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A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF MARK'S USE OF THE *SHEMA*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Mark's use of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4–5), arguing that the Gospel writer utilized the *Shema* within his narrative to express an early high Christology. Building on the work of Joel Marcus and John Lee, the study argues that Mark develops six recurring themes (God's oneness, scribal opposition, accusation of blasphemy, God's kingdom, love, and Son of Man) across four key passages (Mark 2:1–12; 10:17–30; 12:28–37; 14:61–62) to subtly identify Jesus with the one God of Israel. The analysis argues against Marcus's 'quasi-divine agent' interpretation, contending that Mark's narrative ambiguity is better understood as a rhetorical strategy for advancing a controversial theological claim rather than deflecting accusations of blasphemy. This view is then tested by following the narrative trajectory in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark 2, the unanswered scribal question about forgiveness raises the possibility of Jesus' divinity; in Mark 10, Jesus raises the question of his goodness, then places himself in the role of God as the one to whom total covenantal devotion is owed; in Mark 12, the Shema citation in combination with Jesus' question about the Messiah in Psalm 110 reinforces that such devotion must be directed toward Jesus; and in Mark 14, Jesus' climactic self-revelation as the Son of Man confirms his divine identity. The study further strengthens its case through comparison with John's Gospel in interaction with Lori Baron. It is suggested that John read Mark's implicit Christology and made it explicit throughout his gospel, but particularly in John 10:22–39.

KEYWORDS: Mark, Shema, Christology, narrative, John

Introduction

Early Christians found themselves at an uncomfortable crossroads. On the one hand, many of them came from a Jewish background and continued to view themselves as proud inheritors of 'the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the temple service, and the promises' (Romans 9:4). On the other hand, their new faith in Jesus put them at odds with the majority of their Jewish neighbors who rejected Jesus as Messiah. These Christian communities often sought to live in continuity with their Jewish roots, yet at the same time they believed that God had done something new by acting climactically through Jesus. This tension of the old refracted through

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the new can be seen in particular by how the early church interpreted the Jewish sacred texts, what Christians today commonly call the Old Testament.

One example of how this challenge worked itself out was the way the first Christians read and interpreted the *Shema*, Israel's great declaration of their unique God (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). Although the term monotheism has been hotly debated, first-century Jews clearly believed in one supreme deity who is ontologically different from his creation. Christians continued to believe in the uniqueness of Israel's God, but they began making claims about Jesus that fellow Jews saw as impinging on God's absolute uniqueness. This situation was bound to lead to interpretive disagreements about their shared Scriptures, and the *Shema* was a key text in the debate between the church and the synagogue (Tan 2008: 181).

Of all the gospel writers, Mark uniquely focuses on the *Shema* as he relates his narrative. While all three synoptics quote Deuteronomy 6:5 'love the Lord your God' (Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27), Mark alone includes the preceding verse: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Mark 12:29; cf Deuteronomy 6:4). Furthermore, Mark includes two references to 'the one God' (*heis ho theos*) which likely allude to the *Shema*. In Mark 2:7 the scribes reply to Jesus' statement that the paralytic man's sins were forgiven with the question, 'Who can forgive sins except *the one God*?' Later, in Mark 10:17 Jesus is called 'good teacher' by a rich man, to which Jesus replies, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except *the one God*' (Mark 10:18). While these accounts are also included in Matthew and Luke, Luke alone uses the phrase 'the one God' (*heis ho theos*), and then only when discussing the rich man (Luke 18:19).

This article will argue that Mark's use of the *Shema* is intentional and that he quotes or alludes to Deuteronomy 6:4 in a series of contexts which build upon related themes. In so doing, Mark is subtly suggesting to the reader that Jesus is the One God of Israel who is confessed in the *Shema*. Ultimately, the narrative will make clear Jesus' identity as the one to whom total devotion must be given to enter the kingdom. This will occur during the climactic revelation of Jesus' divinity to the high priest and the Sanhedrin at his trial. This reading of Mark will be further strengthened through considerations of Mark's original audience and a comparison with John's similar yet more explicit argument for a divine Christology.

Recent Work on the *Shema* in Mark

The gospels' use of the *Shema* has been noted by scholarship (Jeremias 1978: 80–81; Gerhardsson 1996; Tan 2011), but two studies are especially noteworthy for the current project. The first is Joel Marcus, who observed the allusions to the *Shema* in Mark 2:7, 10:18, and 12:29 and sought to understand the reason for their inclusion (Marcus 1994: 196–211). He suggests that the first occurrence of this theme in Mark

2:7 lays out the reason for Mark's particular focus on the *Shema*: Mark is answering the Jewish charge of blasphemy. On this reading, Mark is responding to hostile Jews who believe that Christians are violating the 'one God' principle of the *Shema*, especially by praying to Jesus for forgiveness of sins. In response, it is argued that Mark denies such a claim by instead showing that Jesus was a human agent exercising prerogatives delegated to him by God.

