Let’s move on to Mark 3:1-6

**3**Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. **2**Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. **3**Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.”

**4**Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.

**5**He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. **6**Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

So while we have here another “Jesus vs. the litigious Pharisees” pericope, it’s worth noting that Jesus didn’t actually do any work here, thereby avoiding any Sabbath restrictions. He told the man to stand up, asked a question, then told the man to stretch his hand out, at which point it was fully restored. Mark was probably intentional in this description, avoiding the finer points of Sabbath law altogether, while the Pharisees continue to serve as antagonists. The identity of the Herodians here has never been fully resolved, in part because there’s just too many Herods to go around, though I think it’s safe to read it as “ruling or upper class.”

The pericope draws from 1 Kings 13:1-6 which I’ll read here:

**3**By the word of the Lord a man of God came from Judah to Bethel, as Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make an offering. **2**By the word of the Lord he cried out against the altar: “Altar, altar! This is what the Lord says: ‘A son named Josiah will be born to the house of David. On you he will sacrifice the priests of the high places who make offerings here, and human bones will be burned on you.’” **3**That same day the man of God gave a sign: “This is the sign the Lord has declared: The altar will be split apart and the ashes on it will be poured out.”**4**When King Jeroboam heard what the man of God cried out against the altar at Bethel, he stretched out his hand from the altar and said, “Seize him!” But the hand he stretched out toward the man shriveled up, so that he could not pull it back. **5**Also, the altar was split apart and its ashes poured out according to the sign given by the man of God by the word of the Lord.

**6**Then the king said to the man of God, “Intercede with the Lord your God and pray for me that my hand may be restored.” So the man of God interceded with the Lord, and the king’s hand was restored and became as it was before.

This is the last in a group of pericopes where Jesus comes into conflict with the Pharisees. When we refer to the Biblical passages being referenced in these last couple of pericopes, the theme is profoundly anti-temple, anti-priesthood. If the Pharisees picked up on any of this, it helps explain their antipathy toward Jesus.

Mark 3:7-19 reads as follows:

**7**Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. **8**When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. **9**Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. **10**For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. **11**Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, “You are the Son of God.” **12**But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him. **13**Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. **14**He appointed twelve[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24303a)] that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach **15**and to have authority to drive out demons. **16**These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), **17**James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means “sons of thunder”), **18**Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot **19**and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Whether or not the “12 disciples” are historical is an unanswerable question, and maybe not that important. Jesus may have had 12 disciples he considered closer than the rest, and symbolically it certainly would have made sense for him to do so, with the obvious reference to the 12 tribes of Israel. Then again, neither the Q material or Paul ever mentions 12 disciples, and the synoptic gospels can’t even agree on the list of names. For stories and legends to spring up around Jesus’ chief lieutenants would have been an entirely natural progression no matter how many of them there actually were, so the fact that this occurred both in and out of the gospel stories is not an argument against the historicity of the actual 12. This is likely a situation where if the 12 disciples hadn’t existed, we would have had to create them.

Moving on to Mark 3:20-34

**20**Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. **21**When his family[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24310b)] heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”

**22**And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.”

**23**So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: “How can Satan drive out Satan? **24**If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. **25**If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. **26**And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. **27**In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man’s house. **28**Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, **29**but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.”

**30**He said this because they were saying, “He has an impure spirit.”

**31**Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. **32**A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.”

**33**“Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked.

**34**Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! **35**Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

We have a section of truisms here, but that’s not really our main focus. I would say the most important thing here is the mention of Beelzebul aka Baal-zebub, which is another Markan hypertext indicator. Mark is pointing back to his reference to 2 Kings in the paralytic pericope. It’s important to realize that Beezlebul is mentioned literally only once in the OT, so it’s clear that Mark wants the reader or listener, if they haven’t already, to go look up the unique passage where the name appears.

