Mark 7:1-5 follows:

**7**The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus **2**and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. **3**(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. **4**When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24468a)])

**5**So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”

Unfortunately, most English translations decline to mention that the food the disciples are eating is the miraculous leftover bread (the Greek word is artos) from the previous chapter. So they thought that whole episode was over, and now they’ve got the Pharisees yelling at them about the bread! There’s a couple of odd things about this passage, first of all did the Pharisees really come all the way from Jerusalem just to catch Jesus doing something problematic? Eh…maybe. I can absolutely see the self-appointed religious experts of the day traveling a long distance just to get some dirt on a supposed rival, but then again this might simply be a Markan narrative device. Second, we don’t have specific evidence of the hand-washing rule during this time period, so did the Pharisees really feel strongly about this point? I think the answer is probably yes, you only have to look to Qumran to see the massive role ritual washing could play amongst faithful Jews of the time period. Mark 7:6-15 follows:

He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

“‘These people honor me with their lips,  
    but their hearts are far from me.  
**7**They worship me in vain;  
    their teachings are merely human rules.’[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24471b)]

**8**You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

**9**And he continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24473c)] your own traditions! **10**For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24474d)] and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’[[e](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24474e)] **11**But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— **12**then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. **13**Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

I don’t know if what we have here is the ring of historical authenticity or if Mark is just an excellent storyteller, but this is probably my favorite pericope in this Gospel. Up until now, Jesus has been fairly patient with the “scribes and Pharisees”, but he absolutely tees off on them here. He doesn’t even have a particularly devastating argument ready, He’s talking about this Corban issue that’s clearly been eating at Him for a while by the way, and He ends with “you do many things like that,” does that sound like the cool, calm and collected Jesus we know? Nope, that’s righteous anger talking, not logically flawless rhetoric. So why’s He so mad? Well, for starters He’s clearly just had enough of the Pharisees, but it’s also because they didn’t go after Him, they specifically attacked his disciples. Those same disciples that have continually frustrated Him, here we see the deep love Jesus feels for them. He sounds a lot like a parent who feels their child is being unjustly attacked or accused.

OK, so this episode is the parallel to the Lord of the Sabbath pericope from Chapter 3. If you’ll recall, that pericope also focused on the actions of the disciples, specifically them eating grain from the fields on the Sabbath. Again, we have Pharisees that appear out of seemingly nowhere to accuse the disciples of a questionable infraction. In the earlier pericope, Jesus relates the story of David and his companions eating ***consecrated bread***, and follows this up by essentially telling the Pharisees they have the wrong idea about the Sabbath, calling into question whether they value their traditions over the Word of God.

Now, E.P. Sanders and others have identified 3 things that Jews of the time viewed as badges of Jewishness, identifying them as members of the covenant people, namely food laws, Sabbath observance, and circumcision. Just to mention an obvious example, Jews had been martyred in recent memory for refusal to disobey the food laws, so yeah these rules were a huge deal. This is a massive topic, and would be better covered in a study of Paul, so for our purposes let’s just observe that in the grainfield pericope from Ch. 3 Jesus takes issue with methods of Sabbath observance, and in this pericope He’ll turn the food laws completely on their head. Mark 7:14-23

**14**Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. **15**Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” **[16]**[[f](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24480f)]

**17**After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. **18**“Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? **19**For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

**20**He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. **21**For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, **22**adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. **23**All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

So, Jesus just finished yelling at the Pharisees, but He’s not done yet. I’m guessing public humiliation is pretty much the worst fate imaginable for these folks, so Jesus *calls together the crowd* and is like I’m gonna end this man’s whole career. Once He has his audience, what does He do? What else? He tells a poop joke, at the expense of the Pharisees. It really is the work of a master orator too, because not only does He completely belittle the complaint of the Pharisees, which now seems whiny and nitpicky (ooh, you didn’t wash your hands), but this is the pinnacle of “ears to hear, let them hear.” Yeah, you might laugh at Jesus making fun of the effeminate little Pharisees who are so worried about dirty hands, but if you have ears to hear you might realize that what Jesus is really saying is that the defiling things coming out of a person aren’t restricted to poop, there’s all the evil thoughts that the human heart conjures up. And if you REALLY have ears to hear, you might just come to the inevitable conclusion that Jesus is really getting at, and Mark by the way doesn’t trust us to be that insightful, so he just tells us—All foods are clean. Mark 7:24-30 follows:

**24**Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.[[g](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24488g)] He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. **25**In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. **26**The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

