

*The Gospel
according to*
MARK

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WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

 **APOLLOS**
LEICESTER, ENGLAND

g to them the word, as they were able to hear." The last part of the description is important, "as they were able to hear" (see also 1 Cor 3:1). Parables enlighten or obscure depending on the ability to hear. Those who are able to find them revelatory — and even more will be given to them (vv. 24-25). Those who are unable to hear find parables opaque. Hearing determines whether one is an insider or an outsider. It is the all-important first step that leads to fellowship with Jesus, where fuller understanding becomes possible, for "when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything." "Only in association with Jesus can one learn to understand the language about God."⁸²

Parables were the public persona of Jesus the teacher. By means of public images from everyday life, Jesus teased, tantalized, and tested his audiences, inviting them to an insider experience of the kingdom and fellowship with himself.

⁸² Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, 106.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Who Then Is This?"

MARK 4:35-6:6a

The material in 3:13-4:34 consists of conversations, controversies, and parables. Readers are suddenly transferred in 4:35 to the resumption of Jesus' public ministry around the lake. The four stories in this section, longer and more detailed than many of Mark's pericopes, all highlight Jesus as a miracle worker. His mighty acts evoke a judgment from those who witness them. The disciples in the foundering boat must choose between faith and fear (4:35-41); the witnesses of the healed Gerasene demoniac must choose between acceptance and rejection of Jesus (5:1-20); both Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman must choose between faith and despair (5:21-43); and even Jesus' hometown in Nazareth must choose between belief and disbelief. The initial step of faith may not seem like one at all, for the presence of Jesus is first of all an unsettling presence. His disciples ask, "Who then is this?" (4:41), and his family and acquaintances in Nazareth ask, "How can this man do these things?" (6:2). The right judgment of Jesus cannot be made by following convention, for Jesus supersedes the powers of nature, demons, illness, death, and family influence. Confining Jesus within such categories and stereotypes is to misunderstand him; acknowledging his supremacy to such categories is the first act of discipleship.

JESUS — STILLER OF STORMS (4:35-41)

The calming of the storm is full of vivid details, many of which are flattened or omitted in the versions of the story in Matt 8:23-27 and Luke 8:22-25. Mark's version is replete with eyewitness characteristics: the hour of day (v. 35), the reference that the disciples took Jesus from the

boat in which he was sitting (v. 36), the presence of other boats (v. 36), the boat's drawing water (v. 37), Jesus' sleeping on the cushion (v. 38), the disciples' sarcasm (v. 38) and Jesus' rebuke (v. 40).¹ Moreover, the description of the disciples' fear in v. 41 is redundant in Greek (smoothed out in the NIV, "they were terrified"), reflecting an underlying infinitive absolute in Hebrew. Particulars such as these are evidence of firsthand narration, and Peter is again a likely source. These historical details are not related randomly and inchoately, as one might find in a diary entry, for example. The story exhibits sophisticated theological thought and reflects in particular the influence of Jonah 1 and Ps 107:23-32.² The calming of the storm illustrates Mark's larger purpose of interpreting historical events theologically so as to show Jesus as God incarnate and his significance for discipleship.

35-36 Mention of "other boats with him" may allude to the larger circle of disciples beyond the Twelve who were with Jesus in 3:34 and 4:10. The curious detail that "they took [Jesus] along, just as he was, in the boat" probably reflects the memory of the disciples that Jesus was taken directly from the boat in which he was teaching the crowd (4:1), without his having returned to the shore.

In 1986 the hull of a fishing boat was recovered from the mud on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, about five miles south of Capernaum. The boat — 26½ feet long, 7½ feet wide, and 4½ feet high — corresponds in design to a first-century mosaic of a Galilean boat preserved in Migdal only a mile from the discovery site, and to a sixth-century mosaic of a similar boat from Madeba. Carbon 14 technology dates the boat between 120 B.C. and A.D. 40. Both fore and aft sections of the boat appear to have been covered with a deck, providing space on which to sit or lie. The boat was propelled by four rowers (two per side) and has a total capacity of about fifteen persons. The Galilee boat corresponds to the particulars of the boat described in this story and to depictions in various ancient artistic renderings. A similar boat accommodated Jesus and his disciples on their crossings of the Sea of Galilee.³

37 The disciples and Jesus launch out eastward across the lake. Mark does not state their purpose, but Jesus' desire to preach elsewhere (so 1:38) may apply here. The Sea of Galilee (see at 1:16) lies nearly seven hundred feet below sea level in a basin surrounded by hills and mountains that are especially precipitous on the east side. Thirty miles to the

1. V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 272-73; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 172.