Marcus observes that Mark's full citation of the *Shema* in Mark 12 comes right before Jesus' question concerning Psalm 110. He sees significance in the fact that in Psalm 110 the messianic figure 'my Lord' is different from and derives his authority from 'the Lord' (Marcus 1994: 201). Next, Marcus proposes that the 'Son of Man' reference in Mark 2:10 suggests a background in Daniel 7. He then argues that Daniel 7 presents a figure given authority from God which is then exercised upon earth, rather than in heaven (Marcus 1994: 201–205). Thus, Mark sees the authority of Jesus as derived from God, not something inherently possessed as God, and exercised on earth, rather than in heaven.

The problem with this argument, however, is that the forgiveness of sins is never a right delegated to anyone in the Old Testament or Second Temple texts (Johansson 2011: 351–374). To answer this, Marcus focuses on the angel in whom God's name dwells from Exodus 23 (Marcus 1994: 205–208). That angel, it is warned, will not pardon transgressions if the people rebel against him, a statement which may also imply the opposite: that it is possible he would pardon transgressions for those who follow him. Based on exegetical moves taken by later Jewish writers (notably *Exodus Rabbah* and *The Apocalypse of Abraham*) Marcus argues that this account in Exodus gives a valid example of a figure delegated the right to forgive sins. In sum, for Marcus Jesus is distinct from God, but is 'quasi-divine' (Marcus 1994: 200; cf Marcus 1989) in that he serves as God's agent on earth to enact God's will, specifically the forgiveness of sins.

A more recent work addressing Mark's use of the *Shema* is that of John Lee in his monograph, *A Christological Rereading of the Shema (Deut 6:4) in Mark's Gospel* (Lee 2020). Lee argues, contra Marcus, that Mark has intentionally crafted his narrative to emphasize the unique linkage between God and Jesus while at the same time highlighting their distinction. He concludes that 'language formerly highlighting God's uniqueness is now utilized with a particular interest in the status and significance of Jesus as one inseparably linked with and on par with that God' (Lee 2020: 254). At the same time, Lee argues that such a reading must 'be appreciated in the context of Mark's nuanced, complex, and even paradoxical portrayal of Jesus' relationship to God, which bind the ideas of Jesus' linkage with God and his distinction from that God inseparably with each other' (Lee 2020: 255).

This study is broadly in agreement with Lee's conclusions but will seek to build on his work in at least three ways. (1) Rather than beginning with Mark 12, as do Lee and Marcus, the current study will begin with Mark 2 and move chronologically through the gospel. This enables the reader to see the narrative develop as Mark intended. (2) The current study will take a thematic approach, demonstrating how six major themes (scribes, blasphemy, kingdom, love, Son of Man, oneness) are woven through four major passages (Mark 2:1–12; 10:17–30; 12:28–37; 14:61–62) to build a case for Jesus' unique identity. (3) Finally, the current study will propose a comparison with John that strengthens the case being made. Similar thematic developments in John will suggest that Mark's narrative was likely understood by his earliest readers to teach that Jesus is on par with the 'one God' of Israel, yet in a way that does not undermine the radical uniqueness of God.

Mark's Intended Audience

Correctly reading a text involves understanding the text's intended audience. This inevitably brings up historical considerations, since the assumptions a reader brings to a passage will impact how a reader reads that text. Recent attention in literary studies has been given to the concept of an 'ideal reader' whom the author had in mind when he wrote. One must never forget, however, that the ideal reader was a person who lived in history. For this reason, close attention will be paid to how Mark's original audience would have thought about Jesus so that we may better understand what Mark meant.

Early Christian Beliefs about Jesus

The biblical record depicts the first Christian communities at odds with the Jewish leaders immediately. These texts show the Christian claims concerning Jesus were rejected by Jewish communities throughout the Roman empire. What these communities truly believed, however, and the origin of Christianity itself has been a matter of debate among scholars. One such example is the attention paid to the question of early Christology, especially in the synoptics.

Although recent work has affirmed a divine Christology in the earliest gospel records (Gathercole 2006; Rowe 2006), not all have been convinced. As noted above, Marcus sees Jesus as 'quasi-divine' in his role as the Son of God, who is nevertheless distinct from Israel's God. He sees Mark pushing back against Jewish claims that Jesus' status threatens God's unique status by keeping the two distinct yet still giving Jesus a highly exalted status. He explains the unique ability of Jesus to forgive sins by tying the Son of Man in Daniel 7 with the angel of the Lord in Exodus 23 based on parallels he finds in later Jewish texts (Marcus 1994: 206–208). Daniel Kirk goes further and argues that the synoptics do not present a divine Jesus at all, instead

believing that the category of a highly exalted human agent is sufficient for the synoptists' view of Jesus (Kirk 2016). He does this by appealing to Old Testament figures, especially as understood through the lens of Second Temple texts and later rabbinic texts. These texts describe human agents performing actions which were seen as the unique domain of Yahweh, but which Yahweh would authorize others to perform (Kirk 2016: 44–176).