**27**“First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

**28**“Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

**29**Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

**30**She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Apparently the disciples all took a PTO day here, cause they’re nowhere to be found. Too bad, cause they would have probably enjoyed seeing Jesus get outwitted rhetorically by a woman, a Gentile woman no less. Jesus seems to get a huge kick out of it, to His credit, and the Greek woman’s daughter has her demon exorcised. Yay, everybody’s happy. Mark 7:31-37 follows:

**31**Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.[[h](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24495h)] **32**There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

**33**After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. **34**He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, *“Ephphatha!”* (which means “Be opened!”). **35**At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

**36**Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. **37**People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

OK, mogilalos is the Greek word used here where the NIV says “could hardly talk,” which is certainly better than “mute” which you find in some translations. Mogilalos means “stammerer,” and occurs in the Septuagint version of Isaiah 35 in what is unsurprisingly another clearly Messianic passage.

There’s a couple of different layers here, and they can both be true. Jesus takes the guy off away from the crowd to do the Benny Hinn stuff, so once again we have the “secret Messiah” theme, Jesus doesn’t want to make a big spectacle of this and draw a crowd. I’ve heard a lot of people sound fairly confident they understand what’s going on here with the spit and the fingers and the ears, but I remain unconvinced. Maybe the Gentiles were just more comfortable with this method of healing, or perhaps this allowed Jesus to pass himself off as just another magical healer instead of someone with unique abilities, thereby attracting less attention. There’s another possibility as well, and now is as good a time as any to take a little field trip to talk about the gospel of Mark as oral performance. As you may recall, I mentioned in the intro that I believe much of the material in Mark was originally to be found in the church’s (well, one of the church’s I suppose) performance of the story. In support of this, I offer Galatians 3:1, which says “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified” Paul seems to be referring here to a portrayal of the Jesus story, a passion play essentially. Moreover, the theory just clicks when you start looking for oral performance clues in Mark. Let’s go through some of that evidence: First of all, the miracle stories in Mark are repetitive and would be easy to act out. Jesus never calls for fire from the sky, although that was one of Elijah’s most famous acts so we sort of expect to see it. Jesus never has lightning shoot from his fingertips or anything, instead He miraculously multiples food (twice) and the majority of his other miracles involve casting out demons or healing people. So it’s all stuff that can be acted out fairly simply. Mark gives everyu miracle he includes at least a nominal purpose, but from a reader’s perspective, one food miracle is enough, and maybe a couple of healing miracles and you’ve made your point already. As a performance, though, that’s the good stuff, those are the scenes that get the cheers, you want the most of those you can get. Most of the scholars studying in this area, called “performance criticism”, think people would have cheered after Jesus makes a killer point in his teaching, but I disagree. I think they’re assuming too much Cynic influence, these weren’t philosophy students in the crowd, it was just people. I bet they loved it when Jesus cast out demons and healed people, and the more theatrics involved the better. In my opinion, that’s where a lot of the weird stuff in Mark comes from that nobody can really figure out, like the random Aramaic phrases like ephthatha and Talitha koum. To put it bluntly, they sound like magic words, and make the performance more memorable. Remember, this would all have to be memorized, and as I’ve mentioned before, words like that can act as anchors so that those stories don’t get left out in the retelling. Same with Jesus using his spit and sticking his fingers in the guys ears and stuff, I think that’s stage direction and a way to remember the scene essentially. There’s no end to the possibilities here, you can take this speculation a long way and it continues to work. The miracle feedings may very well have been important to the oral performance, perhaps the disciples carrying the baskets of bread (since Mark specifically has them do that), maybe they threw pieces of bread to the crowd, or even walked around and distributed it. If you were in the crowd, wouldn’t you want 2 of those scenes? The upcoming pericopes about children have always been difficult to exegete, but what if the original purpose was simply to get some bored kids involved in the performance? The kids don’t actually have to say anything, but they’d get to participate nonetheless. Then there’s the structure of the narrative, which sometimes puts an out of context pericope in between two parts of a story..this would allow for prop movement or the appearance of time passing, both of which aren’t needed so much in a written context. For example, Jesus sends the disciples out to preach, then there’s a story about John the Baptist, then the disciples come back. Visually, this does imply that time has passed and the disciples are returning from a journey. In written form, it’s awkward but Mark makes it work by assigning it another meaning. There’s a lot more to go into regarding the performance aspect of Mark, but it also becomes too easy to just start attributing everything in the gospel to the oral performance aspect, and that’s definitely not the case. The entire book is filled with parallels and interreferences. Mark is a complex work of literature, and it won’t do to just say “oh Mark just threw that in there because it worked well in the oral performance” because that’s seldom the case. But…it might sometimes be the case, as much as it might bother us. Exegesis is hard, and we have to make our best guess. Let’s move on, to that 2nd food miracle, the feeding of the 4000. Mark 8:1-10 follows:

**8**During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, **2**“I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. **3**If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”

**4**His disciples answered, “But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?”

**5**“How many loaves do you have?” Jesus asked.

“Seven,” they replied.

