WHAT HAPPENED TO MARK'S "INFANCY" STORY?

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We do not have to look far to realize that Mark's gospel leaves us little to use for the celebration of Christmas. While Luke parades before us his shepherds, and Matthew counters with the Magi, Mark begins his gospel with the proclamation of the Baptist in the desert. True, Mark does not totally ignore the family background of Jesus, but his data is sparse, and he hardly treats Christ's close relatives in glowing terms. Jesus is called Mary's son (6:3), and his kin are mentioned by name. The latter do not seem to hold much regard for Jesus' ministry: they think he is wearing himself out by a kind of madness and want to snatch him away from it (3:20-21). Indeed, Mark seems deliberately to contrast Jesus' blood ties with real discipleship, and makes family connections very much secondary to what Jesus is about (3:33-35).

But those references of Mark concern the period of Jesus' adult life. They are hardly the material associated with the infancy stories. Does Mark have no interest in what happened before John appeared proclaiming a baptism of repentance?

THE FUNCTION OF INFANCY NARRATIVES

Before considering the question of Mark's interest in Jesus' "infancy," it would be helpful to deal with another one first: why are
there infancy narratives in two of the gospels? What function do they perform? In other words, what intention do Matthew and Luke have for each spending two chapters of their gospels treating material that Mark simply omits? Surely it was not primarily to fill in details of the early life of Jesus. Were the gospels biographies, we would have to wonder how the two evangelists could present the stories so differently, and leave so much out. In fact, they are not mainly biographical. Scholars have shown us that the infancy accounts are up to much more than simply giving us a blow-by-blow description of Jesus' early years.²

Both Matthew and Luke use their first two chapters to present carefully chiseled introductions to who Jesus really is. Each evangelist defines Jesus in the light of themes that will be developed in the rest of the gospel.³ Matthew's Jesus is the son of Abraham, of David, of God. He is the new Moses, who will form a new people Israel with a new covenant. He is Emmanuel, God with us, who relives the history of his people in an exemplary way. Luke's Jesus, on the other hand, is the great Prophet. His birth story parallels John the Baptist's, even as Jesus, the Spirit-empowered son of the Most High, clearly supersedes John. Through his common humanity, Luke's Jesus mediates God's word and presence to all people, including most especially the poor and marginalized of the human family. In many ways, Matthew and Luke use their infancy narratives to provide the credentials of Jesus. Each give him a theological identity card that introduces us to who it is that proclaims the good news that is the gospel of God.

Mark, for his part, does not utilize the infancy narrative approach. An earlier gospel,⁴ Mark follows the more focused framework of what was considered the essential Christian experience of Jesus: his public ministry from the baptism of John through the resurrection. Contact with this period of Jesus' life is what Luke considered necessary to be chosen one of the Twelve (Acts 1:21-22). Indeed, Luke's summary of the Christian kerygma in Acts 10:36-43 might almost be considered a mini-version of Mark's entire gospel. Still, even while Mark omits any infancy account, that does not mean he fails to accomplish
in his own way what Matthew and Luke do with their much longer and more elaborate introductions to Jesus.

THE MARKAN JESUS

Mark formally begins Jesus’ public ministry in the synagogue at Capernaun (1:21-28). There we encounter the two major themes of that ministry, Jesus’ new teaching with power and authority, and his definitive overthrow of the power of evil. The first eight chapters of Mark will challenge people to recognize the Christ among them in many variations on these two themes. When Jesus asks his disciple (8:27, 29) “who do people say that I am”? “who do you say that I am?” it is on the basis of that definitive preaching and the overthrow of demons that an answer might be expected. In fact, it is the very continuation of those themes that constitutes the mission of the Twelve (3:14-15).

But before launching Jesus’ ministry, Mark sets the stage (1:1-20). He introduces what we need to know about the one who will begin God’s work in Capernaum. Deftly, in the first twenty verses of Mark’s first chapter, the gospel sums up [a] who Jesus is, [b] what his mission will be, [c] who will share and continue that mission. In providing this preliminary view of Jesus, Mark accomplishes for his gospel what Matthew and Luke do in their respective infancy stories.

