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Descending Spirit and Descending Gods: A "Greek" Interpretation of the Spirit's "Descent as a Dove" in Mark 1:10

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καὶ εὐθὺς ἀναβαίνων ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος εἶδεν σχιζομένους τοὺς οὐρανοὺς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ὡς περιστερὰν καταβαῖνον εἰς αὐτόν. (Mark 1:10)

And when he came up from the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending into him as a dove

It is well known that the Markan account of Jesus' baptism includes several echoes of Israel's Scriptures. The rending of the heavens, the heavenly voice, and the voice's words to Jesus certainly turn the reader's mind to the OT. For decades, scholars have commonly proposed that the Spirit's "descent as a dove" in Mark 1:10 is also an image drawn from Jewish literature. However, thorough searches of canonical and noncanonical Jewish texts have yet to yield an indisputable antecedent.[1] Perhaps one of the reasons the motif's origin remains puzzling is that scholars have been searching in the wrong locale. Simply because many of the allusions in Mark 1:9–11 originate from the OT does not necessarily mean that all do. Given that Jesus traditions arose in a thoroughly hellenized world, exegetes ought to consider

[1] W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr.'s commentary on Matthew lists sixteen different interpretations of the phrase (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* [3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997], 1:331–34). For a more detailed review of scholarship, see Leander Keck, "The Spirit and the Dove," *NTS* 17 (1970): 41–67; and Stephen Gero, "The Spirit as a Dove at the Baptism of Jesus," *NovT* 18 (1976): 17–35. Individual positions will be cited below in the section on the history of research.

a diversity of cultural and literary influences when analyzing Gospel stories. Several pericopes in Mark's Gospel, such as Jesus' walking on water and the transfiguration, have been identified as scenes that exhibit a confluence of Jewish and Greek literary traditions.[2] A look into the world of Greek mythology may suggest that the same is true of Mark's baptism account. In the course of this article, I hope to show that the Spirit's "descent as a dove" is a motif that resonates closely with Greek mythological traditions. In order to bring to light the Greek resonances of the Spirit's descent, however, it is necessary to shift focus away from the dove, which has received a preponderance of scholarly attention, to the verse's use of a bird simile in its depiction of the Spirit's descent. By placing emphasis on the bird simile, rather than on the dove, one discerns that the Spirit's "descent as a dove" has no clear antecedent in Jewish literature precisely because the bird simile is a literary device that finds a natural home in Greek mythology—where such similes are used to describe arrivals and departures of gods.

After making the case that Greek mythology provides a logical literary home for the simile, I will explore ways in which the original author(s), tradents, and hearers of the Markan pericope might have construed the motif in terms of Jesus' identity. If, as is likely, those who handed on and received stories about Jesus had differing degrees of familiarity with Jewish and Greek cultural traditions, the images and symbols in those stories would have been variously understood.[3] Accordingly, those who were familiar with Greek traditions would have been inclined to relate images and symbols in the Gospel stories to well-known themes and topoi from those traditions. I suggest that certain elements in the baptism, along with other scenes in Mark's Gospel, would have invited such individuals to associate the dove simile in Mark 1:10 with the common mythological topos of gods in human form.

[2] E.g., Adela Yarbro Collins, "Rulers, Divine Men, and Walking on the Water (Mark 6:45–52)," in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World: Essays Honoring Dieter Georgi* (ed. Lukas Bormann, Kelly Del Tredici, and Angela Standhartinger; NovTSup 74; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 207–27; and Candida Moss, "The Transfiguration: An Exercise in Markan Accommodation," *BibInt* 12 (2004): 69–89. Throughout the article, I use variations of the terms "Jewish traditions" and "Greek traditions." This delineation does not intend to suggest that Jewish and Greek cultures were untouched by one another in the first century C.E. Hellenism had strongly impacted Jewish thought by the time of Jesus. The terms will be used as a way to delineate between literature that is traditionally thought of as Jewish (e.g., the OT, OT Apocyrpha, Qumran, rabbinic literature, etc.) and that which is traditionally Greek (e.g., Greek mythology).

[3] It is reasonable to suppose that early followers of Jesus would have had varying degrees of familiarity with Jewish and Greek literature and culture. Some would have had greater exposure to OT stories, while others may have been more familiar with Greek mythological traditions. Early Christians and potential converts should be thought of as representing a spectrum of familiarity with the various traditions.

I. "Spirit Descending as a Dove": Traditional Interpretations

The earliest Gospel reports that, as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending like a dove (ὡς περιστεράν) into him (Mark 1:10).[4] Scholars have long sought the literary antecedent of the Spirit's birdlike descent. Hugo Gressmann, Hermann Gunkel, and Rudolf Bultmann argued that the dove motif derives from non-Jewish traditions. Gressmann and Gunkel pointed to ancient Near Eastern "Call to Kingship Sagas," and Bultmann to Persian mythology.[5] Most exegetes, however, consider these traditions to be too far afield and suggest that a precedent can be found in Jewish literature.[6] Some prefer to identify Mark's dove with Noah's, citing as support 1 Pet 3:20–21, which compares Noah's deliverance to baptism.[7] A few scholars cite passages in the OT where Israel is compared to a dove. They infer from this that Jesus is to be identified with a renewed Israel as he emerges from the baptismal waters.[8] However, a majority of commentators see an allusion to Gen 1:2, where the Spirit of God hovers over the face of the waters.[9] While the scope of this article does not permit a detailed exam-

[4] All NT and LXX translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

[5] Hugo Gressmann, "Die Sage von der Taufe Jesu und die vorderorientalische Taubengöttin," *AR* 20 (1920–21): 1–40, 323–59; Hermann Gunkel, *Das Märchen im Alten Testament* (Religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher für die deutsche christliche Gegenwart 2/23; Tübingen: Mohr, 1921), 147–51. For a summary of Gressmann and Gunkel's position, as well as Bultmann's own, see Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; rev. ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 248–50. Gero ("Spirit as a Dove," 17–35) adapts the work of Gressmann, proposing that the dove-election motif becomes connected to the baptism through *Odes of Solomon* 24. While *Odes of Solomon* has the dove, it makes no mention of the Spirit. In contrast, the *Gospel of the Hebrews* tells of the Spirit at the baptism, but not of the dove. Gero proposes that Mark, then, conflated the two accounts. His assessment is highly speculative, especially since Mark appears to precede both the *Odes of Solomon* and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*.

[6] For a critique of Gressmann, Gunkel, and Bultmann, see Keck, "Spirit and the Dove," 54–63.

[7] E.g., Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, "*Baptisma* in the New Testament" *SJT* 5 (1952): 167; James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (London: SCM, 1970), 27; and Paul Garnet, "The Baptism of Jesus and the Son of Man Idea," *JSNT* 9 (1980): 49–65.

[8] E.g., T. Alec Burkill, *Mysterious Revelation: An Examination of the Philosophy of St Mark's Gospel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963), 18–19.

[9] E.g., C. K. Barrett, *The Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1947), 38–39; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 54; Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to St Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), 161; Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917–24; repr., 2 vols. in 1; Library of Biblical Studies; New York: Ktav, 1967), 1:49–50; Keck, "Spirit and the Dove," 41–67; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:334; and Joel Marcus,

ination of each of these interpretations, this last-mentioned position merits attention as it is presently a dominant opinion.