**6**He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so. **7**They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. **8**The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. **9**About four thousand were present. After he had sent them away, **10**he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.

Mark usually has some kind of obvious difference between the accounts when he doubles up stories like this, but I don’t really see one here except that this is a Gentile crowd, but that fact isn’t emphasized in any way. We don’t even know they’re Gentiles for sure, since we still don’t know where Dalmanutha was. This is the pericope I had in mind when I was talking about material being included for the performance aspect. That being said, there might very well be some hypertext in here that I just haven’t figured out yet.

Here’s Mark 8:11-13:

**11**The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. **12**He sighed deeply and said, “Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it.” **13**Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side.

The normal analysis is that Jesus clearly believes that they have received adequate proof from YWHW already. A sign may also refer to a flag or war banner, meaning that the Pharisees are looking for a military Messiah to lead them against their oppressors. They won’t receive this either.

My analysis isn’t that different, but it relates back to the previous pericope, the feeding of the 4000. Earlier I put forth the hypothesis that the crowds at these miraculous feedings didn’t know a miracle was happening. The Pharisees are just like those crowds in that they’re asking for a sign (like many in the crowd who only came to see Jesus do some miracles), but Jesus tells them they won’t get a sign. The irony being that the sign, in both cases, is actually what’s happening right around them, right now, Jesus’s multiplication of food. The Kingdom of God is upon them, as it were, but they don’t have ears to hear, or in this case, eyes to see.

Mark 8:14-21 follows:

**14**The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. **15**“Be careful,” Jesus warned them. “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.”

**16**They discussed this with one another and said, “It is because we have no bread.”

**17**Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? **18**Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember? **19**When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”

“Twelve,” they replied.

**20**“And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”

They answered, “Seven.”

**21**He said to them, “Do you still not understand?”

Difficult to put an exact definition on what Jesus means by “leaven” here. Generally I think it just means the “influence” of the Pharisees and Herod, in other words stay away from those guys, don’t act like them. They’re both examples of people “trying to serve two masters” in that their worldly concerns keep them from serving God faithfully. Jesus is warning the disciples not to get compromised themselves. Also, Jesus doing the Captain Picard facepalm and getting annoyed with his disciples cause they’re so hung up on the bread issue is pretty funny. Verse 17: WHY ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT HAVING NO BREAD. We can see why Jesus is frustrated with them, they’re acting just like the Pharisees in the previous pericope, refusing to acknowledge the miraculous beginnings of the Kingdom of God taking place around them and instead worrying about the next meal.

Mark 8:22-26 follows:

**2**They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. **23**He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, “Do you see anything?”

**24**He looked up and said, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.”

**25**Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. **26**Jesus sent him home, saying, “Don’t even go into[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24527a)] the village.”

Jesus is so annoyed that the last guy ignored his request not to tell anybody that He just tells this guy not to even go into the village. The healing process is similar to the last blind man that Jesus healed, i.e. Jesus spits on the guy. Did we really need another miracle story here, especially when it’s so similar to the last one we had. No, but I’m sure you already figured out what’s going on here, this is a metaphor for Jesus opening the eyes of the disciples, and is meant to be paired with the next pericope. It even mentions an intermediate step where they sooooorta can start to see what’s going on. Here’s that next pericope, Mark 8:27-30:

**27**Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

**28**They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

**29**“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

**30**Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

This conversation directly parallels the previous healing pericope. One can of course take a longer term view of the metaphor, as the disciples come to an even fuller understanding after Jesus’s death and resurrection. Note that once the disciples, well Peter at least, understand that Jesus really is the Messiah, it’s even more important to avoid too much attention. Mark 8:31-33 follows:

**1**He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. **32**He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

**33**But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

I mentioned we could extend the metaphor of the healing of the blind man, and here’s a good example. Just like the half-healed blind man who saw vague images of people walking around, Peter has certainly had a breakthrough, but doesn’t really understand what he’s looking at yet. We assume the disciples still were expecting the Messiah to be a military and political leader, someone in the Maccabean mold who would lead the revolution against the Gentile oppressors. We can sympathize with Peter, who was taken aback hearing Jesus predicting what sounds very much like defeat. After all, there was no natural force that Jesus had failed to overcome in His time with the disciples. While we can look at this pericope and say, “yes, but Jesus is actually describing his future victory over Death, mankind’s greatest enemy” Peter didn’t have the benefit of theological hindsight that we do. Mark points out that Jesus spoke to them plainly about these future events, but after all the parables Jesus used, we certainly can’t blame the disciples for wondering what He *really* meant.