Jesus’ Identity

Mark sums up Jesus’ identity in one compact statement (1:1) that includes the essential titles of this person who inaugurates the “good news.” He is first of all “Jesus,” the carpenter from Nazareth. But more than that, he is the “Messiah,” the “Christ” or “anointed one” whom Israel had been awaiting to fulfill its aspirations and needs. The first half of Mark’s gospel will portray Jesus as fulfillment of what this title implies as he brings to the diverse situations of human need his healing, forgiving, reconciling, life-giving presence. Unfortunately, however, it is a title that will fall on deaf ears. Three times
Jesus will be rejected: by the leadership of Israel, who want to kill him (3:6); by his own familiars, who lack the faith to fit him into their narrow categories (6:2-6); by his chosen disciples, who remain too dense and preoccupied with their own expectations to see what is right before them (8:14-21).

But more than the Jewish “Messiah,” Jesus is also the “son of God.” This title assumed greater significance among Gentile Christians after the resurrection. Thus, not surprisingly, this awareness concerning Jesus emerges more clearly in the second part of the gospel, as he draws near to the drama of the cross. One sees it in the words of God at the Transfiguration (9:7), in the imagery of the parable of the unfaithful tenants (12:6), and possibly even in the question about how the Christ could ever be merely David’s son (12:37). Most strikingly, the centurion’s confession uses this title at Jesus’ death, providing the climax to the entire Markan gospel: “Truly, this man was the son of God” (15:39).7

Triple Testimony to Jesus’ Identity

Mark begins to complement his initial statement of Jesus’ identity by the opening scenes of chapter one. He enlists three witnesses: the Old Testament in the person of John the Baptist, the divine voice from heaven, and Jesus himself. Besides providing authoritative credibility, these witnesses enhance with added dimensions the bare statement of Jesus’ identity that is given in 1:1.

John clearly stands in the tradition of the ancient prophets of Israel. His clothing, food and area of activity have often evoked the memory of that paragon of prophets, Elijah.8 But the Baptist’s words, though attributed to Isaiah, are in fact a medley of prophetic echoes. When referring to Jesus, John, almost as spokesman for the Old Testament, introduces three key themes: Jesus will be the mighty, powerful one; his dignity far surpasses anything the Old Testament prophetic tradition could lay claim to; his baptism will be associated with the Holy Spirit.9 Thus, as the gospel unfolds, we watch Jesus’ power take on and defeat that of the former master, Satan (1:24-26, 3:23-27,
Moreover, Christ embodies the characteristics of Deuteronomy's great prophet (Deut. 18:15-19), the one who alone would speak for God in a way comparable to Moses. It will be no surprise when the Transfiguration portrays Jesus in dialogue with those two pinnacles of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. Finally, Jesus, invested with God's spirit (1:10), will be called the "Holy one of God" (1:24). He will purify the Temple (11:17). His death will be the event that splits the veil that separates the "Holy of Holies" from contact with ordinary people.

The baptism scene deepens and intensifies John's testimony. Now, it is the voice from heaven, God himself, who designates Jesus as "Son." As the heavens, long sealed off against contact with sinful humanity, now split open, the spirit descends upon Jesus to indicate his aptness to proclaim the gospel of God. God's voice specifies who it is who is so fit to carry out the divine mission: Jesus is the beloved son, the unique one on whom God's favor rests because he alone can be trusted to carry out the Father's intents.

All three Synoptics present this theophany. The Fourth Gospel elaborates its significance in Jesus' disputes with the Jews, when he reiterates his absolute fidelity to the Fathers' will and word, for which he will lay down his life (Jn. 8:28-29, 55-56; 10:17-18). This is who the "beloved Son" is, one in the mold of Deuteronomy's great prophet. It is into his mouth that God will put his words: "he shall tell them all that I command him" (Dt. 18:18). Unlike Israel before him and his own disciples, Jesus will think as God does rather than as humans do (Mk. 8:23), and therefore should be listened to (Mk. 9:7).