Advocates of the Genesis position typically cite Gen 1:2 as the echoed text in Mark 1:10 (and parallels) because it shares three elements with the baptism: the Spirit, water, and the image of a bird (implied in Gen 1:2 by the "hovering" of the Spirit over the waters). These scholars suggest that a passage in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Ḥag.* 15a) supports such a reading because it states that the Spirit at creation "hovered over the face of the waters—like a dove which hovers over her young without touching [them]."[10] Supporters of Gen 1:2 also note that a Genesis interpretation of the baptism is at home with the early church's conception of the eschatological age as a new creation. By the time Christianity began to develop, it was common to associate the coming of the Messiah, and the accompanying eschatological age, with images of creation. Accordingly, the arrival of Jesus, as the Messiah, was often connected with the beginning of Genesis.[11]

Dale C. Allison, Jr., has suggested that a Dead Sea text, 4Q521 (4QMessAp), strengthens the "new creation" interpretation of the baptism.[12] He argues that the fragment bears on the baptism and the dove simile because it alludes to Gen 1:2 in an eschatological context. Several features of the text interest him. First, the document specifically refers to a single messiah whom the heavens and earth will obey in a messianic future.[13] Second, and more significant, line 6 of the first readable column states, "And over the Poor will His Spirit hover and the Faithful will He support with his strength."[14] Allison points out that the author of 4Q521 is using the language of Gen 1:2 as he contemplates eschatological redemption. Allison underscores the importance of this fragment because it is the only known *pre*-Christian text that applies Gen 1:2 to the eschatological future and the only known text in which the Spirit hovers over humans instead of lifeless material.[15] Furthermore, he notes that before the publication of 4Q521 those who interpreted the dove in terms of Gen 1:2 could not cite *any specific* Jewish precedent. For Allison, this text provides the missing link that a "new creation" interpretation of the Spirit's dovelike descent needs. He concludes, therefore, that this text "all but confirms" that the Spirit's "descent as a dove" is an allusion to Gen 1:2.[16]

Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (2 vols.; AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000, 2009), 1:159.

[10] Trans. Dale C. Allison Jr., "The Baptism of Jesus and a New Dead Sea Scroll," *BAR* 18, no. 2 (March–April 1992): 58.

[11] Ibid., 59; and Marcus, *Mark*, 1:164–66. For a general discussion of the early church's connection of creation and Christ's coming, see Nils Dahl, *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 120–40.

[12] Allison, "Baptism" 58–60. The fragment was published in 1991.

[13] Ibid., 59.

[14] Trans. Allison, "Baptism," 59.

[15] Ibid., 60.

[16] Ibid.

Despite Allison's confident assertions, there is reason to question his claims and the Gen 1:2 position in general. While advocates of this position argue that the bird imagery common to Gen 1:2 (hovering), *b. Ḥag.* 15a (hovering dove), and 4Q521 (hovering) provides strong textual support for their interpretation of Mark 1:10, the problem is that the point of connection between these texts is the Spirit's "hovering" rather than its comparison to a dove. The association of the "hovering" Spirit with a dove is not attested until *b. Ḥag.* 15a, which was completed several centuries after Mark.[17] Furthermore, *b. Ḥag.* 15a seems to be the only canonical, deuterocanonical, or ancient rabbinic text that likens God's Spirit at creation to a dove.[18] In fact, three other rabbinic texts (*Gen. Rab.* 2:4; *y. Ḥag.* 77b; and *t. Ḥag.* 2.6), which cite the same tradition as *b. Ḥag.* 15a, indicate that the Spirit of God "hovered" at creation, but they fail to compare the Spirit's hovering to a dove.[19] The fact that *b. Ḥag.* 15a, 4Q521, and three additional rabbinic texts share the motif of hovering, but not the dove, suggests that hovering was the normative allusion to Gen 1:2 rather than the dove. This observation presents a problem for the Gen 1:2 position. If Mark intended to convey an unquestionable allusion to Gen 1:2, it seems that he would have had the Spirit "hover" over Jesus rather than employ the somewhat vague description of the Spirit's avian descent into him.[20]

An additional difficulty for Allison's case is that in 4Q521 the Spirit hovers over "the Poor" (i.e., the saints), rather than over the messiah, as a sign of eschato-

[17] The saying is attributed to Ben Zoma. Thus, even if the attribution is correct, the earliest possible date for this reference is the late first to early second century.

[18] Abrahams (*Studies*, 47–50) argues that *b. Ḥag.* 15a becomes more significant when it is read in conjunction with rabbinic passages that associate the *Bath-Qol* with the chirping of a bird, for example, *b. Ber*. 3a, "I heard a *Bath-Qol* moaning as a dove and saying: Woe to the children through whose iniquities I laid waste My Temple" (trans. Abrahams, *Studies*, 47). However, aside from the late dating of this text, Mark's Gospel does not say that the dove spoke or that the heavenly voice sounded like a dove's (Keck, "Spirit and the Dove," 52). The dove and the voice simply are not the same motif in the Gospel accounts. Further, as Morna Hooker notes, it is unlikely that the *Bath-Qol* was significant for Mark's understanding of the baptism. The *Bath-Qol* is an inferior voice, a substitute for the direct gift of God's Spirit, while the voice in Mark is the direct word of God (Morna Hooker, *The Gospel according to St Mark* [BNTC 2; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991; repr., London: A. & C. Black, 1995], 46-47). Similarly, the targum on Song 2:12 likens the voice of a turtledove to the voice of the Holy Spirit. The canonical text contains the line, "And the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land," and is interpreted as "the voice of the Holy Spirit of Salvation" (trans. Abrahams, *Studies*, 49; also cited by Hooker, *Mark*, 46). Keck rightly cites the passage unfavorably because of the targum's late date (seventh or eighth century C.E.) ("Spirit and the Dove," 52–53). Further, Keck's critique of *b. Ber.* 3a applies also to the targum. In Mark, the dovelike Holy Spirit does not speak, and the heavenly voice is not compared to that of a dove.

[19] Both *y. Ḥag.* 77b and *t. Ḥag.* 2.6 compare the Spirit to an eagle that "hovers over its young." *Genesis Rabbah* 2:4 simply indicates that the Spirit "hovered like a bird that flies and flaps with its wings" (trans. Deborah F. Middleton, "Whence the Feet?" *JJS* 36 [1985]: 70–71).

[20] Against Keck, who argues that the simile's depiction of the movement of the Spirit is what connects it to the rabbinic texts ("Spirit and the Dove," 63–67).

logical redemption, even though the messiah is present in the text. The fragment's failure to relate its bird imagery specifically to the messiah raises further doubt that it prefigures the Markan baptism scene.

The shortcomings of the Gen 1:2 position by no means exhaust all the difficulties surrounding the interpretation of Mark 1:10. Mark's choice to portray the Spirit as *descending* into or upon a figure also raises difficulties. Many times in the OT the Spirit of God "comes upon" individuals in various ways, and the idea that the future messiah would be endowed with the Spirit is attested as well.[21] Nowhere in the OT, or in any pre-Christian Jewish literature (including the Dead Sea Scrolls), however, does the Spirit autonomously "descend" into or upon anyone. Significantly, this observation holds true in the passages that are commonly thought to anticipate Jesus' reception of the Spirit at the baptism. Isaiah 11:2 LXX states that "the Spirit of the Lord shall rest on [ἀναπαύσεται ἐπί]" the future Davidic king. In Isa 42:1, God says of a servant figure, "I put [ἔδωκα] my Spirit upon [ἐπ᾽] him." Isaiah 61:1 indicates that the Spirit of the Lord "is upon [ἐπ᾽]" an anointed figure who, like Jesus, is to proclaim the good news. Additionally, two passages in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* refer to God's bestowal of a spirit upon a messianic priest. *Testament of Levi* 18:7 states that "the spirit of understanding and sanctification shall rest upon him," while *T. Jud.* 24:2 indicates that "the heavens will be opened upon him to pour out the Spirit."[22] In each of these texts, the Spirit either "rests upon," "is placed upon," or "is poured upon" the figure. None of the passages describes the autonomous descent of the Spirit, as Mark's Gospel does at the baptism.[23] Moreover, the preposition of choice in the Isaian passages is ἐπί, while Mark's Gospel uses εἰς.[24] The differences between these texts and Mark's baptism account suggest that Mark 1:10 is not wholly consistent with typical, Jewish messianic language.

