
Mark's Jesus, Jonah, and Foreign Neighbors

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The Book of Jonah includes the tale of a sea voyage on the Mediterranean; the Gospel of Mark recounts three boat trips across the Sea of Galilee. There is reason to believe that the Markan evangelist intended his audience to understand some pointed parallels and distinctions between the journeys of Jonah and Jesus. A cluster of verbal parallels, the same words being used in the Greek of Mark 4 as in the Septuagint of Jonah 1, signal the audience to keep the Jonah story in mind when hearing the Jesus story. But it is the broader narrative parallels or contrasts in the two texts, that is, similar or opposite actions or events in each story, that give the audience—ancient or modern—a clearer understanding of what the Markan storyteller is hoping we will “get” with these biblical allusions.¹ Let's look first at the verbal parallels because they show us *how* the narrative of Mark cues the audience to think of Jesus' sea voyages in relation to that of Jonah.

Verbal parallels

Perhaps the two most frequently shared words in Jonah and Mark's sea voyage stories are the nouns boat or ship, *ploion*, and sea, *thalassa*. *Ploion* occurs four times in Jonah and eight times in Mark's sea voyage stories; *thalassa* occurs twelve times in Jonah and six times in Mark's sea voyage stories. It might seem that these two words are so common and so essential to any story that involves travel on a body of water that they are not persuasive evidence for the clarity of an allusion to Jonah in Mark. I admit that this is probably the case for *ploion*, which seems to be able to refer equally well to a cargo ship that can sail the Mediterranean Sea and a small fishing boat. However, as I observed years ago,² the Gospel of Mark seems to be the first text to apply the name Sea (*Thalassa*) of Galilee to what Luke clearly and consistently identifies for his audience as the Lake (*Limnē*) of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1; cf. 5:2; 8:22, 23, 33³),

1. This essay derives from my larger, scholarly work on the topic: Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Jonah, Jesus, Gentiles, and the Sea: Markan Narrative Intersections,” in *Reading the Gospel of Mark in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Geert Van Oyen (Leuven: Peters, 2019), 251-295.

2. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 76. See also Malbon, “The Jesus of Mark and the Sea of Galilee,” *JBL* 103 (1984) 367-377, especially 363-364.

3. Matthew and John, like Mark, consistently use the term

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an inland and freshwater lake. In my research on narrative space in Mark, I suggested that Mark insistently used the term *thalassa* to allude to scriptural texts such as Genesis 1, Psalm 107, and Job 38.⁴ What I would add now is that the Book of Jonah seems at least as likely an allusive target.

But more impressive as allusions are four verbs from Jonah 1:5-16 that cluster together in Mark 4:38-41: sleep (*katheudō*), perish (*apollumi*), subside (*kopazō*), and fear (*phobeō*). This cluster of parallel verbs connects Jonah's first journey, his failed attempt to sail to Tarshish, in the opposite direction of Gentile Nineveh to which he was sent, with Jesus' first sea voyage, in which he successfully travels across the Sea of Galilee to the dominantly Gentile country of the Gerasenes, where he casts a Legion of demons out of a possessed man into a herd of pigs. Both Jonah (1:5) and

thalassa.

4. Malbon, *Narrative Space*, 77; Malbon, “Sea of Galilee,” 375-376.

Jesus (Mark 4:38) begin their voyage by sleeping. It is unusual, of course, for someone to be sleeping on a ship or boat in a storm, so this unsuspected action calls attention to the main characters. The interpretive value is different in the two cases, however. Jonah seems to be trying to ignore the situation as part of his attempt to run away from God's command. Jesus seems trusting of God's care and mercy in all circumstances. By calling attention to Jesus sleeping, Mark makes a link to Jonah sleeping, but as a dissimile⁵ rather than a simile. Jesus is like Jonah (simile) in sleeping in a boat on the sea in a storm but unlike Jonah (dissimile) in his reason for sleeping in such a circumstance.