Finally, Mark's very brief temptation account presents proleptically Jesus' own testimony about himself. It is a testimony, not through word, but through witness of life. Driven by the spirit, Jesus goes into the desert where he is tempted by Satan. Mark does not elaborate this scene in the manner of Matthew 4 and Luke 4, with their dramatic three-fold encounters between Jesus and Satan. Rather, for Mark, Christ's whole ministry will involve conflict with the power of evil. It will begin in the synagogue of Capernaum, when the unclean
spirit is expelled. But it continues as Jesus almost systematically begins to dismantle the various embodiments of evil’s hold on the world of the human: sickness, alienation, sinfulness, hunger, natural calamity, death. All of Jesus’ works of power concretize and illustrate just what happens when the kingdom of God snatches control from the kingdom of evil. In some ways, the most striking example of that conflict will be portrayed in Mark 5, where the Gerasene demoniac is transformed from a self-destructive, uncontrollable monster into a serene, human companion. This incident shows vividly just who the Christ is: the one who brings among earth’s wild beasts the presence of heaven’s ministry (1:13).\textsuperscript{12}

\section*{JESUS’ MINISTRY}

Having set up the broad outlines of Jesus’ identity, Mark then proceeds in two short verses (1:14-15) to sum up what Jesus’ ministry is all about. Jesus comes as a herald to proclaim the good news of God. This gospel focuses on the coming of the “kingdom,” even though in this preliminary summary that term is not defined.\textsuperscript{13} Rather, it will be the gospel proper that will spell out in the words and deeds of Jesus just what the kingdom involves.

Briefly, “God’s rule” is a composite reality, woven of three main strands: the presence, the power, and the promise of God. First of all, it indicates God’s renewed and dynamic presence in the person of Jesus, who begins to reestablish divine rule in a world dominated by the presence of the evil one. For this, God’s power will be enlisted in Jesus’ words and deeds to break the hold of Satan, the former powerful one (3:27). Jesus’ many deeds of power, especially those prior to his entering Jerusalem, directly undo the suffering and pain identified with Satan’s rule. But God’s power will manifest itself most especially, and contrary to all expectations, in Jesus’ own sacrifice of self as servant, his suffering and death “as a ransom for many” (10:45). Lastly, though the kingdom begins in Jesus, it is still not fully present. Jesus also embodies God’s promise. He effectively points to what is still to come. His person and ministry are analogous to what Paul,
speaking of Christ's spirit, calls the "down-payment" or "first installment" (II Cor 5:5). Initiated in Jesus, the fullness of the kingdom is still to come. But it certainly will. For Jesus himself serves as guarantee that God's promise is trustworthy.

After summing up Jesus' message, Mark also manages to sketch in 1:15 what the human response to that message should be. This involves two movements: a transformation of one's way of thinking and acting that breaks with the past and with what holds back; an adherence to what is present and coming, belief in the good news. It is the classic call to conversion: to break or separate from what has been aligned with the power of evil, to adhere to the spirit of the kingdom. In this process, the crucial component is faith, a personal trust in and commitment to the parameters that God offers rather than the narrow confines of propriety or much too "common" sense. Jesus lambastes a "faithless generation" whose hardened hearts block understanding of the kingdom theme that "everything is possible to one who has faith," because "all things are possible for God" (9:19-23, 10:27, 14:36).

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is, of course, the prime example of the kingdom attitude. His willingness to let nothing hold him back from his adherence to God's will manifests itself repeatedly. Neither success (1:37-39), nor family concerns (3:21, 31-35) got in his way. Personal needs like food and rest also got laid aside (3:20, 6:31-34). Not even danger nor the threat of death were able to obscure his focus on proclaiming the good news of the kingdom (8:31-35, 14:36). His own positive spirit of faith can be glimpsed in the parables that Mark provides, especially those like the sower or the mustard seed, which portray God's capacity to bring much out of what seems to be very little (4:1-9, 26-34).