2. R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, 1.267-75.

3. See S. Wachsmann, "The Galilee Boat," *BAR* 14/5 (1988): 18-33.

northeast Mt. Hermon rises to 9,200 feet above sea level. The interchange between cold upper air from Mt. Hermon and warm air rising from the Sea of Galilee produces tempestuous weather conditions for which the lake is famed. The "furious squall" of v. 37, which in Greek can mean "hurricane," fits the stories of Galilean fishermen even today, to whom the early evening easterly is known as "Sharkia" (Arabic for "shark").⁴ Although the Greek word for the "furious squall" (*lailaps*) is not used in Jonah, in other respects the description of the storm in v. 37 echoes the violent storm that befell the ship in which Jonah was fleeing (Jonah 1:4).

38 As Jonah retired to the bowels of the ship and fell into a deep sleep (Jonah 1:5), Jesus is also described by Mark sleeping on a sailor's cushion in the stern of the boat. Ironically, the only place in the Gospels that we hear of Jesus sleeping is during a storm. The scene depicts his complete trust in God in the midst of adversity, like the farmer in the preceding parables (4:3-9, 27) who trusts God's providential working over all obstacles and adversities.⁵ As in the Jonah story, the disciples, some of them veteran seamen, are terrified by the ferocity of the storm. The captain of Jonah's ship upbraids Jonah for sleeping while the crew is perishing (LXX, *apollymi*); likewise the disciples reproach Jesus, "'Teacher, don't you care if we drown (Gk. *apollymi*)?'" Matt 8:25 softens the reproach to a prayer, and Luke 8:24 to a plea for help. The rudeness of Mark's wording reflects the way frustrated and desperate people speak (cf. Luke 10:40) and is probably a verbatim reminiscence of the disciples' response in the crisis. A later editor is not likely to have made Jesus the object of such a reproof. The divine humility of Jesus is made evident by his tolerance of the reproaches of his disciples.⁶ That same humility will be evinced later when verbal reproach turns to outright abandonment (14:50).

39 The disciples are not abandoned to watery peril, however. Jesus "got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm." When Jonah is thrown overboard, the sea becomes calm (Jonah 1:15); so also in the tempest on the Sea of Galilee, nature is made to conform to the repose of its Master. The grateful change is effected not by prayer or incantation, but by the authoritative word of Jesus, just as God produced order from chaos in the beginning (Gen 1:2).

Mark's description of the stilling of the storm exceeds the Hebrew penchant for personalizing nature (e.g., Ps 104:3-6). In particular, the lan-

4. On weather conditions on the Sea of Galilee, see M. Nun, *The Sea of Galilee and Its Fishermen in the New Testament* (Kibbutz Ein Gev: Kinnereth Sailing Company, 1989), 52-87.

5. So Lev 26:6; Pss 3:5; 4:8; Job 11:18-19; Prov 3:21-26.

6. So Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 174.

guage of v. 39 is, strictly speaking, proper to that of exorcism. The wind is "rebuked" (or "censured"). The Gk. *epitiman* has been used twice earlier in Mark of the rebuking of evil spirits (1:25; 3:12). The word is not used in Hellenistic exorcisms; it is rather a technical term in Jewish exorcisms for "the commanding word, uttered by God or by his spokesman, by which evil powers are brought into submission and the way is thereby prepared for the establishment of God's righteous rule in the world."⁷ To the waves Jesus orders, "'Quiet! Be still!'" and they "obey him" (v. 41). The Greek word for "'Be still!'" *pephimōso*, carries the sense of "muzzled." It occurs in the second person singular, as though Jesus were addressing a personal being. Its unusual perfect passive imperative form indicates that the condition shall persist, that is, "Be still, and stay still."

Such language is more appropriate of demonic forces than of inanimate nature (1:25; 3:12; 9:25; cf. 8:33!). Not uncommonly in the OT wind and waters symbolize hostile forces over which God prevails.⁸ The stilling of the storm is often regarded simply as a "nature miracle" told with hyperbole and metaphor so as to emphasize Jesus' extraordinary power. The language of v. 39, however, depicts Jesus as the Strong Man (3:27; 1:7) who vanquishes Satan and plunders his evil minions (3:27; cf. 1:7). Jesus' power over the forces of nature, and the language in which it is described, foreshadows his power over the forces that disrupt human nature in the story of the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20). In both stories Jesus vanquishes hostile forces that attempt to prevent him from extending his ministry into Gentile regions.

