

Why Did Jesus' Disciples Fail to Cast Out the Deaf and Mute Spirit? (Mark 9:14–29)

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Mark relates an incident about a man who had a son with “a mute spirit” (πνεῦμα ἄλαλον, Mark 9:17, my translation). He brings him to Jesus to cast it out after his disciples had failed in their attempt to do so. Toward the end of the passage Jesus' disciples ask him, “Why could we not cast it out?” and Jesus answers, “This kind [τοῦτο τὸ γένος] can come out only through prayer” (9:29).¹ This passage has been subject of some scholarly and some not so scholarly discussion. To many, it suggests that Mark assumed that different kinds of spirits caused different maladies and had to be dealt with in different ways.² Various attempts have been made at more precisely identifying the spirit in question.³

In this paper, I will try to better understand how Mark meant for this passage to be understood.⁴ Unlike other scholars, I will not address

¹ English language Bible quotes are taken from the NRSV^{UE} unless otherwise specified.

² See, for example, John Christopher Thomas, *The Devil, Disease and Deliverance: Origins of Illness in New Testament Thought* (Cleveland: CPT, 2010), 297: “Mark 9 suggests the existence of different classes of demons, some of whom are more difficult to exorcise than others.”

³ See discussion below. In addition, some commentaries (for example, Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002]) simply ignore the expression “this kind.”

⁴ A summary of some of the points made in this article is found in Torsten Löfstedt, *The Devil, Demons, Judas and “the Jews”: Opponents of Christ in the Gospels* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2021), 77–80.

the question of how Mark's account meshes with what the historical Jesus really did or said.⁵ Nor will I try to reconstruct a written version of the story that would antedate Mark's as that is a purely speculative exercise.⁶ It is Mark's text as it has been reconstructed by textual critics that I will analyse through a close reading. I will assume that Mark's Gospel is a coherent and well-constructed text, even if Mark's style is reminiscent of oral literature.⁷

SOME ATTEMPTS AT IDENTIFYING THE SPIRIT

According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus had given his disciples authority over unclean spirits (6:7) and they had cast out many demons (6:13), but this time they failed. When they ask him why they had been unable to cast out the spirit, Jesus replies, "This kind [τοῦτο τὸ γένος] can come out only through prayer" (9:29).⁸ What does he mean? It has been suggested that "this kind" should be understood as "this kind of spirit" (thus CEB). It appears that while some demons can be readily cast out using a simple exorcistic formula, others require prayer. What kind of spirits is he referring to in that case? Some suggest that "mute spirits,"

⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier, "Miracles and the Historical Jesus: A Study of Mark 9:14–29," *CBQ* 37 (1975): 471–491; Stevan L. Davies, *Jesus the Healer: Possession, Trance and the Origins of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1995); Gregory E. Sterling, "Jesus as Exorcist: An Analysis of Matthew 17:14–20; Mark 9:14–29; Luke 9:37–43a," *CBQ* 55 (1993): 467–493; Amanda Witmer, *Jesus, the Galilean Exorcist: His Exorcisms in Social and Political Context* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 185–191, etc.

⁶ Achtemeier, "Miracles"; Sterling, "Jesus as Exorcist"; Mara Rescio, "Demons and Prayer: Traces of Jesus' Esoteric Teaching from Mark to Clement of Alexandria," *Annali di Storia dell'Esgesi* 31 (2014): 53–81. It may be of interest to note that according to Rescio, vv. 28–29 are Mark's own addition to the text.

⁷ Ernest Best, "Mark's Narrative Technique," *JSNT* 37 (1989): 43–58. David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

⁸ Most manuscripts actually read τοῦτο τὸ γένος ἐν οὐδενὶ δύνανται ἐξελεῖν εἰ μὴ ἐν προσευχῇ καὶ νηστείᾳ. I will discuss this reading later in the article.

that is to say, spirits that cause people to be unable to speak, need to be handled in this way. If knowledge of a spirit's name was believed to be useful in exorcism, the inability or unwillingness to speak would make this kind of spirit especially difficult to cast out.⁹ In support of this interpretation we may turn to the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20). In this passage, Jesus commands a spirit to leave a man, but it does not obey him immediately:

When he [the man with the unclean spirit] saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him, and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." (Mark 5:6–9)

Jesus asks the demon its name; this is the only case in the Gospels where he does so. The question is why he asks it to identify itself. Some commentators note that according to folk belief of that time knowledge of the demon's name gives you power over it. Adela Yarbro Collins writes, "Asking a demon to reveal his name is a typical exorcistic technique."¹⁰ Commentators have noted parallels in the Greek magical papyri. Joel Marcus quotes one such text: "I adjure you, every demonic spirit, to say what you are."¹¹ But in the case of the Gerasene demoniac, Mark does

⁹ Thomas, *Devil*, 141; Graham H. Twelftree, "Healing and Exorcism in the Early Church" in *Healing and Exorcism in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Mikael Tellbe and Tommy Wasserman (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 113–139 (124). Some have suggested that the expression "mute spirits" refers to spirits that refuse to reveal their names. See references in Thomas, *Devil*, 141. This seems unduly speculative. Clinton Wahlen, *Jesus and the Impurity of Spirits in the Synoptic Gospels* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 102, suggests that Jesus' reference to the spirit as not only mute but also deaf (Mark 9:25) "highlights Jesus' superior knowledge of the spirit's nature." More likely the second adjective just serves to make Jesus' command more emphatic.