Unfortunately, most of the people Jesus encounters in Mark's gospel do not manifest kingdom attitudes. Israel's leaders see him as a threat to what they consider sacred and proper (2:7, 16, 24, 3:2, 22, 7:5), and oppose him; his relatives and acquaintances are scandalized by his message and lifestyle (3:21, 6:2-6); his disciples simply do not
understand, and remain impervious to what he is really about (1:36-37, 8:17-21, 33, 10:37). On two occasions, Jesus does associate certain people with the kingdom: the children who have nothing but their desire to be near him (10:14-15) and the scribe who agrees with Jesus on the centrality of the great commandment (12:32-34). But these are isolated characters, and hardly typical.

One significant individual, however, does embody Jesus’ approach. The blind beggar, Bartimaeus, appears at the conclusion of Jesus’ wandering ministry, just before he enters Jerusalem. Bartimaeus exemplifies the true response of discipleship, and spells out in narrative what is summarized in 1:15. Though blind, he does see what is important: the presence and power and promise that is Jesus. It is his faith that is operative in this encounter. “Go your way; your faith has saved you” (10:52). Indeed, it is that faith which has enabled this beggar to recognize who Jesus really is: as son of David, Jesus is messiah; as one who can have mercy on him, Jesus is son of God (10:47-48). Like the children, Bartimaeus seeks only Jesus. He is not held back by anything, not even the cloak in which he collected what people doled out to him. And, once cured, he follows Jesus on the road—the road which, from 8:31 on, has been leading to Calvary (10:52).

**JESUS’ COMMUNITY**

The final piece of the picture that forms Mark’s introduction to the gospel is the context in which Jesus will proclaim the kingdom. Jesus’ mission will be a collaborative one. It will include, as an essential part, other people—a community of believers. Granted, the community will take time to develop, and it will need a great deal of formation before it begins to think “as God does” (8:33). In fact, despite some preliminary activities (3:14, 6:7-13), true Christian community will actually begin to function only in the aftermath of Jesus’ death and resurrection, when Peter and his disciples will learn that he is alive (14:28, 16:7). But from the very start, as is evident in all four gospels, a community of disciples is what Jesus desires to be at the center of.
The call of the disciples in 1:16-20 provides all the introduction that is necessary. Jesus summons four men to share his mission, which is graphically depicted as becoming “fishers of men.” Three of the four—Peter, James, John—will be present at many of the important events in Jesus’ ministry: the cure of Peter’s mother-in-law, the raising of the dead daughter of Jairus, the Transfiguration, the agony in Gethsemane. James would die an early martyr (Acts 12:2), Peter and John would be considered “pillars” of the post-resurrection Jerusalem community (Gal 2:9). And the three are mentioned at the head of all New Testament lists of the Twelve.

Mark’s brief description of the call of these first disciples is paradigmatic. Set amid the preliminary themes of 1:1-20, these common fishermen embody all those who will share the mission of Jesus. It is no accident that the details of their call parallel the broad outlines of Christian discipleship described above in 1:15: to repent or transform their way of thinking and living, to cut loose from what holds them back from the kingdom; and to believe in or adhere to the gospel. Peter and Andrew, James and John do leave all, breaking with what had up to that point been major parts of their lives: nets, boat, father and hired men. And they follow Jesus, “coming after” him who will henceforth become the focus of their lives. Later, in the first writing of what became the Christian Scriptures, Paul would paraphrase that same process as it had been traced in Thessalonica: “how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to await his Son from heaven, Jesus whom he raised from the dead, who delivers us from the coming wrath” (I Th. 1:9-10).

