing miracles recorded by Mark. The vividness with which the story is told as well as the precision with

which it is located at Jericho on the final stage of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is apparently due to eyewitness report. Jericho was located about five miles west of the Jordan and eighteen miles northeast of Jerusalem. The old city had badly deteriorated by the first century, but extending southward the new city built by Herod as the site for his magnificent winter palace was renowned for its singular beauty and fertility. The crowd which came out of the city with Jesus and his disciples plays almost no role in the ensuing drama; it most likely consisted of pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for the feast (cf. Ps. 42:4). Though the road which led from Jericho to the capital passed through desolate mountainous country and was notoriously unsafe, it was much travelled. The presence of a blind beggar just outside the city gates, on the pilgrimage way, was a common sight in the Near East. The preservation of his name is unusual, and is limited to the Marcan account. Mark so rarely records names in connection with incidents of healing (only Ch. 5:22) that it is probable that the Son of Timai was known in the later Church.

47–48 It is evident that Bartimaeus has heard about Jesus of Nazareth and that his relentless crying of “Son of David, have mercy upon me” reflects a conviction, formed on the basis of what he had heard, that Jesus could restore his sight. Nevertheless, it is difficult to be certain of the significance of the component parts in his appeal for help. “Have mercy upon me” is a cry directed to God by the afflicted in the Psalter (e.g. Ps. 4:1; 6:2; 41:4, 10; 51:1; 109:26; 123:3). In this context it may be a general plea for God’s goodness and mercy which is channeled through his servant, Jesus. The nuance in “Son of David” is more difficult to determine. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark had made little of this theme. Jesus is addressed as Son of David only here (cf. Chs. 11:9–10; 12:35–37). There is no indication in the text that he rejected the title. The command that the blind man be called (verse 49) rather implies that he paid it particular attention. If it is proper to understand the designation in its messianic context (cf. Isa. 11:1ff.; Jer. 23:5 f.; Ezek. 34:23 f.; 4QPatriarchal Blessings i. 3–4, “the righteous Messiah, the branch of David”), the epithet is closely related to the confession of Ch. 8:29 (cf. Ch. 15:32). Presumably, Jesus did not silence the beggar (in contrast to Ch. 8:30) because he is at the threshold of Jerusalem where his messianic vocation must be fulfilled. The “messianic secret” is relaxed because it must be made clear to all the people that Jesus goes to Jerusalem as the Messiah, and that he dies as the Messiah. This may be the natural way to interpret the designation, and it is probable that Mark’s readers understood the epithet in this messianic context (cf. Rom. 1:3). The problem is that Bartimaeus’ use of “Son of David” is confined to his period of blindness before he has gained Jesus’ attention. When he stands in the presence of Jesus he addresses him respectfully as “my master,” but there is no suggestion of messianism in this title of honor. If the request to see reflects a messianic conviction that Jesus is the one through whom the promises of Isa. 35:4–5; 61:1 are fulfilled, this is not made explicit in the text (in contrast to Ch. 7:37). For these reasons it is, perhaps, better to find in “Son of David” a respectful form of address colored by the vivid Davidic associations of Jerusalem but informed by the conviction that Jesus was the instrument of God for bringing healing and blessing to the land. It is not necessary to conclude that Bartimaeus knew of Jesus’ Davidic lineage or recognized that he was the Messiah. It is evident from Ch. 11:10 (cf. Acts 4:25) that those who had no direct Davidic descent could speak of “our father David” (with the implication that they were the sons of David). All that is required by the ensuing narrative is that the blind man recognized Jesus as the one from whom he could expect the gracious mercy of God. The ambiguity in “Son of David” permitted Mark’s readers to hear his cry as an acknowledgment of Jesus’ messianic dignity.

Those in the crowd who rebuked the beggar undoubtedly regarded his shouting as a nuisance and resented the thought of any possible delay. They had probably become quite hardened to seeing beggars along the roadside, and especially at the city gates, crying for

alms. Undeterred, the man resolutely continued his chant until he succeeded in drawing Jesus' attention to himself.

49–50 Jesus took the initiative in directing that the blind man should be called. The rebuke of those who had attempted to silence the beggar was not allowed to stand (cf. Ch. 10:13f.), for even on the way to Jerusalem Jesus had time for a man who appealed for his help in faith. The encouragement offered to Bartimaeus assured him that Jesus was concerned with his plight and relieved the anxiety and distress expressed in his cry. His response was dramatic and decisive. He cast aside his outer garment, which he had spread on the ground in front of him to receive alms, sprang up, and came, apparently unaided, to Jesus.

51–52 Jesus did not exercise his power arbitrarily or impersonally but in the context of a genuine involvement which established the existence of faith sufficient to receive the gift of healing from God. For this purpose questions or brief conversations are frequently an element in the healing narratives of the Gospel (e.g. Chs. 2:5–11; 5:30–34; 7:27–29; 9:21–24). The cause of Bartimaeus' distress was clear, but Jesus' question is designed to strengthen his faith by encouraging him to express it forthrightly. The response, "Master, let me receive my sight," acknowledged Jesus as the one who can make the blind to see (Ch. 8:22–26; Isa. 35:5). It was recognized by the Lord as an affirmation of confident trust in the gracious mercy of God and his power to heal (cf. Ch. 5:34). The healing was immediate: "he received his sight and followed him in the way." That Bartimaeus followed Jesus does not mean that he became a disciple, like one of the Twelve, but that he joined the crowd of pilgrims who were accompanying the Master. It would undoubtedly be his intention to go up to the Temple in order to offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving for his sight. The following "on the way" contrasts dramatically with his former sitting "along the way" and anticipates Ch. 11:1–11 when the pilgrims enter Jerusalem with the ancient songs of praise. Mark may have had in mind the contrast between the Son of David, who has in his company the former blind man, and the warrior king, who had recognized in the blind and the lame only an obstacle to be destroyed in the taking of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:6–8). Jesus had fulfilled the condition for entrance into Jerusalem (taking away the blind, 2 Sam. 6:5) by restoring sight to the blind beggar in the way. The healing of Bartimaeus displays, without any concealment, the messianic dignity of Jesus and his compassion on those who believe in him, and throws in bold relief the blindness of the leaders of Israel, whose eyes remained closed to his glory.

Chapter 11

The arrival in Jerusalem marks a new section in the gospel – the final few days of Jesus' ministry and indeed of his life. All the events take place in Jerusalem although Jesus and the disciples do withdraw to Bethany in the evenings.

Verses 1-11 The Triumphal Entry

The road into Jerusalem from the East came over the shoulder of the Mount of Olives – the hill which looks across the Kidron valley to Jerusalem. Bethphage was on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, probably a mile from the city walls, and represented the outer limit of what was called greater Jerusalem for the purpose of accommodating the huge crowds which came to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. So many pilgrims came for this Feast that they could not be accommodated within the city walls and since, as Jewish tradition tells us, it was compulsory to remain inside Jerusalem during the Feast, many stayed on the surrounding hills within what was called greater Jerusalem.

The fetching of the colt must have been pre-arranged as the words the disciples were told to us seem to represent a password rather than words which would have persuaded villagers to hand over valuable animals to strangers. Jesus pre-planned a messianic entry into Jerusalem.

It was not customary for pilgrims to enter Jerusalem riding upon an ass; the final stage of the pilgrimage was generally completed on foot. The great messianic oracle, Zech. 9:9, already contained the three essential elements of the Marcan account: the entry (“See, your king comes”), the messianic animal (“riding upon an ass, even upon a colt, the foal of an ass”), and the jubilation of the people (“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion”). Yet Mark does not cite this oracle, and Jesus’ fulfilment of the prophecy occurred in circumstances that paradoxically concealed the meaning of his action. The presence of the crowds, the greens, the antiphonal chanting of the Hallel Psalms, the feeling of exultation when the city comes into view, mark the final stage of the pilgrimage even if Jesus was not present. It is probable that the strewing of the pilgrim’s way with greens cut from the fields and with outer clothing marks a moment of high enthusiasm intended to honor a pilgrim engaged in a prophetic mission. Yet the demonstration was apparently not so significant as to attract the attention of the Roman authorities, and the exultation in Ch. 11:9–10 stops short of messianic assertion. When Jesus entered the city the group of pilgrims who had accompanied him quickly dispersed, and he appears to have come to the Temple accompanied only by the Twelve.