¹⁰ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 268.

¹¹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 344, quoting H. D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago

not say that Jesus actually referred to the demon by name when he exorcised it. This suggests that Mark includes the interchange between Jesus and Legion mainly to underscore how impressive this exorcism was, not because Jesus needed to know the demon's name. Judging by the way the demon identified himself and the number of pigs whose death the demons caused, the reader is led to understand that Jesus cast thousands of demons out of the man at the same time.¹² This passage does not give support to the claim that Jesus or his disciples had to address a spirit by name to cast it out; quite the contrary: had it been necessary to identify demons by name to cast them out, Jesus would have had to name thousands of demons. The fact that Jesus asks the demon its name does suggest, however, that for Mark, demons have individual identities.

It has been suggested that the reason that Jesus asks the father how long the child had been afflicted (Mark 9:21) was to use this information in making a diagnosis.¹³ Since he cannot ask the demon to identify itself, he asks the boy's father for more information about the demon to help him cast it out. Marcus writes, "Jesus is culling information about the nature of the demon, which according to ancient ideas will be vital for the job of expelling it."¹⁴ There is nothing implausible in that interpretation. I consider it likely, however, that Mark includes this interchange between Jesus and the boy's father primarily to show how great

Press, 1986), 4:3037–3039. Similarly Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I–IX*, Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 738; Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 84; Sydney H. T. Page, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 152.

¹² Collins, *Mark*, 269. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 251, argues that Jesus originally failed to free the man because he tried to exorcise a single spirit, when the man was possessed by thousands of unclean spirits.

¹³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 366. See also Ed Murphy, *The Handbook for Spiritual Warfare* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 295.

¹⁴ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 660.

the miracle was. Jesus was able to heal the man's son, even though he had been afflicted since childhood.¹⁵

What kind of a spirit was it? Many commentators have speculated about the real cause of the boy's malady. The consensus seems to be that the boy suffered from epilepsy.¹⁶ For example, John P. Meier writes, "while we moderns recognize the problem as epilepsy, both Mark and all the actors in the story, including Jesus, think in terms of a demon and its expulsion."¹⁷ In his commentary on Luke's version of the exorcism of the mute demon, Luke Timothy Johnson writes:

Luke gives symptoms that fit a grand mal seizure ... The suddenness and violence of such seizures made them appear in the ancient world to be caused—as were other forms of psychological dissociation—by spirit possession rather than neurological disorder.¹⁸

James D. G. Dunn and Graham H. Twelftree write,

Mark 9 is probably a good example of "pre-scientific" man attributing to demon-possession a malady whose physical mechanism we have since learned to identify and largely control.¹⁹

This speculation is all very interesting, but it does not help us understand Mark's intentions. R. T. France wisely counsels that we should

¹⁵ According to Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 660, this question fills several functions in Mark's narrative.

¹⁶ Thomas, *Devil*, 141–142, writes: "Scholars are nearly unanimous in identifying the condition here described as some form of epilepsy." Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 665, notes that in ancient times, it was believed that epilepsy "could be healed only by a god or someone with divine power." It follows that a spirit that caused epilepsy was an especially "troublesome kind of spirit."

¹⁷ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew, Volume Two: Mentor, Message and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 655.

¹⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), 158.

¹⁹ James D. G. Dunn and Graham H. Twelftree, "Demon-Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament," *The Churchman* 94 (1980): 210–225 (222). See also Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 652–653.

avoid referring to the boy's condition as epilepsy.²⁰ As far as Mark is concerned the boy's troubles were caused by a spirit, and it is Mark's account that we are studying, not a reconstructed historical event. We might add that using the term "epilepsy" does not, in fact, explain anything. It is just the name that modern medicine gives a collection of symptoms; it does not say anything about what caused these symptoms. Here we may also mention that some authors writing from a charismatic Christian perspective mix Mark's categories and modern understandings of what it was that ailed the boy. Pentecostal evangelist Derek Prince speaks of "spirits of epilepsy,"²¹ while Ed Murphy uses the expression "an epileptic-type spirit."²² But Mark does not speak of a spirit of epilepsy, and references to spirits of epilepsy do not help us understand Mark.