The problem with this methodology is that it prioritizes texts further removed both in time and thought from the communities of Mark. The New Testament clearly testifies to a divine Jesus, from some of the earliest texts written (Philippians 2:5–11; Colossians 1:15–20) to some of the latest (John, Revelation). The point is even admitted by Kirk: 'Divine and preexistence Christologies can be found in the New Testament, including John's Gospel, the Christ hymn of Colossians 1, and the opening salvo of Hebrews' (Kirk: 2016: 16). How then does Kirk reconcile these testimonies with his own view that the synoptics, Mark included, diverged from this early tradition? Kirk states: '…the assumption of a divine Christology in Paul should not be determinative for our reading of the Gospels, and the latter must be allowed, in the scholarly movement from particular data to general theories, to offer their unique claims about Jesus without being forced to fit into preconceptions that are created either by subsequent church history or by larger theories of Christological development' (Kirk 2016: 13).

Yet much of Kirk's work involves making comparison with other texts which are further removed from the early Christian community in time and thought. Marcus follows a similar path when he looks to later apocalyptic and rabbinic discussions to demonstrate possible lines of exegesis Mark might have followed in developing an understanding that Jesus was given the right to forgive sins by God (Marcus 1994). For both Marcus and Kirk, non-canonical Jewish texts are the lens through which the Old Testament is interpreted and become important for these authors' view of early Christian understandings about Jesus. A better path forward would be to acknowledge the strength that other New Testament documents should have in understanding the Christian community at the time which Mark wrote. Indeed, it is not only possible but likely that Mark wrote in and to communities that understood Jesus as God.

Furthermore, the Gospel of Mark itself opens with a composite Old Testament citation in which Mark applies to Jesus language that, in its original context, referred to God. In Mark 1:2–3, Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 are combined to describe a coming messenger who will prepare the way of the Lord (*Yahweh* in the Hebrew). In the Gospel account, these texts are applied to John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus (Mark 1:4–8). This exegetical move uses the Greek word for 'Lord' (*kyrios*) as a double entendre, where a passage that originally referred to Yahweh now refers to

Jesus. Marcus acknowledges that in this usage there is a 'an unprecedentedly close relationship between Jesus and God' (Marcus 2000: 147). Yet because of other texts in Mark that maintain a distinction between God and Jesus, he maintains that this should not be taken to mean that Jesus is Yahweh (Marcus 2000: 147–148). Lee suggests a better solution when he lays out passages that identify Jesus with Israel's God and passages that suggest a distinction (Lee 2020: 198–227). Lee concludes that Mark intentionally included this tension of (1) seeing Jesus as sharing in the identity of Israel's God while also (2) remaining distinct from him (Lee 2020: 227–253).

Mark's Reason for Utilizing the Shema

Marcus has argued that Mark alludes to the *Shema* to respond to Jewish hostility toward the Christian practice of looking to Jesus for forgiveness of sins (Marcus 1994: 198–201). According to Marcus, Mark responds by presenting Jesus as clearly different from God, yet functioning on God's behalf as the Son of God and thereby enjoying a 'participation in God's lordship' (Marcus 1989: 140). This results in an interpretation of Son of God that goes beyond a mere Davidic understanding, but includes a 'high, quasi-divine interpretation' (Marcus 1989: 141). Mark likely was writing in a context of heated debate between Jews and Christians over Jesus and his relationship to the *Shema*. As noted above, prominent early Christian communities made statements that treated Jesus as divine, and such behavior was likely to create problems with unconverted Jews.

If this is indeed the reason for Mark's inclusion of the *Shema* allusions, then careful attention should be given to the *way* in which Mark responded to these concerns. Mark's ambiguity in each of these three contexts is perhaps surprising if he was speaking into such a volatile situation. In the first two instances (Mark 2, 10), a question is asked that never receives a direct answer. In the first case, Jesus answers the scribes' question ('who can forgive sins except the one God?') with another question ('which is easier…'), and in the second Jesus asks a question ('Why do you call me good?') that is never directly answered, but instead is left for both the rich man and the reader to ponder. In the final instance (Mark 12), the dialogue between Jesus and the scribe ends with Jesus' cryptic statement: 'You are not far from the kingdom.'

All of this demonstrates Mark's tendency to use narrative ambiguity to move his plot forward, but his style is important for another reason. This lack of clarity is better used to propose a complex or controversial answer to a problem, rather than to clarify a misconception. Ambiguity is more useful for proposing something controversial than for deflecting accusations of blasphemy. A strong case for seeing Mark's use of the *Shema* to identify Jesus with God can thus be made based on (1) the lack of explicit clarity here, (2) the historical situation in which early Christian communities

understood Christ to be divine, and (3) Mark's own statements applying Old Testament 'Lord' language to Jesus.