Following immediately after this allusive reference to sleeping is an allusion to perishing, in the form of a plea *not* to perish. At Mark 4:38, the disciples awaken Jesus and say to him, "Teacher, does it not matter to you that we are perishing?" (my translation of Mark throughout). At Jonah 1:6, the captain awakens Jonah and says to him, "Why are you snoring? Get up, invoke your god in order that the god might deliver us and we not perish" (NETS throughout). This second allusive verb, "perish," occurs just once in Mark's three sea voyage stories but four times in Jonah. In terms of how the verb functions in the story, it is the first use of "perish" in Jonah, 1:6, that is paralleled in Mark 4:38: the one who wakes up the prophet asks that he do something in order that all those on board not perish. That is the simile. The dissimile is seen in what the prophet does to calm the storm: request that he be thrown overboard into the sea or command the sea to be still.

This progression of uses of "perish" in Jonah underlies the theme of God's mercy for all, despite the reluctant prophet's unwillingness to proclaim such a message. Both the captain and the sailors ask that they not perish (1:6, 14), and they do not. The Ninevites, stirred by Jonah's half-hearted proclamation, repent that they may not perish (3:9), and they do not. But the gourd vine that the Lord ordered to shade Jonah does perish (4:10), disturbing Jonah more than the perishing of all the Ninevites would have! Thus, the author of Jonah gives God the last word and has God contrast God's universal mercy with Jonah's attitude of self-centeredness and exclusivity. In Mark, Jesus, acting as God's delegate, not only saves the disciples from perishing on the sea twice but also continually extends God's mercy even to Gentiles across the sea in healing and feeding. Ironically, it is the sailors who show mercy—to Jonah: they "exerted themselves to return to land" (1:13) to try to avoid having to throw Jonah overboard as he has advised them (1:12).

When the sailors seek this advice from Jonah, and when he gives it, they both use the verb "subside" (*kopazō*). The goal is that the "sea" will "subside" from them (1:11-12). Interestingly enough, when this advice is followed and succeeds, the verb "subside" is not used by the narrator in Jonah; at 1:15 it is said that "the sea ceased (*estē*) from its tumult." However, at Mark 4:39, as well as 6:51, the narrator does use the verb "subside." Thus, the Markan

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narrator uses vocabulary that, in Jonah, is used by characters within the narrative but not by the narrator.

The fourth and final allusive verb in this cluster is fear (*phobeō*). It seems also to be the most important of the seven overlapping words between Mark 4:38-41 and Jonah 1. It is the third of three uses of "fear" in Jonah, 1:16, that is parallel to Mark's story in 4:41. The disciples with Jesus in the boat "feared with a great fear" just as the passengers on the ship with Jonah "feared the Lord in great fear, and they sacrificed a sacrifice to the Lord and vowed vows." As mentioned above, there is a significant progression in the fear of Jonah's fellow shipmates. It is not unreasonable to assume that the author of Mark had this entire pattern of fearing, and fearing with great fear, in mind in using this distinctive phrase in 4:41.

Grammatically, "feared with a great fear" is a manifestation of the cognate accusative. In this figure of speech, used in both Hebrew and Greek, a root word is used in two forms, like "feared" and "fear." Jonah includes six cognate accusatives (or datives): four referring to the sailors, two noting that they "feared with (a) great fear" (1:10, cf. 16), and two referring to their responses after the third expression of their fear, their fear of the Lord: "they sacrificed a sacrifice to the Lord and vowed vows" (1:16); plus two occurrences referring to Jonah, first as "grieved with great grief" (4:1) as Nineveh is spared by God and then as "happy with great happiness" (4:6) as God provides a gourd vine to shade Jonah. This etymological figure of speech is used for intensification, and throughout Jonah and in the first sea voyage in Mark, it is used to intensify emotions of characters: fear, grief, happiness, but especially fear. The Book of Jonah contrasts the characters by intensifying their emotions: the sailors move from fear of the storm, to fear of Jonah's actions, to fear of the Lord, and from there to

5. Kelli S. O'Brien, *The Use of Scripture in the Markan Passion Narrative* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 53.

sacrificing a sacrifice and vowing vows to the Lord. But Jonah's movement from great grief to great happiness seems as temporary as the gourd vine itself. The emphatic recurrence of this intensive form in Jonah increases the likelihood that Mark is alluding to Jonah in describing—and characterizing—the disciples as “fearing with a great fear.”

