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The Red Wilderness: Mark and Modern Western Storytelling

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The Red Wilderness: Mark and Modern Western Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

Many adaptations of “the Gospel” have been made in recent years, but few of these are sustained engagements with one of the four gospels in particular. Modern biblical scholarship is increasingly realizing, however, the narrative integrity of each gospel taken on its own terms. Though four-gospel canonical adaptations are legitimate, this thesis hopes to lay some groundwork for the adaptation of one gospel in particular, the Gospel of Mark, showing that such a project is both feasible and desirable. It will do so by 1) briefly exploring adaptation theory to clarify the goals and challenges such an adaptation would face, 2) investigating one element of Mark’s narrative—his use of wilderness—in depth, and 3) exploring the resources a modern form of storytelling, the Western novel of Cormac McCarthy, provides for adapting Mark. Though no adaptation will here be presented, this study hopes that these preliminary steps are sufficient to spark curiosity and to encourage adaptors to consider Mark, rather than an amalgam of the four gospels, for adaptation.

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“When he came too, he couldn’t move. He was almost paralyzed. . . . This man was wounded. He was left to die. Perhaps the priest and the Levite thought he was dead. They didn’t want to defile themselves from contact with a corpse (because the Law of Moses indicated that you shouldn’t touch a corpse). And they were unwilling or unable to save him. But then. . . a certain Samaritan came by. He risked his life; the thieves could still have been lurking in the vicinity. . . .”¹

The story is familiar, but far from the text of Luke’s gospel (10:25-37). What Luke’s text only implies, this sermon provides in abundance. Motivation: “They didn’t want to defile themselves.” Background information: “the Law of Moses indicated that you shouldn’t touch a corpse.” Detail: “He couldn’t move. He was almost paralyzed.” Luke’s parable of the Good Samaritan is pithy enough to survive the test of time, and profound enough that most Westerners, Christian or not, know some version of it. Nonetheless, it is rare that the story is ever just *read*. Even in services where the text is read aloud in full, the preacher almost always feels the need to retell a spiced-up version of it for the sermon. The story, they are convinced, won’t quite communicate on its own.

This retelling is a form of adaptation, in this case, for the sake of making relevant what seems dry. A scriptural story, in addition to being retold in its original form, is given the treatment of modern storytelling. This particular example is rather tame, sticking closely to the setting, characters, and details of the text. Yet some modern retellings, like the Cohen Brothers’ *A Serious Man*, change stories in almost every detail.

¹ Billy Graham, *Good Samaritan*, Cincinnati, OH, 2002.

Nonetheless, *A Serious Man* is still demonstrably the story of Job. Some themes have been added, others ignored, and the conclusion is darker, but the soul of the story—wrestling with God and the problem of evil—is still there.

The biggest difference between these two adaptations is not that one sticks close to the text in its historical character shape and the other one deviates from it. Indeed, Billy Graham interprets Luke in a typological way, one that includes but seriously redirects the original thrust of the text; his Samaritan is Jesus, and the rest of humanity is the man on the side of the road. The big difference is that *A Serious Man* is an adaptation of a complete text, and Billy Graham's sermon uses just a small slice of a much larger work. They both change their source texts in significant ways, particularly if viewed from the perspective of the whole.

Unfortunately, the history of synoptic study has tended to obscure literary wholes by focusing on form and source criticism, and on the "synoptic-problem." While these questions are valuable in their own right, they tend to downplay the author's agency in shaping the text by searching for the sources behind it. Indeed, the evangelists in these studies often come off as little more than collectors of stories from their various communities. The end result is that the gospels become fragmented collections of loosely related narrative and sayings, prime to be chopped up as any scholar, preacher, or adapter wills.

More recent scholarship has shifted its focus to the literary integrity of each Gospel. Though parables *do* have the wonderful quality of working on their own, synoptic scholars will point out huge differences in the message of a parable based on its location in the different synoptics, not least because the parable often set the terms for

interpreting the surrounding story.² This is proper because stories do not communicate in small chunks, but as wholes. Meaning *can* be extracted from small pieces of episodic narrative like the gospels, but the meaning of an individual story also morphs and grows as the whole progresses. One cannot understand the full implications of the “double touch healing” (Mk 8:22-26) without reading Peter’s flawed confession (vv. 27-33) through to the healing of Bartimaeus (10:46-52).