The description of the stilling of the storm in the language of exorcism is intended not simply to demonstrate that Jesus possesses power over nature as well as over illness and demon possession. Its ultimate purpose is to show that Jesus does what only God can do.⁹ Mark's narra-

7. H. C. Kee, "The Terminology of Mark's Exorcism Stories," *NTS* 14 (1968): 323-46.

8. Exod 14:21ff.; Job 12:15; 28:25; Pss 33:7; 65:7; 77:16; 107:23-30; 147:18; Prov 30:4; Amos 4:13; Nah 1:3ff.

9. In an insightful investigation of the language of 4:35-41, Gisela Kittel, "'Wer ist der?' Markus 4,35-41 und der mehrfache Sinn der Schrift," in *Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift. Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums*, Herausgegeben von Ch. Landmesser, H.-J. Eckstein, und H. Lichtenberger, BZNW (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 517-42, draws attention to the mythic proportions of Mark's language in this story. In the OT, God alone can save people from the storms of chaos (Pss 33:7; 65:8; 89:11; 104:7; Job 26:12; 38:8). Hence this is not simply a miracle story of salvation; rather, it is a story of Jesus as the Epiphany of God who does what only God can do. Kittel asks the provocative question posed by the story, "Who is this who in the middle of the storm stands at one and the same time with his own and also at the side of God? Who is this, in whom God's creative and redeeming power invades the world of chaos and snatches people from its destructive force? This question must now accompany the disciples."

tion invites comparison with Ps 107:23-32 as well as with Jonah 1. Psalm 107 speaks of God's stirring up a tempest at sea that causes sailors to melt in fear. They cry to the Lord in their distress, and "He stilled the storm to a whisper; and the waves of the sea were hushed" (107:29). The language and pattern of this psalm are unmistakably reflected in Mark's story. In the OT God alone possesses power to quell natural storms such as this (Pss 65:7; 89:9; 104:7; also *T. Adam* 3:1). In this story, Mark informs us that the same power and authority belong to Jesus. In a final allusion to the Jonah story in v. 41, Mark says that the disciples were terrified at the calming of the storm. Their exceeding fear repeats verbatim the fear of the sailors in the Jonah story (*ephobēthēsan phobon megan*, Jonah 1:10, 16). The pagan sailors in the Jonah story recognized God in the presence of the miracle and offered sacrifice to him. In the calming of the storm on the lake Jesus does again what only God can do (so 2:7-10), and Mark invites disciples, then and now, to recognize in Jesus the same presence of God.¹⁰

40-41 Typically in Mark, whenever the person and work of Jesus are highlighted, so, too, are discipleship. For Mark, the revelation of Jesus as God's Son is not an isolated datum that transpires in a vacuum. Jesus' self-disclosure occurs in the presence of insiders so that they may be enabled to hear, comprehend, and increase in faith. Who Jesus is lays a claim on what his disciples may become. These two elements of Christology and discipleship are evident in the present story.

Throughout the stilling of the storm Mark gives clues that the purpose of the miracle is for the disciples. The story is told from their perspective: it is they who take Jesus with them (v. 36) and raise him from sleep (v. 38); they are afraid (v. 41), and their probing question concludes the story (v. 41). This is an unusual perspective for Mark, who normally is an anonymous narrator. In addition, the narrative focus of the story is on faith. In the eye of the storm the disciples panic and accuse Jesus of forsaking them (v. 38). In their response Mark may intend a parallel between the situation of the disciples in the boat and those of his church in Rome

10. The christological purpose of the stilling of the storm, i.e., that in the person and word of Jesus the purpose of God is effective, sets this miracle apart from other stories of calming waters in antiquity. The legend of a Jewish boy in *J. Ber.* 9:1 (4th cent. A.D.) who saved a boatload of Gentiles from peril at sea is essentially about the superiority of Judaism over paganism. Plutarch's story of the Dioscuri (*Moralia*, "Obsolescence of Oracles," 30) simply recognizes the sons of Zeus as protectors and patrons of mariners. The same theme is present in Lucian's "The Ship" or "The Wishes" 9. Both Philostratus (*Life of Apoll.* 4:13) and Porphyry (*Life of Pythagoras* 29) relate stories about calming of waves so imperiled travelers could arrive safely, but the purpose of both is the exoneration of Apollonius and Pythagoras as miracle workers. See *HCNT*, 66-68. In addition to their different emphases, all the stories noted above (with the exception of Porphyry) postdate Mark and cannot have been prototypes of Mark 4:35-41.