The question of what kind of a spirit plagued the boy seems central to understanding this passage, as Jesus appears to suggest that different kinds of spirit have to be handled differently. But why would Mark let the reader know that prayer was necessary for spirits of a certain class but not clearly identify what class he is talking about? France suggests that the phrase "this kind can come out only through prayer" is not referring to a specific kind of spirit or demon, but to demons as a class; τοῦτο τὸ γένος "denotes demons in general as a γένος which can never be tackled in merely human strength."²³ To France this suggests that the disciples were unsuccessful in driving out the demon not because the demon was of an especially difficult kind, but because they had forgotten that their authority over demons in general was dependent on their relationship with Jesus.²⁴ If this interpretation is correct—and it is

²⁰ France, *Mark*, 363. See also Kirk Wegter-McNelly, "I Believe; Help My Unbelief! Mark 9:14–29," *Ex Auditu* 32 (2016): 198–202 (199): "The idea of Jesus casting out a medical condition suggests to me a confused juxtaposition of two worldviews."

²¹ Derek Prince, *They Shall Expel Demons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 193.

²² Murphy, *Handbook for Spiritual Warfare*, 294.

²³ France, *Mark*, 370.

²⁴ France, *Mark*, 370, writes, "The disciples' problem, on this understanding, has

rather persuasive—Mark appears to suggest that demons constitute a unique kind of being, which can only be combatted with Jesus' authority.²⁵ If we follow this interpretation, the question arises, what are demons as a class contrasted with? Perhaps Mark is making an unusually clear distinction between spirits and diseases; while other forms of healing may work on other diseases, it is only through prayer that people can be set free from demons. The fact that the disciples had to be told to pray suggests that they had begun to take their authority for granted and forgotten that the authority they had did not come from themselves.²⁶ It appears that they had simply become careless in carrying out exorcisms.

WHY DID THE DISCIPLES HAVE TO BE TOLD TO PRAY?

There are some good reasons to suppose that the reason the disciples failed was that they were insufficiently aware of their dependence on Jesus. Matthew, one of Mark's first interpreters, explains that the disciples failed because of their little faith (Matt 17:20). One could say that they were unsuccessful for the same reason as the sons of Sceva were unsuccessful (Acts 19:15); they were unaware that their authority over demons was wholly dependent on Jesus. While Mark does not say that the disciples had forgotten what they had learned earlier about exorcism, he does mention how on several other occasions the disciples

been a loss of sense of dependence on Jesus' unique ἐξουσία which has undergirded their earlier exorcistic success." John Painter, *Mark's Gospel: Worlds in Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1997), 129, writes regarding the expression "this kind": "It seems more likely that Mark sees the event as a general failure of the disciples rather than failure in face of a more than usually difficult case." See also Thomas, *Devil*, 150.

²⁵ According to William R. S. Lamb, ed., *The Catena in Marcum: A Byzantine Anthology of Early Commentary on Mark*, Texts and Editions for New Testament Study 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 338, Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Matthaeum* 57/3, writes regarding prayer and fasting that "the entire species of demons ... is cured through these things."

²⁶ France, *Mark*, 370; Painter, *Mark's Gospel*, 129; Thomas, *Devil*, 150.

grossly misunderstood Jesus' mission and his teachings. A classic case is where Peter had tried to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem to die (Mark 8:31–33). On another occasion the disciples were caught in the midst of the storm and Jesus chides them for being afraid and for asking, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (4:38–40). In the same vein, the disciples were equally perplexed after the second time that Jesus multiplied the loaves as after the first (8:19–21). Mark gives other examples of how the disciples overestimate their own importance. Shortly after Jesus had taught, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35), James and John request to sit to the right and left of Jesus when he would reign in glory (10:37). There is nothing unlikely in the suggestion that they might have misunderstood or forgotten that they needed to continually rely on Jesus in order to conduct exorcisms.

There are, nevertheless, some problems with this view. Mara Rescio points out that when Jesus' disciples ask him in private why they failed, he does not criticise them for their lack of faith, even though Mark lets Jesus criticise his disciples on many other occasions for not understanding (4:13; 7:18; 8:17–18, 21) and for lacking faith (4:40).²⁷ As was mentioned, when Matthew reworks this account he traces the disciples' failure to their lack of faith (Matt 17:20). But Rescio suggests that Matthew's reworking of this passage has caused people to misunderstand Mark's intentions. She argues that the reason his disciples were not able to cast out the spirit was not that they lacked faith but because the people did not have faith in the disciples' healing ability. Jesus could not heal people when they lacked faith (Mark 6:5–6), and neither could his disciples.²⁸ Rescio argues that in this passage Jesus does not criticise his disciples. Instead he gives them some practical advice on how to deal with difficult spirits. This passage preserves an example of Jesus' esoteric teaching. Rescio admits, however, that this particular example has only

²⁷ Rescio, "Demons," 68.