Furthermore, to my knowledge, no ancient Jewish text depicts a "descent" of any heavenly being in the form of a bird. The OT tells of many descents—of angels, of the Lord, of the Spirit from the Lord (once, in Isa 63:14 LXX), and so on—but the idea that these figures should descend as birds is completely foreign to the OT and other pre-Markan Jewish literature.[25]

[21] For ways in which the Spirit of God comes upon people, see Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; and 1 Sam 10:6; 11:6; 19:20.

[22] Trans. Howard Clark Kee, "*Testaments of the Twelve Patriachs*," *OTP* 1:795, 801.

[23] Against James R. Edwards, who mentions that the passages from *Testament of Levi* and *Testament of Judah* clearly depict the "descent of the Spirit" ("The Baptism of Jesus according to the Gospel of Mark," *JETS* 34 [1991]: 44). Donald H. Juel also assesses these texts incorrectly, stating that the Spirit "descends" on the eschatological figure ("The Baptism of Jesus [Mark 1:9–11]," in *All Things New: Essays in Honor of Roy A. Harrisville* [ed. Arland J. Hultgren, Donald H. Juel, and Jack D. Kingsbury; *WW* Supplement Series 1; Saint Paul, MN: Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 1992], 122).

[24] See below for further discussion of the translation of εἰς αὐτόν.

[25] Ivor Buse has pointed out that the Spirit descends in Isa 63:14 LXX, three verses after the

This review of scholarship suggests that Mark, if he so desired, could have used language that would have evoked specific biblical themes. If the evangelist wanted to recall Gen 1:2, he could have had the Spirit "hover" over Jesus. If he wanted to link the baptism definitively to messianic passages from the LXX or intertestamental literature, he could have made the Spirit rest upon Jesus or be poured upon him. However, the evangelist permitted a construction to stand that does not conform to any single biblical antecedent. Perhaps this is because the motif is the result of an amalgamation of biblical allusions *or* perhaps the construction as it appears in Mark was drawn from a source outside of Jewish literature.

II. Gods as Birds: An Interpretation from Greek Mythology

Dennis MacDonald has recently argued for the intertextual relationship between Mark's Gospel and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (eighth to seventh centuries B.C.E.).[26] While it is questionable that Mark's Gospel, as a whole, has an intricate literary connection to the Homeric epics, MacDonald does offer strong support for the idea that Homeric motifs and figures of speech could easily have reached nascent Christian communities.[27] As MacDonald indicates, Homer's works were very influential in the ancient world. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were the rudiments of the ancient educational system. The poet's epics essentially taught children how to read and write.[28] Martin Hengel, likewise, observes, "literary instruction . . . was

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Holy Spirit is put "among" (ἐν) the people of Israel ("The Markan Account of the Baptism of Jesus and Isaiah LXIII," *JTS* 7 [1956]: 74–75). He notes further that the Hebrew text of Isa 63:11 has the singular pronoun, denoting that the Holy Spirit is put "in Moses." In the Hebrew, however, there is no descent of the Spirit in Isa 63:14. This text is provocative, but it does not answer the question of the bird simile.

[26] Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). MacDonald addresses the baptism in his Appendix 1. I discuss his interpretation below. Translations of Homer are my own, unless otherwise noted.

[27] Ibid., 1–8.

[28] Ibid., 4. The level of literacy in the ancient world, however, should not be overestimated. A majority of the population was served by "schools of letters," that is, institutions of low prestige that provided "utilitarian literacy" (i.e., enough "literacy" to function in whatever trade one was to be engaged) (Robert Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* [Transformations of the Classical Heritage 11; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988], 24). The ability to read and write extended passages of prose and poetry was attained only by those higher up on the socioeconomic ladder. Nevertheless, the most basic level of education was taught using names of Homeric heroes and gods as well as short lines from Homer's epics (Ronald F. Hock, "Homer in Greco-Roman Education," in *Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity* [ed. Dennis R. MacDonald; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001], 61–62). Jean Morgan has made the logical suggestion that these lists and lines of poetry

concentrated on one language, the Greek mother-tongue, and on one—it might almost be called the canonical—book, the epic work of Homer, especially the *Iliad*."[29] Around the same time as Hengel, Homeric scholar Moses Finley also wrote of the general popularity of Homer in the Hellenistic world, noting that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were as likely to be found on a Greek's "bookshelf" as anything from the rest of Greek literature.[30] Proof that Homeric thought remained commonplace in subsequent generations is evidenced also by later poets who used Homer as a prototype for epics of their own. Apollonius of Rhodes (third century B.C.E.) and Virgil (first century B.C.E.) wrote epics in the Homeric tradition (and both authors incorporated bird imagery into their epics; see below). The use of Homer in both the educational system and later epics suggests that Homer's impact on the first-century world was pervasive. This widespread influence makes it reasonable to think that Mark and other early followers of Jesus would have had a basic familiarity with Homeric stories and conventions, whether through formal education or by means of the general cultural milieu of the first century. Therefore, as we undertake a new search for the antecedent of the bird simile in Mark, it should not surprise the modern reader if the simile has a precursor in the Homeric tradition.[31]

The baptism of Jesus is, at its base, the descent of a heavenly power from the heavens to earth and the implantation of that power into an earthly figure. As noted above, Mark's description of a heavenly power's birdlike descent to earth is unparalleled in the biblical corpus (except in the Gospel parallels). As noted, however, this is not true of all pre-Markan literature. While the heavenly abode of God was an

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would have served also to introduce students to larger stories in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Teachers would certainly have told tales associated with the names of the gods and heroes (Jean Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* [Cambridge Classical Studies; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 77, 101–2).

[29] Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (trans. John Bowden; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 1:66. Hengel also notes that constant reading of Homer (in the East) kept alive the knowledge of Greek mythology (ibid., 1:67).

[30] Moses I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977), 21.

[31] The issue of familiarity with Homer is also a question of provenance. Mark's translation of Aramaic terms (e.g., 5:41; 15:34) suggests that Mark's audience included Greek speakers who did not know Aramaic. Furthermore, it seems that at least some in the audience were not Jewish (see Mark 7:3, where the evangelist has to explain Jewish purification customs). These observations support a provenance outside of Palestine. Most scholars prefer to locate the Gospel in Rome or Syria. A Syrian or Roman provenance (where Hellenism would have faced less opposition from a conservative Jewish culture) strengthens the possibility that Mark and his audience would have been comfortable with pagan cultural traditions. However, since first-century Palestine was hellenized to a significant extent, even a Palestinian provenance does not demand that Mark and the Gospel stories handed down to him were untouched by Hellenistic influences (Marcus, *Mark*, 1:70). For further discussion of Mark's provenance, see Marcus, *Mark*, 1:33–37.

enduring concept in the biblical tradition, Greeks too conceived of the heavens above as the home of the gods. Moreover, they believed that these gods commonly visited the earth below. Homer reflects these common beliefs in his epics through frequent accounts of gods' travels between the two realms. Interestingly, in these scenes in which gods travel to and from earth, Homer often uses bird similes to describe their arrivals and departures.[32]