While Mark knew that he was narrating the entry of the Messiah into Jerusalem and the coming of the Lord to his Temple, he has not allowed this later understanding to color his account. At the time only Jesus knew the messianic significance of his action. He intended to conform his entry to the prophecy of Zech. 9:9. His action was a veiled assertion of both the fact and the character of his messiahship; it affirmed that the royal way involved humility and suffering. Only later did the disciples recognize that the Scripture had been fulfilled, and that Jesus had come to Jerusalem as the Messiah. The messianic hiddenness which characterized Jesus’ entire ministry was preserved in the ambiguity of the entry, and it is important not to exaggerate its character.

The description of the colt as one which had never been ridden is significant in the light of the ancient provision that an animal devoted to a sacred purpose must be one that had not been put to ordinary use (cf. Num. 19:2; Deut. 21:3; 1 Sam. 6:7). This detail emphasizes the appropriateness of the colt for the sacred task it will perform and characterizes Jesus’ entry as a symbolic action possessing profound messianic significance.

The disciples placed their outer garments on the colt in place of a saddle, and Jesus began his ride to the gates of Jerusalem. What is described in verse 8 appears to have been a spontaneous expression of homage to Jesus. The pilgrims may have believed that he had come to Jerusalem in fulfilment of a prophetic mission. The spreading of the garment upon the way is similar to the royal salute given to Jehu (2 Kings 9:12f.), or the gesture of profound respect shown to Cato of Utica when he was about to leave his soldiers (Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 7). The reference to the branches of green and the antiphonal singing recalls the entry into Jerusalem of Simon, the last of the five Hasmonean brothers, on a triumphal occasion (1 Macc. 13:51). A note of jubilation and excitement is evident in the text. Yet the action described does not appear to possess a messianic significance, for there is no explicit acknowledgment of Jesus’ majesty in the acclamation of verses 9–10. It was a brief moment of enthusiasm outside the city walls which would have been appropriate to a royal enthronement, but was scarcely distinguishable from the exultation which characterized other groups of pilgrims when the City of David, with its magnificent Temple, came into view.

By Jesus's time Hosannah had just become a shout of acclamation, but its original meaning – Lord save us – is clearly significant in the light of what Jesus was going to do on the cross. The people spoke more profoundly than they knew.

Once within the city, the crowd of pilgrims seems to have quickly dispersed. The lateness of the hour is natural enough since they had come from Jericho, nearly eighteen miles away. Jesus seems to have gone to the Temple alone, or accompanied by the Twelve. In recording this visit to the Temple Mark has no intention of depicting Jesus as a pilgrim who has come to Jerusalem for the first time and has a natural desire to see "all things." The point is rather that Jesus is the Lord of the Temple, who must inspect its premises to determine whether the purpose intended by God is being fulfilled (cf. Mal. 3:1). The whole of the Temple precincts are denoted in the comprehensive term used by the evangelist, but it is probable that Jesus proceeded no further than the Court of the Men. His survey, which took in all that could be seen, provided the ground of his action the following day. In the company of the Twelve Jesus withdrew to Bethany, as he was to do each of the successive evenings. Commentators have spoken of a *dénouement* in verse 11 and of the quiet ending of the entire section. The ending is quiet, but it is the quiet before the storm!

Verses 12-14 Jesus curses the fig tree

Jesus of course knew there would be no figs, Its an act designed to stimulate interest and curiosity, it's an act of prophetic realism like the OT prophets.

The prophets frequently spoke of the fig tree in referring to Israel's status before God (e.g. Jer. 8:13; 29:17; Hos. 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7; Micah 7:1–6), while the destruction of the fig tree is associated with judgment (Hos. 2:12; Isa. 34:4; cf. Lk. 13:6–9). In this context the fig tree symbolizes Israel in Jesus' day, and what happens to the tree the terrible fate that inevitably awaited Jerusalem. The explanation was already put forth by Victor of Antioch, in the oldest existing commentary on Mark, that Jesus had "used the fig tree to set forth the judgment that was about to fall on Jerusalem." This is certainly the evangelist's understanding of the episode, for in the Gospel of Mark Jesus' action in the Temple is firmly embedded within the fig tree incident. The a-b-a structure of Ch. 11:12–21 (fig tree—cleansing of the Temple—fig tree) serves to provide a mutual commentary on these two events. Just as the leaves of the tree concealed the fact that there was no fruit to enjoy, so the magnificence of the Temple and its ceremony conceals the fact that Israel has not brought forth the fruit of righteousness demanded by God. Both incidents have the character of a prophetic sign which warns of judgment to fall upon Israel for honoring God with their lips when their heart was far from him (cf. Ch. 7:6).

Verses 15-19 The Cleansing of the Temple

This incident within the Temple precincts only comes into perspective when the great importance that Judaism at that time accorded to everything which concerned the Temple of Jerusalem is remembered. The splendor of Herod's Temple, the immense crowds of pilgrims which assembled there on the occasion of the principal feasts, and the fanaticism with which the Jews defended the sacred precincts until the disaster of A.D. 70 provide an index to the veneration which attended the Temple. On the Mount of Olives, which was considered a part of the Temple precincts for ritual purposes, there were four markets where pilgrims could buy doves and other ritually pure objects of sacrifice for Temple offerings (TJ *Ta'anith* IV. 8). These markets were not under the jurisdiction of the High Priest, but of the Sanhedrin. Although it is commonly assumed that the commercial use of the Court of the Gentiles was a practice of long standing, there is actually no evidence that traffic in ritually pure items took

place in the Temple prior to A.D. 30. V. Eppstein has argued that the sale of animals in the Temple forecourt was an innovation of recent date, introduced by Caiaphas, who wished to set up a market which would be in punitive competition with the traditional markets on the Mount of Olives. The rabbinic evidence marshalled in support of this thesis indicates that the markets of the Temple and of the Mount of Olives had been the subject of impassioned quarrels during this period, while the existence of the four markets on the Mount of Olives is presumptive evidence that the transaction of business in sacrificial objects inside the Temple was not an established institution, but an exceptional and shocking license introduced by Caiaphas forty years before the destruction of the Temple, i.e. *ca.* A.D. 30. The presence of certified markets on the Mount of Olives nullified any argument in support of the use of the Court of the Gentiles for similar purposes. Jesus' action expressed his deep indignation at the flagrant violation of the divinely announced purpose for the Temple. The use to which the forecourt was devoted entrenched the entire people in disobedience to God. In order to halt this deplorable situation he inflicted blows upon the guilty and drove them from the court.³⁶ This is the only act of violence recorded of the Lord, and it is understandable as a public demonstration of zeal for God's honor.

The absence of any immediate counter-action on the part of the Temple authorities is surprising but intelligible. While the incident disturbed the activity in the Court of the Gentiles, it did not interrupt the functioning of the Sanctuary. Moreover, Jesus' action was too ambiguous in character to be directly revolutionary.³⁸ His violent expulsion of the merchants could be explained within a current of active pietism which openly appealed to Phinehas and his zeal for God (Num. 25:6–12; Ps. 106:28–31; Ecclus. 45:23 f.; 1 Macc. 2:54), or as an exercise of prophetic authority within the tradition of Jeremiah (Jer. 7:1–15; 26:1–15), or as the coming of the Lord to his Temple, whose purging action is the immediate prelude to judgment (Mal. 3:1–5).

The Court of the Gentiles was a wide enclosure which provided access to the interior parts of the Temple precincts, from which it was separated by a high partition-wall. While it was protected by certain regulations prohibiting the use of the forecourt as a thoroughfare, it was generally considered to have little sacred significance. In a country where the circulating currency consisted primarily of Roman money, provision had to be made for the Jews to pay the annual Temple tax "after the shekel of the Sanctuary" as commanded in Ex. 30:13–16. In the first century all Temple dues had to be paid in Tyrian coinage, since the Tyrian shekel was the closest available equivalent to the old Hebrew shekel. To make the necessary exchange the tables of the money changers were set up in the provinces on Adar 15, and in the Temple forecourt on Adar 25 (M. *Shekalim* I. 3), five days before the first of Nisan, when the tax was due. The slight surcharge permitted in the exchange (1/24 of a shekel) was intended to cover loss resulting from the wear of coins in circulation (M. *Shekalim* I. 7).

