Mark 8:22–26: Jesus the Parable-Worker

or

The Healing of the Blind Man at Bethsaida as a Parable of the Disciples' Faith

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I. Introduction

Upon an initial reading, there is something quite striking about the account of Jesus healing the blind man at Bethsaida in Mark 8:22–26. A cursory glance reveals that Jesus healed the blind man in two phases, almost as if he was not able to heal him on the first attempt. No doubt this passage has left many Christian Bible readers puzzled, wondering why Jesus did not heal the man all at once, as was his custom. The pericope reads, according to the ESV, in full:

> [22] And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. [23] And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" [24] And he looked up and said, "I see people, but they look like trees, walking." [25] Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. [26] And he sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village."

The questions surrounding the two-staged healing are legion: Why did Jesus do it this way? What was the physical state of the man's eyes "between" the healings? Did the disciples think there was anything unusual about Jesus acting this way? Why did Jesus tell the man not to go to the village when presumably that is where he lived? It could even be asked if Jesus was able to heal the man in one stage.

Upon further evaluation, another unique feature of the pericope arises: the account is recorded only in the Gospel of Mark. Another full measure of questions can be asked concerning this fact, too. However, the two questions are not isolated inquiries. The answer to the second will be informed by the answer to the first.

While this paper ultimately will attempt to provide an overview of the significance of this scene of the life of Jesus, it does so only by evaluating two questions: (1) why Jesus performed the miracle in two stages and (2) why Mark is the only Synoptic Gospel to record the event.

In short, Mark's account of the healing the blind man in Bethsaida is a live-action parable that pictures the disciples' lack of faith in and understanding of the person and work of Jesus. The two discrete stages of healing require some kind of symbolic understanding of the

miracle. Additionally, our pericope is situated in the middle of a Marcan "sandwich" surrounded by a discussion between Jesus and his disciples regarding their understanding of Jesus, concluding with Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ. As such, the miracle functions as a parable that symbolizes the disciples' understanding of the person and mission of Jesus in the character of the blind man. More broadly, the parable symbolizes the spiritual understanding of the Christian as progressive.

Second, Mark records this account, while no other evangelist mentions it, because it follows his theme of the disciples' unbelief and underscores the unique and unexpected nature of Jesus' role in redemptive history as the Christ. When this pericope is understood as a parable, the careful reader of Mark carries the tension between the true identity of Jesus and the disciples' limited understanding of him forward, even beyond Peter's confession: the confession of Peter is not the end of the tension. Mark wrote the Gospel after sitting under the tutelage of Peter and hearing many of his sermons. In retrospect, Peter understands that he made his confession as the man with half sight, seeing Jesus as Messiah, but not truly grasping the totality of what that meant. Peter likely demonstrated that fact in his preaching, and Mark then highlights it in his writing. For the other evangelists, this theme and focus on the faith of the disciples does not take center stage as it does in Mark. This answer to the second question is thus dependent on the first answer. If there was no intention that the miracle be understood as a parable, then this episode does not further Mark's themes with respect to the disciples' understanding.

This paper will proceed in two main parts by first addressing the significance of the two-staged healing and by second proposing why this pericope is only found in Mark. Each section is sub-divided to discuss important background issues before moving on to the argument itself. Thus, the first argument will follow a brief discussion of the significance of miracles and a proposal for defining and understanding parables. Likewise, the second argument will be proceeded by discussions of critical scholarship and the purpose of Mark's Gospel. Finally, the paper will attempt to draw some conclusions from these discussions to help the reader of this difficult pericope better grasp the fullness of the riches of the text at hand.

II. The Question of the Two-Stage Healing

Jesus healed in two-stages because he was acting out a real life parable to teach a comparison between the disciples' understanding of his identity and mission and the sight of the blind man. To reach this conclusion, this section will first uncover the significance of miracles generally and within Mark specifically. Second, we will attempt to define and understand the genre of parable. Finally, we will proceed to argue that is miracle actually fits within the broad definition of the genre of parable and should be interpreted accordingly as teaching about the spiritual understanding of the disciples and Christians more broadly.

a. Significance of Miracles

Miracles make up one-third of the entire Gospel of Mark—and half of the first ten chapters—much more than any other Gospel.[1] Understanding the function and purpose of miracles within the broader context of Redemptive History and more locally in Mark is necessary before examining the miracle of Jesus at hand.

One cannot encounter the Gospels without being confronted with the stories of great miracles of Jesus. There is a long list of various objections to the miracles themselves, leading many to question the credibility of the NT claims.[2] Presuming a worldview that includes supernatural and divine activity, the scholarship of Blomberg and others which refute critical attacks on the miracles provides the basis for beginning to approach the spiritual and theological significance of the miracles of Christ.[3]

Because the Synoptics, and Mark in particular, do not provide explicit commentary regarding the purpose of miracles, Christians today must evaluate the wonders of Christ within the context of his ministry and the history of redemption.[4] In short, Poythress finds the

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[1] Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical & Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 57.

[2] For an overview of the issues involved, see Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; Nottingham, England: APOLLOS, 2007), 104–51.

[3] Ibid. For a summary of Blomberg's conclusion, see ibid., 150–51. Vern S. Poythress, *The Miracles of Jesus: How the Savior's Mighty Acts Serve as Signs of Redemption* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 17–24 provides a succinct summary of this basic position as well. For a more detailed study of miracles ancient and modern with an eye to understand the Gospels' miracles, see Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

[4] See Poythress, *The Miracles of Jesus*, 65.

miracles first point to the identity of Jesus, the miracle-worker: His deity; his humanity and office as prophet; and his role as the Messiah, the deliverer of God's people.[5] The miracles also are symbols which depict redemption and even embody redemption in some respects.[6] Miracles are not merely isolated events found in Jesus' ministry, but they fit within the broader purpose of the mission of Christ and his identity. Appropriating for application to miracles "Clowney's Triangle," an interpretive method that seeks to understand and rightly apply OT types of Christ, Poythress helpfully explains that the miracles should be understood using a three step process plus application: first, identifying the miraculous symbol; second, identifying the truth symbolized; third, identifying the truth as fulfilled by Christ; and fourth, applying that truth to the Christian.[7] For example, in the miracle of feeding the 5,000, the miraculous symbol is Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 people bread and fish. The truth symbolized is that Jesus is the one who offers spiritual food. Next, that truth is fulfilled and realized upon Jesus' death on the cross, as his sacrifice is our food for life. This is applied to believers by understanding that believers are justified and sustained by feeding on Jesus by faith in him.[8]

Thus, Poythress locates the miracles within the redemptive-historical context of divine revelation as indicators and symbols of Christ's central role in the history of salvation. All miracles point beyond the time and space of the individual work to the need of the ultimate work of God: the atoning sacrifice of the Son. The importance of miracles is found within the thing which they symbolize. Without this understanding of the miracles, they are lost on readers as simple amusements or interesting feats.

