



FRESNO PACIFIC
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

The use of Psalms in Mark.

Author(s): Geddert, Timothy J..

Source: *Direction*, vol. 38, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 179-192.

Published by: Direction.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/452>

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the [Fresno Pacific University](#) community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the web and assures their preservation for the future.

The Use of Psalms in Mark¹

Timothy J. Geddert

The Gospel of Mark is not noted for its frequent and extensive quotations from the Old Testament. In this respect, Mark is not like, for example, Matthew, Romans, or Hebrews. There are, however, some significant quotations and many allusions (sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle) that shape our reading of the text. And some of these are from the Psalms.

Mark's Gospel will drop subtle hints that Jesus is not only a great miracle-worker, not only a great prophet, not only the Messiah, not only the Son of God—Jesus is God!

This paper will survey the quotations from and a few of the allusions to the Psalms that I find (and find *significant*) within the Gospel of Mark. There will be special focus on several fascinating Markan texts in which Old Testament background texts (in this case highlighting those from the Psalms) significantly shape the way we are expected to interpret those Markan texts. In the examples to be examined, Mark seems deliberately to say more than is obvious on the surface of the narrative. Like those old 3-D posters popular around twenty years ago, in which images or pictures were embedded, often hidden initially to the casual observer but clearly apparent in a flash of perception,² the Gospel of Mark incorporates numerous images and symbols into the deep structure of its narrative.

Those who have encountered my previous publications on Mark's Gospel will know already that I consider Mark's Gospel to be a literary and

Timothy Geddert has taught at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California, since 1986. His publications (English and German) have focused on the Gospel of Mark, biblical interpretation, church theology, and ethics. He is currently trying to balance his passion for teaching New Testament at MBBS and in other church and academic contexts, with administrative responsibilities as Academic Dean.

theological masterpiece, written by a subtle writer and profound thinker. For centuries scholars seemed unable to see past Mark's relatively simple surface story line and his less than elegant Greek. And so they assumed that Mark was a crude assembler of fairly randomly collected traditions, that he produced numerous clumsy constructions, that he told stories but often forgot to give the punch lines, and that he generally did a fairly mediocre job of writing a gospel. The longer I study Mark, the more sure I am that this perception is absolutely wrong.

There is more to be discovered in the feeding narratives than how many loaves were broken and how many basketfuls were left over. There is more to be discovered in Mark 13 than a list of "signs." For those ready to hear the message of the cross, Mark presents Jesus from the start as more than a wonder-worker. And Mark did not botch his ending nor did copyists lose it. Mark wrote a gospel that is profound and provocative.

This paper will not attempt to bring to the surface all the hidden images to be discerned within Mark's narrative; rather, it will focus on a few that come into view when we pay attention to the ways in which Mark incorporates quotations from and allusions to the Psalms.

DIRECT QUOTATIONS FROM THE PSALMS

The Gospel of Mark contains five *direct* quotations (six if you count repetitions), though not all interpreters have recognized the first of these. Strictly speaking, *Mark* never does quote from the Psalms—that is to say, Mark, speaking in the voice of the narrator, never does. Mark's Gospel is not like the Gospel of Matthew, in which the narrator constantly comments on the plot. "This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet" (and then come quotations from the Old Testament). In Mark all quotations from the Psalms come from the mouths of the characters, and that is also true of every other quotation from the Old Testament with the notable exception of the Isaiah-Malachi quotation in 1:2, 3.

Mark's quotations from the Psalms include: God's voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism quotes Psalm 2; the pilgrims who celebrate the king on the colt quote Psalm 118; Jesus then also quotes Psalm 118 and later Psalm 110 in the temple, and he quotes Psalm 22 from the cross. Mark's story world is populated with divine and human voices, insiders and outsiders, who know the Scriptures and who quote them. Mark as author and narrator joins them in combining two texts that he quotes at the beginning and then by alluding to many more after that. Mark uses these quotations and allusions to shape the *reader's* interpretation of what is happening.