who lived under the dominion of pagan powers and gods, and who suffered hot persecution in the later years of Nero's reign (A.D. 64-68). Like the disciples, Mark's first readers may have thought God indifferent to their hardship and suffering. This story assured them, as it assures us, that even seismic revolt against God's Son cannot swamp the boat in which he is gathered with his disciples. In the midst of their consternation the authoritative word of Jesus that has muzzled rebel powers asks the disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"¹¹ This will not be the last time Jesus questions the disciples' lack of faith.¹² The disciples may indeed be insiders (4:10-11), but they do not yet fully understand Jesus — nor can they until the cross and resurrection. Jesus does not reproach the disciples for their lack of knowledge, however, but for their fear, the Greek word for which means "losing heart" or "cowardice" (see 6:50-51). The real threat to faith comes not from lack of knowledge but from doubt and fear.

Mark concludes the stilling of the storm with a question that is a doorway to faith. The disciples, we are told, "were terrified." This will not be the last time that the mighty acts of God will produce fear in them. The women at the tomb will be equally terrified (16:8). Ironically, the terror of the disciples at what Jesus has done exceeds their initial fear of the storm. The presence of the supernatural is more frightening to humanity than the most destructive of natural disasters. Jesus is still a stranger to his own followers, for they are better able to handle the possibility of their own death than the possibility of the presence of God among them. In this instance, God's nearness in Jesus is not something reassuring but something profoundly unsettling, even terrifying. Yet such consternation produces the one question that makes faith possible. It is a question that was first asked by the crowd in 1:27. Now it is present on the lips of the disciples, "Who then is this?" Following the Exodus, the Israelites had also feared God. "And when the Israelites saw the great power of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him" (Exod 14:31). The question before the disciples and Mark's readers is this: Will their fear lead them also to "put their trust in him"?

11. Among the textual variants of v. 40, the shorter version of the question *deiloi ste? oupō* ("Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?") has the strongest textual support and is preferable to the NIV, "Why are you so afraid?" (Metzger, TCGNT, 84).

12. 7:18; 8:17, 21, 33; 9:19; [16:14].

CREATION FROM CHAOS (5:1-20)

Jesus has just calmed a violent storm at sea (4:35-41); he now meets a man with an equally violent storm inside him. In both cases the power of Jesus prevails over chaos and destruction. The purpose of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac, as with the stilling of the storm on the lake, is not simply to leave readers awestruck at Jesus' power, however, but to prompt them to consider "how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (5:19). Once again Jesus is connoted with God, for the Lord who has healed the demoniac is none other than Jesus (v. 20).

1 Mark locates the exorcism and healing of the demoniac in "the region of the Gerasenes." The place name is puzzling because the city of Gerasa (modern Jerash) lay not on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee but thirty-seven miles inland to the southeast. A two-day commute by foot between Gerasa and the Sea where our episode takes place is obviously out of the question. Skeptics have made sport of the pigs running the great distance from Gerasa (or even from Gadara, according to Matt 8:28, five miles to the southeast) across steep ravines and wadis before plunging into the lake.

If "the region of the Gerasenes" is the original reading in v. 1, then Mark may mean the *region* associated with Gerasa, which may have extended to the Sea of Galilee, rather than the city itself. But "Gerasenes" is not a certain reading. The name of the location in v. 1 appears in different manuscripts as "Gerasa," "Gadara," or "Gergesa."¹³ None of the three locations is clearly superior to the other two in terms of textual support.¹⁴ As we have noted, both Gerasa and Gadara lay too far inland to be suitable sites for the story. We cannot say for certain, but a town named Gergesa apparently existed on the northeast shore of the lake. Both Origen (*Comm. on John* 6:41, chap. 24) and Eusebius (*Onomasticon* 64.1) identified the swine miracle with a town named Gergesa on the eastern side of the lake. Moreover, a midrash to Song of Songs (*Zuta* 1:4) mentions a form of the name in the following reference, "the graves of Gog and Magog will be open from south of the Kidron Valley to Gergeshta on the eastern side of Lake Tiberias." Although the *Zuta* midrash is late, this particular saying is ascribed to Rabbi Nehemiah, an acclaimed disciple of Akiba in the second century A.D. This quotation preserves an independent tradition a century

13. *Gerasēnōn*, *Gadarēnōn*, *Gergesēnōn*. See the brief discussion of the terms in Metzger, TCGNT, 84.

14. "Gergesa," however, possesses the most *diverse* attestation, including uncial and minuscule manuscripts, ancient versions, and patristic citations. "Gergesa" is also the corrected reading in Sinaiticus (N).