Doves were the recognized offering of the poor, required for the purification of women (Lev. 12:6; Lk. 2:22–24), the cleansing of lepers (Lev. 14:22), and other purposes (Lev. 15:14, 29). The installation of stalls for the sale of animals and of other requirements for the sacrifice such as wine, oil and salt, had the effect of transforming the Court of the Gentiles into an oriental bazaar and a cattle mart. Jesus was appalled at this disregard for the sanctity of an area consecrated for the use of Gentiles who had not yet become full proselytes to Judaism. His action in driving out the merchants and their patrons, overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves, and standing guard over the court to prohibit its use as a thoroughfare, was an astonishing display of zeal for God's honor and respect for the sacredness of the Temple precincts. Ironically, Jesus' spirited protest entailed a rigorous application of existing provisions, which prohibited anyone from entering the Temple Mount

with a staff, sandals or his wallet, and which specifically denied the right to make of the forecourt “a short by-path” (M. *Berachoth* IX. 5; TB *Berachoth* 54a). The reference to the vessels of the Temple in verse 16, in conjunction with the expulsion of the merchants in verse 15, indicates that Jesus was acting in fulfilment of the obligation laid upon him by Zech. 14:21: “and every vessel in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts ... and there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.” By purging the Temple forecourt Jesus bore witness to the conditions of “that day” when God would gather the righteous Gentiles to his Temple to worship him (cf. Zech. 14:16).

The scriptural warrant for Jesus’ violent action is solemnly introduced. The quotation is drawn from Isa. 56:7 and agrees exactly with the LXX text. The prophecy speaks of a destiny and a function which God has designed for his house, and occurs in the midst of promises which describe his generous purposes both for his people Israel and for all the nations. While the designation of the Temple as a house of prayer is ancient (cf. 1 Kings 8:28–30; Isa. 56:7 twice; 60:7 LXX), the clause “for all the nations” is found only in Isa. 56:7 and in Mark’s summary of Jesus’ teaching. This notice indicates that Jesus expelled the merchants from the Court of the Gentiles in order to safeguard rights and privileges sanctioned by God. The use of the forecourt as an open market effectually prevented the one area of the Temple which was available to the Gentiles from being a place of prayer.

The second part of Jesus’ protest recalls the language of Jer. 7:11 and sets in sharp opposition what the Temple has become with what it must be in God’s intention. The perfect tense in the statement “You *have made* it a cave of marauders” stresses the irremediable character of the action of the priestly authorities and points forward to the stern warning in Ch. 13:2. It is possible that the strong term “robbers” or “marauders” should be understood in the more technical sense it bore in the works of Strabo and Josephus, where it describes those engaged in anti-government guerrilla warfare. Jesus would then be saying that the Temple authorities had prepared the way for the Temple to be turned into a Zealot stronghold. On the other hand, the distinctive vocabulary is already a part of Jeremiah’s denunciation of the false sense of security bred by the presence of the Temple of the Lord in his own day and may be intended to evoke the larger context of Jer. 7:11 where the destruction of the land is prophesied. In that case the merchants are described as marauders, not so much because they were involved in fraudulent practices but because they were insensitive to the holiness of the area where they practiced their trade. By expelling them from the forecourt Jesus freed the place where the Gentiles were allowed to worship. In view of the explicit citation of Isa. 56:7 and the allusion to Jer. 7:11, speculation that Jesus’ action was aimed at reform or abolition of the Temple worship is irrelevant. He is depicted as making possible the worship of the Gentiles at the feast of the Passover which commemorated God’s redemption of his people. The importance of this would not be lost upon Mark’s readers in the predominantly Gentile Church of Rome.

Verses 20-25 The withered fig tree faith and prayer

The detail that the tree was withered from the roots indicates the totality of its destruction (cf. Job 18:16; 31:12; Ezek. 17:9; Hos. 9:16) and demonstrates that no one will in the future eat fruit from the tree (verse 14). The remark that Peter remembered (cf. Ch. 14:72) suggests that the entire incident was associated with the Petrine memoirs in the tradition. Jesus made no attempt to interpret the event, but it is clear that the withering of the tree served as a vivid warning of impending judgment (Ch. 13:2; cf. Ps. 90:6; Joel 1:12; Hos. 9:16).

22–24 If the connection between verses 20 f. and verse 22 is historical, it implies that the source of Jesus’ authority is his unbroken relationship with the Father. These sayings on faith and prayer, however, occur in quite scattered contexts in the Synoptic Gospels and may have

been uttered on different occasions. In Mark they constitute a summons to faith and to action consistent with that faith. The brief saying in verse 22 is commonly interpreted as an exhortation to have faith in God. It is possible that it should be understood as an encouragement rather than an exhortation: you have the faithfulness of God (cf. Hab. 2:4). On this understanding the solemnly introduced assurances of verses 23–24 are grounded explicitly on God’s faithfulness and not on the ability of a man to banish from his heart the presumption of doubt. Basic to both of these alternative ways of reading the text is the concept of faith as a quiet confidence in the power and goodness of God who accomplishes *everything*. The corollary to faith is miracle, and in this immediate context faith is unwavering trust in miraculous divine help.

The Dead Sea is visible from the Mount of Olives and it is appropriate to take the reference to “this mountain” quite literally. An allusion may be intended to Zech. 14:4. In the eschatological day described there the Mount of Olives is to be split in two, and when the Lord assumes his kingship “the whole land shall be turned into a plain” (Zech. 14:10). The prayer in question is then specifically a Passover prayer for God to establish his reign. What is affirmed is God’s absolute readiness to respond to the resolute faith that prays (cf. Isa. 65:24). What distinguishes the faith for which Jesus calls from that self-intoxication which reduces a man and his work to a fiasco is the discipline of prayer through faith. When prayer is the source of faith’s power and the means of its strength, God’s sovereignty is its only restriction. The assertion in verse 24 reiterates this assurance in more comprehensive and general terms. The man who bows his head before the hidden glory of God in the fulness of faith does so in the certainty that God can deal with every situation and any difficulty and that with him nothing is impossible (Ch. 10:27).

25 While there is no textual evidence for the omission of verse 25, this saying stands under strong suspicion of being a gloss, influenced by Mt. 6:14 f. While the distinctive vocabulary and phraseology (“if you have anything against someone ... your Father who is in heaven ... forgive you your trespasses”) is unparalleled in Mark, it is decidedly Matthean in character (cf. Mt. 5:23; 6:9, 14 f.). Matthew appears to follow Mark in this pericope, but only through Ch. 11:24, which may suggest that his copy of Mark actually concluded this section with verse 24. Moreover, the transition between verses 24 and 25 is abrupt, since Jesus has been talking about faith, while the new saying speaks of forgiveness. Ch. 11:26 is a clear case of a transfer from Mt. 6:15 which did not take place in the best MSS but shows how easily a passage from one Gospel could become attached to the context through catchword association.⁵⁶ Yet none of these arguments is decisive in itself, and verse 25 actually differs in formulation from Mt. 6:14 to a greater degree than is usual in cases of Synoptic transfer. Verse 25 must be considered as a logion in its own right. Its formulation has been influenced by the liturgical language of the Lord’s Prayer. K. Stendahl has shown through paraphrase that it is thoroughly appropriate to this context, which is concerned with omnipotent prayer: “When you stand and pray—especially if you expect your prayer to share in the power of the messianic age—forgive if you have something against somebody ...” The effect of the juxtaposition of verses 23–24 and 25 is to suggest that not only faith but also the willingness of the Christian to forgive conditions the efficacy of prayer. The conjunction of these two thoughts in Mark affirms that the right to pray the prayer envisioned in verses 23–24 belongs only to brothers who are mutually reconciled and united in a community of faith.

Verses 27-33 The Authority of Jesus

Jesus is present in the temple to proclaim “good news” to the people, but the Jerusalem leadership interrupts him with hostile intentions, they’re planning to kill him. They couldn’t care less about Jesus’ message of salvation they just want to be rid of him. In listing the

three leadership groups Mark makes it clear that the Jews challenging Jesus were an official delegation representing the Sanhedrin. The strategy of these leaders is quite clear. Accosting Jesus before the people, they're seeking to portray him as an outsider, as a person not to be held in high regard or trusted. They're trying to shame him publicly by casting doubt on his authority to teach as he did and do what he did. But Jesus turns the tables on the Jerusalem leadership by turning the idea of authorisation they've introduced against them and showing that they don't have legitimate authority whilst presenting himself as the authoritative teacher.

The Jewish leadership don't really want an answer to their question, they think they already have all the answers. The question these leaders put to Jesus indicates not only a questioning of Jesus's authority, but a war of worlds – fundamentally different visions of God's purpose, the character of leadership, and the nature of Israel's redemption. This is made especially relevant coming as it does on the heels of Jesus' cleansing of the temple (Luke 19:45-46). Luke's readers are already well aware of Jesus's authority (Luke 4:32, 36; 5:24) based on his divine sonship and grounded in his rooting in the Holy Spirit. The people in the temple are also aware of Jesus's authority for they recently welcomed him into Jerusalem as a king (Luke 19:29-40).