Adaptations of the synoptics have not seriously engaged this new direction in scholarship. True, adaptations of the full “Gospel Story” abound, but these adaptations are almost always canonical in nature, amalgamating the narrative of all four Gospels and interpreting them through the lenses of later Christological, theological, or political disputes.³ Biblical and archeological scholarship is used to recover necessary context for the gospel episodes used, but the individual evangelists are not heard in their distinctive voices. This, I assert, is a trend that should be balanced by adaptations of particular gospels.

To this effect, the following study will begin to explore the adaptation of the Gospel of Mark.⁴ This exploration will take three parts. 1) I will use Linda Hutcheon’s

² John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 25-27. Also helpful is Donahue’s discussion of Mark as a parable about “Christology and Discipleship.” See pages 194-198.

³ For a helpful discussion of various adaptations of the Gospel in film and novel, see Graham Holderness, *Re-writing Jesus: Christ in 20th-Century Fiction and Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). There are a few film adaptations of single gospels—typically John—but these often fall into that genre of Jesus film that just narrates the gospel out loud. While a step in the right direction, these adaptations don’t really utilize the artistic potential of their medium.

⁴ By which I mean the Greek of Mark *as it would have been performed*, up to verse 16:8. That is, it is the event of the text’s oration by a storyteller, and not the text itself, that constitutes the “original.” For this reason, my use of the terms “scripture” and “original” in reference to the Gospel of Mark will be in some sense attenuated; “scripture” because it is not the holy writ ratified by the Church in which the thesis is interested, but the moment of performance that the original author most likely intended when writing this script, and “original” because every performance of a script is in some sense an adaptation it—there is no one “original” performance. It must be assumed that Mark and his authorized storytellers did not

landmark study *A Theory of Adaptation* to clarify the concept of “adaptation,” and thus better define the goals and challenges of such an adaptation of Mark. 2) I will begin the process of research for an adaptation, focusing on Mark’s use of setting—wilderness in particular—to see how this landscape shapes his larger message. 3) I will briefly explore an American depiction of wilderness as found Cormac McCarthy’s western novels, particularly *The Border Trilogy*, to discuss the potential opportunities and obstacles the modern western may provide for such an adaptation. Though an adaptation will not here be attempted, I hope to draw attention to the beneficial nature of such a pursuit and the rich challenge it would provide for skilled authors.

A Theory of Adaptation: Fidelity and Format

Adapting scripture is always a thorny issue. Many believers view it as changing the changeless Word of God. On the one hand, these Christians demand a high degree of “fidelity” in their adaptation—by which they mean strict adherence to the details of the Gospel story. On the other, that the original details of the Gospel do not communicate to a modern audience is the very impetus for adaptation. Adaptations of the Gospel often end up either unendingly dull (for they do not make use of the psychologically-heavy storytelling techniques that communicate to modern audiences), or sacrilegiously libertine.⁵ But it need not be so. A more adequate understanding of “adaptation” and the

consciously intend this work to be canonized in writing and thus given a canonical interpretation as a primarily written text. Nonetheless, for the sake of this study the words of these hypothetical “original” performances will usually be assumed to be those of the Nestle-Aland 28, up to 16:8.

⁵ See Holderness’s discussion of *Quarantine*, Holderness, *Re-writing Jesus*, 87-107. Holderness manages a positive evaluation of Jim Crace’s *Quarantine*, arguing that he does not manage to undercut the intention of the gospel as completely as he intended. Nonetheless, it remains that Crace’s approach is in no way designed to replicate the message of the original gospels. Such adaptations are not illicit, but are not the goal of the current project.

processes involved in it will open up a wealth of new options for Gospel adaptations, as well as raise new problems for what counts as “fidelity” when adapting a single evangelist in particular.