²⁸ Rescio, "Demons," 67.

been partially preserved. In short, “what Mark reports here ... is not a mere warning to the disciples, but a little lesson in exorcism, whose precise contours remain largely unattainable.”²⁹ Again, a difficulty with this view is that Mark does not say exactly what kind of spirits Jesus’ instruction relates to and it is not clear why he would have included an incomplete lesson in exorcism in the Gospel.

Susan R. Garrett argues that Jesus’ interchange with the boy’s father explains the kind of prayer needed, namely single-minded prayer, that is to say prayer without doubting, which is also described in Mark 11:22–24.³⁰ In our passage, the man says to Jesus,

“If you are able to do anything, help us! Have compassion on us!” Jesus said to him, “If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:22b–24)

The man exemplifies the kind of faith necessary to pray single-mindedly—it is not a faith in his own abilities, but a faith that God could work miracles through Jesus. The interchange shows that a faith that is less than perfect is not an unsurpassable obstacle; one can ask Jesus to strengthen one’s faith in him to allow him to do his work. Mark has mentioned before that Jesus had authority over demons (1:27). In the present passage Jesus’ emphatic use of the first person pronoun when he casts out the demon, saying *ἐγὼ ἐπιτάσσω σοι* (9:25) underscores his authority.³¹ But Mark (6:5–6) has also mentioned that where people did not have faith in Jesus, he could not heal. According to Garrett, Mark’s point is that when faced with difficult healings or exorcisms, one must humbly and single-mindedly ask God for help. Those who cannot pray without doubting can pray that God strengthen their faith, following

²⁹ Rescio, “Demons,” 69.

³⁰ Susan R. Garrett, *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 166–167.

³¹ On the emphatic use of the pronoun, see France, *Mark*, 368.

the example of the father of the boy.³² This is an attractive explanation. We may note that while the father of the boy could ask Jesus to help his unbelief, the disciples could not ask Jesus to strengthen their faith because he was not around to ask for help. I will return to this point.

Jesus says that this kind of spirit could only be cast out with prayer, but Collins notes that Mark does not say that Jesus actually prayed. She suggests that the discrepancy may be attributed to the combination of two streams of tradition in Mark's text.³³ I am sceptical regarding the possibility of reconstructing traditions behind Mark's text and will not follow that line of thinking. Marcus suggests that these seeming inconsistencies in the account of the healing of the boy with a mute spirit stem from the

two-level nature of Gospel narratives: on one level the evangelist is telling about what happened "way back when" in Jesus' time, but on another level he is telling a story about what is happening now to his own Christian community.³⁴

I agree that there are two levels to this story, but I will argue that the text is actually more consistent than Marcus and Collins grant.

How significant is the non-reference to Jesus' praying? Some have argued that Jesus himself did not need to pray;³⁵ the boy's father exemplifies the prayer that is necessary when he asks Jesus for help.³⁶ This argument is weakened when we consider that Mark does speak of Jesus praying in other situations (1:35; 6:46; 14:32–39). Why would he do that if he did not need to pray? Mark includes another account of Jesus healing a deaf and mute man (7:31–37), where no reference to a spirit

³² Garrett, *Temptations*, 166–167. So also Gundry, *Mark*, 492–493. Page, *Powers of Evil*, 163–164, notes that some scholars (e.g., P. M. Miller) have suggested that Mark's point was that exorcism should in general be replaced by prayer. Against this interpretation he cites the continuing practice of exorcism in the patristic period.

³³ Collins, *Mark*, 439.

³⁴ Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 665.

³⁵ Gundry, *Mark*, 493.

³⁶ See discussion in Rescio, "Demons," 70, n. 54.

or demon is made. No mention is made of Jesus praying here either, but significantly Mark does mention that Jesus looked up to heaven and sighed (7:34). As France points out, Jesus' heavenward gaze should be seen as a reference to prayer; it may be compared to the account of Jesus' looking up to heaven before reciting the blessing in feeding the five thousand (6:41), and to his looking upward to pray before he commanded the dead Lazarus to come out of the grave (John 11:41).³⁷ Mark's mention of the heavenward gaze suggests that Jesus did pray in healing the deaf and mute man in Mark 7:34. Thus, in light of the facts that Mark speaks of Jesus praying on various occasions and that Jesus' heavenward gaze in connection with healing a deaf and mute man in 7:34 probably refers to him praying, taken together with Jesus' explanation that prayer was necessary in exorcisms like this (9:29), it is likely that Mark implies that Jesus prayed before casting out the mute spirit in Mark 9:14–29 as well.