Although narrative parallels to Jonah occur throughout all three Markan sea voyage stories, it makes sense that clear verbal parallels, or allusions, to Jonah are clustered in the first story, 4:35–41: boat, sea, sleep, perish, subside, fear. This situation cues the audience at Jesus' first sea crossing in Mark to think about Jonah's first journey, by sea. And, once the audience is thinking about Jonah's journeys when hearing about the journeys of Jesus, the audience can more fully appreciate the importance of narrative parallels and contrasts.

Narrative parallels and contrasts

There is a fundamental narrative parallel between the Jonah story of two journeys (the first a sea voyage away from the Gentiles to whom he was sent, which functions as a detour before the second and successful journey, presumably overland) and the Markan stories of Jesus' three sea voyages across the sea to Gentiles (with the second one detoured). As Kelli O'Brien points out, the English “word *allusion* comes from the Latin word *ludere*, meaning to play with, to imitate, and *alludere*, to play with, to make playful or mocking reference to.”⁶ The Gospel of Mark does seem to engage in such playful, even mocking, reference to Jonah as it narrates Jesus' voyages on and around the Sea of Galilee.

Jonah's sea voyage fails on two counts: it fails in carrying out God's purpose—for Jonah to go to the foreign peoples of Nineveh and warn them to repent, and it fails in carrying out Jonah's purpose—to flee to Tarshish, presumably as far away from Nineveh as he could travel. Jonah's first journey, an unsuccessful sea voyage detoured by way of the belly of the sea monster, is elaborated, but the second journey is only implied, although Jonah's time in Nineveh is described. Mark, on the other hand, develops three sea voyages and an elaborate overland detour of the second one. The second sea voyage, the voyage of the disciples, fails when the disciples, having been joined by Jesus who walked to them on the sea, come to land at Gennesaret, on the western side of the sea from which they began. As God gives the reluctant prophet Jonah a second chance by sending him again to Nineveh (3:1–3), presumably by land, and giving him specific teaching afterwards (4:6–11), so Jesus, the willing prophet, gives the disciples a second chance, but by leading them on an overland route through other Gentile territories, teaching them all along the way, and arriving with them at Bethsaida, on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, at 8:22.

Because the sea voyage makes up a larger portion of Jonah than the three sea voyages do of Mark, it is not surprising that the Jonah sea voyage is more elaborated. For example, the extended

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conversation between Jonah and his fellow passengers in 1:8–12 has no Markan parallels. In Jonah, the passengers are sailors; in Mark, they are disciples. Both the sailors and the disciples express fear, but, as we noted above, the object of the fear of the passengers in the Jonah story shows a significant development: from fear of the storm (1:5), to fear of Jonah's action of avoiding the command of his God (1:10), to fear of the Lord (1:16). In fact, the sailors in Jonah consistently—and ironically—show more pious and obedient behavior than Jonah! The same cannot be said of the Markan boat passengers, the disciples.

In addition, there are events in Jonah with no Markan narrative parallel because the overall plot, and especially the action of its central human character, the prophet Jonah, is quite different from the plot of the three Markan sea voyages. In Jonah 2:1 in the Septuagint (1:17 in most translations), God shows mercy to the reluctant prophet by “ordering” a sea monster to swallow Jonah—and thus protect him from drowning. In 3:1–2, God sends Jonah to Nineveh a second time, since he failed in his first mission. Finally, the Book of Jonah closes with the prophet's negative response to God's merciful action toward Gentile foreigners, that is, the Ninevites (4:1–5), and God's corrective encounter with the prophet (4:6–11), in which God communicates with Jonah by ordering first a gourd to grow to provide shade for Jonah and then a worm to destroy the gourd vine and finally a scorching wind. Mark's Jesus could be called a prophet (see 6:4), but he is not a reluctant prophet, needs no second sending, does not respond negatively to God's mercy toward Gentiles (in fact, he extends it), and thus needs no corrective encounter with God.