Mark often creatively structures miracles by, as Earnest Best argues, often placing them within the context of a chiastic "sandwich," a particular literary form where the miracle is inserted in the middle of a broader story or vice versa.[9] As a result, the miracle sheds light on

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[5] Ibid. 27–30.
[6] Ibid., 58.
[7] Ibid. 65–68.
[8] Ibid. 68–71.
[9] Ernest Best, "The Miracles in Mark," *RevExp* 75 (1978): 539–54, 540–41. Edwards makes the same observation with regard to the structure of the Gospel as a whole, not just miracles. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: APOLLOS, 2002), 11–12. France, though recognizing the same structural reality, argues that the "sandwich" explanation is too simplistic and fails to fully comprehend how Mark moves his focus between parallel scenes, not merely one scene within another. R.T. France, *The Gospel*

the broader story, and the broader story sheds light on the miracle.[10] For example, Jesus' cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12–14) and the subsequent withering of the fig tree (11:20–25) creates a sandwich around Jesus' cleansing of the temple (11:15–19). Because of this literary structure, Best explains that more is happening in the miracle than its "literal factuality,"[11] namely that light is shed upon understanding the miracle: "The fig tree is Israel, and Jesus has come to Jerusalem, the city of God, looking for the fruit which should have appeared in Israel, but as the sequel shows he finds none: God's greatest messenger is rejected in the very place, Jerusalem, where he ought to have been received."[12]

Undertaking a full evaluation of Marcan miracles, Graham Twelftree concludes that Mark does not intend to "disdain the miraculous and warn his readers against belief in miracles," nor does he set out to construct a first century "divine man" character, two contemporary views on miracles in Mark.[13] Instead, Twelftree concludes that Mark uses miracles in the context of his Gospel written to encourage believeres in their faith.[14] He makes a number of observations regarding the purpose of miracles, including the following three: One, miracles help answer the question, "Who is Jesus?"[15] The miracles display that Jesus is the Messiah, God himself working in the world. This underscores the vivid Christological focus Mark continues throughout the book. Two, Mark uses miracles to establish the fact that Jesus was not merely a teacher: he was a doer, a miracle-worker.[16] Jesus' teaching and miracles go hand-in-hand, and Mark's emphasis on the miracles over teaching is a helpful corrective to those who want to think of Jesus as merely a teacher.[17]

Furthermore, Twelftree argues that miracles in Mark "are not unequivocal heavenly signs but *parabolic in nature* and ambiguous in their message."[18] Even those with Jesus were

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of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 19.

[10] Best, "The Miracles in Mark," 541.

[11] Ibid., 540.

[12] Ibid, 541.

[13] Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 92–93.

[14] Ibid., 58.

[15] Ibid., 93–95.

[16] Ibid., 95–96.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 98 (emphasis added).

not able to understand the purpose of his miracles: some thought Jesus was possessed by demons (3:22–30), and his disciples repeatedly did not understand the point of the miracles (see, e.g., 4:35–41, 6:51–52, 8:14–21). Thus, Twelftree argues, faith is required to properly understand the meaning of the miracles, as it is required to understand the parables (4:10–12).[19] Jesus links healing with forgiveness in an early miracle in Mark (2:10), underscoring the fact that Jesus' miracles symbolize something. The parabolic nature of the miracles generally is attenuated, however, because "in themselves, [miracles] also actualize what they symbolize."[20] The reader sees Jesus' symbolic establishing of his kingdom as he casts out demons, commands nature, and heals the sick. But the reader is also confronted with something greater than the miracle itself: the person of Jesus who, by his death, resurrection, ascension, and judgment, will eschatologically and finally cast out demons, heal the sick, and establish his kingdom for eternity. Thus, Twelftree speaks of the miracles in Mark as parabolic because (1) can only be understood by faith and (2) they are symbolic, pointing to a greater reality beyond the particular act itself.

In sum, Poythress helps us locate the redemptive-historical significance of miracles. The parables point to the redemptive work of Christ and vividly illustrate individuals' need for him, just as OT types pointed to the necessity of the work of Christ. Twelftree complements this perspective by showing how Mark uses miracles to highlight the person of Christ, that the ministry of Jesus included teaching and actions, and that miracles in Mark are parabolic, at least in a certain sense.

b. The Meaning of Parables

Next, the parable as a genre has a storied history of veneration and interpretation in the Christian church. Recent scholarly efforts have attempted to revise the reading of the parables. This section will look more specifically at the form and significance of parables in the Gospels and Mark specifically.

Of central importance for the purposes of this paper is understanding what a parable is, that is, what classifies a saying as a parable. The Greek word παραβολή, from which we get the

[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

English word "parable," was a term used in and around the first century generally for "something that serves as a model or example pointing beyond itself for later realization."[21] The term has come to mean "a narrative or saying of varying length, designed to illustrate a truth especially through comparison or simile," especially in the Synoptic Gospels.[22] Blomberg reminds us that "παραβολή must be viewed as representing a wider variety of figures of speech than has usually been associated with the term [parable]" because, in the Gospels, when παραβολή is used, it indicates an analogy of some kind being presented.[23] In English, there is ambiguity as to whether the use of the word "parable" refers to the broader Greek concept of a vehicle for an analogy of some kind, or whether it refers to a specific literary genre, creating problems for the English speaker in properly defining parable.

Stein argues that the NT Greek παραβολή has to be understood against the background of the OT Hebrew *mashal*.[24] The term *mashal* could refer to a maxim or proverb, a byword or taunt, a riddle, a parable, an allegory, a figurative discourse, an ode or poem, or a fable.[25] Similarly, in the narratives of Jesus' teachings, παραβολή indicates: maxims or proverbs, similes and metaphors, riddles, similitudes, story parables, example parables, and allegories.[26] The overlap of these categories shows that the NT παραβολή is fundamentally "a comparison of two unlike things."[27] It is important to note that Jesus spoke in "parables" even when the word παραβολή was not used, such as at the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–35) and the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23–35).

Thus, the genre of parable is broader than some certain type of "illustration" or "story." No particular form or vocabulary indicator is required to trigger the use of a parabolic expression. Literarily, the parable genre includes all kinds of figurative, metaphorical, and

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[21] "*παραβολή, -ῆς, ἡ,*" BDAG 759–60.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; Nottingham, England: APOLLOS, 2012), 51. Luke refers to both the maxim, "Physician, heal yourself" (Luke 4:23) and the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) as παραβολή, highlighting the fact that the Gospel writers did not use the term with reference to a narrow gene that contains a metaphorical story.
[24] Robert H. Stein, "The Genre of the Parables," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. Richard R. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 39–49.
[25] Ibid., 39–41.
[26] Ibid., 41–47.
[27] Ibid., 47. See also Charles W. Hedrick, "Parable," *NIDB* 4:368–377.

symbolic language and, ultimately, Stein's conception of "a comparison of two unlike things" made by Jesus.