Although the question posed by the Jewish leadership was open ended, Jesus narrows the choices to two alternatives – divine origin or human origin.

This was a very relevant question because John's ministry and Jesus's ministry were totally interlinked. John's ministry was of fundamental importance. J C Ryle says: "It may reasonably be doubted whether the importance of John the Baptist's ministry is generally understood by Christians. The brightness of our Lord's history overshadows the history of His forerunner, and the result is that John's baptism and preaching do not receive the attention which they deserve. Yet it should never be forgotten, that the ministry of the Baptist was the only New Testament ministry foretold in the Old Testament, excepting that of Christ. It was a ministry which produced an immense effect on the Jewish mind, and aroused the expectation of Israel from one end of Palestine to the other. Above all, it was a ministry which made the Jews without excuse in their rejection of Christ, when Christ appeared. They could not say that they were taken by surprise when our Lord began to preach. Their minds had been thoroughly prepared for His appearing. To see the full sinfulness of the Jews, and the entire justice of the judgments which came on them after crucifying our Lord, we must remember the ministry of John the Baptist. Christ spoke of John and testified of him that he was the greatest prophet that Israel had in its history."

John's ministry was to preach a message of radical repentance which was in opposition to the Jewish leadership and which called into question the Jewish ethnic basis for acceptance by God. From the viewpoint of the Jerusalem leadership represented here, John's ministry was indeed threatening. Further, John's role was largely to prepare the way for Jesus, the greater one to follow him, the Son of God (Luke 1:16–17, 32–35, 68–76; 3:16). So acknowledgement that John's message originated with God is tantamount to admitting that Jesus's ministry was itself sanctioned by God.

This reasoning is not lost on the Jerusalem leadership. Mark portrays them as discussing amongst themselves the implications of the choices posed by Jesus's question. They are on the horns of a dilemma. If they attribute divine origin to John's message they will stand self condemned because they rejected John's message and now refuse to accept the divine quality

of Jesus's ministry as prophesied by John. On the other hand if they fail to acknowledge the divine origin of John's message they risk falling victim to the wrath of the crowds who rightly considered John to be a prophet and who in stoning them would in effect be accusing them of blasphemy. A yawning chasm has opened up between the Jewish leadership and those they are supposed to lead.

When the Jerusalem leadership claims ignorance about John's message and ministry we can hear an echo of Jesus's earlier indictment of them concerning their ignorance of the divine visitation which had come amongst them in the person of Jesus (Luke 19:44). As Amos prophesied they were unable to perceive and hear God's word:

“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign LORD, “when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.” (Amos 8:11 NIV)

The final judgement of God is the inability to hear him when he speaks.

So the leaders now stand self condemned for their lack of openness to and recognition of divine visitation. Their answer is nothing more than a feeble attempt to maintain their elevated status in Israel. Jesus's answer repeats and fails to answer their original question, but his references to John carry the clear implication that his mission is divinely authorised.

Well, Jesus didn't answer their question and God doesn't answer all our questions either. If the answers lie within scripture then he expects us to read his word and take note of his answers, but some questions are not answered by scripture, and there I believe we can assume that we don't need to know those answers. God will not always give us the answers we want, but He gives us something better – Himself – and in that we must be confident: “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him”. (Job 13:15 AV)

Chapter 12

Verses 1-12 The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

The idea of an absentee landlord would have been familiar to Jesus' hearers, some of the priests would have owned land away from Jerusalem. Usually the owner got an agreed proportion from the crop, leaving the tenants to make their living from the rest.

The fault of the tenants in withholding the due produce (and in the violence perpetrated on the slaves which represents the Jews violence against God's prophets) is massively compounded by their decision to murder the owner's son and so to attempt to take over the property. At this point the story has moved away from everyday reality, and, as often happens in parables (notably in 22:7), the intended symbolism has apparently invaded the story-line: the murder of the son represents the forthcoming execution of Jesus.

The opening of the parable is like Isaiah 5:1-7, so the vineyard is explicitly identified with Israel. The tenants of the vineyard are the current Jewish leadership.

In these times slaves were not necessarily unimportant, they could be stewards or estate managers and so their fate has significance. The slaves are the prophets.

When the son goes as a messenger he should command all the authority and respect of the father. To reject the son's demand is therefore the climax of rebellion. But to kill him is to

add injury to insult. As a bid for independence and an attempt to gain possession for themselves it was hardly likely to succeed in a society under the rule of law, and it reads more as a spontaneous and ill-conceived impulse than as a calculated policy. But a parable does not have to fit into real life, and the points at which it becomes improbable are usually meant to draw attention. The Christian reader cannot fail to see here the status of Jesus as the Son of God, the heir of the vineyard of Israel, and his death as Israel's culminating act of rebellion, and may well reflect on how futile it was to try to escape from under God's rule. To kill the son is an act of defiance to the father, and he cannot be expected to let them get away with it.

But instead of a single new tenant, or even a new ruling group to replace the current Jewish leadership, Jesus speaks of a "nation". See introductory comments above on how this unexpected substitution may be related to the theme of a new people of God arising out of Jesus' ministry and characterized by faith in him, such as has been outlined in 8:11–12 and in the rabble of tax-collectors and prostitutes who "go ahead of" the chief priests and elders into the kingdom of God (vv. 31–32). The term *ethnos*, "nation," demands some such understanding, and takes us beyond a change of leadership to a reconstitution of the people of God whom the current leaders have represented. But on the other hand the singular *ethnos* does not carry the specific connotations of its articular plural, *ta ethnē*, "the Gentiles." We may rightly conclude from 8:11–12 that this new "nation" will *contain* many Gentiles, but we saw also at that point that this is not to the exclusion of Jews as such but only of those whose lack of faith has debarred them from the kingdom of heaven.

The vineyard, which is Israel, is not itself destroyed, but rather given a new lease of life, embodied now in a new "nation." This "nation" is neither Israel nor the Gentiles, but a new entity, drawn from both, which is characterized not by ethnic origin but by faith in Jesus.

1 Jesus addressed his parables to the representatives of the Sanhedrin who came to question him concerning the nature and source of his authority, for they are the most natural subject of the verbs found in verse 12 (cf. Ch. 11:18). The initial details of the parable, in which the careful construction of the vineyard is described, are derived from Isa. 5:1 f. The allusion to the Song of the Vineyard (Isa. 5:1–7) has been regarded as a later, allegorical addition to Jesus' parable, since it has no parallel in Lk. 20:9 or the Gospel of Thomas, but this is to misunderstand the Lord's intention. He deliberately appealed to Isa. 5:1 f. in order to force his hearers to draw the conclusion that the parable concerns their abuse of the position they have assumed. This parable was told for the purpose of being understood, and Mark underlines this fact in verse 12. The construction of the vineyard, however, is only preliminary to the situation depicted. The story concerns a landowner who leased a vineyard to tenant farmers who agreed to work the land in his absence. Since the whole of the upper Jordan valley and a large part of the Galilean uplands were in the hands of foreign landlords at this time, such a practice was common. A contract stipulated for the payment of rent in the form of a portion of the produce. The crucial detail is that the owner is living abroad, for the subsequent conduct of the tenants is intelligible only under the existing conditions of absentee ownership.

2–5 At the proper time the owner sent his agent to collect the rent. A previously unpublished papyrus clarifies the reference to "the fruits of the vineyard" in verse 2 since it refers to different kinds of wine, including a cheap wine designated for the slaves of the state. The same papyrus reports a dispute between the agent of the finance minister who owned a vast estate in Beth Anath in Galilee and hostile farmers who were withholding certain

quantities of grapes, wine and corn. While the agent refers to the contract made with the employment-agent of the toparchy, the farmers speak of a “petition” which they themselves have drawn up in their own interest. This was the type of situation which could erupt into the kind of violence Jesus described when he spoke of the indignities heaped upon the first two agents, climaxed by the murder of the third. Having met the owner’s appeal for his rental with a defiance that stopped at nothing, the sequel of the story in the murder of the son and presumed heir is inherent in the logic of the situation. The detail in verse 5b, however, that the owner sent many others, was intended by Jesus to force his listeners beyond the framework of the parable to the history of Israel. In the OT the prophets are frequently designated “the servants” of God (cf. Jer. 7:25 f.; 25:4; Amos 3:7; Zech. 1:6) and it is natural to find a reference to their rejection in the words “beating some, and killing others.”