Narrative Analysis of Mark's Use of the *Shema*

Following the shape of Mark's narrative will allow the reader to better understand how the author uses the *Shema* to develop his Christology. Rather than beginning with the final occurrence of the *Shema* and reading that interpretation back into earlier passages, this study will progress by following the cumulative case for Jesus' divinity as it builds in Mark's Gospel. This will be done by showing the unfolding story of Jesus in conflict with the religious elite and the question of entrance into the kingdom. These two themes begin separately, but are carefully woven together by the end when Jesus confronts the scribes, elders, and chief priests with his claim to be the Danielic Son of Man coming to receive the kingdom from the Power.

Within this narrative, several important themes recur across four key passages: Mark 2:1–12; 10:17–30; 12:28–37; 14:61–62. Although Mark 14 does not include an allusion to the *Shema*, it will be included in this study because it contains several of the themes that are prominent in the passages which allude to the *Shema*. These themes include the repeated confrontations between Jesus and the scribes (Mark 2, 12, 14), the accusation that Jesus is blaspheming (Mark 2 and 14), the title 'Son of Man' which appears first in the gospel in Mark 2 and for the last time in the gospel in Mark 14, the theme of love (Mark 10 and 12), and finally the three allusions to the one God of the *Shema* (Mark 2, 10, and 12). Each of these four passages will be examined in greater detail to demonstrate how these various pieces work together to reveal the identity of Jesus.

Table 1 – Comparison of Themes in Mark 2, 10, 12, and 14

Mark 2:1–12	**Mark 10:17–30**	**Mark 12:28–37**	**Mark 14:61–62**
One God	One God	One God	
Scribes		Scribes	Scribes
	Kingdom	Kingdom	Kingdom
Son of Man			Son of Man
Blasphemy			Blasphemy
	Love	Love	

The Son of Man and the Forgiveness of Sins: Mark 2:1–12

The pericope in Mark 2:1–12 is important for several reasons: (1) it is the first conflict story between Jesus and the 'the scribes,' who serve an important role in the Gospel as a whole; (2) it is the first use of the title 'Son of Man,' a phrase often recognized

to be of crucial importance for the Mark's Christology (Lee 2020: 156–162); and (3) it is the first of three instances where the *Shema* is alluded to in the gospel (cf Mark 10:17–30; 12:28–34). The combination of these three elements set this unit off as especially important for a proper understanding of Mark's narrative as it progresses.

A casual reading of this passage from the perspective of a modern Christian would easily detect an implicit claim to deity here. Jesus' opponents are upset that Jesus appropriates for himself an authority belonging to God alone when he proclaims this man's sins forgiven. Since Jesus does not deny this claim, his justification of his authority to forgive sins could be seen as an implicit claim of divinity. Some have questioned this logic, however, arguing instead that Jesus understood himself as an agent working on behalf of God rather than as being God himself (Kirk 2016: 272–286; Marcus 1994: 196–211).

To understand what Mark is doing in this chapter, it is important to observe how he interacts with two important themes already introduced earlier in the narrative. There the author mentions both Jesus' authority and the scribes in the same verse: 'And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes' (Mark 1:22). This simple statement initiates a tension that will build as Jesus continues to exercise authority in ways the scribes come to deem inappropriate. Jesus initially displays his authority in his teaching and in exorcisms, and although not explicitly stated this authority was likely understood to lie behind his healing ministry at the end of the chapter. At this point, however, Mark does not depict the scribes and Jesus as being in conflict. Although Jesus' authority is perceived by the crowd as superior to that of the scribes, there is no indication that the scribes react negatively to Jesus' teaching, his exorcisms, or his healings. Why then the change in Mark 2? The answer given by the scribes themselves is that they believe that Jesus has overstepped his authority by claiming a right that belongs only to God.

Two mutually reinforcing reasons may be put forward as to why the hostility which was likely brewing between the scribes and Jesus comes to a head here. The first is that Jesus offers this forgiveness without any recourse to the temple and sacrificial system that had been established by the law for just such an occasion. The other reason why this particular act earned the censure of the scribes was because there is no clear indication anywhere else in the OT of a God-appointed agent being given the right to forgive sins (Johansson 2011). Marcus and Kirk, as mentioned above, demur and argue that Jesus does not see himself as God, but rather as God's agent. The critical question, then, is whether Jesus can forgive sins because such a right has been delegated to him by God or because he possesses in and of himself the right to forgive sins as God.

Marcus focuses on the statement 'upon the earth' and the reference to 'Son of Man' as the keys to understanding this passage. He sees the Son of Man as a figure

who has delegated authority, not inherent authority. He also argues that 'authority on earth' contrasts with the 'authority in heaven' which should be seen as exercised by the Ancient of Days. Thus, for Mark, the title Son of Man points to the fact that Jesus has been granted the authority to forgive sins upon the earth by God, rather than that Jesus has a divine right to forgive sins as God (Marcus 1994: 201–205).