Rescio furthermore points out that we have very good grounds to believe that Mark intends for the reader to imagine that Jesus did pray, and probably for a long time, immediately before this event. The account of Jesus' healing of the deaf and mute boy follows directly on the account of Jesus' transfiguration. It is reasonable to assume that Jesus prayed during that mountaintop experience. Mark writes that Jesus led his three disciples up on a high mountain "apart, by themselves" (9:2). Considering that Mark has earlier spoken of Jesus going to a deserted place to pray (1:35) and of him going to a mountain to pray (6:46), this suggests that Jesus went to the mountain with a smaller group of disciples in order to pray.³⁸ This is also how Luke (9:28) interprets Jesus' actions. In prayer Jesus sought to communicate with God, and in this case we hear how his prayer is answered. The disciples see him interacting with Moses and Elijah and they hear the voice of God. It is therefore safe to assume that in Mark's account, Jesus had prayed while he was on

³⁷ France, *Mark*, 303.

³⁸ Rescio, "Demons," 70.

the mountain shortly before encountering the boy with the mute spirit. This brings us to an important issue: in what ways is the passage about the boy with the mute spirit connected to the account of the transfiguration?

DELIMITING THE PERICOPE

I think the proper resolution of two text critical issues is key to correctly interpreting Mark's account of the healing of the boy with a mute spirit. This passage should be seen as a continuation of the story of the transfiguration. The account begins with the sentence, "When they came [ἐλθόντες] to the disciples, they saw [εἶδον] a great crowd around them and some scribes arguing with them" (9:14). It thus picks up the story of Jesus and the three disciples who went to the mountain where he was transfigured (9:2–12), and contrasts their experience with the experience of the disciples who were left behind.³⁹ France notes that most manuscripts have effectively severed the connection between the two accounts by putting the participle and verb in verse 14 in the singular (ἐλθών; εἶδεν).⁴⁰ This is reflected in the reading of the KJV: "And when he came to his disciples, he saw a great multitude about them, and the scribes questioning with them." The editorial committees of NA²⁸ and UBS GNT⁵ assume the plural forms are original; this reading is supported by several ancient manuscripts, including \aleph , B, L, W, and Collins suggests that the verbs were changed to the singular because the following verse speaks of the crowd seeing Jesus, not of it seeing him and his disciples (9:15). She notes that "the impersonal plural followed by the singular is typical of Markan style."⁴¹ The editorial committee for

³⁹ See Rescio, "Demons," 59; and Evald Lövestam, *Jesus and "This Generation": A New Testament Study* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995), 47–48.

⁴⁰ France, *Mark*, 360. Manuscripts that have the singular form include A, C, D.

⁴¹ Collins, *Mark*, 432. See Richard Bauckham, "The Petrine Perspective in the Gospel of Mark" in idem, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), esp. 156–164.

the UBS GNT⁵ rated its choice B, meaning “there is some degree of doubt.”⁴² I believe that the editorial committee made the right decision; the account of the disciples’ failed healing belongs together with Jesus’ transfiguration. Many new translations follow the committee’s lead and use plural verb forms in verse 14 (e.g., RSV, NRSV, NASB, NIV), but the connection between the two passages is nevertheless often concealed by editors who follow the example of the UBS GNT⁵ and separate them by inserting of a caption immediately before that verse: “The Healing of the Boy with a Spirit” (RSV, NRSV); “All Things Possible” (NASB); “Jesus Heals a Boy Possessed by an Impure Spirit” (NIV).⁴³

PRAYER AND FASTING

The second text critical issue involves the final words of Mark 9:29. Did Jesus say that this kind only came out by prayer or that it only came out by prayer and fasting? Many commentaries assume that Mark wrote: τοῦτο τὸ γένος ἐν οὐδενὶ δύναται ἐξελεθεῖν εἰ μὴ ἐν προσευχῇ (“This kind can come out only through prayer”).⁴⁴ That is how NA²⁸ reconstructs the text. Most ancient manuscripts, including \mathfrak{P}^{45} , A, C, D, K, L, W, X, Δ , Θ , Π , Ψ , and a correction to Sinaiticus (\aleph b) witness to a longer reading: τοῦτο τὸ γένος ἐν οὐδενὶ δύναται ἐξελεθεῖν εἰ μὴ ἐν προσευχῇ καὶ νηστείᾳ (“This kind can come out only through prayer and fasting”). On what grounds have interpreters argued that the shorter reading is original? One reason is that two very important manuscripts, Sinaiticus

⁴² Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1998), xiii, 85.

⁴³ The Swedish translation Bibel 2000 also has a caption here: “En pojke med en stum ande botas.” Sharyn E. Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2000), 85, considers 8:31–9:29 a unit; “First Passion Prediction Unit.”

⁴⁴ Collins, *Mark*, 434; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 281; Gundry, *Mark*, 492–493; Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 655; Moloney, *Gospel of Mark*, 186; Painter, *Mark’s Gospel*, 134.

(⌘) and Vaticanus (B), lack the words *καὶ νηστεία* (“and fasting”). But that in itself is not sufficient reason to reject the longer reading.