In turning our attention to the proper interpretation of the parable genre, church history is rich in debate.[28] Recently, understanding parables allegorically has become popular, in part because of the works of literary critics who seek to understand the parables in their original context.[29] Modern scholars are more balanced than their predecessors by rejecting the abusive allegorizing others, such as Jülicher, have fought against, while being unwilling to reject allegorical elements altogether.[30] Scholars such as Blomberg have revived an understanding of the parable as allegory, and discussions now revolve around the precise definition of allegory, whether allegory is a literary gene itself or an interpretive approach, and how symbols come to bear on the parables.[31]

The key to understanding Jesus' parabolic speech is to see that the parabolic comparison is a vehicle for expressing divine truths.[32] Like miracles, parables depict symbols that point to the work of Christ: one common element is compared to another, and the spiritual truth depicting one aspect of redemption and Christ's work comes to light in the mind of the faithful. However, elements within a parable must be assigned a meaning that the original audience could have been expected to understand.[33] Parabolic expressions are not merely informative, however; they do more than simply convey information.[34] The imagery inherent in comparison leads them to being *affective* as well.[35] Parables "disarm and persuade. It is not easy to resist the message of a parable. That is because its riddle-like nature requires involvement by the hearers and because the informative content it bears comes suddenly,

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[28] A full overview of the historical issues, see Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 42–81; Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 19–27; Klyne R. Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus" in Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, 3–29.

[29] See Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing," 19–21. Ultimately, that is the thrust of Stein's argument as well. Stein, "The Genre of the Parables," 39–49.

[30] See, e.g., Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 55.

[31] See, e.g., ibid., 55; Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing," 20.

[32] Stein, "The Genre of the Parables," 47–48.

[33] Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 192.

[34] Stein, "The Genre of the Parables," 48.

[35] Ibid.

usually before people are able to defend themselves against its message."[36] Because of this, Kenneth Bailey, using a parable of his own, explains how best to understand Jesus' parables: "If the parable is a house in which the listener/reader is invited to take up residence, then that person is urged by the parable to look on the world through the windows of that residence."[37] Thus, the parable is a comparison of two things and has intense personal application to the hearers of Jesus' words and the readers of the Gospels.

The Gospel of Mark is well-known for being a Gospel of action.[38] Jesus speaks less in Mark than any other Gospel, and a higher percentage of the text is occupied with his acts of miracles than any other Gospel. As a corollary, Mark also contains fewer parables than the other Synoptics. Benjamin Gladd sees the few parables contained within Mark against the backdrop of OT parables.[39] Early OT prophets such as Moses and Elijah spoke plainly to the people of Israel, but God commands later prophets, Ezekiel in particular (Ez 24:3), to speak to the rebellious Israelites in parables.[40] Glad sees two effects of this symbolic speaking: first, those who have hard hearts will further harden their hearts when they hear parables, and, second, the complacent, though righteous, Israelites will heed the warning by obeying God's prophets.[41] Therefore, in Mark, parables are "riddles. If the listener is unmotivated and impassive, the parable is meaningless. But if the listener vigorously pursues the meaning of the parable and responds appropriately, then the meaning of the symbolism is unlocked."[42]

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 280–81.

[38] See D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 185–86.

[39] Benjamin Gladd, "Mark" in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 77–78.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., 78. Moving to a larger frame and highlighting the Marcan theme of the unbelief of the disciples, James Bailey sees the Gospel itself as parabolic. James L. Bailey, "Perspectives on the Gospel of Mark," *CurTM* 12 (1985): 15–25, 23–25. While Bailey's argument is based on the flawed notion that parables are stories of subversion, his application is helpful. James Bailey emphasizes that, on the whole, the Gospel of Mark presents a Jesus that confronts listeners and readers, requiring an individual to respond to the Jesus who is contained therein. This requires a response similar to that which Kenneth Bailey advocates in his reading of Jesus' parables. Parables can be stories of subversion, but as has been discussed previously, it is better to consider parables to be simply comparisons of unlike things. But to the extent that the intention of Jesus in telling parables was subversive to the expectation of his listeners, Bailey is correct and helpful.

To conclude this discussion of the genre of parable, the parable can be said to be simply an expression of comparison. Modern interpretation should look at parables as symbolizing spiritual truths. In Mark, particularly, parables are a call to self-evaluation and a response of faith. The student of the parable will be enlightened by faith, or he will be darkened by unbelief.

c. Mark 8:22–26: A Miracle as Parable

With these preliminary issues now addressed, we are prepared to turn our attention to the pericope at hand, Jesus' healing of the blind man at Bethsaida, to pay special attention to the significance of the two-stage healing. In many ways, this episode in the life of Christ is like other miracles of Jesus. Jesus is depicted as performing miracles almost everywhere he goes, so another miracle story is of no surprise. Here, a person with a physical need comes to Jesus by way of his friends. Jesus takes the person away from crowds. Jesus heals by touching the person and charges the person not to tell others of the miracle. Each of these elements of this miracle are significant, but they are not unique to this miracle here.

As a preliminary matter, it is important to highlight that this miraculous healing is not merely symbolic or parabolic, as this paper will highlight. The work was still a genuine miracle and retains all of the significance inherent within miracles of this kind. It displays the power and authority of Jesus. Using Clowney's triangle as Poythress demonstrated, giving sight to the blind symbolizes that Jesus is the one who gives spiritual sight.[43] In history, this points to the revelation of God's purposes for his people in the death and resurrection of Christ. As such, the healing of the blind is a vivid depiction that anyone will receive light through faith in the Christ who has died and rose again. Because of the additional parabolic meaning encoded in this story, the meaning of the miracle does not stop here, however.

Jesus' healing of this blind man at Bethsaida is radically different from any other miracle Jesus performs in that it explicitly takes place in two stages. After Jesus' first application of his healing power, the man can see, but only partially.[44] It is only after the second application that

[43] See Poythress, "The Miracles of Jesus," 71–72.

[44] Some speculate as to what caused the partial sight. For three overviews and opinions, see Brian Glenny and John T. Noble, "Perception and Prosopagnosia in Mark 8:22–26," *JSNT* 37 (2014): 71–85, Karelynne Gerber Ayayo,

the man is able to "see everything clearly." This element of the pericope forms the centerpiece for displaying the parabolic second layer of a miracle. The two stages require a symbolic interpretation, and the context of the pericope demonstrate the narrator's intentional comparison of the disciples' understanding of Jesus and the blind man's sight. These primary factors lead to the reasonable conclusion that the story of the miracle should be considered a bona fide parable. As such, the blind man symbolizes the disciple's understanding of the person of Jesus, and the two stages show how the disciples do not completely understand Jesus until his resurrection.