The anti-priesthood anti-temple theme that Mark has been alluding to in the last couple of pericopes comes to a head here when Jesus is accused of being possessed by an evil spirit. Note that Mark say Jesus “began to speak in parables” in verse 23, which to Mark means that what’s being said has another, deeper, often more dangerous meaning for those with ears to hear. On the surface, Jesus’s next few statements basically mean “If I have an evil spirit, how could I throw out another evil spirit?” A typical chreia like this would end with Jesus telling the teachers of the law “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand”, the teachers of the law then have no response to this wisdom and the pericope ends. Jesus just keeps going here, talking about robbing someone’s house and an unforgivable sin. That’s because He’s actually talking about Israel’s desire to rebel against Rome and the inevitable consequences of that action. It’s not hard to see the natural comparison of Rome with Satan, the major development here is that Jesus is also equating Israel with Satan. In other words, if Israel’s way of rebelling is just as violent as Rome, then they’re no better and have become Satan as well. They will be destroyed, and the strong man’s house, the Temple, will be plundered. Mark makes this point specific by using the same word, skeuos, here to refer to the strong man’s plundered goods that he uses in Chapter 11 verse 6 to refer to the vessels used in the temple.

Believers are often concerned about the “unforgivable sin,” mentioned in verse 29. It’s possible that is has to do with willfully ascribing the work of God to demonic forces, as the teacher of the law do in this passage. Jesus will emphasize later that leading believers astray is a grave sin, so I wouldn’t argue too strongly against this interpretation. However, my gut feeling is that with its location at the end of a parable about the destruction of the Temple, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit Jesus speaks of is something more akin to an abomination of desolation kind of scenario, a blasphemous action that occurs on Temple grounds by the destructive forces of Rome. Perhaps it was the conquering general entering the Holy of Holies, maybe it was an idolatrous symbol placed on the altar, it’s hard to say but from looking at the book of Daniel along with the contents of Mark 13, enemy forces performing blasphemous activities on Temple grounds was clearly a big, big deal, which would explain why Jesus feels strongly enough to say it won’t be forgiven.

Let’s move on to Mark 4:

**4**Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge. **2**He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: **3**“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. **4**As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. **5**Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. **6**But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. **7**Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. **8**Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”

**9**Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

**10**When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. **11**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 **12**so that,

“‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,  
    and ever hearing but never understanding;  
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+4&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24336a)]”

**13**Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? **14**The farmer sows the word. **15**Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. **16**Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. **17**But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. **18**Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; **19**but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. **20**Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

Buckle up because there’s a lot here, but that’s what makes it fun, no one seems to agree on the meaning of this section of Mark. Mark 4:11-12, the lines about ever seeing but never perceiving, are particulary controversial, and have generated more secondary literature (including full-length books!) than any other 2 verses in Mark.

Jesus tells parables in a deliberate attempt to obscure information. I mentioned this in the last pericope, where a statement condemning Israel, and specifically those in Israel advocating for violent revolution, is hidden behind much less controversial language. The reasoning is obvious when we think about it, if you go around 1st century Palestine, Roman-controlled 1st Century Palestine that is, saying that you’re about to start your own Kingdom, dethrone the Emperor and tear down the Jewish temple you’ll make basically everybody with any sort of political or religious power mad. As you start to gain followers, it will only get worse since the authorities will really feel the need to deal with you now. You’ll be restricted as to where you can travel, and preach, and eventually you might even have political or religious authorities following you around, just waiting for you to screw up somehow, or asking you Gotcha! Questions so they can show everyone what a hypocrite you are. Take it far enough you might even get crucified. Speaking in parables was the best way to delay this whole inevitable process, because just like today, Jesus’s stories can mean different things depending on whether you have ears to hear. Also, they weren’t written down yet, so it’s not like people were poring over their Bibles trying to decipher the meaning like we do. If you weren’t tuned in any d primed for the message when Jesus said it, you could easily miss the point. And even if they absolutely got the point, couching revolutionary content in a parable surely made it much more difficult for Jesus’s enemies to pin him down on what specific threat He was making.

