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# Baptism and Children in Mark's Vision of the Realm of God

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Amy Lindeman Allen

*Assistant Professor of New Testament  
Christian Theological Seminary  
Indianapolis, Indiana*

At first blush, Mark seems an odd text from which to engage a study of baptism. Mark's narrative focuses almost exclusively on the life and ministry of Jesus, stopping short of post-resurrection appearances, with no mention of Matthew's now infamous baptismal commission or baptisms in the name of Jesus recorded in Acts.<sup>1</sup> Even the later alternate endings appended to Mark's gospel account lack the command to and practice of baptism.<sup>2</sup> Nor does Mark show knowledge of any traditions about Jesus himself baptizing during his lifetime (contrast John 3:22-4:33). In Mark's whole narrative, only *one* baptism is described with any detail—John's baptism of Jesus. Nevertheless, this baptism is woven into the literary fabric of Mark's, serving not only as a framing event in the life of Jesus but also as a paradigmatic event with vocational relevance for the gospel's audience both in the first century and today.

By reading the baptism of Jesus as a paradigm for later Christian baptism, critics have discerned baptismal themes and imagery throughout Mark's gospel account. Robin Scroggs and Kent I. Goff highlight connections between the white garments of the transfiguration, young man in the garden, and young men at Jesus' tomb, with the white baptismal garment used in early Christian practice.<sup>3</sup> Maxwell E. Johnson highlights the themes of identity

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1. Mitzi J. Smith has argued powerfully that labeling Matt 28:18-20 the "Great Commission" is not only exegetically suspect but socially and ethically dangerous due to Euro-American and European white colonial abuses in the guise of Missions. Following Smith, I therefore consciously omit the adjective "great" and use with intention the term "infamous" when referencing this baptismal charge. See Mitzi J. Smith, "Knowing More than is Good for One': A Womanist Interrogation of the Matthean Great Commission," in *Teaching All Nations: Interrogating the Matthean Great Commission*, eds. Mitzi J. Smith and Jayachitra Lalitha (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014) 127-156.

2. In Mark 16:15-16 Jesus commissions his disciples to "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation," adding, "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned." I do not treat this further due to the minimal use of these later endings in mainline Christian traditions, associated with their later date and textual history. Nonetheless, it should be noted that even with this direct reference to baptism, Mark's Jesus neither exhorts his disciples to baptize nor attaches lack of baptism to certain condemnation. In this commission, baptism is decentered in favor of an emphasis on proclamation.

3. Robin Scroggs and Kent I. Goff, "Baptism in Mark: Dying and Rising with Christ," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92:4 (1973),

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and vocation in Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, connecting these with parallel emphases in the baptismal practices of Mark's implicit audience.<sup>4</sup> R. Alan Streett reads both John's baptism and the later Christian practices that emerge from it as rites of resistance, an analogy by which Mark's readers understand God's promise of liberation to be concretely lived out in the context of Roman imperialism.<sup>5</sup> In each case, a thematic cohesion allows a movement from the narrative moment in the story world of Mark to the broader ritual experience of baptism implicitly practiced already by Mark's first-century audience and in various ways by the generations to follow.

From a religious-theological perspective, these thematic readings of baptism in Mark's text open up a rich avenue for thinking about baptism as an embodied ritualization both indicative of and at the same time moving beyond its original storied context. Centered in the proclamation and building up of God's realm,

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4. Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 12-13.

5. R. Alan Streett, *Caesar and the Sacrament: Baptism-A Rite of Resistance*, (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 10.