CONCLUSION

After looking at the way Mark presents the key themes of his gospel in its first twenty verses, one can see why he could dispense with an infancy story. First of all, he was not writing a biography with its demand for chronological completeness and accuracy. More importantly, he really did not need the “infancy” literary format to do what he could accomplish so succinctly and thoroughly on his own.
When Jesus makes his appearance in the synagogue of Capernaum formally to begin his ministry, he does not need an introduction. Mark has already quite adequately prepared the way for him. He has identified who this Jesus is, and drawn on a variety of authoritative witnesses to attest to his credibility. He has summarized what Jesus’ mission would involve, and how people should respond to it. He has prepared us to expect others to become Jesus’ companions in carrying out that mission. The stage is set for the mission to begin.

By omitting an infancy account, the earliest canonical gospel is not unlike the latest. John, too, omits infancy stories. Instead, the Fourth Gospel utilizes a formal prologue (1:1-18) to set up, perhaps more poetically and majestically than in Mark, themes that will be developed in John’s account of the Word made flesh. The themes are different because John’s perspective is different. Indeed, the reality of Jesus, Messiah and Lord, is so rich that many perspectives do not exhaust the depths of mystery inherent in his person.

Mark and John, along with Paul and the other New Testament authors, are quite capable of proclaiming the good news without using infancy stories to do so. In fact, their omission actually helps us appreciate better just what the infancy story technique itself is trying to do. Rather than looking at those accounts merely as vignettes of the early life of Jesus, and consequently setting Christmas as an event off by itself, we begin to see that the Christmas story, like the opening verses of Mark and the prologue of John, is meant to lead into the gospel as a whole. It points toward and sets the scene for the ministry of Jesus. This, ultimately, can only be appreciated in light of its climax at his death and resurrection. Far from simply dismantling the decorations and waiting until next year, we realize that the Christmas mystery moves us right into the very center of Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom.

What happened to Mark’s infancy story? The outer descriptions are gone, but the inner meaning of what Christmas is really all about remains very much there. Mark 1:1-20 carries us right into the heart of Jesus’ ministry. And when Mark aptly inaugurates that ministry (1:21-28), we are quite prepared to encounter Jesus in action, listening
to him teaching with authority, watching him begin to break the hold of evil on the human condition. Then it is up to us, as it was for the first disciples, to be challenged to make our own response to the series of questions and expressions of astonishment that arise from that encounter: "What is this? A new teaching with authority!" "We have never seen anything like this!" "Who is this whom even wind and sea obey?" "He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak" (1:27, 2:12, 4:41, 7:37). Hopefully, our answer will be able to blend that of Peter, Bartimaeus, and the centurion: "You are the Messiah, the son of David, . . . truly the Son of God" (8:29, 15:39).

NOTES


4 This paper follows the more common opinion that Mark is the first gospel. See Ibid: 114-16, 164-66.

5 Most commentators limit Mark’s introduction to 1:1-13, and include 14-20 in Jesus’ Galilee ministry. See A. Stock, The Method and Message of Mark.

6 All three terms translate each other, depending on whether one uses Hebrew, Greek, or English. See the CSB: 426, 431.

7 This title can be ambiguous, especially when one tries to determine how it may have been used by Jesus himself. J. Meier, “Jesus,” in *NJBC*: 1324, indicates the difficulty in a brief analysis of several key texts, including Mk. 12:1-12. R. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1994): 80-89, gives a more extensive analysis, concluding on page 89 that it is “likely that Jesus spoke and thought of himself as ‘the Son,’ implying a very special relationship to God that is part of his identity and status. Yet he never indisputably uses of himself the title ‘the Son of God’” (italics in original). But there seems to be less confusion when it comes to the New Testament text: “...all the Gospels and, in my judgment, all the NT books where the issue arises, treat Jesus as divine even if divinity is expressed in different ways” *Ibid.*: 123, n. 184. In connection with Mark 1:1, see also P. Flanagan, *The Gospel of Mark Made Easy* (New York: Paulist, 1997): 25: “An identity with God is being stated, though stated for the most part obliquely, because the central theology of Mark, I repeat, is that the full meaning of Jesus and of his being the Son of God can be known only on Calvary.” J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, II (New York: Doubleday, 1994): 652, 687, says much the same, albeit in analyses of Mark 5:1-20 and Mark 10:46-52.