So what do we make of the Parable of the Sower? I thought about going through some of the better hypotheses for the meaning of the parable, but there’s so many and most of them miss one thing: if there’s nothing dangerous about the message, why say it in a parable? It’s because this is a Kingdom of God message told in the same way that the Parable of the Vineyard will be told later. Jesus is telling the history of Israel up until His time, pointing out Israel’s repeated rejection of the prophets that YHWH sent to them. Jesus then speaks of the viable seeds which produce the high yield of crops, and the large numbers used are indicative of the hopes people held for the abundance the Kingdom of God, or whatever they called the Messianic Age, would hold. Since this is the last category of seed mentioned, the implication is that this refers to the present day and those who are now hearing and responding to Jesus’s message. A kingdom-announcement such as this would certainly would have attracted the Roman authorities’ attention, as well as angering all those religious authorities who didn’t care for or accept Jesus.

The Parable of the Sower on its own is a fairly simple Kingdom of God announcement. Recognizing the excellent potential for other useful interpretations, Mark has Jesus subsequently explain the parable with a different spin tailored to His audience. In verse 10 we have a familiar scenario in Mark. Jesus and his disciples are gathered privately after Jesus has been teaching, and Jesus fills them in on what He had been trying to communicate in His sermon. This specific verse is the only time Mark uses the phrase “the twelve and the others around him” as opposed to just the 12. What follows is essentially Mark breaking the 4th wall, he’s having Jesus speak to those “others,” who represent the listener or reader. Jesus’s explanation of the parable is suitable for a listener who, while already aware of Jesus’s kingdom message, needs encouragement in their pursuit of it. Well…we couldn’t avoid it forever, and here we are at Mark 4:11-12, the passage we mentioned before that so many exegetes have tied themselves in knots over. So, the section we’re talking about is this:

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 **12**so that,

“‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,  
    and ever hearing but never understanding;  
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+4&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24336a)]”

This is Jesus quoting Isaiah 6:9-10,

“‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding;  
    be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’  
**10**Make the heart of this people calloused;  
    make their ears dull  
    and close their eyes.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+6&version=NIV#fen-NIV-17780a)]  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
    hear with their ears,  
    understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.”

This can certainly lead to some thorny theological issues, maybe a little less thorny if you’re a hardcore Calvinist, but you can certainly interpret this as Jesus saying that God has intentionally closed the eyes and ears of the Jewish people, presumably because their rejection of Jesus’s message is essential to the overarching story line that includes Jesus’ death and resurrection, followed by the extension of the Gospel to the Gentiles. While this certainly identifies the central tragedy of the Gospels, the Jewish people’s rejection of the Kingdom message, I don’t think we need to assign that much weight to this passage. I think the best way to look at this verse is the way I’ve already advocated, which is: parables hide revolutionary or subversive messages from those on the “outside” in order to extend Jesus’ period of ministry before the inevitable clash with the authorities. Who the outsiders are is debatable, but Mark would certainly include the “scribes and Pharisees” as well as King Herod and the Roman authorities. We can also see the quotation as sarcastic, and this is perhaps the best explanation. Something along the lines of: Lest they turn and be forgiven! Like, “Wouldn’t want that, would we?” This would be an understandable response from a prophet whose offer of membership in the Kingdom of God is continually met with anger and rejection from the very people He most wants to offer it to.

Another theory around this parable is that Mark uses the 4 types of people described in Jesus’ explanation of the Sower as archetypes for characters in his Gospel. Mary Ann Tolbert has done a better job than I could ever do explaining this idea, she views the explanation of the parable as a “key” or map legend, to interpret the types of characters found in Mark. It goes as follows:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Typological Functions of the Parable of the Sower** (adapted from Tobert 1989, p171) | | |
| **Parable of the Sower** | **Interpretation** | **Gospel of  Mark** |
|  |  |  |
| seed sown along the way, eaten by birds | those in whom the word is immediately removed by Satan | scribes, Pharisees, Jewish leaders |
| seed sown in rocky ground, comes up quickly, but has no roots, withers in the sun | those who accept the word immediately, endure for a time, but fall away when tribulation comes | disciples, especially Peter, James, and John. |
| seed sown among thorns, thorns choke it and it produces no fruit | others in whom the word is choked by the cares of the world, desire for riches, and desire for other things | Herod, rich man of Mk 10:17-22 |
| seed sown on good earth, brings forth grain in triple abundance | those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit in triple abundance | one healed (or saved) by their faith |

While I don’t agree with it, there is one more theory that bears mentioning. It proposes that when Jesus figured out that only a remnant would be saved from the crowds he was speaking to, He hid things in parables in order to decrease the sin of the Jews who would ultimately reject his message anyway. The idea being that the sin of not knowing any better is not as bad as being aware of the truth and rejecting it anyway. There is some logic here, I just think it would be more believable if it were more in line with the character of Jesus throughout the Gospels. It’s kind of an odd “hedging your bets” thing to do, and unless we’re going full Calvinist, it seems like it would exclude a lot of people who might otherwise understand the message and be saved.