On multiple occasions in the *Iliad*, Homer uses bird similes to describe the descents of gods from the heavenly realm to earth. In book 15, an Achaean soldier smites Hector, leaving him badly injured. Zeus responds to this event by sending his son, Apollo, to aid the Trojan leader. When Apollo makes his descent from Olympus, Homer writes that the god "went down from the hills of Ida [βῆ δὲ κατ᾽ Ἰδαίων ὀρέων], like [ἐοικώς] a swift, dove-slaying falcon, that is the fleetest of winged creatures" (15.237–38). Three books later, Homer uses a simile to depict Achilles' mother, Thetis, as she descends to earth. In this scene, Achilles is mourning the death of his cousin, Patroclus, who, while donning Achilles' armor, was killed by Hector. Because this event leaves Achilles without his battle garb, Thetis descends from the heavenly realm in order to bring new armor to the mighty warrior. After she leaves the shop of the god Hephaestus, the famed craftsman of armor for the gods, Homer writes, "like [ὥς] a falcon she leapt down [ἅλτο] from snow-capped Olympus, bearing the flashing armor from Hephaestus" (18.616–17). While Thetis's presence ultimately encourages Achilles to enter the war against the Trojans, for the time being, the Achaean continues to mourn the loss of his cousin. Because of his refusal to eat during his time of mourning, Zeus sends Athena down to provide Achilles with nectar and ambrosia. Upon his command, Athena, "like [ἠΰκυῖα] a bird of prey, long-winged and shrill-voiced, leapt down [κατεπτάλτο] from heaven through the air" (19.349–50). Her presence remains unnoticed by all. She secretly puts nectar into Achilles' breast and returns to Zeus's house undetected.

Homer uses bird similes also to describe departures of gods. In *Iliad* 13, Poseidon, disguised as Calchas, comes to the two Ajaxes to speak with them regarding the war against the Trojans. When Poseidon finishes his conversation with the two, Homer recounts that the god "took his departure in flight like [ὥς] a swift falcon" (13.62–65).[33] In the early stages of the *Odyssey*, Athena is twice compared to a bird as she ascends to Olympus. In book 1, Athena comes to earth and assumes the form of Odysseus's old friend, Mentes, in order to tell Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, that his father is still alive. When she finishes speaking to him, Homer writes that the goddess departs, "flying upward as [ὥς] a bird" (1.320). The next day, Telema-

[32] Carroll Moulton notes that arrivals and departures of gods are typical points in Homer's narrative for bird similes (*Similes in the Homeric Poems* [Hypomnemata 49; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977], 138).

[33] Trans. John Pollard, in idem, *Birds in Greek Life and Myth* (Aspects of Greek and Roman Life; London: Thames & Hudson, 1977), 158.

chus prays for Athena to return to him. Again the goddess comes (this time in the guise of Mentor) and again Homer compares her departure to a bird. When Athena leaves Telemachus on this occasion, she flies away "in the likeness [εἰδομένη] of a sea-eagle" (3.371–72).

The use of bird imagery in the mythological tradition was not limited to Homer. The motif was adopted by later authors who wrote epics of their own. Virgil's *Aeneid* is replete with heroes and gods and, like Homer, Virgil likens gods to birds when they descend and ascend to and from earth. Early in the epic, Apollo tells Aeneas that he is to go to the land of his ancestors. During his voyage, the hero and his crew land at Carthage. There Venus causes Aeneas and Dido, the queen of Carthage, to fall in love. Because this love affair jeopardizes the completion of Aeneas's god-ordained mission, Jupiter sends his son, Mercury, down from the heavens to remind Aeneas of his mission. Upon Jupiter's command:

> the god . . . first binds on his feet the golden shoes which carry him upborne on wings over seas or land, swift as the gale. . . . And now in flight [*volans*] he descries the peak and steep sides of toiling Atlas. . . . Here, poised on even wings, the Cyllenian first halted; hence with his whole frame he sped sheer down to the waves like a bird [*avi similes*], which round the shores, round the fish-haunted cliffs, flies low near to the waters. . . . So soon as with winged feet he reached the huts, he sees Aeneas founding towers and building new houses. (4.238–61)[34]

While this is the only time, to my knowledge, that Virgil specifically uses a bird simile to describe the descent of a god to a mortal, he does employ bird imagery in other divine–human encounters. Twice Virgil uses bird imagery to describe the goddess Iris as she ascends to the heavens. On both occasions Virgil remarks that Iris, "poised on wings [*alis*] rose into the sky, cleaving in flight her mighty bow beneath the clouds" (*Aen*. 5.657–58 and 9.14–15). Interestingly, the latter of the two accounts parallels Mark 1:10 in an additional manner. In *Aeneid* 9, Iris's bird-like departure is accompanied by a tearing of the heavens. As she flies away, Turnus yells after her, "Iris, glory of the sky, who has brought thee down to me, wafted upon the clouds to earth? Whence this sudden brightness of the air? I see the heavens part asunder [*discedere*], and the stars that roam in the firmament. I follow the mighty omen, whoso thou art callest to arms!" (9.18–22).[35]

[34] Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Virgil are by H. Rushton Fairclough in the LCL.

[35] Turnus takes the parting of the heavens to be an omen that verifies the words of the goddess. Thetis informs Turnus that the time had come for him to battle Aeneas. Because of this omen, Turnus obtains the courage to follow Iris's command. Cicero also attests that the rending of the heavens was an omen for the Romans. The rending of the heavens appears in a list of well-known omens that warned the Roman people of "mighty wars" and "deadly revolutions" (Cicero, *Div.* 1.43.97). Perhaps members of Mark's audience familiar with Roman traditions would have more readily identified the "rending of the heavens" in Mark 1:10 as an omen regarding Jesus' ministry than a prerequisite for divine communication.

In addition to divine–human encounters, authors of Greek myth also likened gods to birds when they traveled to meet other gods or simply traveled the earth. *Homeric Hymn* 2 (To Demeter) describes Demeter speeding over the earth "like [ὥστ᾽] a bird," searching for her daughter, Persephone, whom Pluto had taken captive (43). In *Odyssey* 5, Zeus sends Hermes down to the nymph Calypso to discuss the future of Odysseus. Homer writes that the messenger god, obeying his father's command, "lighted upon the sea, and then sped over the wave like [ἐοικώς] a seabird . . ." (5.50–51). Finally, in Apollonius's *Argonautica*, Hera tells Iris to go down to the sea in order to bring Thetis up to Olympus. Accordingly, Iris "sprang from Olympus and cleaved her way, stretching out her nimble wings" (4.769).

While bird imagery was a common way in Greek mythology to describe the general movement of the gods, the Markan baptism account most closely parallels the Homeric examples. Like Homer's epics, Mark's Gospel uses a bird simile to describe a heavenly entity's descent from the heavens to earth.[36] The connection is strengthened when it is observed that bird similes in Homer typically occur at the moment of a god's arrival or departure.[37] In the instances above, bird similes mark the arrivals of Apollo, Thetis, and Athena and the departures of Poseidon and Athena. Mark 1:10, then, parallels Homer not only in its use of a bird simile but also by using the simile to mark a heavenly arrival on earth. These similarities, in addition to the fact that the OT never uses a bird simile to describe a heavenly descent, invite the suggestion that Homeric traditions influenced the formation of the Markan baptism account.[38]

III. Making Meaning with Greek Mythology

In the introduction to this article, I noted recent scholars who have argued that certain Markan miracle stories contain motifs from both Greek and Jewish lit-

[36] In the Homeric parallels, the gods themselves descend and ascend to and from the earth, while in the Gospels it is the Spirit, the heavenly power of God, that descends.

[37] Moulton, *Similes*, 138.