In addition to the unique problems of adapting the Gospels, adaptations in general are negatively evaluated in American culture. They are “secondary” and “derivative,” damning words in a culture that so highly values novelty.⁶ Nonetheless, every work borrows from another, and there is a reason we continue making adaptations despite their lack of prestige. Repetition with variation is simply pleasurable. It gives us the comfort of the familiar with the surprise of something new and gives us a ready framework within which to discuss the work.⁷ Linda Hutcheon defines an adaptation as any sustained engagement with a previous piece of work, preferably those which announce that relationship. This results in “palimpsestuous works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts.”⁸ This is, admittedly, a rather wide definition. This definition does not exclude cultural artifacts that most Americans would not consider “adaptations.” Rides at Disney Resorts count as adaptations of their respective movies, and church “Apocalypse Experiences” count as (rather bad) adaptations of extra-biblical traditions. By such a definition, *The Lion, Witch, And the Wardrobe*, pieces of the *Brothers Karamazov*, and (to a lesser extent) movies like *Gran Torino*, are adaptations of the gospels, for their ability to communicate their message depends on an announced relationship to the passion narratives.

⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

⁷ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 4.

⁸ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 6.

More important for our study is the fact that the gospels themselves count as adaptations! Synoptic scholars are nearly unanimous that Matthew and Luke both use large portions of Mark, reading, rearranging, and retelling his stories, often assuming the audience already knows the basic narrative.⁹ Mark itself counts as an adaptation, since it is likely based on a mixture of oral tradition and eye-witness testimony about Jesus. In addition, the oral traditions about Jesus' teaching, especially the parables, count as adaptations of the words of Jesus himself, who also may be adapting stories and parables from the surrounding Jewish culture. One could even make the pedantic argument that this study counts as an adaptation of the gospels in a non-fiction form, because it is written with announced and concentrated attention to a single text.

Such a wide definition of adaptation inevitably raises the question of usefulness. If more or less anything can be an adaptation—including works that intentionally undercut their original—why use the term at all? Also, where is the line between mere intertextuality and adaptation? How “announced” does a text's relationship to previous work have to be before it moves into the category of adaptation? Part of this problem stems from Hutcheon's rejection of the evaluative criteria of fidelity. Without this criterion, the door to adaptation is flung wide open.

Of course, calling a work an *adaptation* is to suggest that it be received in the context of some previous work, resulting in a prevalence of comparative study.¹⁰ But Hutcheon rejects the “morally loaded” nature of the term *fidelity*, for it implies that “adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text.”¹¹ But Matthew and Luke do not

⁹ Luke explicitly draws attention to other accounts in his introduction (1:1-4).

¹⁰ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 6.

¹¹ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 7.

simply reproduce Mark in more flowery language, but change it intentionally. The net result is not “unfaithful” works, but unique literary creations of independent value. The struggle of adaptation, then, is not to “be faithful” in the sense of a one-to-one correspondence, but to “make suitable” a text from a different context. That is, adaptation produces a new story that has some value for modern people not immediately available to them from the original.

The extent of change such a process involves will invariably depend upon the supposed deficiency that one is trying to overcome, either in the original text, its temporal relationship to modern readers, or in the readers themselves. “Adaptations” that take the form of plain translations attempt to solve only a language barrier, while other adaptations seek to explore new themes absent in the originals. For example, some newer translations of classical texts change the emphasis of passages to foreground the moral deficiencies of ancient culture. Emily Wilson’s new translation of *The Odyssey* explicitly draws attention to the slavery and sexism implicit in the text, thereby planting in her translation a critique of Greek slavery practice foreign to the original.¹² She is correcting the moral deficiencies of the text.

On the other end of the spectrum, most preachers propose no intrinsic deficiency in scripture. Rather, cultural change, the passage of time, and the deafness of human ears to the full implications of scripture poses the problem. As most theological accounts would have it, the one who speaks in scripture is Christ—that is, God.¹³ The preacher

¹² Emily Wilson, *The Odyssey* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018). Though marketed as a translation, there is an argument that Wilson has, in fact, become an author of her own work by considerably and intentionally reworking the emphasis of the original.