As noted above, the difficulty with this position is that forgiveness of sins is never a right delegated by God to his earthly agents. The closest that Marcus is able to come to such a delegated right is the angel in whom dwells God's name from Exodus 23. However, in order to attempt to connect these pieces Marcus must look to non-canonical Jewish writings such as *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the Talmud, and even then, inferences must be made (Marcus 1994: 205–207). That Marcus must go to such lengths to make his case subtly highlights the obvious: no clear OT example exists of God granting an agent to exercise the right to forgive sins on God's behalf. This is clearly the scribes' understanding, which is seemingly why Mark does not recount resistance from the scribes until this incident. For Jesus to teach with authority and even to cast out demons is one thing. For him to claim the right to do that which only God can do is quite another.

When we examine the details of the text itself, several things are worth noting. First, neither Mark nor the scribes give the reason why God alone can forgive sins. The logic is apparently clear enough to the scribes, Mark, and his readers. The simplest solutions are either (1) no figure has ever been delegated the right to forgive sins, or (2) sin is ultimately an offense against God himself (cf. Psalm 51:4), and therefore forgiveness of sins is uniquely the prerogative of the offended party. Second, whatever the logic might have been, Jesus at no point contradicts this line of thinking. His question to them, 'Which is easier…' does not provide an explanation that they will find satisfactory, but rather serves to heighten the stakes of his claim.

Mark thus introduces the theme of the oneness of God in his narrative by leaving the question of the scribes hanging in the air: 'Who can forgive sins except the one God?' The reader is left to puzzle over what exactly it means that Jesus is able to forgive sins, since no human has ever claimed this right before. The scribes' accusation is not refuted; if anything, it is accepted. Although this section of Mark does not definitively answer the question of Jesus' divinity, at the very least it raises the question while inclining the reader towards an affirmative answer. The scribes charge of blasphemy is also left unresolved. They never acknowledge Jesus' right after the miracle. The charge of blasphemy will be made later in the narrative at a very critical juncture.

The Rich Man and The Difficulty of Entering the Kingdom: Mark 10:17–30

Of the three units which allude to the *Shema*, the story of the rich man appears to provide the strongest counterevidence against the view that Mark is claiming Jesus is

the one God of Israel. Jesus' statement to the rich man—'Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God' (Mark 10:18)—certainly seems to imply a distinction between Jesus and God. If the trajectory laid out in Mark 2 is followed, however, the reader will note that Christological questions are once again being asked in a passage alluding to the *Shema*. Given Mark's penchant for moving the plot forward with questions, the reader will examine the narrative to see if there are any clues to the answer this question. In doing so, several lines of evidence will cast doubt on seeing Jesus' statement as a simple denial of having the status of God. Rather, this question invites the reader to consider Jesus' goodness and his relationship to God.

Surprisingly, even Marcus admits that there is more to Jesus' question than meets the eye, and that Jesus is inviting the rich man to consider who Jesus is, rather than to distance himself from God. Marcus observes:

> The passage as a whole, on the contrary, seems to be deliberately shaped to emphasize Jesus' benevolence, a quality often associated with goodness; in 10:21 Jesus looks at the man, loves him and graciously shows him the way to enter into the kingdom of God. Elsewhere in the gospel, too, Jesus' 'goodness' is assumed, for example in 3.4, where he asks his opponents whether it is permitted on the Sabbath 'to do good or to do evil… suggest[ing] that Jesus' subsequent act of healing is an example of doing good and thus, one would suppose, an indication of his goodness. And if, as seems incontrovertible, Mark believes that the demon in 1.24 is correct in acclaiming Jesus as 'the holy one of God', it is difficult to see how Mark could think that Jesus *was* holy but *not* good. (Marcus 1994: 209)

Marcus goes on to argue that Jesus is good because he serves as God's earthly representative, not because Jesus himself is the one God. Therefore '[Jesus'] goodness does not impugn on the radicalized form of the *Shema* that attributes goodness only to God, because his goodness *is* God's goodness' (Marcus 1994: 210). Marcus is right to recognize that Mark's narrative presents Jesus as being truly good, yet his solution for explaining this evidence in light Jesus' question can be improved.

This pericope stands out as the first instance where Jesus discusses the standard for entrance into the kingdom. Throughout the gospel of Mark, the kingdom of God has been an important focus (1:15, 4:11; 9:1, 47; 10:14–15). While the necessity of belief and repentance has been emphasized, it is not until here that the question of entrance into the kingdom is explicitly asked. Interestingly, Jesus' answer to the man's question focuses on the second half of the decalogue, which addresses ethical interpersonal behavior. By doing so, Jesus has skipped over the first half which addresses one's relationship to God, a point that would likely not be missed by careful readers. Jesus thus subtly invites the question of whether this man has in fact followed all

of the decalogue by loving God with all his heart, soul, and might. In other words, the reader is left wondering if the problem will be that the man does not love God. But as the story develops, the narrative takes another interesting turn. The statement that Jesus loved the man (Mark 10:21) has puzzled interpreters. The fact that 'love' (*agapao*) is used in the gospel of Mark only here and in the later citation of the *Shema* (Mark 12:30–33) is interesting since both 'one God' and 'love' are used in both texts.