Some interpreters have argued that the longer reading appears to contradict Jesus’ words in Mark 2:19, where he explained why his disciples did not fast: “The wedding attendants cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.”⁴⁵ These interpreters also note that some manuscripts of 1 Cor 7:5 instead of *τῆ προσευχῆ* read *τῆ νηστεία καὶ τῆ προσευχῆ* (“Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to [fasting and] prayer”). In the case of 1 Cor 7:5, the longer reading is not attested in the early manuscripts and is clearly later.⁴⁶ It probably reflects later developments in church doctrine and devotional practice. The UBS editorial committee argues that the same developments explain the reading of the vast majority of manuscripts of Mark 9:29: “In light of increasing emphasis in the early church on the necessity of fasting, it is understandable that *καὶ νηστεία* is a gloss that found its way into most witnesses.”⁴⁷ The editorial committee were sure of their decision and ranked this reconstruction an “A” on a scale from A to D, signifying that “the text is virtually certain.”⁴⁸ France cautiously disagrees with this decision:

While these words might have been added to promote a current ascetic spirituality, they might equally have been omitted to discourage a current overemphasis on fasting, or perhaps a scribe felt them to be incompatible with the dismissal of fasting in 2:19.⁴⁹

France’s objection is valid. In chapter 2:19–20, Jesus had said the disciples could not fast as long as he was with them, yet now he says the rea-

⁴⁵ Edwards, *Mark*, 281: “Given Jesus’ negative teaching on fasting earlier (2:19), it would be surprising if fasting were included in his teachings here.”

⁴⁶ Metzger, *Commentary*, 488.

⁴⁷ Metzger, *Commentary*, 85.

⁴⁸ Metzger, *Commentary*, xii.

⁴⁹ France, *Mark*, 361.

son that they were not able to cast out the demon was because they had not fasted. There are various solutions to this discrepancy. One is to argue that Mark did not mean that Jesus had strictly forbidden his disciples to fast. In 2:19 he explains why they were not required to participate in the voluntary fasts observed by the followers of the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist. But in certain other situations, Jesus' disciples were expected to fast even while he was still alive, such as on the Day of Atonement, where fasting was required of all Jews (Lev 16:29–31; 23:26–32).⁵⁰ Similarly, Matthew includes the explanation for why Jesus' disciples did not fast (9:15), but he also tells of Jesus teaching his disciples how they were to behave when fasting (6:16–18).⁵¹ Apparently Matthew did not find the two teachings on fasting contradictory.

JESUS' ABSENCE AND THE NEED TO FAST

There is another way of resolving the seeming contradiction between the impossibility of fasting while Jesus was with them and the necessity of fasting to successfully cast out this spirit. I think this solution actually makes good sense of the narrative. In interpreting the passage, due attention must be given Jesus' question, "How much longer must I be with you?" (Mark 9:19).

It is tempting to the question as being directed in part at least to his disciples, but carrying a double meaning of a kind more common in John's Gospel. The reader might see this question as a reminder that Jesus in fact remains with his disciples even today, and that he will respond even now as they acknowledge their need for help and turn to him in humble prayer. Such a reading could be supported by Jesus' words, "truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt 18:19–

⁵⁰ Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 236.

⁵¹ France, *Mark*, 370.

20). One could also recall Jesus' final words to his disciples in Matt 28:20, "remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." There is, however, no counterpart to these verses in Mark. In Mark's Gospel we are left with Jesus suggesting to his disciples that he would not be with them always. There is no suggestion in this Gospel that he would be spiritually present even when he was gone.⁵² Earlier in the Gospel Jesus had spoken of the time when the bridegroom would be taken away from the disciples (Mark 2:19–20): "then they will fast on that day." Fasting would be part of the disciples' way of life when Jesus was no longer with them.⁵³ This brings us to a second, better interpretation.

As Rescio and others have pointed out, Jesus was not with the disciples who tried and failed to cast out the spirit.⁵⁴ He was up on the mountain at the time. While it is true that his disciples had earlier successfully cast out demons after he had sent them out and thus was not physically with them (Mark 6:13), the situation here is slightly different. When Jesus was on the mountain, he was transfigured. He briefly entered into that state that would be his after the resurrection.⁵⁵ This is in fact the closest thing we have to a resurrection appearance in the oldest manuscripts of Mark.⁵⁶ Significantly, Mark says that Jesus forbade his dis-

⁵² Collins, *Mark*, 199. It is theoretically possible that the Gospel originally ended on a note similar to Matt 28:20 but it is the text as it has been reconstructed by textual critics which is in focus in this paper.

⁵³ France, *Mark*, 140. According to Acts 13:2–3 and 14:23 the early church on occasion fasted in preparation for prayer.

⁵⁴ Rescio, "Demons," 59; Edwards, *Mark*, 276.

⁵⁵ Delbert Burkett, "The Transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:2–8): Epiphany or Apotheosis?" *JBL* 138 (2019): 413–432, argues that the transfiguration should be considered a preview of the "angelification" of Jesus that would be realized at his ascension (428).