8 “From Malachi through Ben Sira to the NT and beyond into the rabbinic literature, Elijah was the eschatological prophet par excellence, the prophet whose return from heaven ... would signal the last days, the regathering and cleansing of Israel, the resolving of all legal questions, and the coming of God to rule in full power.” Meier, *Marginal*, II: 1045. Despite considerable discussion as to what extent John is to be linked with Elijah, *ibid.*: 46-49, this seems to remain a common view. See D. Harrington, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *NJBC*: 599; Stock: 46-47; and the note for Mark 1:6 in CSB: 68.

9 John McKenzie in his *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965) observes that “the spirit in Mt-Mk is generally the OT spirit applied to the
person and mission of Jesus" (843). "In summary, the spirit of the OT, originally the wind and the breath, is conceived as a divine dynamic entity by which Yahweh accomplishes his ends: it saves, it is a creative and charismatic power, and as an agent of His anger it is a demonic power. It remains impersonal." *Ibid.* 841-42. Stock notes an inconsistency in 1:8 since "baptism with the Spirit belongs to the period after the resurrection, which Mark does not describe. And Christian experience of the Spirit was so recent an experience for Mark and his readers that an account of its origin seemed unnecessary. The Holy Spirit is the gift of the final time which will—quite differently from the waters of the Jordan—purify, sanctify, and bind believers to God in a lasting community" (50).

10 Harrington correctly dispels any idea of adoptionism, and states that Mark "probably interpreted the heavenly voice as confirmation of the already existing relationship between God and Jesus" (599). Brown also finds nothing in the text to support an interpretation that Jesus was just an ordinary human being whom God was now adopting as son and endowing with divine power. He adds an observation more apropos to this paper: "... Markan silence about the 'when' of divine sonship may have raised the idea [of adoptionism] among some. Was it to correct adoptionism that Matthew and Luke, who drew on Mark, each prefaced the Markan material with an infancy narrative that makes clear that Jesus was God’s Son from the moment of conception, and that John, who knew the general tradition about Jesus, began with a Prologue that presents Jesus as God’s Word even before creation?" (*Christology:* 128, n. 2).

11 Jesus offers a striking contrast to the infidelity of Israel, the "son" whom Yahweh had called out of Egypt. See also Hos. 11:1-6 for one poignant example of a recurrent Old Testament lament. Matthew’s temptation account (4:1-11) develops this contrast as Jesus resists the very temptations that Israel had succumbed to in the desert. Even more striking is Jesus’ contrast to the other “sons of God,” Israel’s kings. The books of Kings condemn all the rulers of the northern kingdom, and of Judah’s kings unqualified praise is given only to Hezekiah and Josiah (see CSB, RG 165).

12 Mark’s insight is evident as he identifies Jesus’ ministry with God’s work: “Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord [= God] in his mercy has done for you.” Then the man went off and began to proclaim in the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him” (5:20).

13 Meier stays with ‘kingdom’ rather than an alternate form like ‘reign’ to avoid confusion. He admits that the ‘traditional’ term can be both abstract and misleading by seeming to put emphasis on territory. Kingdom of God “is meant to conjure up the dynamic notion of God powerfully ruling over his creation, over his people, and over the history of both... [T]he Kingdom of God means God ruling as king. Hence his action upon and his dynamic relation-
ship to those ruled, rather than any delimited territory, is what is primary" (Marginal, 240).