I have a theory that Mark is using some fairly elaborate hypertext here as well, in this case it’s a reference to the Old Testament prophet Zechariah. Zechariah 3 is a fairly standard apocalyptic vision, and I probably need to read the whole passage to explain my thesis: Zechariah 3:1-10 follows:

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Zechariah+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-22914a)] standing at his right side to accuse him. **2**The Lord said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?”

**3**Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. **4**The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.”

Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.”

**5**Then I said, “Put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the Lord stood by.

**6**The angel of the Lord gave this charge to Joshua: **7**“This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘If you will walk in obedience to me and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.

**8**“‘Listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. **9**See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Zechariah+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-22922b)] on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.

**10**“‘In that day each of you will invite your neighbor to sit under your vine and fig tree,’ declares the Lord Almighty.”

OK, so there’s several parallels that Mark is trying to bring to his audience’s attention, and like he’s done before, his intent is to get us to go back and look at the passage in Zechariah in order to understand the point he’s trying to make. As I’ve said before, Mark often has key words or phrases that function in this capacity, in this instance the word is epitamao, which means rebuke or warn. This is the word used by the Lord to twice rebuke Satan in the Septuagintal version of Zechariah 3. Now, Mark isn’t going to let us miss his point, so get this, between Mark 8:30 and Mark 10:48 he uses epitimao SIX TIMES. Now is when he starts to get cute, though. Audio isn’t the greatest medium to explain this, so if there ever was a time to have these two parallel passages open on your screen or in your Bible, now would be that time. We need to note the positions of the characters in the Zechariah passage--we have Joshua standing before the Lord with Satan to his right, and then we’re informed in Zechariah 3:8 that Joshua’s associates are seated in front of him as well. In Mark 8:33, after we’re told that Peter has taken Jesus aside, presumably meaning they are standing next to each other, Mark has Jesus first turn and look at his disciples before telling Peter “get behind me Satan”. Mark has recreated the apocalyptic royal throne room scene from Zechariah, and he wants to make sure the reader is aware of it. Now, what’s the point of all this? Well, as you’re probably aware, the name Jesus is simply the Hellenized version of the Hebrew name Yeshua, or Joshua. So Jesus is to be associated with Joshua, the High Priest from the Zechariah story. The disciples are called “men who are symbolic of things to come,” which is vague but certainly noteworthy. Peter representing Satan gets all the attention, but IMO should really be viewed as secondary to Mark’s main point, which again is to identify Jesus as filling the role of Joshua, the High Priest. I stated before that when Mark does this routine, just as he did with the Ba’alzebub story earlier, he wants to make sure you’re interpreting an event a certain way. In this case, that event will be the transfiguration, and we’ll get to that in just a moment. First, here’s Mark 8:34-38.

The Way of the Cross

**34**Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **35**For whoever wants to save their life[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24536b)] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. **36**What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? **37**Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? **38**If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

All of Jesus’s sayings here are related to denying the temptations and desires of mankind, and focusing instead on God’s concerns, or as Jesus puts it, His listeners must ”take up their cross and follow me.” It’s certainly possible that this section is influenced by later events surrounding the persecuted early church. It’s even more possible that there is Cynic or Stoic influence here, as the language here could have been influenced by or borrowed from a variety of philosophers of those schools, many of whom held up the “noble death” as the mark of a true philosopher. I haven’t explored the Cynic connections to Jesus’s teaching in this series, partly because I don’t think it’s really all that important, and partly because it would take too much time, and partly because it feels a bit like a wild goose chase. I wouldn’t discourage anyone from pursuing those connections, just keep in mind that by a longshot Jesus’s primary influence was the Hebrew scriptures.