1. Unique Method Implies Symbolic Intent

It is clear that Jesus was able to heal the blind in one fell swoop, by touching or by speaking. In Mark alone, Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus all at once without even laying a hand on him (Mark 10:46–52 cf. Luke 18:35–43). The Evangelists record generally that Jesus healed many blind people (Matt 15:30, 21:14; Luke 7:21); Matthew has stories about two sets of blind men Jesus healed by touch, one explicitly saying he did so "immediately" (Matt 9:27–31, 20:30–34); Matthew contains another story about a blind, dumb, demon-possessed man healed by Jesus (Matt 12:22); and John 9 recounts the famous story of Jesus healing a blind man by creating mud with his saliva and applying it to the blind man's eyes. Of course, Jesus even raised Lazarus from the dead by simply calling to him (John 11).

It is most reasonable, then, to understand that Jesus *intentionally* heals the blind man in two stages in Mark 8 to make a point. He did not heal in two stages for the benefit of the blind man, as if using two stages was somehow more beneficial for him. Neither did the two stages increase the demonstration of the power of Jesus to the disciples. No, the two stages of the miracle teach a lesson. This healing was symbolic. The two-staged process depicts something else beyond the actual events themselves. The exact nature of the symbolism will be considered more below, but it is important to note at this point that the two stages of the healing indicates a symbolic meaning for observers to understand.

"Magical Expectations and the Two-Stage Healing of Mark 8," *BBR* 24.3 (2014): 379–391, and J. Keir Howard, "Men as Trees, Walking: Mark 8:22–26," *SJT* 37 (1984): 163–70.

2. Chiastic Context

Next, evaluating the pericope in context, it is clear that this miracle makes up the middle of a Marcan "sandwich." On either side of the pericope, Jesus and his disciples discuss the identity of Jesus. Before the miracle, from verses 14 to 21, the disciples were worried because they forgot to bring bread with them. Jesus had just performed the miracle of the feeding of the 4,000 (8:1–10) and rebukes them for failing to understand who he is: "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?" (8:17–18). Jesus then reminded them that he fed the 5,000 and the 4,000, both times with much leftover food. He asks one final question of his disciples, "Do you not yet understand?" Without answer, Mark immediately moves the frame to the blind man in Bethsaida.

The point here is unmistakable: the disciples are unaware of who Jesus really is. They have witnessed his marvelous acts, but yet they do not trust him to provide for their needs in the moment. Furthermore, key words such as *perceive*, *understand*, *eyes*, and *see* provide strong linguistic links to Jesus' next act of giving sight to the blind man. The preceding pericope concludes with a most poignant question posed to the disciples: Do you not understand who I am? Without allowing the disciples to respond, Jesus proceeds to demonstrate who he is by performing the miracle of giving sight.

After the miracle, however, it appears as though the disciples do have some understanding of who Jesus is. Jesus asks the famous question, "Who do people say that I am?" and allows the disciples to ponder what others call Jesus (8:27–28). He then makes the question personal, asking, "But who do you say that I am?" The apparent clarity of Peter's response, "You are the Christ" (8:29), is tempered by the rest of the conversation. Jesus tells the disciples that he will be killed and rise again (8:31). Peter's ignorance of Jesus' mission, however, becomes clear when he immediately rebuked Jesus for saying that he would die, and Jesus responded by calling Peter Satan (8:32–33). Peter and the disciples' continued lack of understanding continues throughout the book. Jesus repeatedly tells them he must die, but the disciples do not understand the whole of his true identity. James and John embarrassingly ask Jesus for special permission to sit at his right and left in his kingdom (10:35–45). The

disciples rebuke the woman who prepares Jesus for burial by anointing his feet at Bethany (14:3–9). They knew Jesus to be the Christ, but they did not understand the Christ must sacrifice his life.

This chiastic "sandwich" is comprised of Mark 8:1–33, and the structure of the triad is:

A: Lack of understanding of the disciples, "Having eyes, do you not see?" (8:14–21)
B: Healing of the blind man at Bethsaida in two stages (8:22–26)
A': Disciples understand Jesus in part (8:27–33)

If Best's understanding of literary sandwiches is correct,[45] the A and A' pericopes should cast light on pericope B, and pericope B should cast light on the A and A' pericopes.

First, the A and A' pericopes shed light on pericope B. Specifically, the context of the disciple's lack of understanding Jesus shows that the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida has something to do with understanding. The ESV translates νοῖετε in v. 17 as "perceive," a word with clear optical overtones, and Jesus figuratively asks "Having eyes do you not see?" in v. 18. These words link the ideas of faith and understanding to physical sight, especially as Mark's narrative frame moves from the disciples to the blind man. Thus, from the context, the disciples' mental understanding—or lack thereof—is connected to the blind man's physical sight.

Second, considering how pericope B sheds light on pericopes A and A', the two-staged nature of the miracle has something to do with the disciples' lack of understanding. The facts are plain that the disciples have not yet attained full knowledge of who Jesus is. However, the miracle highlights the fact that they will not be left in that situation forever. Like the blind man, the disciples will too one day have full sight. The precise nature of the connection is debated, but scholars agree that understanding this point is the key to understanding the meaning of the miracle pericope.[46]

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[45] See p. 4, above.

[46] E.S. Johnson, "Mark 8:22–26: The Blind Man from Bethsaida," *NTS* 25 (1979): 380–81. Johnson provides a partial taxonomy of how various scholars understand the relationship between the miracle and Peter's subsequent declaration. Some highlight the parallel construction between Jesus asking the blind man if he can see and Jesus asking the disciples who they believe him to be. Others argue that the healing of the blind man represents how Jesus has attempted to open the eyes of the disciples. Peter's confession represents the man with half sight, and Jesus opens the disciples' eyes through the second half of the Gospel. Another view is that Peter's confession opens the eyes of the disciples to Jesus' identity, but their inability to understand his suffering only begins at that

Stepping back for perspective, it becomes clear that the structure of the three pericopes as a chiastic "sandwich" presents two primary elements: cognitive and physical sight. Not coincidentally, Jesus also makes this connection when he heals blind Bartimaeus in 10:46–52. Bartimaeus repeatedly cries out to Jesus for mercy, and in response, as Mark narrates, "Jesus said to [Bartimaeus], 'Go on your way; your faith has made you well.' And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way" (10:52). The man's faith—understanding and trusting in Jesus—is vitally connected to his recovery of sight. In the same way, Mark's placement of the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida indicates to the reader that the blind man's sight is compared with, or is analogous to, the disciples' faith and understanding.

3. Parable Embedded in the Actions of Jesus

Now, we return to the miracle pericope itself to assess the significance of these connections. The narrator's comparison of sight and understanding places the healing squarely into Stein's conception of the parable genre, namely that parable is a comparison of two unlike things. Bolstering this claim is the fact that we have established that the two-staged aspect of the healing is symbolic. So, not only does Jesus act symbolically, but the narrator clearly compares the symbolic act of giving sight to someone without it to the meager understanding of Jesus that the disciples display. As a result, this miracle is itself a parable, though acted out before the disciples' eyes.