Mark's gospel concomitantly tells the story of Jesus' ministry and empowers its audience, already or soon to be baptized, to carry the ongoing work of the gospel forward. This is the "good news of Jesus Christ" around which Mark's entire narrative revolves (Mark 1:1). However, Mitzi J. Smith argues that such kin\*dom work is only possible when both teaching and action work together as "an interplay, an intricate marriage of just practice and words."<sup>6</sup> If baptism is understood as a one-time action, something done *to* or *for* a person, as often is the case of colonial Missions or infant baptism without direct consent, such a rich interplay is impossible and worse, God's realm of justice and mercy is damaged rather than fortified. Instead, by reading the role of baptism in Mark's gospel account as an embodiment of vocational identity lived out *throughout* one's participation in the ministry of Christ, participation in baptism is both reintegrated into a life of faith and takes on a more dynamic character of ongoing consent, whether first performed in infancy or at a later understood age of reason.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, I argue that by reading baptism within the larger context of the realm of God in Mark the participation of children in the baptismal vocation is both strengthened and serves to clarify and strengthen the embodiment of that vocation for adults and children alike.

Such a reading approaches Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus as it is situated within the whole narrative in order to contextualize the ritual within the larger frame of *μετάνοια*, or realized change, embodied in the baptism John both practices and proclaims (Mark 1:4). Moreover, from a childist perspective, I argue that within the larger vocational frame of proclaiming and bringing about God's realm of justice, baptismal identity as it is developed in and from Mark's narrative, ought to be primarily characterized by the participation of children, whom Jesus names as the possessors of this realm (Mark 10:13-16). To this end, I employ a literary critical reading to identify the theme of baptismal vocation as it washes across Mark's narrative in relation to the gospel's larger mission, the proclamation of the good news of Jesus the Christ. This reading situates Mark's presentation of baptism as paradigmatic not only for a Christian ritual of initiation, but more broadly, for the initiand's participation within Mark's proclamation and practice of bringing about the good news of the realm, or kin\*dom, of God. This argument moves in three parts: first, establishing a connection between baptism and the realm of God in Mark's account; second, establishing children as proprietors of this realm; and finally, exploring the implications on a Markan baptismal theology.

6. Smith, 143.

7. By considering baptismal vocation as a theme implicit throughout Mark's narrative and not tied to any one particular moment, such a reading broadens the frame of baptismal vocation to consider the participation of all people, including infants and young children for whom there is limited historical evidence of baptism in the earliest church, in the life and ministry of a community centered in baptismal practice.

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### Baptism and the realm of God

Baptismal practice and the theological meaning that accompanies it have been the cause of more than one division in Christian churches across time; however, certain common elements remain: water, Spirit, and the trinitarian name of God.<sup>8</sup> All three of these elements can be found in Mark. The most obvious of these elements is the use of water, ideally by immersion in living waters.<sup>9</sup> The verb *βαπτίζω* means "to dip, immerse" with a particular emphasis on washing. Water as the medium of this immersion is implied by the location of John's baptisms at the Jordan river (1:5); however, if there is any doubt, John explains, "I have baptized you with water [*ὕδατι*]" (1:8) and Mark describes Jesus as "coming up out of the water [*τοῦ ὕδατος*]" (1:10). Second, and unique from the other baptisms John performs (1:4-5), Mark punctuates Jesus' baptism with the activity of the Spirit (1:10, 12). The Spirit's presence at Jesus' baptism seems to anticipate John's prophesy that the one coming after him "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (1:8). The use of the verb *βαπτίζω* here need not imply a water immersion, so much as an experience of being enwrapped in the Holy Spirit; however, tradition associates one with the other (Acts 2:1-4, 37-42; 8:12-17). Finally, all three persons of God represented in traditional Christian understanding of the Trinity, although not explicitly named as such, are present at Jesus' baptism: Jesus (as the "Son," 10:11), the voice of God as divine parent "from heaven" proclaiming Jesus as Son (1:11), and "the Spirit descending like a dove" (1:10).

By including these three elements, Mark's description of the baptism of Jesus not only recounts this as a baptism in the tradition of John—"a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4)—but *also* serves as a paradigmatic event for understanding the later Christian practice of initiatory baptism. The correlation between these three elements as has been discussed above point to a thematic connection with the *experience* of baptism. That is

8. See Robin M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012). Kindle edition: "both elements in Jesus' paradigmatic baptism (immersion in water and the descent of the Spirit)."; In relation to the final element of the triune name, it is worth noting that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and some practices within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) serve as notable exceptions to this practice, departing from this tri-fold baptism to baptize solely in the name of Jesus, pointing to Acts for Scriptural precedent; however, even for traditions that baptize in the name of Jesus, the commonality of the first two elements Jensen names remains.