One thing to note, there’s something very important here at the end of Chapter 8 that’s easy to miss. When Jesus says “in his Father’s glory with the holy angels” He identifies the Son of Man, which has up to now been a somewhat enigmatic title, with the Son of God, i.e the Messiah, although in this particular situation He doesn’t necessarily claim to be the Son of Man, he uses the 3rd person. I’ve basically skipped over the whole Son of Man thing so far because I’m going to address it more fully a little bit later, but the language Jesus uses here bears mentioning. For now, let’s move on to Mark 9:1-13.

**9**And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

**2**After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. **3**His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. **4**And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

**5**Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” **6**(He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

**7**Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”

**8**Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

**9**As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. **10**They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what “rising from the dead” meant.

**11**And they asked him, “Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”

**12**Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? **13**But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.”

So there’s certainly a lot going on here. First let’s address the “kingdom of God coming with power” line. It’s understandable to view this as Jesus saying that the full embodiment of the Kingdom was soon to occur, and it’s certainly been interpreted that way over the years. Which means that exegetes have had the following options: A: Jesus expected the Kingdom to arrive without delay, and turned out to just be wrong, B: the reference is to the next event in the story, the Transfiguration, C: Jesus’s resurrection WAS the kingdom of God coming with power, or D, other: which encompasses a variety of difficult theological workarounds to the problem, all of them fairly unconvincing. I think option C, the resurrection as the true beginning of the Kingdom, is certainly defendable, but I believe the better option is B, in which we assume Jesus is just talking about the next thing that happens, the transfiguration. Now, to get back to that Zechariah passage that Mark keeps pointing us toward. Joshua the High Priest is given “fine garments” and a clean turban to replace his “filthy clothes” by the angel of the Lord in what is clearly meant as a cleansing ritual, in fact we’re told that Joshua’s sins have been taken away. Jesus’s dazzling white clothing is meant to echo this incident, while also implying His sinlessness and purity. He is then affirmed as God’s Son, just as Joshua was affirmed as High Priest in Zechariah. We’re told that Moses and Elijah are there as well, a development that probably has several meanings. First, it solves the problem of the whole “Elijah must come first” thing from Malachi that Jews took very seriously at the time. Jesus will go on to explain that JTB fulfilled the role of Elijah, but, just in case anyone found this objectionable or controversial, Elijah himself has now made an appearance at the Transfiguration. Moses and Elijah also function as representatives of the Law and the Prophets, respectively. Mark’s not done with Zechariah yet, though. In Zechariah 4, the prophet has a vision in which he sees “a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lamps on it, with seven channels to the lamps. **3**Also there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.” He is then told that the olive trees are “the two who are anointed to[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Zechariah+4&version=NIV#fen-NIV-22937b)] serve the Lord of all the earth.” This is translationally difficult, and the Hebrew literally means “sons of oil” for the two figures, which basically means affiliated with oil. I believe Elijah and Moses are meant to represent these two sons of oil, or olive trees, and are there to anoint Jesus as High Priest. Other scholars such as Crispin Fletcher-Louis have conjectured that the Transfiguration serves as Jesus’s appointment as High Priest. While they’ve reached that conclusion by a different path than I have, their similar conclusions certainly give me more confidence that I’m reading Mark correctly here. Now, Peter, who having never met them before apparently recognizes Elijah and Moses from their Facebook profiles, suggests building 3 tents, or huts, for them and Jesus. This is likely a reference to the Festival of Booths, which is associated with the ascension of the High Priest. The purpose of Peter’s suggestion, of course, is to show Jesus’s superiority over the older prophets when the voice from within the divine cloud tells those present “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!” In typical Markan fashion the pericope ends with Jesus enjoining the disciples to stay silent about the preceding events until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. Predictably, the disciples still don’t get it, arguing about what “rising from the dead” could mean, even though they’ve seen Jesus perform resurrections before. Mark 9:14-29 follows:

**4**When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. **15**As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

**16**“What are you arguing with them about?” he asked.

**17**A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. **18**Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”

**19**“You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

**20**So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

**21**Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”

“From childhood,” he answered. **22**“It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

**23**“‘If you can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

**24**Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

**25**When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”

**26**The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” **27**But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

**28**After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

**29**He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+9&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24568a)]”

Once again we return to Zechariah, specifically to a line in chapter 4, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit” which serves as explanation for why the demon could only be driven out by prayer. This is perhaps the point of the pericope , a reminder that the true power behind the exorcisms is the Holy Spirit, not the disciples themselves. It can also be seen as Jesus calling out the disciples again, since if prayer can drive out the demon, then prayer is clearly the one thing the disciples weren’t doing. The likely reason that the crowd is overwhelmed with wonder when they see Jesus is that He probably retains much of the radiance that the High Priest was said to acquire upon his yearly entrance to the Holy of Holies. In other words, He was glowing.