Speaking of, if you’re bothered by the majority of religious Jews being left out of the Kingdom, maybe it somehow all seems a little unfair, you’re not alone. Paul was definitely uncomfortable with it, and we can see him trying to work out that part of his theology at several points in his letters.

The rest of Mark 4 is refreshingly straightforward compared to all that, so here goes. Mark 4:21-34 follows:

**21**He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? **22**For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. **23**If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.”

**24**“Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. **25**Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”

The Parable of the Growing Seed

**26**He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. **27**Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. **28**All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. **29**As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

**30**Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? **31**It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. **32**Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

**33**With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. **34**He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

I’m not going to belabor my point too much when it comes to the parables being a cover for subversive messages, but it’s worth noting that these are, in fact, subversive messages announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God. They just don’t sound that way because we’ve heard them so much and we know how the story ends, with the massive growth of Christianity from the small early church.

We have several parables here that reinforce humble beginnings of the Kingdom of God, eventually resulting in great things. Because so many Jews wanted a military Messiah, and because the Maccabees were regarded so highly, Jesus had to continually reinforce that the coming Kingdom wasn’t going to be like that, it would start small and unassuming before growing to great size, just like a seed.

It’s worth mentioning that all these seed parables may be supposed to make the hearer think of resurrection. On the other hand, seeds, trees, birds of the air, even the lamp are all elements mentioned so often in the Hebrew Bible that determining the specific passages they’re meant to reference is difficult at best. Perhaps Jesus uses them specifically because they will be familiar to His listeners, sort of stock images that have a fairly fixed meaning or connotation, e.g. harvest=eschatological events, birds of the air=Gentiles, seeds=resurrection or growth, lamp=Davidic king.

Speaking of the lamp, let’s discuss that parable quickly. The lamp certainly may be a subtle Messianic reference, but it’s not necessary for the parable to make sense. Given the context, this parable is probably saying that while the kingdom of God may seem mysterious at first, to those with ears to hear more insight will be given. The next verse, the measure you use it will be measured to you, is difficult to understand due to translation issues, but it would be best understood as saying that the spiritual insight one receives will be proportional to the amount of receptiveness and attention one gives to the Kingdom message.

Mark 4:35-41 follows:

Jesus Calms the Storm

**35**That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” **36**Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. **37**A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. **38**Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

**39**He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

**40**He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

**41**They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

A transitional passage leading into several miracle accounts, interesting because we can see that the disciples clearly don’t get who Jesus is yet. Note that Jesus’s miracles usually are done calmly and in a simple fashion, demonstrating His complete control over natural forces, as the calming of the storm illustrates. As will become apparent, Mark uses the Sea of Galilee as a literary device to separate Jewish areas from Gentile areas. Mark 5:1-20 follows:

**5**They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+5&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24366a)] **2**When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. **3**This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. **4**For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. **5**Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

**6**When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. **7**He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!” **8**For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”

**9**Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?”

“My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.” **10**And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

**11**A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. **12**The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.” **13**He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

**14**Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. **15**When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. **16**Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. **17**Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

**18**As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. **19**Jesus did not let him, but said, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” **20**So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+5&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24385b)] how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

What a weird story. Whereas Mark 4 ties exegetes in knots, Mark 5 often just gets skipped over. I don’t know, maybe they just used all their energy on Mark 4. Remember, Jesus and the disciples just crossed the Sea of Galillee , so the main difference here is they’re dealing with Gentiles not Jews. There’s so many parallels with Isaiah 65 that it must clearly be intentional, so I’ll read Isaiah 65:1-5 to illustrate:

“I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me;  
    I was found by those who did not seek me.  
To a nation that did not call on my name,  
    I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’  
**2**All day long I have held out my hands  
    to an obstinate people,  
who walk in ways not good,  
    pursuing their own imaginations—  
**3**a people who continually provoke me  
    to my very face,  
offering sacrifices in gardens  
    and burning incense on altars of brick;  
**4**who sit among the graves  
    and spend their nights keeping secret vigil;  
who eat the flesh of pigs,  
    and whose pots hold broth of impure meat;  
**5**who say, ‘Keep away; don’t come near me,  
    for I am too sacred for you!’  
Such people are smoke in my nostrils,  
    a fire that keeps burning all day.

This passage, previously applied to the rebellious people of Israel, is now alluded to in reference to the Gentiles. Slowly, Mark is leading us towards the eventual outcome of the story, the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles. Mark also foreshadowed this when he mentioned the “birds of the air” nesting in the mustard tree in the previous chapter. Not surprisingly, the hypotext in Isaiah is immediately proceeded by the line

Our holy and glorious temple, where our ancestors praised you,  
    has been burned with fire,  
    and all that we treasured lies in ruins.

As to the actual pericope, the demoniac calls Jesus by his name, followed by Son of the most High God. Many commentators have viewed this as sarcasm from the demoniac, which it may very well be. The magical power of naming your enemy is well attested in ancient sources, and when Jesus counters, the demoniac says his name is Legion, essentially avoiding the question. Not that it does him any good. There is almost assuredly a reference here to a Roman legion as well, and many scholars have connected the story to a specific legion that was likely stationed nearby, whose symbol was the wild boar, reminiscent of the pigs in the story.

One thing we can say for certain is that the situation is just about as unclean as it can possibly get, to the point of exaggeration. There’s Gentiles, tombs, and evil spirits. Then, just when you thought it was as unclean as possible, oh yeah theres 2 THOUSAND PIGS on that hill over there. One purpose for this is to ensure that we know Jesus is just as powerful in Gentile territory, and He’s not afraid to go there either. I also think we’re meant to contrast the Gentile response to Jesus’s exorcism with the Jewish response we observed back in Chapter 3.

First we note that the former demoniac begs to go with Jesus, but Jesus won’t let him. Just a reminder that, for now, Jesus has Jewish disciples and the Gospel is, with very few exceptions, for Jews only. We see a hint that this could change, however, since instead of the standard “don’t tell anyone”, Jesus sends him out into the Gentile regions to tell everyone about what Jesus did for him. Presumably Jesus’s unknown status in this region made this ok, combined with the fact that nothing the man would be saying would be controversial like the kingdom of God message was. N.T. Wright has called the demoniac the “first apostle to the Gentiles”, and I think he fulfills a sort of JTB role, preparing the way for the Gospel when it did eventually arrive. We can even speculate that Jesus had this in mind when he commissioned the man instead of bringing him along with him.

The more telling difference between the Gentile and Jewish responses has to do with those aforementioned pigs. Now, I know that people get upset at all the pigs dying, and commentators have gone out of their way to make excuses for Jesus here. And it’s worth noting that Jesus only permits the demons to enter the pigs, he doesn’t send them, therefore He’s not actually directly responsible for their death. Anyway, in the story the pigkeepers arrive at the scene and are talking about the cured demoniac, but they’re also talking about the pig incident. We’re told they pleaded with Jesus to leave the region. This is usually seen as a negative response to Jesus from the Gerasenes, but I disagree. If a strange religious teacher shows up in my neighborhood, snaps his fingers and instantly ruins my next door neighbor financially, I’m sorry that guy, he gots to go, he’s gonna be lucky not to be prosecuted. Now, contrast the Jewish response in Chapter 3 and elsewhere, where Jesus’s actions were entirely positive, there were no dead pigs to contend with, everybody should’ve been happy. Nope, gets accused of being possessed by an evil spirit, gets laughed at, gets rejected by neighbors and family. It’s a theme throughout the gospel, the people who we would expect to respond poorly to Jesus respond well, while the people who should respond the best respond poorly. Oh yeah, one more thing: if the owners of the pigs did have pig insurance, would the insurance company reject their claim because their policy doesn’t cover acts of God?