6–8 The owner, realizing the seriousness of the situation, sent his son to deal with it. The words “they will respect my son” are not didactic reflection on God the Father’s expectation in sending Jesus to Israel, since the parable teaches that Jesus did not expect that. They are an integral part of the parable, and are intelligible on the assumption that the owner was living in a distant foreign land. It could be expected that the son of the owner would command the respect which had been denied to the slaves who had represented him previously. The murder of the son and the final indignity of casting his body over the wall of the vineyard without burial provide the climax of iniquity demanded by the plot of the story. The seizure of the property is illumined by the contemporary legal situation.¹³ The arrival of the son allowed the tenant farmers to assume that the owner had died and that his sole heir had come to claim his inheritance. Under specified circumstances an inheritance could be regarded as “ownerless property,” which could be lawfully claimed by anyone, the prior right of ownership belonging to the claimant who comes first. This was the case when an inheritance was not claimed within a specified period of time. This provision of law explains why the tenants assume that if they murder the son (and presumed heir), they may take unhindered possession of the vineyard. It would become “ownerless property” which they can claim as the actual occupants of the land.

9 The integrity of verse 9 has been questioned because it refers back to Isa. 5:5 LXX, and Jesus did not ordinarily answer his questions. The details of his answer, however, are inherent within the logic of the situation. The murder of the son exhibited the outrageous defiance of the tenants in a most emphatic way. Their foolish assumption that the owner was dead and his property available for seizure would be shattered on the hard rock of reality. The owner would have recourse to governmental intervention to forcibly subdue the mutinous tenants,¹⁴ after which he would naturally lease the vineyard to others. The allusion to Isa. 5:1–7 both at the beginning and conclusion of the parable is a deliberate appeal to those who were plotting Jesus’ death to understand the ultimate seriousness of what they were doing. The fact that in Isa. 5 the vineyard itself is at fault, while in Jesus’ parable it is only the defiant tenant-farmers, indicates that he directed his words specifically to the leaders of the people, and not to the people themselves. Within the scope of the parable the inevitable consequence of the rejection of the son was decisive, catastrophic judgment. This points to the critical significance of the rejection of John and of Jesus which is so prominently in view in Ch. 11:27–12:12, for what is involved is the rejection of God. Without declaring his own transcendent sonship, Jesus clearly implies that the Sanhedrin has rejected God’s final messenger and that disaster will ensue. The sacred trust of the chosen people will be transferred to the new Israel of God.

10–12 The quotation of Ps. 118:22 f. agrees exactly with the LXX form of the text.¹⁵ The passage refers to one of the building blocks gathered at the site of Solomon’s Temple which

was rejected in the construction of the Sanctuary but which proved to be the keystone to the porch. Introduced with the language of debate, the citation is intended to sharpen the application of the parable to Jesus and his immediate listeners. It confirms the identification of Jesus as the son in the parable and contrasts his despised and rejected status with the glorious exaltation to which God has appointed him. The note of rejection followed by vindication sounded in the first prophecy of the passion (see on Ch. 8:31) is here expressed with the covert, but clear terms of the biblical text. In rabbinic literature the rejected stone of Ps. 118:22 was understood with reference to Abraham, David or the Messiah, while the expression “the builders” was sometimes used of the doctors of the Law. Here the text serves as a warning that God will reverse the judgment of men with regard to his final messenger in a startling display of his power, turning apparent defeat into triumph (cf. Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7).

The representatives of the Sanhedrin who heard Jesus speak would naturally find the clue to his meaning in the explicit allusion to Isa. 5:1–7 and in their own experience of hostility toward him. The parable, with its reflection on the history of Israel as marked by rebellion and unfaithfulness in spite of divine grace, amounted to a biting condemnation of their failure as leaders of the people. They understood its tenor only too well. The emphasis on understanding in verse 12 is new (contrast Ch. 4:11 f., 33 f.) and suggests that the secret of the Kingdom is on the point of being publicly revealed. What is significant is that Jesus himself took the initiative to disclose increasingly the secret of his own person, although the men to whom he directed his words were blinded by rage to the truth. Only the presence of crowds of people prevented them from laying violent hands on Jesus there in the Temple. The conclusion of the account echoes Ch. 11:18 f. and suggests that verse 12 may mark the close of the third day in Jerusalem.

The question of Jesus’ authority introduces a sequence of five conflict situations in Jerusalem (Ch. 11:27–12:37) corresponding to the similar sequence of conflict in Galilee in Ch. 2:1–3:6. D. Daube, however, has suggested that the four accounts which follow show an awareness of the traditional structure of the early Passover liturgy. The sequence of questions proposed corresponds to four types of questions recognized by the rabbis: questions of wisdom, which concern a point of law (cf. Ch. 12:13–17); of mockery, which frequently bear on the resurrection (cf. Ch. 12:18–27); of conduct, which center in relationship to God and men (cf. Ch. 12:28–34); and of biblical exegesis, which often concern the resolving of an apparent contradiction between two passages of Scripture (cf. Ch. 12:35–37). It is only in the Passover eve liturgy that the four types of questions appear in this particular order, and there the first three questions are posed by a wise son, a wicked son and a son of simple piety. The fourth is posed by the head of the family himself. This arrangement sheds light on the sequence of questions in Ch. 12:13–37. Daube’s suggestion is attractive that in this section of the Gospel we are in touch with elements of the tradition which were already associated with the Passover eve celebrations among the Christians in the first decades after the resurrection and may account for the grouping and order of the sequence in Mark’s Gospel.

Paying Tribute Verses 13-17

The account is abruptly introduced without any statement of time or place, but it is appropriate to situate this encounter with certain Pharisees and Herodians in one of the porches of the Temple (cf. Chs. 11:27; 12:35). Presumably they had been sent by certain members of the Sanhedrin or by leaders in their respective groups. They may well have been Galileans with previous contact with Jesus who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast (cf. Lk. 23:7), and it is possible that their question, so carefully devised to discredit or imperil

Jesus, was the result of the joint deliberations mentioned in Ch. 3:6. These men were anxious to entangle Jesus “in his word” because in his word they sensed his claim to absolute authority and consequently his threatening character. If they could snare him into making an unguarded statement they might be able to succeed in destroying him.

14–15a The opening remarks addressed to Jesus were designed to close the way to any possible evasion of a painful and difficult question. By reminding Jesus that he was a man of integrity who paid no attention to the opinions of men but taught absolute commitment to the way of life commanded by God, his adversaries intended to force him to face squarely the issue they had decided upon. It is important to appreciate the emotional trauma which pervaded the issue of the tribute money ever since it had first been imposed on the Roman province of Judea in A.D. 6. At that time Judas the Galilean had seen in the census which was the prelude to the taxation an introduction to slavery and an affront to the sovereignty of God (cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* XVIII. i. 1; Acts 5:37). The Zealots resolutely refused to pay the tax because it acknowledged Caesar’s domination over them. The Pharisees resented the humiliation implied in the tax but justified its payment, while the Herodians supported it on principle. In asking if it was allowed by the Law of God to pay the tribute money it could be assumed that the Pharisees were concerned chiefly in the moral and religious implications of the question, and the Herodians with its political or nationalistic ramifications. In point of fact the question was insincere. Its object was to force Jesus into a compromising position either theologically or politically. The form of the question (“shall we give, or shall we not give it?”) was skillfully designed to thrust Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. An affirmative answer would discredit him in the eyes of the people, for whom the tax was an odious token of subjection to Rome.²⁶ A negative reply would invite reprisals from the Roman authorities.

15b–16 Jesus recognized that the question was not sincere but represented one more attempt to discover something which could be used against him (see on Ch. 8:11; 10:2). There is an understandable note of exasperation in the pointed question, Why are you putting me to the test? While the command to bring a denarius implies that neither Jesus nor his adversaries had one, there is little evidence that in the first century there was a general, deep-rooted objection to handling and gazing upon coins bearing a human effigy. The only coin that was accepted for payment of taxes in Judea, as throughout imperial territory, was the Roman denarius. This was a small silver coin that was worth normally about eighteen cents. The denarius of Tiberius portrayed the emperor as the semi-divine son of the god Augustus and the goddess Livia and bore the (abbreviated) inscription “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus” on the obverse and “Pontifex Maximus” on the reverse. Both the representations and the inscriptions were rooted in the imperial cult and constituted a claim to divine honors.²⁸ The unhesitating reply to Jesus’ question in verse 16, that the image and inscription were Caesar’s, indicates that the coin was well known to the delegation through common circulation and use.