[38] Some scholars submit that Mark's use of simile points to the world of apocalyptic symbolism, where earthly comparisons approximate heavenly realities. Ernst Lohmeyer (*Das Evangelium des Markus übersetzt und erklärt* [MeyerK; 15th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959], 23) also sees the dove as coming from apocalyptic roots. See also Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markus-Evangelium* (Wege der Forschung 411; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979), 91; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:331; and Marcus, *Mark*, 1:159. Pesch even argues that ὡς, as used in Mark 1:10, represents *the* specific apocalyptic particle used in comparisons that explain the heavenly unobservable through the observable. The image of the tearing of the heavens, the voice from the heavens, and the particle's use in Revelation and other apocalyptic texts (e.g., Ezekiel and Daniel) may invite the apocalyptic reading. However, the many examples put forth above suggest that Greek mythology is another tradition from which the simile in Mark's baptism account could have derived.

erary traditions. Such scholars take seriously the notion that elements from both traditions are present because the identity of Jesus was communicated by and to individuals from diverse backgrounds. Not all adherents to the Jesus movement would have had complete familiarity with traditional Jewish ways of thinking, nor would all its potential converts. While motifs of Jewish origin would have spoken meaningfully to those steeped in Jewish traditions, individuals who were familiar with Greek traditions would have come with their own symbolic universes as they created, passed on, and received stories about Jesus. Accordingly, the investigation now turns to explore ways in which early tellers and hearers of Gospel stories who were familiar with Homeric traditions may have construed the Spirit's descent as a dove in their attempt to understand Jesus' identity.

Mark's baptism scene depicts the Spirit descending from heaven to earth. Although this observation is painfully obvious, it establishes a setting that is necessary for a proper understanding of the account. Individuals who were familiar with Greek mythology would have known that the Homeric gods frequently came down from their heavenly abodes to visit the earth. Jean-Pierre Vernant notes that the gods typically assume one of three forms during these visits.[39] He groups in one category the instances in which the gods either remain hidden to all or appear undisguised to select individuals, while clustering in a second category the scenes in which gods disguise themselves as humans.[40] In the first category, the gods simply come "to" the mortal (i.e., they do not assume human form). As several of the examples above indicate, Homer sometimes introduces such visits with bird imagery (e.g., Apollo to Hector in *Il.* 15.237–45 and Thetis to Achilles in *Il.* 18.616–17). In these instances, the gods frequently bestow strength and/or encouragement upon the epic hero. Followers of Jesus whose minds turned to these examples would have conceived of Jesus attaining strength or encouragement for his public ministry. While this is one possible motif to which the simile in Mark may have pointed, Vernant's second category has stronger associations with Mark's Gospel. In the second category, gods take on the form of humans so that they may keep their divine identity concealed while they walk the earth and converse with mortals. Several examples of this type were also offered above. Poseidon assumes the form of Calchas when he speaks to the two Ajaxes (*Il.* 13.62–65) and Athena takes the form of Mentes and, later, Mentor, when she converses with Telemachus (*Il.* 1.320 and 3.371–72, respectively). Individuals who recalled these instances would have perceived Jesus as having a concealed divine identity. Certain grammatical and narrative clues in the baptismal pericope and in other Gospel stories would have directed individuals to think of Jesus in these terms. Among the elements pointing in this direction are the Spirit's descent εἰς αὐτόν, the proclamation of God in Mark 1:11, and the epiphany at the transfiguration.

[39] Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays* (ed. Froma I. Zeitlin; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 42.

[40] Ibid., 42–43.

The Spirit's descent εἰς αὐτόν has received much attention. Exegetes are divided over whether the Spirit would have been understood by the pericope's creators and audience to be descending "to," "into," or "upon" Jesus.[41] A. T. Robertson indicates that in the first century C.E., the preposition εἰς could represent any of the three alternatives, especially when used with a verb of motion.[42] Although the position that εἰς equals "to" is not held by many, Vincent Taylor argues in its favor on the basis that εἰς is generally rendered "to" when it follows a verb of motion.[43] While Taylor is right to make this observation, the problem with his argument is that whenever Mark uses εἰς with a verb of motion to indicate movement "to" something, the construction always takes an *impersonal object*.[44] Πρός is Mark's preposition of choice to designate movement toward a personal object.[45] Moreover, each time εἰς or πρός is used in the entire NT corpus with the verb καταβαίνω (which is used in Mark 1:10), this distinction is maintained. In no NT text is a personal object ever used with καταβαίνω + εἰς to denote movement "toward," nor is an impersonal object ever used with καταβαίνω + πρός.[46] Therefore, when Mark 1:10 says that the Spirit descends εἰς αὐτόν (αὐτόν = personal object), it is unlikely that the original author(s) and hearers would have understood εἰς αὐτόν to mean that the Spirit descends "to" Jesus.

Mark's uses of εἰς also suggest that he did not intend the Spirit to descend "upon" Jesus. Mark employs εἰς approximately 140 times in his Gospel and only

[41] For "to him," see Lohmeyer, *Markus*, 23; and Taylor, *Mark*, 160. For "upon him," see Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 62–63; Hooker, *Mark*, 43; Marcus, *Mark*, 1:160; and John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (SP 2; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 65. For "into him," see Ferdinand Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology: Their History in Early Christianity* (Lutterworth Library; New York: World, 1969), 293; Edwards, "Baptism of Jesus," 46; Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 48; and M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 43, 45.

[42] A. T. Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1914), 593.

[43] Taylor observes that this is the case, except when the verb governs the sense of the preposition, such as its use with εἰσέρχομαι (*Mark*, 160).

[44] E.g., 1:14; 2:11; 3:13, 20; 4:35; 6:31; 7:24; 8:22; 9:33; 13:14; etc.

[45] E.g., 1:5, 40, 45; 2:13; 3:8; 5:15; 6:51; 9:14; etc. The one exception is 6:45, πρὸς βηθσαϊδάν, where the preposition is used in apposition with εἰς τὸ πέραν. The change was likely for stylistic purposes. Some scholars have cited Nigel Turner's conclusion that the full meaning of εἰς cannot be insisted on in Mark because the instances of πρός in the Gospel are limited and εἰς has assumed some of the duties of πρός (e.g., Kingsbury, *Christology*, 62). However, Turner also notes in his discussion of εἰς, as we have confirmed, that πρός tends to be used with personal objects and εἰς with impersonal objects (Nigel Turner, *Syntax* [vol. 3 of James H. Moulton, A *Grammar of New Testament Greek*; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963], 256–57).

[46] Taylor points to the use of καταβαίνω + εἰς in John 2:12; Acts 7:15; 14:25; 16:8; 18:22; and 25:6 to support his argument (*Mark,* 160). In each of these cases, however, the subject of the verb goes to *a place*, not a person. Whenever καταβαίνω is used with πρός (Acts 10:21; 14:11; Rev 12:12), it receives a personal object.

twice out of these instances can εἰς indisputably mean "upon" in the spatial sense.[47] Moreover, in neither of these instances is the preposition used with a verb of motion. In 11:8, the crowds spread their cloaks "on" the ground before Jesus as he enters Jerusalem. In 13:3, Jesus sits "on" the Mount of Olives. Comparatively, virtually every time Mark uses εἰς with a verb of motion, as he does in 1:10, the preposition is translated as "to" or "into"—and the former has already been ruled out.[48] Thus, the syntax of Mark's Gospel suggests that Mark, at least, intended to convey that the Spirit descended "into Jesus."[49]

The probability that first-century Greek speakers would have conceived of the Spirit as descending "into" (or perhaps "upon") Jesus suggests that Vernant's second category—that of a god's assumption of human form—is a viable way in which those familiar with Greek mythology could have understood the Spirit's descent εἰς αὐτόν. The tendency to think of Jesus in such terms would have been aided by the commonality of the mythical idea that gods walk the earth in human form. An oft-cited passage from the *Odyssey* illustrates this idea. Upon Odysseus's return to his home in Ithaca, Antinoös, one of Penelope's suitors, strikes Odysseus, who is disguised as a beggar. This prompts another of Penelope's suitors to remark:

> A poor show, that—hitting this famished tramp—
> bad business, if he happened to be a god.
> You know they go in foreign guise, the gods do,
> looking like strangers, turning up
> in towns and settlements to keep an eye
> on manners, good or bad. (*Od.* 17.485–87)[50]

This excerpt is but one of the numerous times that Homer depicts gods walking about on earth in human form.[51] The passages of interest for this article are the

[47] In contrast, Mark commonly uses ἐπί to denote "upon" in the spatial sense, e.g., 4:26; 6:39; 7:30; 8:6; 10:16; etc. Further, Bart Ehrman notes that a majority of the Markan manuscripts likely changed εἰς to ἐπί in order to combat the Gnostic claim that a divine being entered "into" Jesus at his baptism (*The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 141).