Mark 5:21-43 follows:

Jesus Raises a Dead Girl and Heals a Sick Woman

**21**When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. **22**Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. **23**He pleaded earnestly with him, “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.” **24**So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. **25**And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. **26**She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. **27**When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, **28**because she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” **29**Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

**30**At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?”

**31**“You see the people crowding against you,” his disciples answered, “and yet you can ask, ‘Who touched me?’ ”

**32**But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. **33**Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. **34**He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

**35**While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?”

**36**Overhearing[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+5&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24401c)] what they said, Jesus told him, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.”

**37**He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. **38**When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. **39**He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” **40**But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. **41**He took her by the hand and said to her, *“Talitha koum!”* (which means “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). **42**Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. **43**He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

So, we’re back in Jewish territory now for a much more typical miracle story than the Gerasene one. The pericope clearly parallels a story from the Elijah/Elisha cycle, this one is found in 2 Kings 4:8-37. Jesus takes the role of Elisha in the story, which is about a Shunnamite woman with great faith who seeks out Elisha’s help for her dead son. The parallel in Mark is Jairus (whose name means “he will awaken”) by the way. In both stories the child is brought back to life by the prophet and the parents rejoice. In the inserted story in Mark, the woman with presumably vaginal bleeding who touches Jesus’s robe is praised for her faith as well. It’s interesting to note that her unclean condition is cured simply by touching Jesus’s robe. There are precedents in the Old Testament for holiness being communicated via the high priest’s clothing, and that is probably the role that Mark is placing Jesus in here.

This is a good example of material from an oral source that Mark has used in his written work. The entire scene can be easily acted out, and the miracle story is simple but contains the odd element of the magic word “Talitha koum” which I propose would have been the anchor or mnemonic device used by the actor or storyteller. Oral retelling of a legend or story is often marked by substantial differences in the way it gets told, even when related by the same speaker. Anchor words such as Talitha koum would be memorable and difficult to leave out, and are associated with some recollection of the story surrounding them. This would ensure that the basic gist of the pericope gets told each time. We’ll talk some more about the oral performance aspect of Mark later on as well.

Mark 6:1-6 follows:

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. **2**When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? **3**Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+6&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24411a)] Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

**4**Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.” **5**He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. **6**He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Familiarity breeds contempt, well I could have told you that, Jesus…We’ve all experienced this in our daily lives, so it’s an odd thing to be included in the Gospel. That probably means this passage serves another purpose, possibly as an explanation for why Jesus wasn’t particularly popular in the Galillee region post-resurrection, as one might think He would be. Mark is also continuing the theme wherein the people who ought to be the most accepting of Jesus’ message are the ones rejecting it. It’s telling that Mark never mentions Jesus going to the 2 large cities in the region, Tiberias and Sepphoris. We must assume that Jesus deliberately avoided those urban areas, going instead to several places insignificant enough that we don’t even have archaeological proof of their existence. Once again, my opinion is that Jesus was trying to avoid the attention of the religious and political authorities, and bigger cities were much more likely to bring Him into contact with those authorities. One final note, the Greek word tekton is used to describe Jesus’s profession, which CAN mean carpenter, but can also mean stonemason, builder, or even one skilled at interpreting the Torah. I like the idea of Him being a carpenter, partly because there’s a great non-canonical story about Jesus where he miraculously adds length back to a board that He’s cut too short, a scenario that every woodworker has firsthand experience with. The truth is, we have no particularly strong evidence for the finer details of what Jesus’s profession was prior to His ministry. It’s probably just as well, if we ever concluded that Jesus was definitely not a carpenter, Mardel’s would have to clearance out a ton of décor, we’d have to retitle devotional books, a bunch of hymns would be outdated, it’d be a huge mess.

Mark 6:7-13 follows

Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. **7**Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.