Certainly this miracle and narrative does not fit within a popular understanding of a parable as a story told by Jesus, such as the Parable of the Sower or the Parable of the Good Samaritan. However, Mark understands that the parable genre is broader than this, considering Jesus' saying that "no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man" (3:27) a parable. He does so precisely because it is a comparison of the strong man to Satan (cf. 3:23–26). Likewise, the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida is a parable, even if it is an enacted parable.

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point. Still others see Peter's confession as the period of half sight for the disciples. The resurrection restores their sight completely. Ibid.

While there are some dissenters,[47] many commentators recognize symbolism within the healing pericope.[48] One characterizes scholarship as interpreting the pericope in a "parabolic" way.[49] However, only one calls the miracle an "enacted parable."[50] This last interpretation is the most reasonable due to the symbolic and comparative elements present within the pericope.[51]

4. The Meaning of the Parable

Having now established the plausibility of classifying the pericope as an enacted parable, the task remains to understand the parable's significance. As a parable, the miracle contains embedded symbolism that is encoded with spiritual truth. In short, the parable

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[47] Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 392–94, takes issue with any symbolic interpretation of the miracle. First, he says that Mark nowhere records a second "healing" of the disciples' understanding, so the healing of the blind man cannot stand for them unless the readers are supposed to know of the disciples' post-resurrection knowledge of Jesus that is not contained in Mark, which Stein thinks is unreasonable. While the disciples are "dull and blind" and it is evident that they will eventually know the truth about Jesus, Stein sees no explicitly two-staged healing of the disciples, even if Peter's confession is the first stage. Furthermore, Stein finds little to no support from church history for a symbolic interpretation of the passage. Ibid., 393–94. He believes the benefit of the story is purely the miraculous component. Ibid., 394. Likewise, A.E.J. Rawlinson, *St. Mark* (London: Methuen, 1925), 108, thinks that finding symbolism is "a strained attempt to discover symbolism even when it is not there." Finally, William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 285 and William Hendrickson, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 323, refuse to imagine why Jesus healed in two stages.

[48] See, e.g., France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 322–23; Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, WBC 34A (Dallas: Word, 1989), 430–31, 433–34.

[49] Larson says, "Markan scholarship has long recognized the importance of the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida as parabolic of the disciples and their consistent inability to understand who Jesus is." Kevin W. Larsen, "A Focused Christological Reading of Mark 8:22–9:13," *TJ* 26 no. 1 (2005): 33.

[50] Alan Richardson, *The Miracle-Stories of the Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1941), 86.

[51] Two additional considerations strengthen the ties of comparison between understanding and sight. First, Mark records that the blind man himself did not seek healing from Jesus. This fact is highlighted when the man at Bethsaida is compared with Bartimaeus who passionately cried out for Jesus to heal him (10:47–48). Instead, the man at Bethsaida was taken to Jesus by his friends. Neither did anything to affect the miraculous healing of his eyes. Likewise, the disciples did nothing to seek out their understanding of and faith in Jesus. When Jesus called his disciples, Jesus was always the initiator (1:16–20, 2:13–14). Furthermore, Matthew explicitly records Jesus responding to Peter's confession that it was not the result of Peter's own doing: "For flesh and blood has not revealed this [truth about me] to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 16:17). Therefore, there is a parallel between the lack of initiative and ability of the blind man and that of the disciples.

Second, Jesus told the blind man not to tell anyone what had happened to him (Mark 8:26). He also "strictly charged [the disciples] to tell no one about him" immediately after Peter's confession (Mark 8:30). Both Jesus' act of healing and Peter's profession relate to the identity of Jesus, and it was not yet time for the world to know who he was, so Jesus told them to remain silent. This common exhortation heightens the level of comparison between the blind man and the disciples' understanding of Jesus.

These two additional features of the two "sandwich" themes help to strengthen the comparative relationship between the understanding of the disciples and the sight of the blind man. As such, the proposal that the miracle is a parable because it is a comparison is furthered.

depicts the disciples' ignorance of the complete identity of Jesus during the course of Jesus' pre-death ministry and also illustrates the standard model of Christian growth.

One must be careful to not press insignificant details too far and over-interpret the parable.[52] The setting outside of the town of Bethsaida, the usage of spit (instead of another substance or none at all), Jesus' question to the blind man at the mid-point of the miracle, and the request to not tell anybody all serve important functions in the significance of the miracle as miracle, but only create a setting for the miracle as parable and are not significant for a symbolic interpretation. However, there are four primary elements of the parable to consider: what the blindness represents, who Jesus represents, who the blind man represents, and, finally, what the two stages represent. First, it has already been argued that all indicators point to understanding the giving of sight to the blind man to be an awakening to the knowledge of Jesus' identity and mission. Second, it may summarily be said that Jesus stands for God, or, more precisely, the Holy Spirit, the one who awakens men's minds and hearts to understand and lay hold of the gospel.[53] The third and fourth pieces of the quadriad, who the blind man represents and what the two stages represent, are more difficult to discern and will be considered together.

Of those who believe Mark 8:22–26 is symbolic, many indicate that the blind man represents the disciples of Jesus.[54] This connection is only natural due to the heavy contextual repetition of the disciple's lack of understanding. As Edwards says, "Like the blind man, the disciples, who 'have eyes but fail to see, ears but fail to hear" (8:18), can also be made to see and hear."[55]

If the blind man refers to the disciples, then the two-staged healing refers to some kind of growth of their understanding and faith in Jesus. Because the ignorance of the disciples is still pervasive after Peter's confession, Peter's confession cannot be the final stage of

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[52] See, e.g., Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 79–80.

[53] See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 4:46–53.

[54] One opinion, however, argues that the blind man stands specifically for Peter because of parallels he sees between the healing and Peter's subsequent profession. Richardson, *The Miracle-Stories of the Gospels*, 86. However, this precision is unnecessary because Peter, in his confession, speaks on behalf of the entirety of the disciples. Stein, *Mark*, 399.

[55] Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 244.

understanding fully. Instead, Edwards identifies the first stage of healing with Peter's confession.[56] Before the confession, they had no significant understanding of Jesus; after, they had a misunderstanding; they would not see "everything clearly" (8:25) until the resurrection of Jesus.[57] Johnson varies this position slightly, arguing that the disciples see, but only partially, for the entirety of the book of Mark.[58] There is no real difference between the disciples' understanding before Peter's confession and after.[59] So, for Johnson, partial sight is bestowed upon the disciples upon their initial calling, but complete sight does not come until the resurrection of Jesus.[60]

Some hold the view that the blind man stands for Christians generally. Wallace spiritualizes the lesson of the blind man's two-stage growth and makes direct application to the church.[61] Some Christians are immature and, though they have real sight of Jesus, they are only "dimly aware" of spiritual things: "Everything is vague and jumbled, even though they can see."[62] However, the argument continues, as Christ works in the believer, he grows in strength and understanding until he knows Christ clearly. The parable shows there is a greater plane of understanding, and Christians should not be content with inadequate knowledge. Barclay reminds his readers that this parable is a call to real evangelism and discipleship, that "a decision for Christ" does not make someone a mature Christian.[63] In this conception, the two stages refer to varying degrees of spiritual understanding in a Christian's life. They stand for a progression throughout the Christian life, not two discrete phases. Thus, the detail of the two phases to the miracle cannot be pressed.