⁵⁶ The oldest available manuscripts end with the note that the women said nothing because they were afraid (Mark 16:8; Metzger, *Commentary*, 102–106). The resurrection is promised in 8:31; 9:31; 10:34. Resurrection appearances in Galilee are promised in 14:28; 16:7. Compare Collins, *Mark*, 172: "the transfiguration serves as a preview of the resurrected state of Jesus. Mark offers this account instead of a description of an appearance of the risen Jesus later on."

ciples to tell anyone about what they had witnessed “until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead” (9:9). It was only after the resurrection they could tell of the transfiguration. When Jesus was transfigured, three of his disciples witnessed beforehand the kingdom of God come with power (9:1).⁵⁷ The other disciples got to experience how their daily routine would have to change when Jesus was no longer with them.

Although he was still on earth, while he was transfigured on the mountain Jesus was not present to his disciples in the way he had been earlier. We recall that Peter addresses Jesus when he is transfigured (9:5), but Mark says nothing about Jesus answering him. Three of Jesus’ disciples are with him on the mountain and get to see who Jesus will be after he has risen from the dead. Meanwhile, the remaining disciples at the bottom of the mountain are without any forewarning given a foretaste of the changed situation they will face after the resurrection. Suddenly they are no longer able to cast out unclean spirits as readily as before. The reason they failed this time is not because they had forgotten that they were dependent on Jesus to conduct exorcisms, nor was it because this was an especially difficult spirit to cast out. In the world of Mark’s Gospel, while Jesus was physically present on earth his authority over demons was such that people could cast out demons simply by invoking his name (9:38). The one exception was the occasion when he was being transfigured.⁵⁸ The reason they failed was that Jesus was not with them in the way he had been before.

Raphael illustrates this interpretation perfectly in his final painting “The Transfiguration,” in which he combines the story of the transfiguration with a scene of the disciples’ failure to cast out the mute spirit.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Edwards, *Mark*, 260, writes: “the kingdom of God come with power’ ... appears to point to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, of which the subsequent story of the transfiguration is a prolepsis.”

⁵⁸ The actions of the unknown exorcist referred to in Mark 9:38 could not have been simultaneous with the transfiguration, for they were witnessed by John, one of the disciples who was with Jesus on the mountain (Mark 9:2).

⁵⁹ Raphael 1520.



Picture 1: *Raphael, The Transfiguration (Wikimedia Commons)*

The two accounts are rarely combined in art,⁶⁰ but I believe that Raphael has correctly interpreted Mark's intentions.⁶¹ The two events occur at the same time, and the disciples' failure to heal the boy is connected to Jesus' spiritual absence.

It is because Jesus was not present for them that the disciples had to prepare themselves more thoroughly for spiritual battle by prayer and fasting. I agree with France, that when Jesus says, "this kind can only come out by prayer and fasting," in the context of this Gospel "this kind" refers to unclean spirits in general.⁶² I suggest that it is the close connection between demons and Satan (Mark 3:23; cf. Jub. 10:11) that would make it necessary to prepare for exorcisms by prayer and fasting.⁶³ Mark's account of the Beelzebul controversy suggests that it was

⁶⁰ Writing about this painting Joseph C. Forte, "Fictive Truths and Absent Presence in Raphael's Transfiguration," *Notes in the History of Art* 3/4 (1984): 45–56 (45), notes, "There exists ... no pictorial tradition for this conflation."

⁶¹ The connection between the two events is not as clear in the Vulgate, the Bible text Raphael would have read, as it is in modern translations. In the standard edition of the Vulgate, the participle *veniens* and verb *vidit* are in the singular in Mark 9:13 (14). While I believe Raphael has correctly interpreted the text, he also had other reasons for combining the two events in a single painting. Catherine King, "The Liturgical and Commemorative Allusions in Raphael's Transfiguration and Failure to Heal," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 45 (1982): 148–159 (154), notes that both texts are connected to Raphael's patron, Giulio de' Medici. Matthew's account of the transfiguration was the text that was read on the second Sunday of Lent, that day that the pope traditionally visited Santa Maria in Dominica, the church to which Giulio had been assigned. Mark's account of the disciples' failure to cast out the mute spirit was the first Gospel reading at Embertide; Giulio was made cardinal at Embertide in September 1513.

⁶² France, *Mark*, 370. See also Painter, *Mark's Gospel*, 135.