¹³ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 55.

“prayerfully goes to listen to the Bible on behalf of the people and then speaks on Christ’s behalf what she or he hears there.” This is not a simple repetition of scripture’s words, but “telling the truth about...what happens when a biblical text intersects some aspect of our lives and exerts a claim upon us.”¹⁴ Thus the authority of scripture does not exclude “adaptation” but requires a constant stream of application in the form of preaching. Relative to the errant context in which the scripture is read, there will always be room for Christ’s voice in the text to gain greater sovereignty over the reader.

Yet again, other adapters of scripture are less charitable, judging scripture’s scientific naiveté.¹⁵ There is no getting around these prior commitments when adapting. Hence, an adaptation will always be as much about the adapter, their idiosyncratic interests, their judgement of the text, and the pressing issues of their day, as it will be about the original itself. Any adaptation of Mark, then, will have to give intense interest to the “why” of adaptation: what purposes justify the adaptor’s time and effort, and what obstacles inhibit the original text from serving these purposes? The criteria for judging the success for any adaptation will vary wildly depending on the particular adaptor’s purposes.

What, then, is the purpose of the adaptation here proposed, and what prevents the original gospel from serving that purpose? At its heart, the proposed adaptation would be

¹⁴ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 52.

¹⁵ Jim Crace, *Quarantine* (New York: Picador, 1998) is a prime example. Crace’s Jesus dies during his wilderness temptation because scientifically the human body could not survive 40 days without food and water. Of course, the gospels never say Jesus went without *water*, and so Crace’s critique sounds a little flat at this point. Nonetheless, modern people find it difficult to accept miracle stories. The *Jefferson Bible* is, in a sense, an adaptation of the gospels meant to make them more acceptable to modern ears.

the project of a biblical scholar;¹⁶ it is the narrativization of literary and exegetical commentaries' insights on Mark. Like a commentary, this adaptation would seek to uncover and communicate the original meaning(s) of the text as best as is possible for readers so far removed from the original context. The difficulty with commentaries, however, is that they are unendingly boring for all but a select group of specialists. It must be assumed that the impulse to snooze was not what the original audience felt when they heard the story of their Lord and Savior recited, though this is often the case for readers of modern commentaries, if not of the Gospel of Mark itself. The purpose of the proposed adaptation is therefore twofold. First, it should communicate an approximation of the meaning(s) the original text was written to communicate, and second, it will approximate the emotional force the original could have wielded. Unlike most commentaries, however, this project would not try to map the meaning and rhetorical function of individual pericopes so much as the meaning of the gospel as a literary whole. The goal is not to assist preachers who can cover only a small piece of text at a time, but to stimulate a modern reader capable of sitting through a novel-length treatment. The goal is an integrous whole.

Difficulty: Audience

Trying to reproduce the emotional force of the original text immediately raises issues. While it is likely that Mark had an "ideal audience" in mind when he was composing his gospel, it is another matter entirely whether such an audience ever existed

¹⁶ This project is not thereby limited only to people of faith, though a scholar's faith commitment does affect their exegetical judgements.

to receive a performance of the Gospel, and whether Mark managed to make them react the way he hoped. The added distance of time makes the issue even sharper. An adaptation not only has to answer the questions that Mark was trying to answer, but it must also get a modern audience to care about these questions in the first place.¹⁷

Any good adaptation of Mark, then, will have to have a specific audience in mind, as well as a strategy for getting the audience to care about the questions Mark was trying to answer. Any such strategy will necessarily involve relating Mark's questions to things modern audiences already care about without letting those modern cares simply take over. This is a delicate balancing act. Some issues will have more direct cognates, other will not. Graham Holderness demonstrates that essentially any modern gospel adaptation is will be read through later Christological controversies.¹⁸ Was Jesus *really* God, or just a better-than-normal human? The language of modern debates in Christology are obviously absent from Mark's text, but Mark *does* share an interest in Jesus' identity. An adaptor will not have to work hard to get modern audiences interested in Mark's depiction of Jesus, even if they must labor to make Mark's understanding of Jesus intelligible. On the other hand, getting a modern audience offended by the particularity of election to be excited about God's fulfillment of his promises to Israel is likely to require great creativity.