Jesus' love for the man most naturally raises the question of the man's love for Jesus, rather than his love for God. Jesus' statement to this man that to enter the kingdom the man must be willing to sell everything to follow Jesus fits well as a call to love Jesus more than all his possessions. This aligns with the concept of love within the Ancient Near Eastern context of the *Shema*, where subjects were called upon to show love to their sovereign through loyalty and total dedication (Moran 1963). Although the English word 'love' focuses on the emotional aspect, the Ancient Near East emphasis would have been on the volitional side, while not ignoring the emotions. For Israel to love God with all their heart meant that they were to be completely dedicated to him. By doing this, they were accepting the yoke of the kingdom, that is, they were acknowledging that God was their sovereign and that they must be completely devoted to following him (McBride 1973).

In answering this man's question, Jesus has put himself in the place of God. Now Jesus is the one to whom total devotion must be shown in order to enter the kingdom. Jesus demands this man's full love. In Mark's Gospel, the distinction between Jesus and God becomes less clearly defined. Mark has shifted the traditional Jewish emphasis on loving God as a requirement for entering the kingdom, instead placing Jesus in the slot occupied by God himself.

The Greatest Commandment and the Son of David: Mark 12:28–37

The conflict between Jesus and the scribes began when Jesus claimed the right to forgive sins (Mark 2:1–12). This conflict will ultimately climax in his trial (Mark 14:53–65), but before then the religious elite pose a series of questions to Jesus (Mark 12:13–34) after which he asks them a question (Mark 12:35–37). The final section in this dialogue juxtaposes a quotation of the *Shema* and Psalm 110 in a text which once again highlights (1) questions about entrance into the kingdom and (2) the identity of Jesus, the Messiah.

After responding to several questions from the religious leaders, the final question that Jesus answers contains the longest discussion of the *Shema* in the gospels (Mark 12:28–34). Christ responds to a friendly scribe who asks him what the greatest command is by quoting the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4) followed by Levitical command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19:18). The opening of the *Shema*

which focuses on the oneness of God ('the Lord our God, the Lord is one') is included only in Mark's Gospel. This theme is again highlighted by the scribe's interpretive gloss in verse 32: 'You have correctly said that he is one, and there is no one else except him.' Further, the scribe recognizes that if these two commands are indeed central, the result would be a relativization of the sacrificial system. Finally, Jesus concludes the section by informing the scribe 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' What the scribe has said up until this point is necessary but insufficient for entering the kingdom.

This comment by Christ raises the question of what the scribe yet lacks. This scribe's understanding—that loving God and others was the core of which the rest of the law was an exposition—showed remarkable insight into the kingdom values Jesus had been seeking to inculcate. Yet Jesus' statement, 'not far,' implies there is still something missing. What else did Jesus expect of this man for him to be ready for the kingdom? A clue can be discovered by looking to the previous interaction between Jesus and the rich man that also alluded to the *Shema*. Their entrance to the kingdom is predicated on total devotion to Jesus himself. If this is what Mark has in mind, then the scribe had recognized the supreme need to love God exclusively, but he had yet to realize that this supreme loyalty needed to be directed to Jesus himself. Once again, this is a passage where the oneness of God is emphasized, and yet the text implicitly presents Jesus as functioning in the role of God as the one to whom devotion is owed.

This understanding will be strengthened by the following interaction in which Jesus asks a question designed to draw attention to the unique role as the Messiah (Mark 12:35–37). In many ways, Jesus' question about the identity of the Messiah answers the question left hanging in the previous section: 'What more does one need to enter the kingdom?' The answer to this question comes as Jesus points to the inadequate understanding of the Messiah held by the religious leaders. The Messiah is indeed a son of David, but based on Psalm 110, he must also be much more than that. When considered with the account from Mark 10, a passage which also raised the question of Jesus' identity and the entrance into the kingdom, a coherent answer begins to emerge. Those who would enter the kingdom must see Jesus as the Messiah – a Messiah who is the son of David, but also more than a son of David. This recognition of the Messiah's identity will lead to total devotion to him, a loving devotion that Deuteronomy requires for the one God is now being required by Jesus.