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[56] Ibid., 245.
[57] Ibid. See also Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, 434.
[58] Johnson, "Mark 8:22–26," 383.
[59] Ibid., 381–82.
[60] It should be noted that Gladd, in the context of the fuller themes of Mark, makes a very similar statement about the understanding of the disciples. See p. 22, below.
[61] Ronald S. Wallace, *The Gospel Miracles: Studies in Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1960), 121.
[62] Ibid.
[63] William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 191.

There is no reason to think the blind man does not have two referents, both the disciples and Christians, even if in different ways.[64] The application to Christians can be said to be a derivative of a primary application to the disciples. Contemporary Christians can take heart knowing that the Church was built by men who only came to know Christ through trials. Here, Johnson's conclusions fit the bill:

> Mark depicts the partial blindness of the disciples in both halves of the gospel in order to make a comparison between the myopia of his church and the faulty sight of the disciples and also provide a word of encouragement to immature Christians. "The gospel," Mark is saying, "is difficult to understand and you are not alone in your failure to comprehend Jesus. Even his own disciples did not fully grasp his miracles and teaching." . . . Mark is confident that just as the blind man and the disciples fully recovered their vision, the people in his church will also have their spiritual blindness removed. Their myopia will be turned to sight when they understand Jesus' *logos* about the meaning of Christian discipleship and his teaching about his own suffering, death and resurrection. They will 'see clearly' when they experience the presence of the risen Christ more fully in their own lives.[65]

Thus, the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida is a parable that represents both the disciples and Christians. Christians are called to "take up residence" within the parable, as Kenneth Bailey suggests, to evaluate where they stand within the world created by the parable. Here, they should assess whether or not they have the understanding of Christ that comports with the teaching of Jesus himself through scripture. This "riddle," as Glad would put it, only benefits those with the eyes of faith. The disciples are seen in Mark as possessing partial knowledge of Christ until his resurrection, and Christians are called to evaluate what kind of

[64] The disciples' lack of understanding is due to the nature of progressive revelation of redemptive-historical significance *and* individual illumination by the Holy Spirit. Their lack of understanding Jesus in time and space speaks to the expectation of the first century Jews of who the Messiah would be, and Jesus is in the process of revealing himself to the world by fulfilling the messianic role as a suffering servant. However, modern Christians have the fullness of the revelation of the Christ in the Scriptures, and thus their lack of understanding is a matter of spiritual illumination only, not of progressive revelation.

[65] Johnson, "Mark 8:22–26," 383.

knowledge they have of Jesus, whether it is partial, or whether they can see "everything clearly."[66]

5. Conclusion

This section has sought to argue that the work Jesus did to heal the blind man at Bethsaida was actually a live-acted parable. Fundamentally, the two-stages of healing was unnecessary for Jesus to effect healing upon the man, so the two stages have important symbolic significance. Furthermore, the chiastic "sandwich" context of the miracle brings out the comparison between knowledge and sight. Thus, having symbolic elements and comparing understanding and sight, two dissimilar things, all of the requirements for being a parable are met. As such, the parable must be interpreted as a parable. Here, Jesus' healing is used to symbolize and depict the current state of the disciples' understanding of Jesus and to call Christians to evaluate their own knowledge of Christ.

III. The Question of Unique Marcan Content

The second major unique feature of this pericope is the fact that it only appears in the Gospel of Mark. While this appears to be a separate inquiry from the first question addressed, the answer to the first question will inform the answer to this question. Thus, because the account is also a live-acted parable speaking of the disciples' understanding, it is only included in the Gospel of Mark because it furthers Mark's particular themes of the misunderstood identity of Christ and the disciples' central role. This section will first turn our attention to some background information before attempting to answer the question at hand.

a. Relevant Marcan Scholarship

This section will briefly sketch critical issues of Mark that come to bear on this second question, namely the authorship of Mark, the Apostle Peter's contribution to Mark, Mark's role in a solution to the Synoptic problem, and major themes of the book.

[66] Jesus used the vehicle of parable to express this message because (1) it would only be understood by those who are not outside the kingdom of God (Mark 4:10–12) and (2) the affective elements of the parable would have a different effect on the disciples than rebuking them in plain language for their unbelief. This Jesus did elsewhere—even immediately after this parable—but by exhorting them through parable, he ensures they will remember the symbolic and metaphorical elements that could recall the story and the weight of their lack of understanding again at a later time.

Church history teaches that Mark the evangelist relied on the testimony of the Apostle Peter in writing his Gospel.[67] Of course, the amount of influence Peter had on the Gospel, if any, has been debated by scholars.[68] Traditionally, it has been recorded that Mark wrote the Gospel after sitting under the preaching of Peter.[69] Papias, living between the middle of the first and second centuries, records the tradition of his time that Mark was the "interpreter" of Peter.[70] Some scholars reject tradition and argue that Peter was not involved in the writing of the Gospel at all.[71] Others believe it is impossible to adjudicate the claim or pay no special attention to it.[72] Still others think textual evidence supports at least some Petrine influence on the book.[73] Carson and Moo, as well as Lane, observe similarities between the structure of Mark and Peter's sermon recorded in Acts 10:36–41.[74] If Carson and Moo are correct in their observation that "there seems to be no compelling reason to reject the common opinion of the early church on this matter,"[75] then Lane's moderate opinion appears to be the most reasonable: "Although Mark is a witness document prompted by the apostolic preaching and intended to serve the proclamation, the evangelist was ultimately responsible for the selection, arrangement and structuring of the tradition."[76] Thus, Peter was the source of much of the content of Mark, even the structure of Mark to the extent that Mark mimicked Peter's preaching narrative, even though Peter was not the ultimate compiler or editor of the Gospel.

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[67] Mark is technically an anonymous book, but there is tremendous tradition dating back to the late first century corroborating the title given to the book today, that a man named Mark penned the book. For one discussion of varying viewpoints, see Stein, *Mark*, 1–9. It is likely that this man was John Mark, a traveling companion of Peter and Paul who was mentioned a total of five times in Acts (12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37) and four times in various epistles (Col 4:10; Philem 24; 2 Tim 4:11; 1 Pet 5:13). Gladd, "Mark," 65. Tradition handed down through Eusebius and Papias from John the Elder tells us that Mark did not himself witness the events of the Gospel, but he relied on the testimony of the Apostle Peter. Ibid.

[68] Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, xxvii; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 6; France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 45; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 10–12. See Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 176–177, 193.

[69] Gladd, "Mark," 65.

[70] Papias himself claims to have learned this from John the Elder, likely the Apostle John himself. Papias's entire writing is no longer extant, but the pertinent section with regard to Mark is recorded by Eusebius. Hendrickson, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, 12.