Difficulty: Format

¹⁷ For example, a book like Kings may have been riveting for a post-exilic Jewish community worried about the legitimacy of the Davidic kingship, but it is typically bewildering for modern audiences.

¹⁸ Holderness, *Re-writing Jesus*, 20-22.

Hutcheon explores the “media-specificity” of adaptation in some detail. She helpfully breaks down the different media into categories of *showing*, *telling*, and *interacting*.¹⁹ Showing consists primarily of movies and plays, telling of written texts, and interacting of amusement parks, videogames, and the like.

At first, it would seem like writing a novel of Mark would be a simple adaptation from one telling medium to another. It is changing a written text to a written text. This is, however, deeply misleading. In an oral culture like ancient Rome, most the gospel texts would have been actively performed. The written texts served more as an aid to memory than as an official version.²⁰ “For early Christians, the Gospel of Mark... was not a text; it was an event.”²¹ It is only natural, then, that recent years have seen many adaptations of the gospels into other “showing” formats like movies. While it is impossible to recover exactly how Mark would have been performed, performance criticism does seek to read the gospels in light of Greco-Roman performance. Much information about emotion, setting, internal echoes, and allusions could all be signaled by the use of the voice or body in the performance,²² just as actors communicate much about the internal states of characters in play about which the script is neutral. In fact, theater studies have begun to play an increasingly large role in study of the New Testament texts.²³ Some scholars use live performance of the biblical text as their research methodology!²⁴ This may be part of

¹⁹ For a fuller discussion of “media specificity,” see Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 33 – 77.

²⁰ Paul J. Achtemeier, “Omne verbum sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity,” *JBL* 109 (1990): 9.

²¹ David Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies, Part II,” *BTB* 36 (2006): 165.

²² Rhoads, “Performance Criticism Part II,” 174.

²³ Rhoads, “Performance Criticism Part II,” 172. I have participated in this sort of research.

²⁴ Rhoads, “Performance Criticism Part II,” 173.

why ancient texts often feel “thin” to modern readers. Much like a play script, the rhetorical effect of reading does not compare to a live performance.²⁵

Additional difficulties may present themselves when switching from the “showing” to “telling” mode. For many, showing mediums are incredibly good at capturing external action and plot—the focus of the gospels—while “telling” mediums are exceptionally good at capturing interiority. This is, of course, a cliché.²⁶ Many plays are exceptional at portraying complex psychological detail, and books can, through manipulation of language, create vivid and immersive plot movement. Nonetheless, it is a cliché with some teeth. Content that is conveyed in a play’s blocking cannot be transformed into text without a great deal of creativity, and it is more likely than not up to the actors in a play to portray interiority, not the script.

More challenging than this is that audiences already come with expectations of what makes for a “good” novel.²⁷ A novel need not conform with these expectations exactly, but if they are not visibly in conversation with these conventions, the novel is likely to be either dismissed or misunderstood. This is the primary reason older works, even though they are not lacking in sophistication, fail to excite.²⁸ A novelization of Mark will likely have to add all sorts of vivid imagery and psychological detail that were

²⁵ David Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies, Part I,” *BTB* 36 (2006): 130-131.

²⁶ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 56.

²⁷ “All readers of literature carry around with them notions about character and incident, in the form of unconsciously consulted touchstones which shape their evaluations of literary works.” Robert Scholes, James Phelan and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, Fortieth Anniversary ed. (London, Oxford University Press, 1966), 160.