14 "There is always movement in conversion. There is no room for the status quo, for lack of change. Conversion always involves a turning, whether a turning from something or someone or to something or someone. . . . But it is also surprising how seldom the NT actually speaks of conversion as changing one's mind or heart. The general NT sense of conversion is turning (epistrophos). It involves turning away from sin, evil, or godlessness and turning toward God, Jesus, and a righteous life" R. Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994): 21.

15 Witherup sees conversion in Mark as being intimately connected with Faith: "Christian conversion means to follow Jesus, i.e., to become a disciple and to have faith in Jesus. In fact, the first act which Jesus performs after proclaiming his central message is to call his first disciples together (1:16-20). This action sets up the thematic thrust of the rest of the Gospel. It is basically a story of faith and discipleship" Ibid.: 24, 25.

16 Flanagan develops the idea that "Mark's section of parables expresses Jesus' grappling with his failure" (*The Gospel of Mark Made Easy*, 52-53). This builds on themes found in an earlier classic, J. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966): 119-22. "This unwavering assurance is an essential element in Jesus' preaching: God's hour is coming; indeed, it has already begun. In his beginning the end is already implicit. No doubts with regard to his mission, no scorn, no lack of faith, no impatience, can make Jesus waver in his certainty that out of a mere nothing, despite all failure, God is carrying his beginnings on to completion" Ibid.: 121-22.

17 There may be added significance in the case of the scribe. Mark's incident regarding the greatest commandment (12:28-34) comes practically at the end of Jesus' public ministry. In a sense, it provides a summary conclusion to what the kingdom involves, and what Jesus has been about. As such, it parallels the opening summary in 1:15. It also complements the Markan emphasis on faith with love. Strangely, "love" (agape) is rare in Mark. Except for this passage, its lone occurrence—again, only in its verbal form—is in 10:21. Significantly, though, that is in the context of discipleship as commitment. Perhaps it gives us a clue to what Markan love means: a readiness to commit oneself fully, no questions asked. While the rich man cannot respond with the loving commitment of the greatest commandment, others can: Jesus (10:45), his first disciples (1:20), Bartimaeus (10:50-52), and, most appropriately, the poor window (12:41-44). She, in direct contrast to the scribes (12:38-40), manifests in practice what the greatest commandment has just called for. And it is with her that Jesus' public ministry comes to an end. Mark's "apocalyptic discourse," which follows in chapter 13, can be considered a bridge chapter. It serves as a farewell
statement in which a great figure leaves his final words of wisdom to his own, and already points to the Passion proper; see Flanagan, 131-32 and Ninehan, 339-42.

18 To “have mercy” (variations on eleeo, with which the Septuagint translates bessed) is one of Yahweh’s key attributes in dealing with people (cf. Ex. 33:19, 34:6-7 and McKenzie, 565-67). Its relatively few occurrences in the gospels outside the Bartimaeus parallels usually refer mercy to God or those who imitate God. Mark’s only other use of the verb is in 5:19 (see note 12, above, where the literal translation is “how many things the Lord has done for you and had mercy on you”). Also, “Master” (v. 51) is actually “Rabbouni,” an exalted form of “Rabbi.” The only other NT use is when Magdalene meets the Risen Christ (John 20:16). That use, in turn, occurs but a few verses before Thomas addresses Jesus as “my Lord and my God” (20:28), the climax of John’s gospel and “the clearest example in the NT of the use of ‘God’ for Jesus” (Brown, Christology: 188-89). Bartimaeus seems to be encountering in Jesus more than just the “Messiah.”

19 The presentation of the disciples in Matthew and Luke is far more positive than in Mark. One reason is because the other Synoptics see Jesus’ community from a decidedly more post-Resurrection perspective. Compare, for example, Peter’s confession in Mk. 8:29-30 and Mt. 16:16-19; see also how James and John’s ambitious request in Mk. 10:35 is diluted in Mt. 20:20 and omitted by Luke.

20 They form a striking contrast to the rich man in 10:21-22. The contrast is elaborated in the follow-up to that account (10:28-31), when Peter observes that “we have given up everything and followed you.”