17 In his reply Jesus seized on the admission that the image and inscription were Caesar’s. The acceptance and usage of Caesar’s coinage implicitly acknowledged his authority and therefore the obligation to pay the tax. The portrait and legend demonstrated the right of the sovereign who coined the money to demand tribute from the provincials, in keeping with the common understanding that the emperor owned the coins which bore his image. There are obligations to the state which do not infringe the rights of God but are grounded in his appointment (cf. Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Tim. 2:1–6; Tit. 3:1 f.; 1 Peter 2:13–17). By recognizing the relative autonomy of the civil authority in the first part of his response, Jesus showed himself opposed to any belief in an essentially theocratic state and to any expectation of an imminent eschatological consummation of his own mission. But by distinguishing so

sharply between Caesar and God he tacitly protested against the idolatrous claims advanced on the coins. There is always inherent in civil authority a tendency to reach beyond its appointed function, a tendency which leads to self-transcendence. The temptation to self-glorification which always accompanies power was particularly clear in the extravagances of the imperial cult, with its deification of the state and its civil head. Jesus emphatically rejected this insolent confusion between man and God; divine honors belong to God alone. The second part of his response, seen in the total context of Jesus' life and teaching, shows that the duties toward God and Caesar, though distinct, are not completely separate, but are united and ruled by the higher principle of accomplishing in all things the will of God.³¹ Because men bear the image of God they owe their total allegiance to him.

There is gentle irony in Mark's closing comment that his adversaries marvelled greatly at Jesus. It is appropriate that men who had come to ensnare Jesus through unguarded statement should sense the devastating effect of the authority displayed in his word.

Questions Concerning the Resurrection verses 18-27

It is commonly assumed that the Sadducees were an aristocratic party consisting of the high priestly and other leading families of Jerusalem. Actually questions of their origin and development as well as their political and theological orientation are problematic because no certain Sadducean documents have been preserved. The sources describing the Sadducees are frequently conflicting in their reports and antagonistic in intention. The theory of a fundamental relationship between the Sadducees and the Temple is itself based on late source material and conjecture. Of the 28 high priests who held office in the 107-year period between Herod's appointment of Ananel and the destruction of the Temple, only Hanan ben Hanan, who held office for three months, is identified as a Sadducee by Josephus (*Antiquities* XX. ix. 1). The disputes between Sadducean and Pharisaic scribes show a pronounced interest in the Temple but do not warrant the assertion that the Temple hierarchy was by conviction Sadducean or was inclined to follow the traditions of the Sadducees. It is probable that the Sadducees began as a political faction which supported the legitimacy of the Hasmonean throne over the protest of the purists who insisted on a separation of the priestly and royal prerogatives or who looked for a revival of the Davidic kingdom. They also championed the sovereign's authority over the judiciary, in opposition to the concept of a separation of powers which would assign to a self-perpetuating establishment of ordained scribes absolute authority in questions of Jewish law. After the death of the last of the Hasmonean contenders, Mattathias Antigonus II, the Sadducees tended to assume a merely negative role, repudiating the authority of the Pharisaic scribes and rejecting their innovations both in the definition of the Law and in the details of halakhic regulation.

A firm belief in the resurrection was an integral element in popular Jewish piety as expressed in the second benediction of the Shemoneh 'Esreh ("Blessed be thou, O Lord, who raises the dead") or in the doxology to be pronounced in a cemetery, "He will cause you to arise. Blessed be he who keeps his word and raises the dead!" (Tos. *Berachoth* VII. 5). The Sadducees, who took their doctrinal stance from the Pentateuch, were notorious for their rejection of this belief as a later innovation, and the provision of M. *Sanhedrin* X. 1 was directed against them: "Whoever says that the resurrection of the dead cannot be deduced from the Torah has no part in the Age to Come."

19–23 The use of Scripture and an illustrative story to pose a challenge to an accepted interpretation is typical of scribal discussion. This suggests that the delegation which posed their problem to Jesus consisted of Sadducean scribes who, like their counterpart among the Pharisees (cf. Ch. 2:16), were specialists in biblical interpretation. They referred to the

Mosaic provision for levirate marriage, freely citing Deut. 25:5 f., and tailored the story of the woman and her seven husbands, all of whom died childless, to show that the ordinance had been literally fulfilled. The story may have been adapted from a popular version of the book of Tobit (for a woman married to seven husbands, all of whom died childless, cf. Tobit 3:8, 15; 6:13; 7:11; for levirate marriage, cf. Tobit 4:12; 6:9–12; 7:12 f). Their intention is to expose a belief in the resurrection to ridicule with their confident question, “In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?”

24–25 Jesus responded with two counter-questions, each of which is balanced with a positive statement. The root of the Sadducean error was a failure to understand the tenor of the Scriptures or the power of God. When properly understood, the passage cited in verse 26 bears eloquent witness to the truth of the resurrection, while God’s power is revealed in his ability to vanquish death and bestow the gift of life. The Sadducees were mistaken about the character of the resurrection life. The text deals only with the concrete point of marriage, which is germane to the specific problem posed, but points beyond this immediate issue. In opposition to the current Jewish conception that earthly relationships will be resumed after the resurrection,³⁹ Jesus affirmed that the resurrection life is comparable to the life enjoyed by the angels. Its great purpose and center is communion with God.

26–27 Jesus maintained the fact of the resurrection life by an appeal to Scripture and to God’s covenant faithfulness. It is significant that the passage cited, Ex. 3:6, is drawn from the Pentateuch, that part of Scripture acknowledged by the Sadducees to be authoritative. The greater part of commentary opinion denies to Ex. 3:6 even an implicit affirmation of the resurrection of the dead, and finds here a rabbinic type of argumentation that is without relevance for contemporary thought. Precisely here, however, Jesus is concerned to rectify the error of the Sadducees, which has its source in an inability to understand the Scriptures. It is therefore necessary that Jesus should rectify that error and remove that ignorance by teaching which is objectively true, on the truthfulness of which he rests his authority and which possesses permanent value.

F. Dreyfus has shown that the text cited by Jesus has, in a strictly literal sense, a much more profound significance than has been generally appreciated and that it can set forth in all its fulness the biblical doctrine of the resurrection. In the official Jewish prayers used in the first century the phrase “the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob” was used in reference to God as the protector and Savior of the three patriarchs. Twice daily in the second benediction of the Shemoneh ‘Esreh the pious Jew thanked God for the protection he had been for the fathers, which assured him of God’s continual faithfulness to Israel in his own generation: “Blessed be thou, O Lord, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob, God most high ... our shield and the shield of our fathers, our confidence in all generations. Blessed be thou, O Lord, the shield of Abraham.” In the seventeenth benediction the formula “our God and the God of our fathers” is clarified by the phrase “for your blessing upon them, for the love and mercy which you have granted to us and that you have shown to our fathers before us.” In these and related benedictions⁴² what is repeatedly in view is the initiative taken by God on behalf of the patriarchs because of his covenant fidelity, and not the response of fidelity on the part of men. The phrase “the God of ...” is synonymous with helper, savior, and is rooted in the concept of God’s provision of redemption.

This first century (and earlier) interpretation of the formula is completely in harmony with the literal sense of Ex. 3:6. By designating himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the context of his self-revelation to Moses, the Lord presented himself as the God of the covenant concluded with the patriarchs; but here the accent is placed primarily on the action of God who protected the fathers and provided for their deliverance. The sense of the self-designation of God in Ex. 3:6 is “As I have been the God of your fathers,” i.e., their guide,

helper and sustainer, “so I will be your savior in your present affliction.” The formula recurs in Ex. 3:6, 15, 16; 4:5 precisely in passages in which God promises salvation and deliverance to his people, and serves as a guarantee of that deliverance.

This understanding sheds light on Jesus’ triumphant affirmation in verse 27, which could be rendered, “He is not the protector, the savior of the dead, but of the living.” The concept “God of the dead” implies a blatant contradiction, especially in the context of the Sadducean understanding of death as extinction, without the hope of resurrection. If God has assumed the task of protecting the patriarchs from misfortune during the course of their life, but fails to deliver them from that supreme misfortune which marks the definitive and absolute check upon their hopes, his protection is of little value. But it is inconceivable that God would provide for the patriarchs some partial tokens of deliverance and leave the final word to death, of which all the misfortunes and sufferings of human existence are only a foretaste. If the death of the patriarchs is the last word of their history, there has been a breach of the promises of God guaranteed by the covenant, and of which the formula “the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob” is the symbol. It is in fidelity to his covenant that God will resurrect the dead. In citing Ex. 3:6 Jesus showed how resurrection faith is attached in a profound way to the central concept of biblical revelation, the covenant, and how the salvation promised by God to the patriarchs and their descendants in virtue of the covenant contains implicitly the assurance of the resurrection. It was the failure to appreciate the essential link between God’s covenant faithfulness and the resurrection which had led the Sadducees into their grievous error.