There are also four places where the Markan sea voyage stories manifest narrative occurrences that have no parallels in Jonah. Three times in the Markan sea voyage stories (6:50; 8:15; 8:17–21), Jesus speaks to his fellow passengers, his disciples, without a parallel speech in Jonah. Jonah tends to speak when spoken to; the Markan Jesus speaks frequently, and his words are often central to the passage. In Mark's second sea voyage story, Jesus says to the disciples, “Have courage. It is I. Do not be afraid” (6:50). The two other speeches of Jesus without a parallel speech in Jonah occur at the beginning and end of Mark's third sea voyage, which includes more talk than action. At 8:15, Jesus says, “Watch out—beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” At 8:17–21, Jesus questions the disciples (“Do you not yet perceive or understand?”) and then goes over what I call the “arithmetic

6. O'Brien, *Use of Scripture*, 27.

lesson" ("How many baskets full of pieces?" "Twelve." "Seven."). It is important to the overall arrangement of Mark's narrative that these words of Jesus to the disciples are presented on the sea, and the third sea voyage seems to have been created for the purpose of showcasing them there.

The fourth Markan narrative event with no parallel in Jonah is the successful mission at an unplanned destination, 6:54-7:23. Although Jesus had sent his disciples on ahead of him on the sea to Bethsaida at 6:45, because of the storm on the sea they land instead back on their home coast at Gennesaret at 6:53, which, of course, *is* narratively parallel to Jonah's arrival back at his starting place, having been spit out there by the sea monster (2:11, LXX; 2:10 in most translations). Once at Gennesaret, Jesus heals the many sick who are brought to him (6:53-56). Then, in 7:1-23, Jesus has a three-part discussion about the tradition of the elders—first with the Pharisees and scribes, then with the disciples and crowd, then with the disciples in the house. This is part of what I labeled, some years ago, the Markan "detour."⁷

After the disciples fail to go ahead of Jesus to the Gentile territory of Bethsaida, Jesus, as it were, takes the disciples by the hand and leads them on the detour their failed sea crossing initiates. Jesus reiterates in action and teaching his conviction (unlike Jonah) that the mercy of God extends to Gentiles. After the discussion of the tradition of the elders, which ends with the statement that "evil things come from within" and *they* are what "defile a person" (7:23), Jesus travels to Tyre and Sidon and heals a Syrophenician (that is, a Greek, Gentile) woman. Then, by an overland route expressed in a complicated way (7:31), Jesus leads his disciples to the Decapolis, the region of ten Greek (that is, Gentile) cities, where he heals a man who was deaf and mute. Still on the east, Gentile, side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus feeds 4,000 Gentiles (8:1-9), as he had earlier fed 5,000 Jews on the west side of the Sea (6:31-44). Jesus' return to the west (Dalmanutha, 8:10) and his conversation there (8:11-12) set the scene for the third sea voyage (8:13-21), the sea voyage with the "arithmetic lesson" about abundant loaves for both Jews and Gentiles. The detour comes to an end when Jesus and the disciples reach Bethsaida, in Mark's Gospel considered a Gentile city, at 8:22.⁸

These four narrative events in Mark *without* parallels in Jonah call attention to a central contrast between the two texts. The Markan Jesus is a new Jonah, a non-reluctant prophet of God, a prophet who journeys across sea and land to offer God's mercy to Gentiles in healing and feeding.

Various narrative events *with* parallels in Jonah and Mark also contribute to an image of the Markan Jesus that reverses the

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image of Jonah. Jonah's first journey, a sea voyage in the opposite direction of Nineveh, fails; Jesus' first sea voyage (to the country of the Gerasenes) succeeds. Before his second journey (implicitly overland), Jonah prays from the belly of the sea monster in the depths of the sea. Before sending his disciples out on a second sea voyage on their own (which does fail), Jesus prays on the mountain, as high above the depths of the sea as possible. To help save the sailors, Jonah suggests they throw him overboard into the sea, which they do, and the wind ceases. To help save the disciples (in the second sea voyage story), Jesus walks out to them on the sea, and they pull him into the boat, and the wind ceases. The Markan Jesus' disciples also offer a contrast to the fellow passengers of Jonah. Unlike the sailors who are Jonah's fellow passengers, the disciples do not display more piety and obedience than the prophet in their story. In fact, the disciples seem to share some of the reluctance (or at least difficulty) of Jonah in reaching out to Gentiles.