²⁸ “In a culture of written letters... a fixed text will tend to survive its native milieu and be forced to make its way to alien surroundings. Not only will its language become archaic and obsolete, but the assumptions about man and nature and about the proper way to tell a story, upon which the tale is built, will also recede farther and farther from the assumptions of living men.” Scholes, Phelan and Kellogg, *Nature of Narrative*, 83.

largely absent in the original text. Otherwise, the novelization will fail to meet a modern audience's standards. The necessity of these additions pose an additional difficulty. The expectations audiences bring to novels and, more specifically, to individual genres, are not themselves value-neutral. Speaking generally, the realism of modern novels replaced the illustrative/allegorical nature of classical narratives,²⁹ corresponding to the rise of empiricism in western culture and the subsequent loss of confidence in absolute truth external to human experience.³⁰ Characters were no longer distillations of various virtues or vices that inhered in some universal moral order. Particularly when it comes to psychological characterization, the values of modern and classical storytelling stands in tension.³¹ Mark is much less interested in the interiority of characters than he is in their relation to the reign of God in the world, the culmination of Israel's hope, and the *proper* behavior in response to their respective situations. Psychological portraits of characters are necessarily thin, for with ancient characters "we are not called upon to understand their motivation as if they were whole human beings but to understand the principles they illustrate."³² Peter (literally, "Rock") is simultaneously an extended example of the "rocky ground" type in the parable of the sower (Mk 4:1-20), and a representative of the

²⁹ Scholes, Phelan and Kellogg, 82-105.

³⁰ See Scholes, Phelan and Kellogg, *Nature of Narrative*, 151-154.

³¹ "When the private and personal relationship of the individual soul with God supplants this public concept of heroic excellence, then a culture will tend to develop a literature which deals... with aspects of the inward life. Scholes, Phelan and Kellogg, *Nature of Narrative*, 165. The authors in this chapter seem to overemphasize the interiority and individualism of early scriptural narratives, reading back the way medieval mysticism and modern audiences interpret scripture rather than interpreting scripture in its classical setting. The general point stands, however, that the more individual and anthropocentric our concepts of goodness become—the more separate from any external moral order which structures society—the more "interior" our novels become.

³² Scholes, Phelan and Kellogg, *Nature of Narrative*, 88.

disciples in general.³³ He has very little individuality, and even less interiority. Even Jesus' psychological portrait is likely to be unsatisfactory to modern audiences.

This is to say that forms of storytelling enshrine the values of cultures. The values of Mark's culture are radically different than our own, and so utilizing the storytelling techniques of our culture could run contrary to his purposes. This is nowhere clearer than with Judas. Modern depictions of Judas often spend great deals of time showing his progression from a faithful disciple to one willing to betray Jesus, step by step, psychological development by psychological development. In *Jesus Christ: Superstar*, Judas becomes the protagonist, and the audience is moved to sympathize with him rather than view him as a negative example to be shunned. But in the gospels, "the disciples' transition from acceptance to hard-heartedness does not follow the pattern of slow, internal, psychological development one expects and finds in modern literature."³⁴ Mark gives very little indication of Judas's motivations, and whether we take the reference to money (14:11) as a suggestion of greed or care for the poor (v. 4-5), such psychological details are hardly integral to Mark's purposes. For him, it is an established fact that Jesus lived, performed miracles, suffered, and rose from the dead. A character's inability to believe these things is not an invitation to explore the anatomy of modern doubt, but rather an opportunity for the audience to strive to do better. Audiences are not meant to resonate with Judas's betrayal.³⁵

³³ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 154-156.

³⁴ Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 199.

³⁵ The example of the other disciples is, admittedly, more complicated. Tolbert's pervasively negative evaluation of the disciples leaves the audience no room to identify with them. The more positive interpretation of Rhoads (among others) allows the audience to see their own weakness reflected in the disciples, and thus sympathize with them in a comforting way. However we rule on the disciples, it is clear that the audience is meant to positively evaluate the women in the narrative. Thus, their surprising fear at

Any adaptation of Mark is going to have to wrestle with how much it should steer into the accepted conventions of the modern novel. These conventions cannot be totally disregarded, but if one wishes to adapt *Mark's* message, neither can they be appropriated uncritically. A creative approach will be needed to simultaneously utilize and challenge these values, providing the psychological depth a modern audience would need to remain interested in the novel, but subverting that interest by clearly locating the meaning of the novel in the fact of Jesus's existence and people's response to him.