[48] The two exceptions occur in idiomatic expressions: 5:34, "go in peace," and 10:17, "going out on a journey."

[49] Uses of ἐπί in the LXX also indicate Mark's intentions. As noted above, the LXX typically uses ἐπί to denote the Spirit's coming upon individuals: e.g., Judg 3:10; 11:29; 14:6, 19; 1 Sam 10:6; 11:6; Isa 11:2; 32:15; 42:1; 44:3; 61:1. Therefore, Mark's use of εἰς to denote the Spirit's interaction with Jesus suggests an intentional shift in meaning from the OT. Nonetheless, even if some first-century Greek speakers conceived of εἰς as "upon" (such a translation is grammatically possible), this understanding would still cohere with Vernant's second category of divine visitation. Given the technical grammatical possibilities of εἰς, we retain "upon" as a secondary translation option.

[50] Trans. Robert Fitzgerald, *Homer: The Odyssey* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1961), 338–39.

[51] E.g., *Il.* 20.81–82; *Od.* 7.20; 22.200–235; and others cited below.

ones that link a god disguised as a human with a description of that god's assumption of birdlike form or flight.[52]

In the previously discussed passage from book 13 of the *Iliad*, Poseidon comes to the two Ajaxes in the form of Calchas, the seer, in order to provide them with strength in their fight against the Trojans. Homer writes that Poseidon, after speaking with the two, "took his departure in flight like [ὥς] a swift falcon, which, rising from a huge precipitous cliff, sets out to pursue another bird across the plain" (13.62–65).[53]

Similarly, Athena's visits to Telemachus in *Odyssey* 1 and 3 (cited above) are also marked by a human disguise and a birdlike departure. In the first encounter, Athena assumes the likeness of Mentes in order to keep her true identity a secret. Because she assumes human form, she is able to speak freely with the unsuspecting Telemachus. When Athena ends her time with Telemachus, Homer writes, "So spoke bright-eyed Athena, and she departed, flying upward as [ὥς] a bird" (1.320). This same pattern is repeated in the goddess's subsequent visit with the son of Odysseus. In the second encounter, Athena assumes the guise of Mentor, spends time with Telemachus, and then departs "in the likeness of a sea-eagle" (3.371–72).[54]

[52] See Moulton, *Similes,* 135–39, for a discussion of whether Homer's bird similes imply an actual metamorphosis or simply the manner of flight. While certain passages do seem to indicate metamorphoses, a certain ambiguity in Homer's similes persists. A similar ambiguity exists in Mark. It is not clear whether the evangelist intends to describe the Spirit's form or manner of flight (cf. Keck, "Spirit and the Dove," 63-67). If Homer is any indication, the fact that Jesus "sees" the Spirit's descent as a dove does not mean that the simile is adjectival. Characters in Homer also sometimes "see" the gods' birdlike ascents and descents, but even in these instances it is possible that the characters are noting birdlike flight rather than form (see more on this below). Regardless of whether the simile in each work is adjectival or adverbial, the literary and thematic relationship between Homer and Mark remains.

[53] Trans. Pollard, *Birds*, 158.

[54] See also *Od.* 22.239–40, where Athena, after talking with Odysseus in the likeness of Mentor, watches him battle the suitors from a ceiling beam in the likeness of a swallow. MacDonald has suggested that Mark modeled his baptism account after Athena's visit to Telemachus in *Od.* 1.102–324 (*Homeric Epics*, 194–97). According to MacDonald, Mark's account parallels Homer's because both Telemachus and Jesus learn of their paternity by means of a flying messenger and because Homer uses ἀΐξασα (darting), which can suggest the flight of a bird, to describe Athena's descent. It does not appear that Mark has this specific scene in mind. MacDonald's model equates the Spirit with Athena and Jesus with Telemachus. This means that MacDonald would be proposing Vernant's first category of divine visitation, in which the deity simply comes to the mortal. As I have argued, however, Greek speakers were not likely to have understood the Spirit's descent εἰς αὐτόν in this way. Accordingly, the Spirit's descent into/upon Jesus has more affinities with Athena's assumption of the form of Mentes (for whom MacDonald does not even account) than with her visit "to" Telemachus. Because MacDonald equates Jesus with Telemachus, rather than with the goddess, he fails to make this connection. Additionally, MacDonald merely offers Athena's ἀΐξασα from heaven as the parallel to the Spirit's birdlike descent, but I have illustrated that Homer's bird similes provide a much stronger parallel. Thus, it is best to assume that

In these Homeric examples, a god's human disguise is connected to the god's departure as a bird, not the god's arrival as is the case for the Spirit in the Markan baptism. Nonetheless, the scene in Mark carries enough parallels to Homer to warrant the idea that Spirit's birdlike descent could have evoked, perhaps even intentionally, thoughts of descending Olympian gods in the minds of those who first produced and heard the story of Jesus' baptism.[55] Homer's mere juxtaposition of gods in human form with bird similes provides the necessary elements through which individuals familiar with Greek mythology could have associated the Spirit's descent into Jesus. As these individuals told and/or heard of the Spirit's avian arrival and apparent union with Jesus, they may well have envisioned an Olympian god's birdlike descent to earth and subsequent assumption of human form. The voice from the heavens in Mark 1:11 likely added to this suspicion. The voice says to Jesus, "You are my son, the beloved; in you I am well pleased." In Greek myth, Zeus was regarded as the father of the gods. To individuals familiar with the Greek pantheon, God addressing Jesus as "my son" would be associated with Zeus speaking to one of his sons, such as Apollo or Hermes.[56] God's proclamation would have hinted at Jesus' divine identity by relating to him as father to son.

Such a reading of the baptism is supported by the reappearance of the topos of gods in human form later in the Gospel. The transfiguration in Mark 9:2–8 has parallels with Greek mythology that also would have likely evoked thoughts of gods walking the earth in human form. In Greek myth, it is common for gods who meander about earth in human disguise to reveal themselves to selected individuals. A prominent example comes from the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. As a result of Demeter's anger over her daughter's abduction, the goddess goes to the towns of men disguised as an old woman. When she chooses to reveal her true identity, her transformation is described in terms reminiscent of Jesus' transfiguration: "the goddess changed her stature and her form, thrusting old age away from her: beauty spread round about her . . . and from the divine body of the goddess a light shone afar."[57] Like Demeter, Jesus reveals his divine nature by thrusting away his humble disguise in exchange for resplendent clothing. Previous scholars have argued that members of Mark's audience who were conversant with Greek myth would have

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the author(s) of Mark's baptism account did not base the pericope on *Od.* 1.102–324 (*pace* MacDonald), but simply incorporated a popular motif from the Homeric tradition.