The Voice At Jesus' Baptism

It is the voice of God that first quotes from the Psalms in Mark's Gos-

pel. God speaks God's own words in the composite quotation that makes up the baptismal commissioning of Jesus: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased."³ This is a brilliant tri-partite composition that combines three different Old Testament texts and conveys three important themes.⁴

Examining these three in reverse order permits us to leave the quotation from Psalm 2 for last. Jesus is the one with whom God is well-pleased, the one on whom God's favor rests. The words and phrases come from Isaiah 42:1. That means that Jesus is being identified as the Servant of the Lord—The Chosen One in whom God's soul delights, the one into whom God sends the divine Spirit. The larger context in Isaiah 42 helps to define the mission of Jesus. He will faithfully bring about God's justice, but will do so with gentleness, with compassion, with self-sacrifice. He will not cry out or raise his voice . . . he will open blind eyes and release the prisoners. What Luke's Gospel says explicitly (see Luke 4:18, 19), Mark's Gospel hides between the lines.

Working backwards, we hear the heavenly voice refer to "the son, whom I love." The expression is from Genesis 22:2, where Abraham is called to take his son, whom he loves, and lead that beloved son up to the mountain of sacrifice. God will do the same for "the beloved Son of God" as the book of Mark proceeds towards its climax. In the end Isaac is spared when an animal takes his place. In Jesus' case it will be the other way around.

Finally, still working backwards, we come to the quotation from the Psalms. "You are my Son!" The quotation is brief, but the context makes it unmistakable. Psalm 2 is a Messianic enthronement Psalm. It is a Psalm about God's enemies, rulers, and kings, who plot against God and God's Messiah. In that sense, the plot line of Psalm 2 is similar to the plot line of Mark. But though the enemies will mock and deride, God will have the last laugh. "The One enthroned in heaven laughs" (2:4). God has a secret plan, a covert plan of attack: God is installing God's very own Son on Zion's hill! "You are my Son," (2:7) says God to the one who is destined to rule the nations.

The voice from heaven in Mark is simple and straightforward, an affirmation of God's love for Jesus, God's Son: "You are my son, the beloved one, on whom my favor rests." But below the surface, for those with eyes to see, it is far more. Jesus is not only being assured of his Father's love, he "is also being inaugurated into a Messianic ministry, characterized by the way of the cross. This time a ram will not take the place of 'the Son.' Instead, his death will forever end the sacrifice of animals for the atonement of human sin. Yes, Jesus is God's chosen Servant and Son, but chosen for a path of suffering and death, chosen for the way of the cross."⁵

The significance of this in Mark's Roman imperial context can hardly be over-estimated. Mark's opening verse already challenges the imperial cult. Not Caesar, but Jesus, is the "Son of God," the one whose advent is "Good News."⁶ Now, as the divine voice commissions the Son, it announces God's universal kingship over this world's royal pretenders, a rule to be accomplished through a suffering servant, a sacrificial lamb, an obedient Son.⁷ Perceptive readers of Mark can perceive the meaning below the surface of the text.

Hosanna to the "Coming One"

Mark's second quotation from the Psalms is also from a Messianic Psalm. It is quoted precisely when Jesus, the one who is destined to rule the nations, demonstrates what kind of kingdom he brings—a peaceable kingdom, ruled with gentleness by a king who rides a donkey (cf. Zech. 9:9, 10).

The celebrating pilgrims shout "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; blessed is the coming kingdom of our father, David! Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:9, quoting Ps. 118:25, 26). The quotation is from a Psalm perfectly suited to the occasion.

Psalm 118 celebrates the victory over the nations that Psalm 2 had predicted. Israel's Royal King is celebrated as he comes to Zion in a great victorious procession. He has defeated all God's enemies, initiated the new exodus, indeed the new creation. He arrives in the temple where priests bless God, bless the king who comes in God's name, and bless the people.

Israel, now in exile to the Romans, recited Psalm 118 as they remembered God's past acts of deliverance and hoped for another. This Psalm was regularly used in preparation for the Passover. So it is in Mark 11. Jesus joins other pilgrims streaming into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, but he becomes himself the center of the celebration, as Psalm 118 is used to celebrate his coming. It is a subtle use of Psalm 118, for *in the liturgy* those "coming in the name of the Lord" are the *pilgrims*, the worshippers; they are coming in the Lord's name to celebrate the feast. *In Mark* the "one who comes" is more than a pilgrim; he is the goal of the pilgrimage. He is more than a celebrant at the Passover Feast; he is the Passover lamb. He is God's royal king, who will accomplish deliverance once more. But he will not do it through military combat. Ironically, he will not play the role of the angel of death; as the Passover liturgies unfold, Jesus will become the lamb whose blood is applied to make redemption possible.