⁶³ We may also cite Luke 10:17–18 in support of this interpretation; there, the disciples on returning from their mission are especially excited about the fact that demons listen to them, suggesting that unclean spirits were more difficult to deal with than other illnesses. Jesus responds to their excitement by saying he saw "Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning" (10:18), suggesting a close connection between Satan and the demons. See François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 31.

through the power of the Holy Spirit, which had entered him at baptism (Mark 1:10), that Jesus cast out demons (3:20–30).⁶⁴ Jesus had earlier let his disciples share in his authority over demons, but that authority was dependent on his being present among them on earth. The followers of Jesus would one day be baptized in the Spirit (1:8), but that promise had not yet been realized.⁶⁵ Thus the Holy Spirit had not yet been enabled to work directly through the disciples.⁶⁶ The import of Mark 9:29 is that after Christ's death and resurrection, it would be by turning to God in prayer and fasting that followers of Christ would allow the Holy Spirit to work through them to cast out demons.⁶⁷

As John Christopher Thomas notes, this is the last account of an exorcism in Mark's gospel.⁶⁸ As Jesus' disciples (and Mark's readers) continue the story that abruptly ends at 16:8, they will have to prepare for exorcisms by prolonged prayer and fasting. When Jesus is no longer physically present to his disciples, they will have to make more of a conscious effort to be able to do the work he had called them to do. They will have to follow the example of the father in the story, and in prayer ask God to help their insufficient faith (9:24).

This interpretation also makes sense of Jesus' irritated questions, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?" (Mark 9:19). France does not

⁶⁴ Blaine Charette, "The Spirit in Mark: Power and Suffering," *Pneuma* 43 (2021): 400–408, esp. 405–406.

⁶⁵ Charette, "Spirit," 406–407.

⁶⁶ John 14:12–13 develops this notion and explains that the disciples would do even greater works than Jesus, but this will only happen after he has left them and they are given the Holy Spirit (John 16:7).

⁶⁷ Charette, "Spirit," 405–406, suggests that the disciples would receive the Holy Spirit "as a consequence of Jesus's death and, more specifically, as a result of their own personal immersion in the meaning of his death." The references to fasting in 2:20 and 9:29 are thus closely connected. The disciples would fast in response to Jesus leaving them; that fasting would prepare them to receive the Holy Spirit through which they would continue Jesus' work.

⁶⁸ Thomas, *Devil*, 150.

think Jesus is anticipating his return to his heavenly home. In his opinion Mark's theology had not developed this far yet. He suggests that Jesus' questions might be nothing more than "idiomatic expressions of frustration."⁶⁹ While it is true that it would be out of place to speak of a *return* to heaven as Mark does not express a doctrine of the incarnation anywhere else, Jesus could still be looking forward to leaving his disciples to go to heaven. Jesus has already spoken about that he would be killed and then rise again from the dead (8:31, 9:9), and he does so again at the close of this passage (9:31). He has also spoken about the Son of Man returning to the world in the glory of his Father and the holy angels (8:38). He has just met with Elijah (9:4), who was physically taken up to heaven (2 Kgs 2:11). Jesus is anticipating leaving this world, and he is concerned on behalf of his disciples that they are not ready for the job that awaits them.⁷⁰

Marcus suggested that the seeming inconsistencies in the account of the healing of the boy with a mute spirit stem from the "two-level nature of Gospel narratives."⁷¹ In this account Mark merges the two narrative levels. The disciples were unable to cast out the demon because Jesus was not present with them in the way that he had previously been. They therefore experienced the same kind of difficulties as Mark's readers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have argued that the reason Jesus' disciples failed to cast out the deaf and mute spirit was that while they were trying to do this Jesus was being transfigured and was not present among them the way he had been

⁶⁹ France, *Mark*, 366.

⁷⁰ We may also see a parallel with Moses coming down from the mountain only to find that his people had already violated the covenant God made with them. Jesus' words, "You faithless generation," echo Moses' words in Deut 32:5. See Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 657–658.

⁷¹ Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 665.

earlier. This passage with Jesus' enigmatic answer "this kind can come out only through prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:29) gives guidance in how to prepare for exorcisms. Like the disciples who failed to cast out the mute demon while Jesus' was being transfigured, so too Mark's intended readers must prepare for exorcisms by prayer and fasting, for Jesus is not present with them the way he was for his disciples during most of his earthly ministry. One may ask if indeed this is the meaning that Mark intended why he did not make his meaning clearer. I believe that the answer is that here, as in many other passages, Mark's account functions like a parable or a puzzle for his readers to solve.⁷² Unfortunately, copyists made it difficult for readers to properly interpret Jesus' answer by separating the account of disciples' failure to heal the boy with the unclean spirit from the account of the transfiguration by changing the forms of the verb and participle in 9:14 from plural to singular. Editors and translators have perpetuated the difficulties by physically separating the two accounts by inserting a caption at 9:14 and by dropping the final words ("and fasting") in 9:29.

⁷² Ardel B. Caneday, "He Wrote in Parables and Riddles: Mark's Gospel as a Literary Reproduction of Jesus' Teaching Method," *Didaskalia* (1999): 35–67; Craig L. Blomberg, "The Miracles as Parables," in *Gospel Perspectives, Vol. 6: The Miracles of Jesus*, ed. David Wenham and Craig Blomberg (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 327–359.