**8**These were his instructions: “Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. **9**Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. **10**Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. **11**And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

**12**They went out and preached that people should repent. **13**They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

The Bible states the need for more than one witness to verify something in multiple places, this is likely the reason for sending out the disciples in groups of 2. It’s unclear just how well Jesus’s disciples understood the message they were intended to preach, and Mark simply states they told people to repent. The ability to heal and exorcise demons would certainly have been enough to garner respect and attention on their own, though, and one must assume they had listened to Jesus enough to understand something about the Kingdom message. The instructions Jesus gives them can simply mean they need to hurry, without worrying about gathering or being burdened by supplies. This is reinforced when Jesus tells them that if a town won’t listen to you, move on to the next. The overall description also sounds a lot like a stereotypical Cynic philosopher, and Cynic philosophers certainly were around at the same time and the same area as Jesus. We mentioned previously that there’s a lot of disagreement about how much Jesus and Paul both were influenced by Cynic philosophy. That’s a whole nother subject, but for our purposes Mark’s description here is enough for me to venture that he at least had a mental image of a Cynic in mind when writing it. Now, a couple of other things to notice about this passage. One is the admonition to bring hardly anything but a staff, in particular not to bring bread. The other is that the disciples told people to repent, which sounds a lot like the preaching of JTB. Look at that, guess what the next passage, Mark 6:14-29 is about.

**14**King Herod heard about this, for Jesus’ name had become well known. Some were saying,[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+6&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24422b)] “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.”

**15**Others said, “He is Elijah.”

And still others claimed, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.”

**16**But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!”

**17**For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom he had married. **18**For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” **19**So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, **20**because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+6&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24428c)]; yet he liked to listen to him.

**21**Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. **22**When the daughter of[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+6&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24430d)] Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, “Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.” **23**And he promised her with an oath, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.”

**24**She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?”

“The head of John the Baptist,” she answered.

**25**At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

**26**The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. **27**So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, **28**and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. **29**On hearing of this, John’s disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Regarding the text, there are several parallels to the story of Esther here. This may be for ironic reasons, or just to fit the story into a familiar pattern for the listeners. More importantly, since the next pericope after this is about the disciples preaching again, this is an odd place for the JTB background story to get stuck. That means Mark is placing it here for a reason. While the exact relationship between the Baptist’s movement and Jesus’s movement is certainly a disputed matter, Mark seems to be telling us that although JTB is no longer in the picture, his role is carried on by the disciples. Interesting to note that Mark mentions the same issue we discussed a few chapters ago regarding exactly which religious figures Jesus and John are to be identified with. Not that they came up with a satisfactory answer, mind you. EP Sanders has a great quote that I can’t remember exactly, it goes something like “being a religious genius, Jesus was unburdened by the academic need for absolute consistency.” Mark 6:30-44 follows:

**30**The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. **31**Then, because so many peoples were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

**32**So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. **33**But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. **34**When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

**35**By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late. **36**Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

**37**But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “That would take more than half a year’s wages[[e](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+6&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24445e)]! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

**38**“How many loaves do you have?” he asked. “Go and see.”

When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.”

**39**Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. **40**So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. **41**Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. **42**They all ate and were satisfied, **43**and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. **44**The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

This and the next few pericopes are some of my favorites, and I think they’re criminally underappreciated. Mark’s ability to narrate the familiar interaction between Jesus and His disciples is top-notch, and the fact that it can still be felt 2 thousand years later attests to this.

First of all, we’ve clearly skipped forward an undisclosed amount of time, because the disciples have finished their stint of itinerant preaching. This is more material Mark has borrowed from oral performance, and when acted out the JTB story would function as a marker that time was passing, with the disciples returning at the conclusion of the story. Mark actually terms them apostles now, since they’ve completed the preaching assignment Jesus assigned to them. They’ve apparently been very successful since we’re told a large crowd recognizes them and is waiting for Jesus and them when they try to get away for some rest. The sheep without a shepherd quote has several parallels, the most likely reference is to Zechariah 10:2, a passage with clear Messianic undertones. Unsurprisingly, the Feeding of the 5000 pericope parallels a passage from the Elijah/Elisha cycle, specifically 2 Kings 4:38-44.