In a much deeper sense than the pilgrims accompanying Jesus that day through Jerusalem's gates could possibly have realized, this one who comes in the name of the Lord, this "Coming One" that Malachi and John the Baptist had prophesied about, this perfect worshiper ultimately

becomes the one *to be worshipped*, as he fulfills his human and divine mission and embodies the meaning of the Passover. Later Mark will drop just enough hints in his text that we can identify the precise moment of Jesus' great announcement: "The hour has come!" It is the midnight hour on Passover evening.⁸ It is the very minute when other celebrants who have kept the Passover vigil, breathe a sigh and say, "Maybe next year!" Jesus, in contrast, will be led away to the slaughter. By giving his life, he will redeem his people, overthrow empires, and renew creation.

The Son Becomes a Stone

Mark's third quotation from the Psalms comes in Jesus' temple teaching. The quotation is again from Psalm 118, the Psalm celebrating God's victory and Israel's redemption. Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22 just after narrating the parable of the vineyard workers. "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes" (Mark 12:10). It seems an abrupt change of imagery. The vineyard owners kill a "Son" and a rejected "Stone" is restored to a place of honor. There may well be a word play in the underlying Hebrew between "Ben" and "Eben," but this plays no role in Mark's Greek text.

In Jesus' parable, unfaithful custodians of God's vineyard kill God's very Son, God's beloved. God responds by vindicating this Son / this Stone, by raising him up to be a cornerstone. The unfaithful custodians—these are none other than Israel's religious establishment, "the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law" (Mark 8:31), who have all along been collaborating with Rome and its puppet rulers (3:6; 10:33; cf. 15:1). God will redeem Israel when Rome is defeated and collaborators with Rome are replaced by those who, unlike Jerusalem's power-brokers, side with the slaughtered Son, the rejected Stone, the one whose resurrection from death signals his own vindication and God's victory over all who repress others and abuse power, whether that be through military might or religious oppression.

The corrupt leaders of Israel are all leaves—no figs; they have turned God's house into a den of thieves; they devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Their doom will be sealed when they kill the Son, for God will raise up that Son, now as a new temple. Jesus will be the capstone / cornerstone of the new temple. But because it is a temple "not made with hands" (Mark 14:58), Jesus is not merely Stone but still Son, still the rightful heir of the vineyard. And God now gives that vineyard to new custodians, to those who follow the Servant who becomes a ransom, who learn from him that greatness is found in service (10:43–45).

Sitting With David's Lord

Later Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1 and only hints that he is talking about

himself. “The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet’” (Mark 12:36). This verse, the one quoted more frequently in the New Testament than any other from the Hebrew Scriptures, seems designed by Jesus (or at least by Mark) to do three things:

- 1) First, it clarifies that Jesus is not *merely* David’s son (he is that!) but *also* David’s Lord (for he sets up a kingdom that transcends even David’s). This is high Christology—Jesus is identified with the very Lord whom David himself worshiped.
- 2) Second, it explains why the Messianic kingdom, though truly inaugurated, is not yet consummated—there is still a mop-up operation to be carried out while this already and not yet kingdom grows from its mustard seed beginnings to its ultimate destiny in power and glory. Yes, David’s Son is already enthroned (or at least will be within the next few chapters of Mark’s narrative), but even after that, there are enemies yet to be defeated! (One imagines Mark’s persecuted community nodding in agreement, but not too vigorously, lest enemy spies have infiltrated their house fellowship.)
- 3) Third, it continues to develop a pervasive theme in Mark, that Jesus came as a nonviolent victor, one who entrusts his case fully into God’s hands. Jesus *demonstrates* in the Jerusalem temple and he *predicts* its doom along with the doom of its loyal but corrupt custodians. But Jesus will not lift a finger against his enemies. The day will come when all God’s enemies will be under Jesus’ feet; Jesus’ present enemies will one day see him seated at the right hand of Power. Yet throughout this whole volatile situation, Jesus himself will be a pacifist. God will vindicate him and his cause.