9. Didache 7:1.

to say, water, Spirit, and the trinitarian name are not mandated by Mark as necessary elements of baptism; they emerge internally as common to the core experience of the rite. This distinction is significant because it points to the role of Mark's narrative in establishing a theology of common participation in a divine encounter rather than establishing rules and rubrics for a ceremonial act.

Such interaction with the divine, however, is not limited to the baptismal event. God speaks directly to Jesus at his baptism (1:11), but this connection continues throughout Mark's gospel account through Jesus' practice of prayer (1:35; 6:46; 14:32-39), highlighted by God's direct speech again at the transfiguration (9:2-7). Just as Jesus' relationship with God cannot be read outside of this larger context, so too, as Scroggs and Goff compellingly argue, Jesus' baptism and Mark's theology of baptism more generally are best understood within the gospel's narrative whole.<sup>10</sup> Consideration of the place of Jesus' baptism within Mark's narrative, following the narrator's definition of the gospel and immediately preceding Jesus' temptation and the start of Jesus' public ministry, a fourth element of the baptismal experience emerges: struggle.

This fourth element, implicit in Mark 10:38-40, is the act of Jesus' ministry, leading up to his suffering and death, characterized by active struggle.<sup>11</sup> While struggle characterizes conflicts of identity wrought by a missionary emphasis on baptism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and still continued in some parts of the world today, it is not a theme commonly associated with baptism in twenty-first century Euro-American churches, particularly in Christian dominant countries such as the United States in which baptism as an initiation of a member of a racially dominant group into a culturally similar or identical dominant religious group serves as an advantage. However, more than a generation prior to Constantine's legalization of Christianity, struggle, if not outright suffering, would have marked a common experience of Mark's audience, living with the threat of persecution. Nor, in such contexts of persecution, did the struggle abate once the baptism was complete; on the contrary, it was often magnified.

It is in this context that Jesus reframes his experience of baptism. Jesus' struggle begins immediately following his baptism, when then Spirit drives him out into the wilderness (1:12) and continues throughout his ministry, culminating on the cross (10:33-34). Moreover, although Jesus himself does not ever baptize in Mark's gospel account, he does use the language of baptism in order to describe his place in the realm of God and when he does so, it is connected with such struggle. When James and John ask if they can rule alongside him in God's realm, Jesus asks if they are able "to be baptized with the baptism that I am

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baptized with [τὸ βάπτισμα ὃ ἐγὼ βαπτίζομαι]?" (10:38). The verb βαπτίζομαι is in the present passive indicative, suggesting that Jesus is *being* baptized, not that simply that he *has been* nor that he *will be* baptized. Baptism thus understood is not an event contained within Jesus' past, but an ongoing experience begun with water, completed with Jesus' death and resurrection, and in the intermediary, characterized by his struggle to bring about the realm of God in his midst.

What holds Mark's concept of baptism together, then, is not a one-time experience—whether of forgiveness or initiation, but rather, an ongoing experience of immersion, not only in water, but also and more importantly, in the work of the gospel. Mark identifies the content of this gospel in Jesus' first proclamation following his baptism as the coming near of the realm of God: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'" (1:14-15). Moreover, it is concern about their place in this same realm that motivates James and John to begin the dialogue with Jesus, prompting his identification of baptism with the active struggle of bringing about God's reign (10:35-37). Thus, in order to understand the practice of baptism as it is presented in Mark's account, and those who participate in it, it is necessary to situate both baptism and the baptized within Mark's proclamation of the good news of the realm, or kin\*dom, of God.