[71] See, e.g., Pierson Parker, "Authorship of the Second Gospel," *PRSt* 5 (1978): 4–9, 6–7.

[72] See, e.g., Stein, *Mark*, 8.

[73] See, e.g., France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 45; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 10–12.

[74] Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 193; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 10–11.

[75] Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 177

[76] Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 12

Critical interest in Mark was not aroused until the 18th Century.[77] It was then that scholars began the "quest for the historical Jesus" and postulated that Mark pre-dated Matthew and was used as a source of Matthew and Luke.[78] Scholars in the following centuries began attempting to solve the "Synoptic problem."[79] Without surveying the possible solutions to the "problem" by determining which of the Synoptic Gospels relied on which, it is worth noting France's moderating position because it best makes sense the situation over and against the Two Source Hypothesis and the Two Gospel Hypothesis.[80] France does envision a Marcan temporal "priority" or "privilege" compared to the other Gospels, especially considering its Petrine authority, but the process of creating the Gospels was "more complex and fluid than a matter of simple literary dependence of one writer on another."[81] It is more realistic that there was more "cross-fertilisation" than "liner dependence."[82] France is self-aware that this approach does suggest that finding a "full 'solution' is neither possible nor necessary."[83]

Mark finds its voice among the other Synoptics in part due to its emphasis on the acts of Jesus and its themes. Overlooked in generations past because almost all of its content is found elsewhere,[84] Mark is distinctive in many ways. Because it likely was the first Gospel, even according to France's hypothesis, it lays the foundation for what many today take for granted, namely that Christianity is grounded in history.[85] More than that, Mark clearly depicts Jesus as the Christ, God made flesh, the Son of God who has come to die and raise again; the

[77] Stein, *Mark*, 15
[78] Ibid., 16.
[79] For a handy overview of the lay of the terrain in Synoptic scholarship, see Guy Prentiss Waters, "The Synoptic Problem," in Kruger, *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament*, 581–91. Mark's contribution to the "problem" is that of the 11,025 words in Mark, consisting of 661 verses, only 304 words have no parallel in Matthew, and 1,282 have no parallel in Luke. Thus, 97.2% of Mark's content is present in Matthew, and 88.4% is found in Luke. Robert H. Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels: Origin and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 50–52.
[80] France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 42-45.
[81] Ibid., 43.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., 45. In the end, France persuasively argues that scholars should be content without a full "solution" to the so-called problem. Instead, they should know there was much inter-relation between the Synoptic Gospels as they relied on similar sources, varied sources, and each other.
[84] Stein, *Mark*, 15–16.
[85] Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 192.

Christological focus of Mark is difficult to miss.[86] Mark also is deeply ironic, as the disciples' own understanding of the identity and mission of Jesus is never completely clear.[87] In part, this is due to the fact that the Jews as a whole expected a different kind of Christ figure, one who would reign as a political and military leader, not one who suffers humiliation and death. So, Gladd helpfully summarizes a primary theme of Mark,

> Jesus must rework [people's] understanding of the Messiah (and the kingdom he established). The end-time kingdom and Jesus's messiahship are marked not by political triumph but by suffering and death. The disciples will be able to grasp this truth only *after* the crucifixion and the resurrection. Only then will they understand the nature of Jesus's identity and the nature of the kingdom.[88]

Thus, Jesus' self-revelation as the Christ, and the lack of understanding of these things by the disciples, takes center stage in Mark's Gospel.

To recapitulate, the author of Mark's Gospel had an especially close association with Peter who, due to this relationship, provided much content for Mark's Gospel. Mark's relationship to Matthew and Luke is not as simple as some critical scholars want it to be, but instead is complex, as the evangelists used common sources and traditions, and even each other, in crafting each individual Gospel. Lastly, the focus of Mark is the identity of Jesus as the Christ, but the Christ who must suffer. Mark carries the theme of the disciples' lack of understanding through the entire book to act as a foil for the reader to correctly see the person of Jesus. Moving forward from this brief review, the next section will address the question at hand, namely why Mark 8:22–26 does not appear in any other Gospels.

b. Unique Marcan Themes Embedded in Mark 8:22–26

The second major unique feature of Mark 8:22–26 is that it is the only miracle story of Jesus recorded in Mark that is not mentioned in any other Gospel. This section will very briefly

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[86] Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 191; Gladd, "Mark," 67–69; Stein, *Mark*, 21–26; Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 12–16; France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 23–27; Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, xxxix–xl; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 230–33.
[87] Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 12; David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 60–61.
[88] Gladd, "Mark," 69

consider this feature and argue that it was intentionally not included in Matthew or Luke because the parabolic message of the pericope is uniquely Marcan.

It must first be noted that no matter one's solution to the Synoptic problem, the fact that this pericope is unique to Mark must be accounted for. Two Source Hypothesis proponents would argue that Matthew and Luke had a particular reason to *exclude* the pericope. Two Gospels Hypothesis proponents must argue that Mark had a compelling reason to *include* the pericope. Even France's most compelling "cross-fertilisation" theory must recognize that at the least either Mark intentionally included the pericope for some reason or Matthew and Luke excluded it for another reason.

The cross-fertilisation theory has no problem with Mark 8:22–26 not appearing in any other Gospel. The most likely explanation is that the life-action parable serves exclusively the purposes of Mark's Gospel. No matter how the gospel material came to the evangelists, it is clear that, if it was known to Matthew and Luke, it was left on the workshop floor as scrap not best supporting the message of those Gospels. Mark, on the other hand, easily appropriated the material as significantly contributing to his book's dual themes of the identity of Christ and the disciples' inability to comprehend.

Some, such as Edwards, account for the absence of this story in Matthew and Luke by arguing that the story denotes Jesus was unsuccessful in healing on his first attempt.[89] It just simply too difficult of a story. This is not the most likely solution because any careful reader will understand that Jesus was not unsuccessful in his first "attempt"—the two-staged healing was intentionally symbolic.[90] France opines that Matthew and Luke were not interested in the story because its "almost 'magical' nature" due to the use of saliva and touching, but he also argues that it was not included in Matthew and Luke because the two stages of healing "may have been felt to detract from the otherwise instantaneous nature of Jesus' recorded cures."[91] Rather, Johnson is more correct, as will be demonstrated here, when he says the passage "is eliminated [from Matthew and Luke] because Mark relates it so closely to his presentation of

[89] Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 244.
[90] See p. 11, above.
[91] France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 332.

the blindness of the disciples, a theme which Matthew and Luke to not find as useful for their purposes."[92] So, it is not that the healing is too difficult to understand in Matthew and Luke's estimation, but their understanding of the miracle as parable did not comport with the themes of their books.

The result of this pericope, properly understood as a parable, leads to a dramatic tension through the rest of the book of book of Mark.[93] Jesus continues to spell out explicitly that he must die, but his message does not penetrate the disciples' understanding, even though others understand, such as the Syrophoenician woman in 7:24–30. The disciples' pre-conceived notions of the identity of the Christ dominated their expectations of Jesus' identity and mission. The disciples continue in their half-sight for the duration of the Gospel.