I mentioned previously that Mark contains elements that were likely used in an acted-out presentation of the gospel. There are several individuals and groups currently who specifically do either spoken word or semi-theatrical performances of the gospel. Apparently, this scene is the one that gets the most laughs from audiences, which we wouldn’t necessarily realize when we read it. However, it is comical, with the child foaming at the mouth and convulsing on the ground while Jesus asks “how long has he been like this?” The father replies, and Jesus then gets all nit-picky about the language and says “if you can. Everything is possible for one that believes…” at which point the father is just losing it and says “I do believe! Help me overcome my unbelief!” sort of like “what do you want me to say, just help him already!” The parallel here is to the healing of the Shunammite woman’s son by Elisha in 2 Kings 4. Mark replaces the mother who lacks faith with a father who lacks faith, for reasons we’ll get to a bit later. Moving on to Mark 9:30-37

**30**They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, **31**because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” **32**But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

**33**They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” **34**But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

**35**Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

**36**He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, **37**“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

So the first thing we notice is that Jesus is keeping a low profile because He wants to make sure His disciples are somewhat aware of what’s about to happen, i.e. the crucifixion and resurrection. This has mixed results at best, which we can see from the fact that the disciples are focused on who is the greatest amongst them, still not realizing the momentous events that are about to occur. Jesus answers their unasked question by telling them the first must be last, a theme that appears several times in Mark’s gospel. Some scholars see a link here with the list of disciples in Mark 3, looking at the first and last names in that list for clues, but I think this is just more a general point that Jesus is making about servant leadership. We then have a couple verses involving some children that have apparently materialized out of thin air. These children are likely meant to be seen as representative of followers of Jesus, who are likened to children several times in the Gospel. My theory that I’ve stated previously is this is another element of the theatrical presentation making its way into Mark’s gospel. Anyone who’s had their small children attend a Sunday sermon with them can appreciate just how antsy and bored they can get, and perhaps a scene like this served as an opportunity for the kids to get to be a part of the action. Next is Mark 9:38-50

**8**“Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

**39**“Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything ybad about me, **40**for whoever is not against us is for us. **41**Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

Causing to Stumble

**42**“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. **43**If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. **[44]**[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+9&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24583b)] **45**And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. **[46]**[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+9&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24585c)] **47**And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, **48**where

“‘the worms that eat them do not die,  
    and the fire is not quenched.’[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+9&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24587d)]

**49**Everyone will be salted with fire.

**50**“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

A bit of an odd section of text, it feels somewhat haphazard, like perhaps the evangelist had some source material he wanted to include, but couldn’t find a particularly great place to put it and it got dumped together here. It’s noteworthy that the section about cutting your foot off, etc. sounds a lot like Paul and raises the question of the relationship between the Pauline epistles and the gospel of Mark. There’s plenty of material that sounds alike between the 2, though no direct quotations that we know of. It does seem likely that there was some relationship there, but it’s disputed as to whether Paul had read Mark, Mark had read Paul, or if perhaps there was some common material they both had access to. The most likely scenario is Mark having access to at least some of the writings of Paul. The quotation “the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched” describes the ones who rebelled against the Lord in Isaiah 66, and as you probably guessed, that whole chapter has Messianic overtones. Most commentators skip right over the salt sayings at the end of Mark 9, or focus on “the value of salt in the 1st century”, or can salt actually lose its saltiness (spoiler alert: no but maybe yes). The material here is enigmatic enough that skipping over it is completely understandable. Salted with fire refers either to enduring hardship or to receiving the Holy Spirit which of course are 2 very different options. There’s plenty of Old Testament material referring to the day of the Lord being a refining fire of some sort, and as we’ll see shortly this is probably the way to interpret the “salted with fire” phrase here. That being the case, we can view the following verses about salt as an exhortation to “salt” one another, that is, refine one another, to keep one another sharp in the vein of “iron sharpens iron.” If that’s the case, this would seem to be an insert from the author’s own time and not original to Jesus. We should also remember salt’s preserving qualities, and perhaps the last line of this section about being at peace with one another is an allusion to this. Our interpretation of these sayings doesn’t seem crucial when it comes to our exegesis of the whole gospel, and to be honest I’m not sure the salt and fire statements are original to Mark anyway, so let’s move on to Mark 10:1-12