Significantly, there are two narrative events that are manifest in each of the four narratives (Jonah and all three Markan sea voyages). These parallels signal what the stories have in common: the successful arrival of the prophet at a specified location among a foreign people (Gentiles) and the successful—and merciful—mission of the prophet among a foreign people (Gentiles). This mission to foreigners/Gentiles is the climax of the Jonah sea voyage story and of *each* of the three Markan sea voyage stories. Thus, it is a thrice-told tale in Mark. Of course, Jonah remains a reluctant prophet to the end, so the success of the mission is clearly shown as God's. But the Markan Jesus also attributes the success of his mission to God. For example, Jesus says to the healed demoniac in the country of the Gerasenes, "Go home to your own, and report to them everything the Lord has done for you, and that he had mercy on you" (5:19; cf. 1:44).

The historical contexts of Jonah and Mark form an important background for understanding why these stories might end the way they do. According to a number of scholars, Jonah is a satire that dates to the postexilic period, using humor, irony, and exaggeration to criticize a point of view it opposes. Jonah presents a more "universalistic" or "internationalistic" Jewish position over against a more "exclusivistic" or "nationalistic" Jewish position as Jews face the challenges of living among Gentiles.⁹ Mark, as many of us

7. Malbon, *Narrative Space*, 22, 27-29, 54-55. See also Malbon, "Sea of Galilee," 34, and Malbon, "Echoes and Foreshadowings in Mark 4-8: Reading and Rereading," *JBL* 112 (1993) 211-230, especially pp. 226-227.

8. See Malbon, "Placing Bethsaida: From Mark to Matthew and Luke to John," in *Anatomies of the Gospels and Early Christianities: Essays in Honor of R. Alan Culpepper*, eds. Mikeal C. Parsons, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, and Paul N. Anderson (Leiden, Brill, 2018), 127-143.

9. The quotation marks are to indicate that these terms, "universalistic" or "exclusivistic" and "internationalistic" or "nationalistic," are problematic and have been used by Christian exegetes in anti-

have argued, especially in its central section that includes the three sea voyages, presents the more “universalistic” position within the Jesus movement that argued that Gentiles could become followers of the Jewish Jesus over against the more “exclusivistic” position within the Jesus movement that insisted that Gentile followers must become Jews first. Thus, it makes sense that the author of the Gospel of Mark would find the Book of Jonah appropriate as a background for his work that deals with a similar challenge in persuading the audience to have an open attitude toward Gentiles.

The author of Mark seems to have understood the satire of Jonah: The Book of Jonah argues *for* a more accepting attitude toward Gentiles, with God's prophet Jonah ironically manifesting the opposite attitude and God's mercy exaggerated by being shown to the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, which had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE. Mark's author reverses the satire: Jesus represents the accepting attitude, although the disciples seem to struggle with it, as some members of Mark's audience likely do. In Mark, it is not the prophet who has difficulty accepting that God's mercy is extended to Gentiles, but those following the prophet. Thus, the author of Jonah and the author of Mark choose different ways to communicate a similar—and challenging—conviction: that their audiences should adopt a welcoming position toward Gentiles.

The Book of Jonah ends with a question, one God asks Jonah and the author asks the audience, “But shall I not spare Nineveh [Nineveh], the great city, in which dwell more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who did not know their right hand from their left, and many animals?” (4:11). Mark's third and final sea voyage also ends with a question, one that Jesus asks his disciples and the author asks the audience, “Do you not yet understand?” (8:21). And both authors find the sea voyage story an appropriate subgenre for portraying this message. In the Jonah story, the prophet sets out on the sea in the opposite direction of the Gentiles to whom he is sent; his experience on—and under—the sea seems to turn him around. In Mark's story, Jesus voyages to Gentiles across the sea, but his disciples find that a stormy journey to make.