[55] We should not expect the use of the motif in Mark to mirror Homer in every detail—nor does it need to in order for Homer to be the literary thought world from which the motif derives. A certain amount of intentional adaptation (and/or unintentional variation) is to be expected in instances of imitation.

[56] Adela Yarbro Collins, "Mark and His Readers: The Son of God among the Greeks and Romans," *HTR* 93 (2000): 86.

[57] *Homeric Hymn* 2 (To Demeter) 275–79; trans. Collins, "Son of God," 91. This parallel is cited also by Moss, "Transfiguration," 78.

recognized Jesus' transfiguration as an epiphany of a Greek god.[58] Further, Moss has argued persuasively that the similarities between Mark's account and Greek epiphanies are not accidental. It is likely that Mark intentionally modeled the transfiguration after a Greek epiphany in order to accommodate the members of his audience who were more familiar with Greek traditions than with Jewish ones.[59] Since the express point of a Greek epiphany is to reveal to the privileged characters, as well as to the story's readers and hearers, that the "human" is actually a god, Jesus' transformation before Peter, James, and John would have signaled to those in Mark's audience familiar with such epiphanies that Jesus too is a divine being walking the earth in human disguise.

When the proposals of Yarbro Collins and Moss are read in conjunction with the thesis of this article, a unifying motif in the baptism and transfiguration comes to light. Together the two scenes echo the common Greek mythological topos of gods walking about the earth disguised as humans. The bird epiphany calls to mind the arrival of a god upon the earth who subsequently takes up human form. The transfiguration, in accordance with the narrative fashion of Greek mythology, marks the point at which the god, after a period of secrecy, chooses to reveal his/her divine identity to a select few. In the Gospel, these scenes establish a narrative progression that would have made sense to readers and hearers of the Gospel who were familiar with Homeric traditions. The dual motif would have likely turned these individuals' minds to images of gods in human form, thereby compelling them to think of Jesus in similar terms.[60]

[58] Collins, "Son of God," 91; Moss, "Transfiguration," 77–83.

[59] Moss, "Transfiguration," 69–89.

[60] The presence of this motif in Mark's Gospel is supported by the fact that other Christian writings make use of this topos. It is commonly acknowledged that the Lukan account of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra (Acts 14:8–20) draws on Ovid's story of Baucis and Philemon (*Metam.* 8.612–725). In the Roman tale, Jupiter and Mercury visit the hill country of Phrygia, disguised as humans. The two gods remain undetected until they reveal themselves to the worthy Phrygian couple. Dean Philip Bechard and Amy Wordelman rightly suggest that these two features in Ovid (gods in human disguise and their subsequent revelation) are common motifs in Greek mythological traditions. In his adaptation of the Baucis and Philemon story, Luke, then, also appears to access these common Greek elements (so Wordelman). The naïve Lystrans deduce that Paul and Barnabas must be gods based on the healing Paul performs. Accordingly, the Lystrans proclaim of the missionaries, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of humans" (Acts 14:11). Although Luke refutes the Lystran belief, his mere use of such a motif lends support to my interpretation of Mark 1:10. For the idea that Acts 14:11 comes from the heart of Greek mythological tradition, see Amy L. Wordelman, "Cultural Divides and Dual Realities: A Greco-Roman Context for Acts 14," in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse* (ed. Todd C. Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele; SBLSymS 20; Boston: Brill, 2004), 205–32. For the opinion that Ovid himself draws upon long-standing Greek topoi, see Dean Philip Bechard, *Paul Outside the Walls: A Study of Luke's Socio-Geographical Universalism in Acts 14:8-20* (AnBib 143; Rome:

IV. Greek Myth and Markan Secrecy

Reading the baptism in the context of Greek mythology also adds a new dimension to the scene's role in the Markan secrecy motif. It is a well-known feature of the Gospel that the evangelist reveals Jesus' true identity to his readers while keeping it a secret within the narrative itself. Accordingly, Mark makes his audience privy to the Spirit's descent into Jesus, while, at the narrative level, he restricts the observation of this event to Jesus alone (indicated by the singular εἶδεν in 1:10). This textual clue would have preserved the messianic secret in an important way for those in the audience who were familiar with Homeric traditions. These readers and hearers would have been aware that a god's avian departure signifies to epic characters that the "human" conversing with them was actually a god in disguise.[61] Such epiphanies occur in several of the passages discussed above. Poseidon's birdlike departure from the two Ajaxes enables them to identify that it was not Calchas speaking with them but a god. Upon Poseidon's departure, Homer writes, "And of the twain swift Aias, son of Oileus, was first to mark the god, and forthwith, spake to Aias, son of Telamon: Aias, seeing it is one of the gods who hold Olympus that in the likeness of the seer biddeth the two of us fight beside the ships—not Calchus is he . . . for easily did I know the tokens behind him of feet and of legs as he went from us" (*Il.* 13.66–72 [trans. Murray, LCL]). There has been much debate surrounding Ajax's final phrase, "the tokens behind him of feet and legs," but it is most natural to assume that the comment refers to footprints left by a raptorial bird after takeoff or to Poseidon's birdlike gate.[62] Regardless, it is the god's assumption of bird form (or, at least, the Ajaxes' imagining that he became a bird) that makes him known.[63]

Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000), 293. Confusing impressive humans (typically because of their beauty) for gods occurs also in Hellenistic novels; see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP 5; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 248. For example, in Xenophon's *An Ephesian Tale*, the people of Rhodes believe the main protagonists, Habrocomes and Anthia, to be a visitation of gods. The pair receives worship and adoration from the Rhodians (1.12). In Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, some mistake Callirhoe for a goddess because of the belief that Aphrodite would manifest herself in the fields (1.14).

[61] Pollard observes, "The majority of transformations take place at the moment of a god's arrival or departure, when a bird's sudden appearance apparently convinces those present that a deity had been present all the time" (*Birds*, 155). Similarly Gerard Mussies comments, "On several occasions in Homer ordinary men or women who have been helpful in some way or other disappear in the end in the shape of a bird and thus give themselves away as gods" ("Identification and Self-Identification of Gods in Classical and Hellenistic Times," in *Knowledge of God in the Graeco-Roman World* [ed. Roelof van den Broek, Tjitze Baarda, and Jaap Mansfield; EPRO 112; Leiden/New York: Brill, 1988], 3).

[62] Pollard, *Birds*, 58.

[63] Ibid.

When Athena speaks with Telemachus in *Odyssey* 1, she disguises herself as Mentes. It is only her departure "like a bird" that enables him to recognize her true identity. When Athena flies away, in his mind Telemachus "observed her and marveled, for he suspected that she was a god" (1.323). Athena's second visit to the son of Odysseus follows a similar pattern. During this visit, Athena assumes the form of Mentor and converses freely with Telemachus on multiple occasions. However, not until the goddess departs "in the likeness of a sea-eagle" are Telemachus and one of Odysseus's old friends, Nestor, able to determine that she is a god (3.371–72). When they see Athena fly away, Nestor remarks, "Friend, I do not think you will be evil or cowardly if truly when you are young the gods look after you as your guides. For truly this is no other than one of those who has an abode on Olympus, but the daughter of Zeus" (3.375–78).

In each of these Homeric passages, a god's assumption of avian form or flight reveals the deity's true identity to those present. However, like Mark's audience, Homer's audience is already aware of the human character's divine identity. It is only the actors in the story who do not possess an omniscient viewpoint. At the story level, the actors learn the truth of the matter only through the god's birdlike flight. Consequently, Mark's readers who were familiar with this motif would have been aware that if other characters in the Gospel were privy to the Spirit's birdlike descent into Jesus, they too would have known his divine identity. However, because it is only Jesus and the Gospel's audience who see the Spirit descend as a dove, the secrecy motif remains intact.