It should be noted that, though Jesus does not exactly quote Psalm 110 during his trial, Mark surely intends readers to see Psalm 110 in Jesus’ response to the High Priest’s question: “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” Combining Daniel 7’s reference to the authoritative Son of Man with Psalm 110’s reference to God’s seated viceroy, Jesus responds: “I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). A condemned criminal will someday preside over God’s Kingdom and bring to justice corrupt priests, judges, kings, and emperors.⁹

Reading Psalm 22 Backwards

We come to the fifth and final quotation from the Psalms in Mark, Jesus’ so-called cry of dereliction from the cross, his direct quotation of Psalm 22:1, “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*” Mark first transcribes the He-

brew into Greek and then provides the translation. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).

How many historical-critical scholars have jumped on this text, gleefully rejoicing that Mark was too unsophisticated and un-theological to doctor up the tradition and hide the embarrassing fact that Jesus really did die in utter despair, with far less courage, dignity, and poise than a host of Greek and Hebrew martyrs before him. They believe that Mark let the cat out of the bag, unlike the more illustrious and capable (and historically suspect) evangelists, who were decent enough to paint lovely portraits of a trusting Messiah who gently commits his Spirit into the Father's hand while celebrating his own victory, "It is accomplished." Mark unwittingly (because he was not known for having much wit) lets the real truth slip through—Jesus died a defeated and disillusioned man, whose cause ultimately failed. Nothing could be further from the truth. These scholars have simply never glimpsed the figure embedded in the text! In Mark, Jesus does not die in despair. And I will never join those who think they can reconstruct an historical Jesus more accurately than Matthew, Mark, Luke and John did long before them. A bit of careful reading helps us trace the lines of Mark's portrait clearly enough to see that there is no despairing Jesus to be found in Mark.

Markan scholars often refer to "passion predictions" in Mark. There are none! There are only "passion/resurrection predictions." Every time Jesus tries to help his followers anticipate and accept the passion that he knows is inevitable, he clearly predicts that a resurrection will follow! It is not only in Luke that Jesus wrestles through to victory in Gethsemane and then moves confidently forward as he drinks God's cup and mounts his throne on Calvary's cross. Mark paints exactly the same picture.

One sees it in his pronouncement after a night watch of prayer: "The hour has come!" (14:41)—the midnight hour, Passover night, the hour of deliverance (though it costs the life of a lamb!). One sees it in both Jesus' silence and his speech during his double trial. Jesus knows he is innocent, yet he is willing to be condemned. He submits to a human trial now because he knows his present judges will one day bow before his throne when the Son of Man is seated in judgment at the right hand of the Mighty One. One sees it in Mark's portrayal of Jesus taking the place of Barabbas, a remarkable though subtle symbolic enactment of the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death. The true faithful Son of the Father takes the place of "another son of another father" (Bar-Abbas—Son of the Father).

By the way, how does one embed an *Aramaic* word play into a *Greek* text? One does it by setting up the word play in advance. In the Bartimeus story Mark tells his readers that "bar" means "son" (10:46). In the Gethsemane narrative he tells us that "Abba" means "Father" (14:36). And then at

just the right moment Mark springs his word play on the reader: Jesus, the faithful Son, who had said to his own ABBA, Father, "Not what I will, but what you will" (14:36), ultimately takes the place of another son of another father, Bar-Abbas. This condemned but released rebel stands symbolically in Mark's text for all who deserve to die but are set free because Jesus was willing to take their place. And Barabbas stands for all who think Rome will be defeated by insurrectionists and their swords, but need to learn that the empire will fall to God's more powerful kingdom, because its Messianic king chooses nonviolence and martyrdom over the weaker weapons of steel. Jesus and his weapons replace them and theirs. Subtle and profound—but what else would we expect from Mark!? He has been training the reader from the very first verse to look below the surface of the text.

No, Jesus did not die in despair. He died, confident that his Father would vindicate him and his cause in a great resurrection three days hence. He died, knowing that his death would atone for the sins of the world and would be in place of those who deserved a death he did not deserve. He died, knowing that his death was according to God's own perfect will, which Jesus was fully committed to carry out to the end.