### The baptized in the realm of God

In order to understand a political realm such as God's kin\*dom, one must understand its inhabitants. Although contemporary theologians might equate the population of this realm with the baptized, Mark is at the same time much more expansive and much more specific. Jesus proclaims to all who will listen, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near" (1:15). However, he is also quite specific about *to whom* God's realm belongs: the children.

Mark's gospel account describes Jesus healing, casting demons from, and occasionally interacting with children throughout the course of the narrative; however, perhaps the most quintessential encounter between Jesus and children in Mark's narrative occurs

10. Scroggs and Goff, 532-533.

11. The elements of struggle and suffering implicit in this exchange are commonly affirmed by New Testament scholarship, which sees in Jesus' response an allusion to martyrdom. See, for example, Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 494: "The first [teaching about discipleship] (vv. 38-39) makes the point that suffering is the characteristic of Jesus that calls for emulation, not his glorious greatness; it also probably alludes to the death of James and perhaps also to that of John."



in Mark 10:13-16 when Jesus welcomes children into his presence, declares that the kingdom of God belongs to *them*, and then lays his hands on them in blessing. This is the scene that, since the invention of the modern Sunday school, has dominated church wall art and children's pamphlets. It is typically depicted as a tender moment between Jesus and a group of children. Toward the middle of the twentieth century, this passage took on an added significance as a proof text for those who advocated for infant baptism.<sup>12</sup> Understanding baptism as one's entry into the kingdom of God, Joachim Jeremias cites this text, in which Jesus is quoted as saying, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (10:15) as evidence not only for but an imperative in favor of infant and child baptism. In contrast, Kurt Aland argues that this interpretation is a later gloss and that there is no evidence for infant baptism until the fourth-century CE.<sup>13</sup> Both Jeremias and Aland present plausible arguments for their understanding of this encounter, largely grounded in each scholar's religious-theological commitment prior to exegeting the text; however, they fail to ask the question of the *experience* of baptism for the infants involved.

Focusing instead on the experience of the infants and children in Mark 10:13-15, child-centered scholars such as James Francis and Judith Gundry aver direct baptismal connections and instead frame this passage as the culmination of Jesus' ministry with and for children.<sup>14</sup> For Gundry, "the miracles for children imply that children are those for whom the kingdom of God has drawn near...[and] 'Jesus' teaching in Mark 10:14, 'to such as these [little children] belongs the kingdom of God,' makes this implication explicit."<sup>15</sup> The realm of God not only belongs to children in a future sense, but through Jesus' teaching and healing, they are already receiving its benefits.<sup>16</sup>

The Markan Jesus does not stop at affirming the participa-

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tion of children in God's realm, but names them as its *possessors*.<sup>17</sup> Sharon Betsworth points out that children receive these benefits not only because of Jesus' generosity or their need but because they are *entitled* to them as the possessors of the realm of God itself.<sup>18</sup> Within the economy of the first-century household, I have previously argued that such possession of God's kingdom not only entitles children to its benefits, but also to "participate in defining the world around them, modeling...the ways in which to live and be in this new kingdom."<sup>19</sup> Children, as possessors of the realm of God, act as proprietors of the household of God. They not only model but define the way in which the rest of the family, participating alongside of them in both the struggle and the fruits of the building process, interact and experience the kin\*dom.

Across the four gospel accounts, only two groups are named in this relationship to the kin\*dom: little children and the poor.<sup>20</sup> In Mark's account, possession of the realm of God is reserved solely for children.<sup>21</sup> To immerse oneself in the work of gospel within this narrative world therefore requires a reorientation away from adult concerns to those of the little children. Mark illustrates this earlier in his account, describing Jesus as embracing a little child (9:36) and instructing his disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (9:37). Demonstrating a close connection between these two passages through an *inclusio* that frames Jesus' teachings on family, Betsworth notes that in both instances the value of children within the account is highlighted in "that children are not just of value to their families for what

12. Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. David Cairns (London: SCM Press, 1960) 54-55, (cf. 48-55); Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (London: SCM Press, 1950), 78 (cf. 71-80); David Wright, *Out, In, Our: Jesus' Blessing of the Children and Infant Baptism in Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies* eds. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 193; Judith Gundry, "Children in the Gospel of Mark, with Special Attention to Jesus' Blessing of the Children (Mark 10:13-16) and the Purpose of Mark," in Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 154.

13. Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1961); Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. David Cairns (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1960).

14. James Francis, "Children and Childhood in the New Testament," in *The Family in Theological Perspective*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 73; Gundry, 150-151.

15. Gundry, 151.

16. Children in Mark's account, parallel to adults, do not specifically receive baptism. For more on this, see Amy Lindeman Allen, "Theirs is the Kingdom": Children as Proprietors of the Kingdom of God in Luke 18:15-17," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World*, eds. Sharon Betsworth and Julie Faith Parker (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2019), 274-275.

17. For more on the significance of this role see Lindeman Allen, 273-276.

18. Sharon Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 68.

19. Lindeman Allen, 283.

20. For little children, see the synoptic parallels in Matt 19:14 and Luke 18:16. For the poor, see the beatitudes in Matt 5:3 and Luke 6:20.

21. On the possibility that children here represent paradigmatically a larger class of those who have been "marginalized and dominated" see Bonnie J. Miller McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 96.

they will be and will be able to provide; rather children in the present, as children, are models of discipleship.<sup>22</sup> The struggle of discipleship is thus embodied, not primarily in The Twelve, but rather, in the little children whom Jesus welcomes, teaches, and heals. In as much as this struggle characterizes baptism, then, the marginalized and dependent experiences of children in Mark's first-century world must inform any attempt at developing a Markan baptismal theology.

### Baptism as ongoing formation

In sum, the experience and significance of baptism can be read as embedded in the entire narrative of Mark's gospel account. Although Jesus himself never directly baptizes anyone, his own baptism and his ongoing experience of being baptized, inform Jesus' ministry as he confronts head-on the struggle for God's realm in Mark's dualistic view of the forces of evil and good in this world (cf. Mark 1:13). Within this struggle, surrounded (or 'immersed') by the power of God through the Holy Spirit (1:10; 13:11), Jesus remains confident in the ultimate advent of the realm of God. This realm, itself, however, is also characterized by struggle and dependency, which can serve as a fourth pillar for understanding baptism in its crossover between Mark's narrative world and contemporary experience.

Within the Markan narrative children stand at the head of the kin\*dom, defining the bounds and actions therein. Biologically, these children are still developing their full physical, emotional, and spiritual capacities. While Aland and Jeremias debate about whether such children can or should be baptized by adults, a childist reading turns the tables, placing the agency back in the hands of the children and asking what it means for adults, through baptism, to be brought into a realm overseen by children. In Mark's narrative, the place and role of children in God's realm, whether they engage in ritualized baptism sooner or later, is not up for debate. Rather, it is the *experience* of children in all their complexities that helps to define what it means to live into one's baptism in the present tense, engaging the interplay between word and practice highlighted by Smith.

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The realm of God in Mark is the property of children. It is a living and active space characterized by the life and ministry of Jesus, immersed by the presence of God through the Holy Spirit. By reading Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus within this larger context, what emerges is not only a ritualized encounter with vocational identity ("You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," Mark 1:11), nor a mere embodied act of resistance, though both of these do occur. But rather, at the core, immersion in the waters and the Spirit represents John's *μετάνοια*, or turning. Baptism into a realm overseen by children suggests an intentional turn from a way of life focused on the independence or political power that may characterize vocation or resistance alone and toward an experience of lifelong formation. Like children who are still growing, Jesus' invocation of baptism as a state of being rather than a static ritual, suggest an experience of continually being immersed into the identity God names, continually resisting the powers that would undermine claiming this identity as one's own, and yet never quite bringing this identity to completion. Baptism in Mark's gospel account, like the realm of God itself, is ongoing as we await the return of Christ.

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22. Betsworth, 67; see also Betsworth, 68-69.