Just as the verbal parallels between Jonah 1, Jonah's sea voyage, and Mark 4, Jesus' first sea voyage, show us *how* the narrative cues the reader to link the stories of these two prophetic voyagers, so the narrative parallels and contrasts between Jonah's story and the Markan Jesus' story show us *why* these narrative intersections with Jonah prove useful for Mark's Gospel in contributing to the overall message of chapters 4-8 to the audience—both ancient and modern.

Conclusion

Think of it this way. The Book of Jonah tells the story of Jonah. Jonah is a reluctant prophet of a God merciful to Gentiles. When

Jewish ways. An anti-Jewish reading is not my intention here. I am not in a position to argue about how the Hebrew Book of Jonah was “originally” interpreted, but it does seem likely to me that the Markan evangelist interpreted the Jonah story's extension of the mercy of God to Gentiles as an important aspect of the Greek book.

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Jonah tries to run away from God's purpose—for himself and for foreigners (Gentiles)—God provides for Jonah a second chance. Jonah cannot hinder God's mercy, and God works patiently to coax Jonah into extending it. Jonah is not portrayed as a villain; even God's response to Jonah's final pout is gentle and coaxing. The Gospel of Mark tells a story not only about Jesus but about the disciples, so the pattern of Jonah is both reversed and extended, not simply paralleled. Jesus is a willing prophet of a God merciful to Gentiles. Jesus' disciples are reluctant (or struggling) to be followers of such a prophet of such a God. Jesus provides for the disciples a second round of guided instruction to encourage and enable them to do so. Jesus *and* his disciples continue Jesus' initial success as a prophet of a God merciful to Gentiles—although the disciples continue to struggle with the implications of such discipleship to the end.

It is faulty logic to say that Jesus is to the disciples as God is to Jonah, therefore, Jesus is God. This way of reading the analogy, or homology, is wrong at a basic level. An analogy or homology is a relation between two relations. So, in the statement “Jesus is to the disciples as God is to Jonah,” it is the *relationship* of Jesus to the disciples that is being compared with the *relationship* of God to Jonah. Such a statement is meant to compare these relationships, *not* to compare individual elements, such as Jesus and God, as if one could say from this analogy that Jesus is like God or even that Jesus is God in some metaphysical way. The narrative parallels with the Book of Jonah suggest that Mark's Jesus acts like God in the way Jesus tries to teach and guide and lead his disciples, as God tries to teach and guide and lead Jonah. Mark's Jesus acts like the God he trusts and follows in being merciful to Gentiles and in providing a second opportunity to those who find that a hard path to follow, a rough sea to row. But that was just what the God of the Book of Jonah was trying to teach Jonah. Mark's Jesus seems to have understood that lesson and not only understood it for himself but understood that the point was to teach it to others, to pass it on—not as God, but as a follower of God who understands God and acts in accordance with that

understanding. So, the Jesus of Mark both reverses the reluctance of Jonah and extends the prophetic outreach of Jonah. One would have to guess that the God of Jonah would be pleased. At least I am willing to guess that the author of the Book of Jonah would be pleased with the author of the Gospel of Mark. It is the two implied authors in their relationships to their implied audiences who are analogous—even more than their characters.

We do not know at the end of the Book of Jonah whether Jonah learns anything from the multiple object lessons God has patiently provided for him—from the sea monster to the gourd vine, worm, and scorching wind. We do know that the disciples continue as followers of the Markan Jesus, although fallible followers, back and forth across the Sea of Galilee and even to the cross of Jesus. What these fallible followers do in response to the empty tomb is not narrated directly, although it has been hinted at in chapter 13: “they will hand you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for the sake of me . . . ” (13:9). And I think I have come to know that the implied author of the Gospel according to Mark understood something from the Book of Jonah that he found relevant for his own narrative.

What we do not know is whether the ancient audience of Jonah or the ancient audience of Mark learned what the storyteller was trying to communicate in these sea voyage stories of Jonah and Jesus about God's outreach and mercy to Gentiles, to foreigners, to strangers. I suspect biblical scholars will continue to debate these issues. Perhaps what all biblical readers and hearers should ask ourselves amid these ongoing scholarly inquiries is whether we, as the current audience of both Jonah and Mark, have ourselves learned anything about such outreach and mercy to Gentiles—to foreigners, even those from across the sea—in our own day.

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