This point is furthered by another observation that has not been yet mentioned: the parallel between Mark 8:22–26 and Mark 7:31–37,[94] where Jesus heals a mute, deaf man at the Sea of Galilee. The distinctive literary parallels between the two Marcan accounts are remarkable: people bring a person in need of healing to Jesus; Jesus removes that person from the crowd and goes to a private location; Jesus touches the person; Jesus applies saliva to the person; he tells everyone not to tell anybody what happened; and immediately afterward, Jesus is identified as extraordinary by those watching.

This parallel construction highlights the fact that the miracles should be considered a pair[95] that depict Jesus as the healer of the blind, deaf, and mute. This pair recalls the words of the prophet in Isaiah 36:4–6a, which says,

> Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not!
> Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense
> of God. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind
> shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall

[92] Johnson, "Mark 8:22–26," 370. Reinforcing this theory, Best argues that the subsequent partial confession of Peter in Mark stands in contrast to how Matthew and Luke use Peter's confession. In Matthew, it is a more "complete" confession, and Luke does not even mention that Peter does not understand Jesus' prediction of his death. Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1981), 137.
[93] See Larsen, "A Focused Christological Reading," 45–46.
[94] France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 301, 322. Interestingly, Mark 7:31–37, like Mark 8:22–26, is not explicitly recounted in any other Gospel. Instead, Matt 15:29–31 speaks of Jesus healing the mute and many others by the Sea of Galilee. It is likely Mark tells a particular story of which Matt only gives a general account.
[95] See Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, 429.

> the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

In other words, the first century Jew knew that when God comes to save his people, the blind will see, the deaf will hear, and the mute will sing.[96] Mark demonstrates that Jesus is performing these messianic functions by linking these accounts containing healing of the blind, deaf, and mute. Several observations about this connection are in order.

First, Mark's allusion to Isaiah reveals the identity of Christ to the reader. Jesus is the Christ, the one spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. God has come to save his people in Jesus. Second, Mark's placement of Peter's confession right after the second miracle reinforces to the reader this messianic reading of Jesus' identity. Third, immediately after Peter's confession, Jesus reveals he's not the Christ in the way that was expected: he is going to die for his people. While the reader should comprehend Jesus' words—especially by the third time he explicitly states his mission is to die in Mark 10:32–34—the disciples are not able to.

Mark embeds this dramatic irony within the whole of the Gospel. At no point in Mark do the disciples have an epiphany that leads to seeing "everything clearly." Though through Mark 8:22–26 Mark sets the expectation that the disciples will fully come to understand Jesus, he keeps the reader in suspense by not resolving the tension. This literary element provides Mark the opportunity to "draw[] the readers into accepting the narrator's point of view."[97] As the disciple's half-belief is pictured, the readers realize that Jesus actually reveals a fuller picture of himself than the disciples understand.

So, Mark highlights the disciples' lack of understanding unlike Matthew and Luke. As Gladd stated for us already, Jesus in Mark is reworking people's understanding of him as the Christ. He is not going to politically triumph over the oppressors of God's people (yet); he is going to demonstrate what suffering and humility look like. The dramatic irony of the disciples' lack of knowledge—especially when compared to the understanding and faith of characters like the Syrophoenician Woman (7:24–30) and the woman who anointed him at Bethany (14:3–9)—highlights the unexpected nature of Jesus' work for the reader.

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[96] See Wallace, *The Gospel Miracles*, 114–122.
[97] Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 61.

One additional fact seems to support this. If tradition is correct that Peter was closely associated with Mark, it stands to reason that Peter may have highlighted this theme in his own preaching, especially as the disciple in the Gospel who was so zealous to defend Jesus but always played the fool.[98] In hindsight, Peter no doubt understood his ignorance as he proclaimed the gospel at Pentecost (Acts 2:14–41) and later in Rome, realizing himself how much greater Christ's person and work was than he had even envisioned when he walked with Jesus himself. Mark naturally picked up on this theme that would flow out of Peter's sermons and included it in his Gospel.

All of this points to the fact that Mark records this miracle but Matthew and Luke do not because Mark highlights the disciples' unbelief as a foil to assist the reader in understanding who Jesus is. While it is possible that Matthew and Luke may not have been attracted to Jesus' use of spit to heal the man, our theory makes better sense of the whole of Mark than the position that Matthew and Luke did not include the pericope merely because it makes Jesus appear unsuccessful on his first attempt.

IV. Conclusion

We have evaluated two unique features of Mark 8:22–26 to help us understand the significance of Jesus' healing of the blind man at Bethsaida. This paper argued first that the two stages of the healing process is best explained by the fact that the miracle is intended to be understood as a parable. The literary features of symbolism and comparison support this conclusion. Next, the fact that the pericope is recorded only by Mark is not surprising given the unique contribution the parabolic reading of the miracle makes to the theme of the disciples' lack of knowledge about Jesus. Jesus repeatedly clearly states what he has come to do, but the disciples do not comprehend this. However, the parable indicates the disciples do have real sight of the person of Jesus, even if severely attenuated, and that they will eventually be given complete sight.

[98] The accounts of Peter's confession (8:27–33), the transfiguration (9:2–13), Peter's insistence that he would never betray Jesus (14:27–31), and Peter's defense of Jesus as he is being arrested and subsequent feeling (14:47–50) illustrate this.

In walking through these prominent features of the pericope, we have begun to understand the significance of the miracle. Specifically, at least three different layers of meaning are embedded in this account. First, the pericope contains a miracle of giving sight. Jesus performs miracles not merely for the sake of performing a miracle, but to point humanity to himself as redeemer. Jesus not only demonstrates himself as superior, having authority over the physical world, but he also reveals here that he is the one who gives sight through faith, leading to eternal life. Thus, there is a redemptive-historical focus of the miracle on the work of Christ on the cross. Second, the miracle is also a parable that compares the physical sight of the blind man to the spiritual understanding of the disciples. The blind man is healed in two stages, and the disciples throughout the book of Mark only understand Jesus partially, as the blind man could only see partially before the second stage of healing. Third, the pericope, especially taken as a pair with Mark 7:31–37, alludes to the prophet Isaiah's prophecy of the coming Messiah, especially in Isaiah 36:4–6a. Jesus is identified as the one who will set it people free in fulfilment of the OT prophecy.

One theme recurs through each of these layers of meaning: the person and work of Jesus. Mark skillfully constructs the narrative of this miracle in such a way that draws the observer in to the story of redemption and the declaration of the work of the Christ. As Isaiah foretold, God is on the scene to save his people. True faith comes by seeing the cross of Christ and in it as the only possible hope of salvation. Jesus' enacting of this parable give us hope that although we only perceive Jesus now dimly as in a mirror, we shall one day see him face to face, declaring with the blind man that we can see "everything clearly," including the grace and glory of Christ.

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