So why then does he cry out in despair? He doesn't! He asks a question: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And he asks the question because he wants the perceptive onlooker, or at least because Mark wants the perceptive reader, to supply the answer. As Robert Fowler once wrote: "What better way to channel our thinking than to challenge us with unanswered questions?"¹⁰ God has abandoned the chosen Messiah, the beloved Son, the faithful Servant—but only for a short season, because God will never abandon the world this Son came to save.

If we look closely, we see that Psalm 22 does not suddenly enter Mark's text on the lips of Jesus.¹¹ It is there already in Mark 15:24 as the soldiers gamble for Jesus' garments. The Psalmist had written: "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing" (Ps. 22:18). It is there already in Mark 15:27 and 29, as the crucified Jesus is encircled by mocking criminals and derisive crowds. The Psalmist had written: "[They] open their mouths wide against me . . . a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet" (Ps. 22:13, 16). It is there already in verse 31 as the chief priests and scribes make fun of this one who saved others but cannot even save himself. The Psalmist had already written: "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. 'He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him'" (Ps. 22:7, 8).

Mark has built Psalm 22 into his passion narrative before he quotes Jesus' question. And interestingly he has done so exactly in reverse order. As we move through Mark 15 we are moving backwards through Psalm

22. In the end, we reach the beginning, as Jesus ends his earthly life by quoting the beginning of the Psalm, that great question: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He knows the answer: it is part of the mystery of God’s plan to save the world, more immediately to save those disciples who have followed Jesus but abandoned him in the crisis (14:27, 28). The shepherd will be struck down and the sheep scattered. But Jesus has known all along: he will be going ahead of them into Galilee, where the discipleship road can begin again, this time in the presence and power of the resurrected one!

Jesus did not die in despair with a cry of dereliction on his lips, not even in Mark—*especially not in Mark*. Those who read the narrative that way are standing alongside the uncomprehending crowds and the mocking religious rulers; they are seeing blotches of color and squiggly lines, but catch no glimpse of the real picture that was there all along. All they can see is one whose external appearance betrays no “beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him, He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (Isa. 53:2b, 3a).

Jesus did not die in despair, not in Mark, not anywhere in biblical literature. Truth is, the psalmist who first penned Psalm 22:1 was not in despair either. Psalms of Lament are not Psalms of despair. Laments are really Psalms of reorientation. The psalmist leads God’s people to realize that even situations that might well lead to despair do not have to for those who can see that even there God is at work. God stands with God’s faithful people in hard times, working out divine purposes beyond our ability to imagine, showing us the deeper picture behind the squiggly lines and blotches of color that often confront even the most faithful.

It would not be a stretch to imagine the Markan community, pondering long and deeply the portrait that Mark paints of the crucified Messiah, hearing the penetrating cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and then gradually immersing themselves back into the rest of Psalm 22, even those parts that Mark neither quotes nor alludes to. And as they immerse themselves in Psalm 22, they discover that it is not only about the psalmist, not only about Israel, not only about Jesus—it is also about them.

They hear the Psalm encouraging them as well, “Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights!” (22:8 NRSV). They hear the psalmist’s words of assurance, “He did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him” (22:24b NRSV), and they realize again that this was not only about the psalmist, and about their Lord; it is true for them as well. They break forth with the psalmist in words of praise, “Dominion belongs to the Lord” (22:28a NRSV), and in

words of commitment, "I shall live for him" (22:29c NRSV). And they recommit themselves to their mission, to spread the good news of the gospel to the ends of the earth, to the end of the age, as they reach the end of Psalm 22, "They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn—for he has done it."

Matthew makes that point with his Great Commission and John with Jesus' cry, "It is finished." Mark makes the point by embedding Psalm 22 deeply into his narrative, reading it backwards for Jesus, so that we can read it forwards ever after! "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we ask. And God answers, "I will never truly forsake you, though it may seem like it for a time. Soon! Soon I will establish my Dominion forever."

Mark has prepared his readers to stand at the foot of the cross, and as Jesus breathes his last (15:37), to respond with eyes that see and ears that hear. We see in the torn temple veil (15:38) the first glimpses of Jesus reordering religion . . . and to hear in the Roman Centurion's confession (15:39) Jesus reordering politics. And Mark's readers know they need not fear the temporary power of Jerusalem's corrupt rulers, nor Rome's overconfident imperial claims. The one destined to rule the nations has mounted his throne and shed his blood. Resurrection and final victory lie ahead!