The Great Commandment verses 28-34

The question concerning the great commandment was asked by a scribe who was well impressed with the appropriateness of Jesus’ words in the preceding discussion. He was not necessarily a Pharisee, since the Sadducees also had their interpreters of the Law.⁴⁶ A distinction between lighter and weightier, smaller and greater commandments was an inevitable feature of Palestinian piety, since it was traditional to speak of the 613 individual statutes of the Law. The basis of distinguishing between small and great commandments was generally the nature of the demand (in the case of commandments) or of the propitiation demanded (in the case of prohibitions which had been infringed). Both the question and its presuppositions stem from a piety of human achievement, supported by scribal interpretation of the biblical mandates.

29–31 Jesus’ response goes much deeper than the distinction between small and great commandments and shows that he understood the question to concern the principle of Law. The attempt to summarize the whole Law in a single utterance was remembered in anecdotes concerning some of the early scribal teachers. When challenged by a Gentile, Hillel the Elder (*ca.* 40 B.C.-A.D. 10) replied: “What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole Law, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.” For Jesus the whole Law is summarized in the will of God which calls for the love which is a whole-hearted response to God and to the neighbor.⁴⁹

Mark alone reports that Jesus introduced his answer with the opening words of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4). Their use by the pious Jew as a prayer and a confession of faith every morning and evening dates very probably to the second century B.C. The first words of the formula were of such importance that their omission in the Jewish milieu presupposed in the Marcan narrative would be scarcely intelligible. They indicate that the command to love God is an obligation which stems from his uniqueness as God and his gracious favor in extending his covenant love to Israel. It is *the Lord our God* who is to be loved with a completeness of

devotion which is defined by the repeated “all.” Because the whole man is the object of God’s covenant love, the whole man is claimed by God for himself. To love God in the way defined by the great commandment is to seek God for his own sake, to have pleasure in him and to strive impulsively after him. Jesus demands a decision and readiness for God, and for God alone, in an unconditional manner. Clearly this cannot be the subject of legal enactment. It is a matter of the will and action. The love which determines the whole disposition of one’s life and places one’s whole personality in the service of God reflects a commitment to God which springs from divine sonship.⁵²

This commitment finds expression in a similar commitment to men. Jesus responds to the question about the *first* commandment with reference to the first and second because they are inseparable. A whole-hearted love for God necessarily finds its expression in a selfless concern for another man which decides and acts in a manner consistent with itself. In the second commandment God addresses men as they are, sinners who love themselves, and claims them as such for love to the neighbor. In Lev. 19:18 the neighbor is defined by the prior reference to “the sons of your own people” in the first part of the verse, and this understanding was presupposed in the first century. Jesus freed the commandment from this restriction in reference, with his startling teaching concerning the neighbor in Lk. 10:25–37. This definition of the will of God and its fulfilment as the combined and inseparable love for God and love for men left an indelible impression on subsequent apostolic teaching (cf. Rom. 13:8–9; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8).

32–34a These verses, which record the approving response of the scribe and Jesus’ recognition of his favorable disposition in the perspective of the Kingdom of God, are confined to the Marcan account. The omission of the divine name in the reaffirmation of the *Shema* (“he is one”) is typically Jewish, and stems from a respect for the name of God grounded in the third commandment (Ex. 20:7). The qualifying phrase “and there is no other beside him” is drawn from Deut. 4:35 (cf. Ex. 8:10; Isa. 45:21). The surprising feature in the scribe’s response is the declaration that the double law of love is superior to sacrifice. The common scribal position is well summarized in the maxim of Simon the Just (*ca.* 200 B.C.): “The world rests on three things: the Law, the sacrificial worship, and expressions of love” (M. *Aboth* I. 2). But there are also statements in rabbinic literature which are attached explicitly or implicitly to OT texts like 1 Sam. 15:22; Hos. 6:6; Prov. 21:3 which affirm the superiority of the moral life, and especially of love, to cult and sacrifice. A careful reading of the texts indicates that “love” is understood as benevolence expressed in works of love which are set above sacrifice because of their atoning significance (cf. *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan* IV. 2). This concept falls short of expressing that inner commitment to God for his own sake which Jesus had affirmed. The explicit statement that the scribe answered discreetly implies an unreserved acknowledgment of the demand expressed in the double commandment of love for God and men.

Jesus’ statement, “you are not far from the Kingdom” is deliberately ambiguous and was undoubtedly intended to provoke reflection. The scribe’s openness and humility before God exhibited a favorable disposition, while his enthusiastic approval of Jesus’ teaching revealed an attraction toward the one through whom God had brought the Kingdom near to men in an eschatological and messianic perspective. The account does not concern a rabbinic discussion about the heart of the Mosaic Law, but a proclamation of the demands of the messianic Kingdom.

34b The silence of Jesus’ adversaries is significant in the context of debate (cf. Ch. 3:4). It is difficult to know whether this brief comment refers to the discussions which precede or is intended to introduce the following account concerning the Davidic descent of the Messiah. The latter alternative has much to commend it, since the silence of those who had questioned

Jesus will then explain the initiative he took in posing the question which is the core of Ch. 12:35–37. The issue, however, must be left open.

Whose son is the Christ verses 35-37

The question concerning the Davidic lineage of the Messiah finds its larger context in the general expectation of a restored kingdom. Popular hopes, heightened by the celebration of redemption in the festival season, found expression in the pilgrim chant, “Blessed be the kingdom of our father David which is coming” (Ch. 11:10). The conviction that national deliverance would be achieved under Davidic leadership was an integral element of both scribal and sectarian piety, and the matter of the fulfilment of the divine promise to David (2 Sam. 7:11–16) was in the air. The Davidic sonship of the Messiah was a scribal tenet firmly grounded in the old prophetic literature (Isa. 9:2–7; 11:1–9; Jer. 23:5 f.; 30:9; 33:15, 17, 22; Ezek. 34:23 f.; 37:24; Hos. 3:5; Amos 9:11). Although the precise terminology “son of David” is not attested until the middle of the first century B.C. (Ps. Sol. 17:23), the designation soon became common for the messianic deliverer among early Palestinian teachers.

Jesus’ challenge was not designed to deny the word and prophecy of Scripture but to raise the crucial issue of its proper meaning. Verse 35 should be understood in the sense, “What do the scribes mean when they say that the Messiah is the son of David?” and verse 37, “In what sense then is he his son?” Those questions are calculated to provoke thoughtful reflection upon the character of the Messiah in the perspective of the OT witness to his lordship. What is in view is *the relationship* of the Davidic sonship to the Messiah’s transcendent majesty. Among the scribes this would be recognized as a Haggada-question, a question of exegesis concerned with the reconciliation of two seemingly contradictory points of view expressed in Scripture. The unity of different biblical passages was stressed by demonstrating their harmony, which depends upon bringing them into a correct relationship to each other. In a Haggada-question it is shown that two affirmations are true, but each is concerned with a different situation or a different epoch. Jesus, then, posed the question how the Davidic descent of the Messiah (which is attested by the Scriptures) is to be harmonized with the equally supported affirmation that the Messiah is David’s Lord.⁶²

36–37 The initial question is immediately followed by a reference to what David said under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The elaborate introduction to the citation shows that David is regarded as a prophetic witness to the supreme dignity of the Messiah. In the psalm David clearly affirmed that the divine promise concerned not himself, but the Messiah. Here only among the sayings of Jesus is the authority of an OT passage traced to its inspiration.⁶⁴ The question closely follows the LXX text of Ps. 110:1, with minor variations. In the Hebrew text the initial reference to “the Lord” translates the tetragrammaton *Yahweh*, the covenant name of God, while the second (“to my Lord”) renders *Adonai*. Jesus’ citation of the passage would have point only if the scribes of his day recognized with him the messianic reference in the text. The purpose of the provocative question in verse 37 is to invite thought and decision. If David referred to the Messiah as his “Lord,” he understood that the one who would receive the promise was far greater than himself.

The brief Marcan account capsulizes a larger discussion in terms of its most salient point. Light is shed upon this discussion by other NT passages (Acts 2:29–34; 13:23–39; Heb. 1:5–13) in which the relationship of the Davidic sonship of Jesus the Messiah is linked to his exaltation in terms of Ps. 110:1. In these texts the prophetic promise to David serves as the starting point for the proclamation of Jesus as the Savior whose resurrection and exaltation

marked the fulfilment of the promise. Jesus is the fulfiller of Scripture, in this case, the promise to David.