The Messiah Son of the Blessed One: Mark 14:61–62

The final passage investigated does not allude to the *Shema,* but it concludes multiple trajectories from themes which were present in passages that do allude to the *Shema*. Here the conflict between Jesus and the scribes that began in Mark 2 comes

to an explosive conclusion as Jesus reveals his identity once again—this time more clearly as 'the Son of Man'—and is again accused of blasphemy. Not only does this text include the themes of the scribes (cf Mark 14:53), blasphemy, and the identity of Jesus, but there is also further teaching on the theme of 'kingdom.' While the exact word 'kingdom' may not be used, the picture of the Danielic Son of Man coming on the clouds is closely associated with the kingdom, since in Daniel the Son of Man is given a 'dominion and glory and a kingdom.' (Daniel 7:14)

To understand Jesus' response, careful attention must be paid to the question of the high priest 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' Here Marcus argues that the appositive should be understood as restrictive rather than nonrestrictive (Marcus 1989: 125–126). Nonrestrictive apposition means that an appositive provides information that is extraneous and unnecessary for identifying the head noun. This apposition would be separated by a comma and would mean that 'Christ (i.e. Messiah)' and 'Son of the Blessed One (i.e. Son of God)' are synonymous. Restrictive apposition, on the other hand, means that the appositive is necessary for identifying the head noun. In this context this would mean that Jesus is not just any Messiah, since there were many different Messianic expectations, but rather that Jesus is the Messiah who claims to be the 'Son of God.' Marcus argues that Jesus is doing exactly this: presenting himself as more than a son of David, a son of Joseph, or a son of Aaron or Israel (Marcus 1989: 130–135). Instead, Jesus was presenting himself as something greater than all of these: a son of God himself. He furthers his case by pointing out that in the final confrontation between Jesus and this group just days earlier, Jesus had begun by asking whose son the Messiah was and pointing out that a merely Davidic Messiah was insufficient in light of Psalm 110 (Marcus 1989: 135–137).

If Marcus is correct in his analysis, then the high priest's question amounts to more than simply asking Jesus if he thinks himself to be the Messiah. Rather, he is specifically asking if Jesus is the Messiah, not merely as a son of David or son of Aaron, but as the Son of God. This would give important context for Jesus' answer to the high priest, especially his first two words: 'I am' (*ego eimi*). Now, *ego eimi* can be used as nothing more than a phrase of identification (e.g. Matthew 26:22), but it must also be recognized that there are contexts where an implication of deity is present (John 8:58) and others in which it is at least strongly suggested (John 18:5–6). Therefore, the question of context becomes crucial and should raise the question, 'Does this context suggest a claim for divinity or is it simply an expression of self-identification?' The question of chief priest should lean us toward seeing this as an exegetically loaded context, where the full use of *ego eimi* is particularly significant.

Jesus' claim to be the Son of Man coming in the clouds could also be seen as a claim to deity. Daniel 7 has the Son of Man being served (*palach*), a term that is used

nine times in Daniel, and in every other use it has God/gods as its object. Furthermore, the ability to ride on the clouds was often seen as a sign of deity in the ancient world. Finally, the chapter closes by saying that God himself will have the sovereignty, dominion, and kingdom and that all nations will serve him (*palach*). Thus, what is said of the Son of Man is later said of God himself.

The question of whether Jesus considered himself the Christ Son of the Blessed One, the use of *ego eimi* in this climactic scene, and the description of Jesus as the Son of Man coming in the clouds all lend credence to the reading that Jesus was revealing his divinity in this trial. Mark has dropped hints along the way, from the question of the scribes left hanging at the end of Mark 2:1–12, to the statement of Jesus that only God is good after Mark has already showed him doing good on the Sabbath, to the demand that love for Jesus in terms of total devotion is required of for entrance into the kingdom. Finally, Jesus' exegesis of Psalm 110 that the Messiah must be more than merely a son of David and his self-revelation at his trial leads to the conclusion that Mark presents Jesus as understanding himself to be divine, a truth hinted at but not fully revealed until Jesus' trial.

John's Reading of Mark

This study has argued that Mark uses ambiguity to raise the question of Jesus' relation to the one God of Israel. Mark then hints at the answer throughout the narrative, eventually giving a definitive answer in the climactic self-revelation of Jesus at his trial. This case could be further strengthened if it can be demonstrated that the earliest readers of Mark saw in his writing an implicit claim to deity. Although most investigations of Mark's readers involve studies in the other synoptics, Matthew and Luke, in this case such a study yields little. As noted above, Matthew and Luke usually move away from the theme of God's oneness in parallel accounts.

Some have suggested, however, that John and the synoptics may have had a relationship, particularly that John may have used Mark in some way. This is not a novel interpretation (Attridge 2021: 9–21), and it is one that has received increasing attention recently (e.g. Becker, Bond, and Williams 2021). Such views note that John appears to adopt and expand Markan themes in such a way that it is possible John used Mark as a source or at the very least was aware of Mark. Even if there was not a historical, literary relationship, the fact that two Gospel writers would wrestle through Jesus' relationship to the God in terms of the *Shema* is noteworthy. For that reason, John's use of the *Shema* will be briefly examined and then compared with Mark's use of the *Shema*.