Now, the good part here that so many exegetes miss out on comes when Jesus tells the disciples to give the people something to eat. Remember, *they’re not supposed to have bread with them* according to Jesus’ orders. So of course their response to Jesus isn’t “we don’t have enough bread for all of them”, instead they avoid the question by saying “How are we supposed to do that, we don’t have that kind of money!”. But Jesus isn’t gonna let them off the hook, He straight up asks them (and here is the part that was referenced in the grainfield pericope, if you’ll remember) “how many loaves do you have, go and see.” So with that they realize they’re busted, and sheepishly tell Him “five loaves…and 2 fish.” After Jesus miraculously feeds the 5 thousand, or to be specific, has the disciples feed the 5000, the disciples gather up 12 baskets of leftovers.

Now, E.P. Sanders and others have noted that none of the people who’ve been miraculously fed seem too amazed or impressed, not like they do when Jesus heals or casts out demons. In my admittedly not-mainstream opinion, that’s because they didn’t know a miracle happened. First of all, we’re told that the people were divided into groups of 50-100, though we’re not told why. We’re also told that Jesus distributed the food to his disciples first, who then gave it to the groups, though no explicit reason is given for this either. I believe the reason behind these decisions is to hide the miraculous nature behind the multiplication of the food, which would have been obvious had Jesus simply waved his hand over the five loaves and 2 fish a la Criss Angel. Jesus, realizing He has much to accomplish before the end of His earthly ministry, is again putting the brakes on his popularity. Had it become widely known that Jesus could conjure food out of thin air, it would have immensely increased his notoriety, but it would also have filled his audience with people who essentially were looking for the 1st century version of the food replicator from the Starship Enterprise. The vast majority of these spectacle seekers would fall under the seed without a root if not the seed along the path classifications from the parable of the sower. Of course, alternative explanations for why Jesus separated his audience into groups and had his disciples act as waiters can be easily had, but the question must still be answered as to WHY Mark chose to include those two otherwise unnecessary details in his story, and I think it’s a continuation of the Markan “secret Messiah” theme I continually seem to come back to. All that being said, 2 things are clear: 1) the abundance of food is a sign that the Kingdom of God is being inaugurated, and 2) the disciples are aware the miracle has occurred, after all they’re the ones who picked up the 12 baskets of food somehow left over from their 5 loaves and 2 fish. Mark 6:45-56 follows:

**45**Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. **46**After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

**47**Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. **48**He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, **49**but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, **50**because they all saw him and were terrified.

Immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” **51**Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, **52**for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

**53**When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. **54**As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. **55**They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. **56**And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

This is the beginning of the “Bethsaida” section of Mark, which spans from 6:45 to 8:26. The section begins and ends with visits to Bethsaida, and basically it may or may not belong to the original text. We’ll treat this section as being from the author’s hand, but there’s decent evidence of redaction here, though I don’t believe the section fits in as poorly as some scholars seem to think.

We begin with a famous story, Jesus walking on the water. One interesting take on this pericope comes from, of all places, the NIV Application Commentary, specifically from David Garland. He argues, based on parallel passages and the way parechomai is used in the Septuagint that “pass them by” is a reference to an epiphany from the deity. I think he’s right, especially since Jesus then drops the famous “I am” ego eimi, in vs. 50. The significance being that Jesus is leading the disciples inexorably towards a point where they acknowledge His Messiahship and therefore His status as Son of God. In verse 52, the phrase “For they had not understood about the loaves, their hearts were hardened” doesn’t fit the usual Markan structure, which normally would end with the disciples being “completely amazed.” Often this is seen as redaction material, but I think its odd parenthetical nature may be due to something else: I think it’s a joke. I think we’re meant to find it funny that the disciples, in spite of literally seeing the human manifestation of the Godhead walking on the water, are still so annoyed at getting called out for having bread on them, that that’s all they can focus on. Joke or not, the point remains that the disciples still just don’t get it—as long as they’re with Jesus, they don’t need to worry about their next meal, just as they don’t need to worry about storms at sea or any other normal day to day worries. Mark Chapter 6 ends at Genneseratt, which is on the Jewish side of the Sea of Galillee.