SUMMARY

These five quotations from the Psalms in Mark, then, all help paint a picture and develop Mark's central message. Psalm 2 conspires with other texts to allude, already in the first chapter, to the fact that Jesus, this humble, gentle Servant of the Lord, this One who will lay down his life in obedience to the Father's perfect will, will someday rule the nations! Psalm 118 in the mouths of the pilgrims joins Zechariah 9 in Mark's narrative to allude to this faithful, humble pilgrim, who is ultimately the King, the LORD in fact, the one destined to shatter chariots and battle bows, so that a kingdom of peace can rule from sea to sea. Psalm 118 in the mouth of Jesus assures those willing to listen that, though he will be killed by evil men, he and his followers will ultimately take their place as faithful custodians of the people of God, in fact as the very temple within which heaven and earth meet. Psalm 110 is quoted by Jesus so as to confound his enemies, but also so that those with eyes to see will be assured: The kingdom, a kingdom greater than David's, truly is being established, though enemies still abound. We need not despair, for the Lord is on the throne and the end is in sight. And Psalm 22, brilliantly embedded into the whole narrative of the passion, allows those *without eyes to see* to go right on mocking this weak and helpless would-be savior who cannot save himself. But it invites those *with eyes to see* to catch glimpses of the world's Savior, who did not

save himself precisely so that he could save the world!

INDIRECT QUOTATIONS FROM THE PSALMS

It is impossible to say how many texts in Mark contain allusions to texts from the Psalms. That is not because there are thousands; it is because we can never be completely certain where to draw the line. An author, a community, and a tradition that are immersed in the themes and the images of their Holy Scriptures will often speak and write and think and imagine in ways that weave together aspects of those Holy Scriptures that they themselves might not always be able explicitly to identify. Space permits the examination of only one of many texts that make subtle allusions to texts from the Psalms.

Mark 4, the parable chapter about the unstoppable coming of a kingdom that cannot fail, ends with what on the surface appears to be a “cute little story” about a tired preacher catching a nap in less than ideal circumstances. Jesus is hushed by the same wind that is shattering the disciples’ eardrums and terrorizing even these seasoned fishermen. Soon Jesus sleeps peacefully in the bottom of a boat, rocked to sleep by the waves that are rocking the disciples’ world. Sleeping in a crisis is not always the right response. In Gethsemane, for example, Jesus chides his disciples for sleeping when they should be watchful, should be praying, should be preparing for the battle ahead (14:41). But sometimes sleeping in the crisis is precisely right, as the psalmist said, “I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety” (Ps. 4:8).

Mark seems to suggest that the disciples simply do not “get it.” Jesus has just spoken at length about a kingdom that cannot fail, that cannot be defeated, that will produce its intended harvest. “Do not be deceived by its mustard seed beginnings,” says Jesus. The disciples should have been ready to face anything, but that very same evening they are sure that they are about to drown along with their master. In fact, they doubt that Jesus even cares!¹²

Jesus’ sleep is not the only allusion to a Psalm in this narrative. The sea itself is described in graphic terms: “A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped” (Mark 4:37). One thinks of Psalm 107:23–27: “Others went out on the sea in ships . . . They saw the works of the Lord . . . For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits’ end.” (Perhaps this Psalm inspired the popular sea shanty: “What shall we do with a drunken sailor?”)

Why do I suggest that Psalm 107 might be in Mark’s mind as he nar-

rates the story of the storm? Because he describes the outcome just as the psalmist had. The disciples wake Jesus in panic and then they experience the great miracle. Mark writes, "Then the wind died down and it was completely calm" (4:39). The psalmist had written: "Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed" (107:28, 29). Jesus did for them what only God can do, muzzle the wind and calm the angry sea.