John's Use of the Shema

John never directly quotes the *Shema*, and so one might ask in what sense it is possible to even discuss the *Shema* in John. This question is considered by Lori Baron (Baron 2010; 2022), whose work sees the *Shema* as a crucial text underlying the gospel of John as a whole. In fact, Baron goes so far as to say, 'What I propose is that the *Shema* is a central motif in the *Gospel of John*; that John makes *more* of it than do the synoptic authors who cite it' (Baron 2010: 54). Baron sets out to argue this case by highlighting the major themes of the *Shema* and showing how each of these major themes plays a role in John's work. For Baron, these themes include hearing, oneness, love, and kingdom (Baron 2010: 54). Although hearing is a theme that has not been considered in this study, it is significant that oneness, love, and kingdom have all shown up as important themes in these four Markan passages.

The first of these themes in John—that Jesus is one with the Father—goes beyond a mere empowerment by God. As Baron notes 'Jesus' oneness with the Father is not a product of his role as divine agent; instead, this unity is the pre-existent reality from which comparisons with other mediators are derived.' (Baron 2010: 56) Beyond this, Baron notes that love likewise becomes a major motif for John and that it appears to be related to the concept of love present in the *Shema*. Just as the Ancient Near Eastern background for love anchored the *Shema* in a covenantal context that implied obedience to a suzerain, so the command to love in John implies obedience to the words of Jesus (John 14:21; 15:12; Baron 2010: 57–58). Finally, the theme of kingdom is seen in that the *Shema* was recited as a way of accepting the yoke of the kingdom, as dictated by the rabbis (Baron 2010: 54). This brief sketch of Baron's proposal should highlight the similarity of themes between John and Mark. While this alone does not mean that John used Mark, the degree of overlap in these themes is compelling.

John, Mark, and the Shema

Baron herself examines the question of Mark, John, and the *Shema* (Baron 2018). Here she briefly reiterates Marcus's proposal regarding Mark's use of the *Shema* and her own work on the *Shema* in John. In her conclusion, she suggests that Mark and John serve as stages in the parting of the ways between Christians and Jews. Whereas Mark's explanation of Jesus' relationship to God is subtly suggested through narrative, John is much more explicit when he quotes Jesus as saying, 'I and the Father are one' (John 10:30). Baron then suggests that 'John's use of the Shema paved the way for later Gentile Christians to redeploy it, thereby contributing to the widening of the ways' (Baron 2018: 207).

While Baron focuses on the differences between John and Mark in their use of the *Shema*, there are remarkable similarities that should not be overlooked. For example,

of the six themes this study has identified as occurring in the context of *Shema* allusions/citations in Mark, Baron sees three of them as foundational for John's gospel. Further exploration of these themes in John will demonstrate that while the charge of blasphemy appears only once in John (10:33–35), the unit in which it appears emphasizes several of the studied *Shema*-related themes (John 10:22–39). This section of John's gospel contains a number of the themes that have been explored.

The first and perhaps most significant of these themes is the charge of God's oneness: 'I and my Father are one' (John 10:30). Furthermore, Baron's theme of hearing is also present in this context (John 10:27), where Jesus takes the divine role as shepherd of Israel whose sheep hear his voice (Baron 2018: 196–200). Although the vocabulary of 'kingdom' is absent, the concept is present when Jesus promises 'eternal life' to those who follow him (John 10:28). In John, the opposition of the scribes has been replaced more generally by the opposition of the Jews, but the overlap with Mark's use of the *Shema* in this section in particular is significant. Here, Jesus is accused of blasphemy by Jewish opponents because they believe that by his language he equates himself with God. In both John and Mark, this occurs in a context where Jesus claims to be the key to eschatological salvation. Such similarities suggest that John, if he did indeed read Mark, read him in a way that saw Mark's use of the *Shema* as an implicit claim to deity.

Conclusion

That Jesus performed actions which presented him as the God of Israel, that he spoke and prayed to God as Father, and that there was only one God would certainly have been a challenging set of beliefs to hold simultaneously. However, this was not a new problem, as Paul and John also held firmly to the belief in one God and yet a divine Jesus. Ultimately, this complex and seemingly contradictory set of beliefs would take the long path to Chalcedon, but even the earliest Christian thinkers had to wrestle through these issues. Paul's answer included a reworked *Shema* that included both Jesus and the Father, while still emphasizing the oneness of God (1 Corinthians 8:4–6). John held to the oneness of God by understanding Jesus and the Father to be one (John 10:30), possessing a unique ontological unity that explained how God could be one and yet be both Father and Son. Mark's answer is to present a narrative that quietly and subtly asserts both that God is one and that the one God who alone forgives sin, who alone does good, and who alone demands total devotion from his followers is both Jesus and the Father to whom Jesus prays. That later generations of Christians developed the doctrine of the Trinity as they wrestled through this material is not surprising, for looking back it becomes clear that their conclusions were simply the result of carefully reading the story of Jesus.

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