V. Implications for Christology

The past twenty to thirty years have brought a decided movement away from *theios anēr* as the key to Markan christology. We heed the cautions of earlier scholars that neither *theios anēr* nor "son of God" was a fixed title used to denote a specific type of divine-human figure, and it is not my intention to suggest a Markan "divine man" christology.[64] I do intend, however, to object to the concomitant movement toward the notion that all imagery in scenes such as Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, including imagery that characterizes Jesus as "son of God," is to be found only in OT and Jewish backgrounds.[65] The move away from *theios anēr*

[64] For notable arguments against a fixed "divine man" figure, see Wülfing von Martitz, "υἱός," *TDNT* 8:339–40; David L. Tiede, *The Charismatic Figure as Miracle Worker* (SBLDS 1; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1972); and Carl Holladay, *Theios Anēr in Hellenistic-Judaism: A Critique of the Use of This Category in New Testament Christology* (SBLDS 40; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).

[65] Against Kingsbury, *Christology*; Barry Blackburn, *Theios Anēr and the Markan Miracle Traditions: A Critique of the Theios Anēr Concept as an Interpretative Background of the Miracle Traditions Used by Mark* (WUNT 2/40; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991); and Marcus, *Mark*, 1:164–

should not also insist on a turning away from the true cultural plurality in which the Gospel grew and was disseminated. Scholars who insist on this movement are returning to a pre-Hengelian dichotomy of cultural separation. This tendency must be resisted, and scholars must continue to allow for a conflation of backgrounds and cultural traditions in both the Gospel's production and its reception. Allusions such as the Spirit's avian descent at the baptism and Jesus' epiphany at the transfiguration, among other scenes and phrases throughout the Gospel, should be conceived of in the fullness of their Judeo-Greco-Roman culture.

Further, if such culturally plural allusions are present, it is then necessary for scholars to inquire about the possible resonances, christological or otherwise, that such imagery might have had in the minds of those who first produced and heard stories about Jesus. In terms of the thesis of this article, a look into the broader, non-Jewish Greco-Roman culture reveals that the image of Olympian gods in human form occurs in accounts of heroic figures such as miracle workers, wise men, and rulers. Perhaps the most well-known example of a miracle worker who receives divine attributions is Pythagoras (sixth century B.C.E.). In addition to Porphyry's preservation of a Nicomachean list of Pythagorean miracles (third century C.E.) in which Pythagoras reveals that he is the Olympian Apollo, Iamblichus (third to fourth century C.E.) accesses the topos of gods in human form in a list that recounts the ways in which Pythagoras was worshiped. He writes that some regarded Pythagoras as "one of the Olympian Gods, who, in order to benefit and correct the mortal life, appeared to men of those times in human form" (*Vit. Pyth.* 30).[66] Also in the third century, Philostratus writes that Pythagoras has certain knowledge of his divinity because Apollo had come to him acknowledging that he was "the god [i.e., Apollo] in person" (*Vit. Apoll.* 1.1).[67] Finally, Lucian of Samosota (second century C.E.), in a farcical description of Pythagoras's divinity, closely identifies Pythagoras with Apollo in human form—and does so by means of a bird. A cock, enlivened by Pythagoras's soul, says, "How my soul originally left Apollo, flew down to earth and entered a human body and what sin it was condemned to expiate in that way would make a long story" (*Gall.* 18).[68] Although Lucian's account is certainly satirical, his choice to access the topos demonstrates its popularity in the general culture.

Such attributions were not reserved solely for miracle workers such as Pythagoras. Rulers also, especially Roman emperors, were depicted as gods in human form. In his *Odes*, Horace interprets the purpose of the life of Augustus as

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67. For instance, Kingsbury writes,"if one probes the story of Mark itself, the indications are that 1:10 is part and parcel of the same OT and Jewish imagery that is so prominent throughout the whole section 1:1–13" (*Christology*, 64; cf. 37).

[66] Trans. Blackburn, *Theios Anēr*, 51.

[67] This text is cited by Blackburn, *Theios Anēr*, 46.

[68] Trans. Blackburn, *Theios Anēr*, 46.

an epiphany of Hermes or Apollo: "Whom of the gods shall the folk call to the needs of the falling empire? . . . To whom shall Jupiter assign the task of atoning for our guilt? Come thou at length, we pray thee, prophetic Apollo . . . or thou, winged son of benign Maia, if changing thy form, thou assumest on earth the guise of man, right ready to be called the avenger of Caesar" (*Carm.* 1.2.25–44 [trans. Bennett, LCL]).[69] In a similar way, Virgil describes Augustus's birth through the lens of Apollo's descent to earth to establish peace: "The last age of the Sibyl's poem is now come. . . . Now a new offspring is sent down from high heaven. Do thou, chaste Lucina, favour the birth of the child under whom the iron breed will first cease and a golden race arise throughout the world. Now shall thine own Apollo bear sway" (*Ecl.* 4.4–10).[70]

The characterization of great figures as Olympian gods in human form suggests that it would have been natural for followers of Jesus to think of their own Savior in similar categories. Exactly *how* the producers of the miracle stories, the Markan evangelist, and the Gospel's audience would have conceived of these potential parallels is beyond the scope of the present study. The intent here is simply to note that other figures around the time of Jesus who were proclaimed to be divine or semi-divine were also depicted as Olympian gods on earth. The topos was a part of the cultural landscape.

VI. Conclusion

The Spirit's "descent as a dove" suggests the presence of a Homeric literary motif in Mark's baptism account. Such an interpretation by no means intends to suppress the Jewish characteristics of the Markan baptism. The report certainly draws on images from the OT as well. The rending of the heavens and the echo of Ps 2:7 would have spoken to those who were well-versed in Jewish literary traditions. The existing "Jewish" interpretations of the Spirit's "descent as a dove," however, are lacking because most exegetes have focused too intently on the dove. By

[69] This text is cited by Charles H. Talbert, "The Myth of a Descending-Ascending Redeemer in Mediterranean Antiquity," *NTS* 22 (1976): 420.

[70] Trans. Talbert, "Myth," 420. In addition to these literary references, the material culture was permeated with associations of emperors with Olympian gods: for example, coins (Harold Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum,* vol. 1, *Augustus to Vitellius* [London: British Museum, 1923; repr., 1965], 103–4 [nos. 637–42], 209–11 [nos. 67–80], etc.); inscriptions (e.g., *IG* 1:1117, 1163, 1206, 1322; *CIG* add. 2903–4; etc., cited by Lilly Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* [Philological Monographs 1; Middletown, CT: American Philological Association, 1931], 270, 277; Victor Ehrenberg and A. H. M. Jones, *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus & Tiberius* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1949], 85, no. 117); and statues (e.g., the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias). On various ways emperors were conceived to be godlike, see Simon R. F. Price, "Gods and Emperors: The Greek Language of the Roman Imperial Cult," *JHS* 104 (1984): 79–95.

separating the Spirit's "descent as" from "the dove," I have allowed each element to be interpreted on its own terms. The dove alone may be an echo of the OT. It may have called to mind Noah's dove or Israel's comparison to a dove in Hosea and other texts. The Spirit's birdlike descent, however, finds no antecedent in Jewish literature. Passages from Homer show that the motif draws largely on Greek myth. Given that Greek mythology uses bird similes to signify the arrivals and departures of divine beings on the earth, Mark's simile, along with other mythological resonances in the Gospel, appears to echo the common mythological topos of gods in human form. Such resonances would have expanded the ways in which Jesus' identity could have been communicated and received in the culturally diverse world of the first century.