This primitive Christian understanding provides the context for properly interpreting the Marcan text. Jesus' questions do not imply that there will be an exaltation of the Messiah through which he is affirmed as David's Lord, in opposition to his Davidic sonship; nor is the contrast between the Messiah's humiliation and subsequent exaltation when he is unveiled as David's Lord. Rather the question posed by Jesus concerns the messianic fulfilment of the promise announced in Ps. 110:1 and anticipates his own resurrection and exaltation to God's right hand. The point made is that David himself distinguished between his earthly, political sovereignty and the higher level of sovereignty assigned to the Messiah. The Messiah is not only "son of David"; he is also, and especially, his Lord. His role is not to restore on earth the Davidic kingdom or the sovereignty of Israel. He does not simply extend the work of David, but comes to establish a wholly different Kingdom, the throne of which is situated at God's right hand. It is thus the question of another kind of fulfilment to the promise than that which contemporary Judaism expected. The political-nationalistic concept of the messianic mission supported by the scribes is simplistic.

When Jesus posed his question within the Temple precincts he stood before his suffering and death (cf. Chs. 10:32–34; 11:18; 12:12). He knew himself to be in a situation of conflict for the salvation of the people of God. The battle would not be fought against Rome or any other earthly power, and it had no national-political goals. It was rather against the demonic powers of the spiritual world that he set himself. Victory demanded configuration with the suffering Servant in obedience to God, fully trusting in the vindication promised in Ps. 110:1. God's promise to David is fulfilled by the cross which, for Jesus, is the prelude to resurrection.

This interpretation strikes at the heart of the national-political understanding of the Davidic promise. To the question, "In what sense, then, is the Messiah David's son?" no satisfactory answer could be given from a scribal viewpoint. Only from the perspective of the New Covenant is the answer provided: already in the exaltation of the Messiah to God's right hand is the promise of everlasting dominion fulfilled (2 Sam. 7:13, 16; Ps. 110:1). In this way the Scriptures affirming Davidic sonship and the Messiah as David's Lord were united.

Jesus' rhetorical statements imply a veiled self-affirmation. They suggest, but do not explicitly affirm, that his sonship is more than a matter of human descent and that his dignity is transcendent. Behind Ch. 12:35–37 stands the same Christology affirmed in the confessional formulations of Rom. 1:3f.; 2 Tim. 2:8: the son of David is the exalted Lord who now reigns at God's right hand, having fulfilled the expectation of Israel according to a modality startlingly different from scribal interpretation.

If it is proper to view verse 37b as a concluding comment to the preceding discussion, it serves to identify the common people with Jesus. They sensed the discomfort of the scribes and responded enthusiastically to his teaching, without necessarily penetrating its significance. It is possible, however, that Mark intended a reference to Jesus' Temple ministry as a whole (cf. Ch. 14:49). In that case, these words provide a general comment upon the popular response to an extended ministry, which is summarized in the five conflict-stories of Ch. 12:13–37.

Warning about the scribes verses 38-40

Jesus' warning against scribal abuses is introduced in a most general way. No attention is given to details of time and place or to the specific circumstances which called forth this denunciation. It appears to have found its place in the Marcan outline through topical

association with the preceding paragraph: in Ch. 12:35–37 the teaching of the scribes is exposed as simplistic and misleading; here their self-intoxication is placed under the judgment of God. While Ch. 12:28–34 indicates that Jesus’ relationship with the scribes was not always strained, throughout the Gospel Mark has noted a sustained conflict with the scribes from Jerusalem (see Chs. 3:22–30; 7:1–5; 11:18, 27f.; 12:12). The new note sounded in this pericope is the bold attack upon the love of deference in men whose preoccupation with the Law should have made them singularly zealous that God alone should receive the praise of men.

The scribe was distinguished by his linen robe, a long white mantle reaching to the feet and provided with a long fringe. White linen clothes were regarded as a mark of distinction, so that men of eminence (priests, Levites, scribes), or those who wished to parade their position, wore white and left bright colors to the common people. By the majority of the people the scribes were venerated with unbounded respect and awe. Their words were considered to possess sovereign authority. When a scribe passed by on the street or in the bazaar people rose respectfully. Only tradesmen at their work were exempted from this display of deference.⁷⁴ The scribe was greeted with titles of deepest respect: “Rabbi,” “Father,” “Master,” and there is evidence that in the first century A.D. the designation “Rabbi” was undergoing a transition from its former status as a general title of honor to one reserved exclusively for ordained scribes.⁷⁶ When the important men of Jerusalem gave a feast they considered it an ornament to the feast to have a distinguished scribe and his pupils there. The highest places were assigned to them, and the scribe was given precedence in honor over the aged, and even over parents. In the synagogues as well the seat of honor was reserved for him; he sat at the front with his back to the chest containing the Torah, in full view of the congregation. Jesus condemned the scribes for their desire for these tokens of status and for the self-satisfaction they perpetuated.

40 The shift in emphasis from the desire for deference to the abuse of privilege suggests that it is better to read a full stop at verse 39 and to regard verse 40 as a separate, and independent, charge. In the first century A.D. the scribes lived primarily on subsidies, since it was forbidden that they should be paid for exercising their profession. While few scribes were reduced to begging, an abundance of evidence shows that the Jerusalem scribes belonged to the poorer classes. The extension of hospitality to them was strongly encouraged as an act of piety; it was considered particularly meritorious to relieve a scribe of concern for his livelihood. Many well-to-do persons placed their financial resources at the disposal of scribes, and it was inevitable that there should be abuses.⁸⁰ The charge that the scribes “devoured widows’ houses” refers to the fact that they sponged on the hospitality of people of limited means. The accusation that on the pretext of deep piety they made of public prayers an opportunity to win the esteem of men indicates the peril in the loss of perspective in the service of God. This displacement of the honor of God from the center of concern is what distinguished the scribes from Jesus and exposed them to the searching judgment of God.

This stern denunciation of scribal practices concludes the Marcan account of Jesus’ public ministry. The incident which follows, like the Olivet discourse, centers in teaching directed to the disciples. By terminating the public ministry with this account the evangelist points to the sharp opposition between Jesus and the Jewish authorities which led inevitably to events recalled in the passion narrative.

The widows offering verses 41-44

This brief account has the character of a postscript to the preceding paragraph. It serves to sharpen the contrast between the sham righteousness of the scribes and that wholehearted devotion to God which characterized an unnamed widow whose poverty was absolute. It is equally a transitional passage to the prophetic discourse which follows, for its setting is the Court of the Women. It was as Jesus left the sacred precincts with his disciples that he prophesied the complete destruction of the Temple complex (Ch. 13:1-2). The sequence of movement envisioned in Ch. 12:41-13:2 is natural and undoubtedly reflects what happened upon a single occasion.

Jesus was seated upon a bench watching the people bring their contributions to the Temple treasury. According to the Mishnah, *Shekalim* VI. 5, there were thirteen trumpet-shaped receptacles for this purpose which were placed against the wall of the Court of the Women. In contrast to many wealthy persons who brought "much" Jesus noticed a woman whose poverty could be estimated from the size of her gift. She cast into the receptacle two of the smallest copper coins which circulated in Palestine.⁸⁴ For the benefit of his Roman readers Mark computes their value in terms of Roman coinage. The fact that the woman gave two coins was significant, for she could easily have kept one for herself.

43-44 Jesus saw in the widow an example which the disciples needed to appreciate. They undoubtedly felt that those who were wealthy had made the significant contribution, since so much more could be accomplished with the sizable gifts they brought (see on Ch. 10:25-26). What was the value of two almost-worthless coins in comparison to such munificence? Prefacing his statement with his solemn Amen, Jesus overturned this facile assumption of conventional piety. What the Twelve had failed to appreciate was the total commitment to God that the widow's gift represented. In contrast with those who brought a gift from their abundance, she gave all that she had, even her whole living.

The rabbinic literature contains a similar account: a priest rejected the offering of a handful of meal from a poor woman. That night in a dream he was commanded: "Do not despise her. It is as if she had offered her life." This account, like the evangelical narrative, serves to stress the qualitative difference between God's perspective and man's: "man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks upon the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). There is, however, an added dimension to the evangelical narrative which is provided by its context in the gospel. The woman sacrifices *what is necessary*, all she had. It was this that the disciples needed to understand, for the call to the gospel is a call for absolute surrender to God and total trust in him.