And that reminds us of other Psalms that are alluded to here, for example: "It was you who split open the sea by your power; you broke the heads of the monster in the waters. It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan" (Ps. 74:13, 14). For Jews steeped in their own history and sacred texts, the sea was the home of sinister evil powers. Only God could open up a way through the angry sea, muzzle the powers of the deep, crush the monsters that threaten the security of God's people. Is it any wonder that Jesus' storm-stilling is narrated with very clear allusions to Jesus' prior acts of driving out demons: "[He] *rebuked* the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! *be still!*' (lit. *be muzzled!*)"—language Mark has already used to show how Jesus mastered demonic enemies (cf. 4:39; 1:25).

We come to perhaps the most interesting allusion to the Old Testament in this text. It is not from the Psalms but complements those that are. The disciples, all in a panic as they battle wind and waves, wake Jesus from his peaceful, trusting sleep—but why? What were they hoping he might do? Did they expect him to grab an oar? Join them pulling ropes, perhaps? Maybe pick up a pail and start bailing water? Of course not, they wanted him to calm the storm (we sometimes glibly imagine), until we examine the text and notice that this assumption does not fit at all.

For Jews steeped in their Old Testament, to still a storm at sea is of a completely different order of magnitude than the miracles the disciples had previously seen Jesus do. Clearly the disciples do *not* expect Jesus to calm the sea. Had they really believed he could do that, they would not have been utterly astonished when in fact he did. Nor would they have asked, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (Mark 4:41).

And yet it is hard to believe they wanted nothing more than help with the oars and the ropes, help with the water pouring into their boat. Surely they, or at least Mark the author, is thinking of another incident, where another man sleeps in the bottom of a boat, while a storm is raging and the seafarers are in panic. So why did they wake Jonah? Well, they were at their wits' end. They had tried everything. Perhaps this man had a special connection to divine power. If he would call out to his God, perhaps they could all be saved after all. That must be what the disciples are thinking. Surely if this Jesus, the one who can heal and cleanse, cries out to the only

one capable of calming an angry sea, then God will act.

Well, it works. God does intervene. Only Jesus does not bother praying. He just answers the prayer directly. He does not play the role of the intercessor. He plays the role of the one who answers prayer. Jesus answers the prayer they wanted him to utter. Who then is this? They really do not have a clue.

But the reader should by now. This is not the first time, and certainly not nearly the last time that Mark's Gospel will drop subtle hints that Jesus is not only a great miracle-worker, not only a great prophet, not only the Messiah, not only the Son of God—Jesus *is* God! Jesus does what only God can do. Only God can forgive sin, say the teachers of the law—so Jesus does (2:1–12)! No one is good except God, Jesus tells the rich man—so either Jesus is not good or Jesus is God, take your pick (10:18)! Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?, ask Jesus' earthly judges. *Ego eimi* (*I Am*, i.e. aim higher!), says Jesus (14:61, 62). Only God can calm the angry sea—so Jesus does (4:39). I do not think it is a stretch to claim that in Mark there are at least ten texts designed to communicate to the reader: If you have eyes to see it, you can recognize in Jesus the very person of God! But in every one of them the crucial hints are placed between the lines.

Once more we hear Psalm 107:28: "They cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed." Who did it? God did. The LORD did. *Yahweh* did. That is why *Jesus* did. "Who then is this?"

NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented Jan. 23, 2009 at International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague, Czech Republic, and scheduled to be published by that school's journal.
2. For contemporary examples, see <http://www.magiceye.com/> (accessed Apr. 21, 2009).
3. All Scripture quotations are from NIV unless otherwise noted.
4. I. Howard Marshall, "Son of God or Servant of Yahweh?—A Reconsideration of Mark 1:11," *NTS* 15 (1968–69): 326–36.
5. Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2001), 35.
6. C.A. Evans, "Mark's Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel," *JGRCh* 1 (2000): 67–81.
7. Rikk Watts, "The Psalms in Mark's Gospel," in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and J. J. Menken Maarten (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 25–45.

8. Timothy J. Geddert, "Therefore Keep Watch: Mark 14:17–15:15; 13:32–37," in *Double Take: New Meanings from Old Stories* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 2007), 87–93.
9. See especially Watts, "Psalms in Mark's Gospel," 41.
10. Robert Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991), 126.
11. Frank Matera, *The Kingship of Jesus: Composition and Theology in Mark 15* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982), 40.
12. Cf. Timothy J. Geddert, "Three Lessons from a Boat" in *Double Take*, 63–71.