Conclusions

Adaptation is a complex process. I have written this section as a cursory sketch of what that complexity means for an adaptation of the gospel of Mark, and as an attempt to be clearer about what exactly such an adaptation might be trying to accomplish. An adaptation that focuses on one-to-one correspondence of details will almost inevitably fall afoul of a modern audience, not only because it will be boring, but because a modern audience will have no real way of knowing what these details might have meant in their original context. In fact, a novelization that follows a one-to-one correspondence will inevitably be interpreted in a way unrelated to Mark's intentions, for his details have been heavily laden with meanings foreign to their original intention in the long history of Mark's reception, not least from the other two synoptic gospels. Some level of change will be necessary to faithfully recall Mark's original meaning with clarity and force.

the end of the narrative does press a sort of internal "why" question on the audience. "Why does the good soil fear? What went wrong and how can I do better?" Still, this is not accomplished through a psychological portrait, but by breaking the women out of their archetype of "good earth" in a jolting way.

This is not to disparage interpretive development. “Original” meaning can never be perfectly represented, no matter how creative the adaptor. The situations facing new audiences will always be different than those to whom the author wrote, requiring new significance to be drawn from the original meaning. All adaptations are necessarily a hybrid of the original text and the new situation. Nonetheless, it is better to be conscious of such hybridization, and thus navigate it to optimal effect, than it is to try and wash one’s hands of the process by simply reproducing the details of the gospel. This introduces all sorts of new and complex considerations into the adapting process, but it also provides new opportunities. If true fidelity does not look like one-to-one correspondence, the adaptor is not bound to it. She is free to rearrange, rewrite, resituate, or reimagine the text on principled grounds.³⁶ The elements of Mark’s storytelling are not shackles, but a vast well of riches from which to draw.

The rest of the paper will explore the complexities of adapting one particular element of Mark’s narrative that stretches through the whole, its utilization of setting, especially the “wilderness.” The hope is to ignite the imagination, suggesting the complexities of such a project, but also the interesting opportunities exploring such an adaptation provides to believer and artist both.

³⁶ For example, the navigation of Jew/Gentile issues may not affect all modern audiences, but the role of ethnicity in access to God is still important. Hence, the film adaptation *Son of Man* (2006) explicitly applies the gospels’ message in a critique of apartheid. Mark and the other evangelists could not have foreseen this application, but certainly they would applaud it as “faithful” to their message, except insofar as the centrality of Jesus is subordinated to social critique.

Setting/Wilderness in Mark

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. (Mark 1:12-13, NIV)

The desert he rode was red and red the dust he raised, the small dust that powdered the legs of the horse he rode, the horse he led. In the evening a wind came up and reddened all the sky before him. There were few cattle in that country because it was barren country indeed yet he came at evening upon a solitary bull rolling in the dust against the bloodred sunset like an animal in sacrificial torment. The bloodred dust blew down out of the sun. He touched the horse with his heels and rode on. He rode with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west across the evening land and the small desert birds flew chittering among the dry bracken and horse and rider and horse passed on and their long shadows passed in tandem like the shadow of a single being. Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come. (Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 302).

Mark 1:12-13 (read in conjunction with vv. 1-6) is one of the most important stories ever set in “the wilderness,” occasioning adaptations from Matthew and Luke, and by extension authors like Dostoyevsky.³⁷ Despite its importance, it has nowhere near the resonance of a passage like Cormac McCarthy’s for a modern reader. McCarthy’s prose is admittedly exceptional, but we should not assume that Mark lacks immediate power because of his relatively unadorned narrative.³⁸ Rather, modern audiences are no longer aware of the resonances that Mark’s text evokes. They have no way of situating these verses within a larger context that would communicate meaning beyond the level of

³⁷ See Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor*, trans. H. P. Blavatsky (Waiheke Island: New Zealand, 2009), 18-38. The conversation between Christ and the Grand Inquisitor is Ivan Karamazov’s interpretation of the desert temptation scenes in Matthew and Luke, where Jesus is offered three modes of rule contrary to the nature of his coming—bread, awe of miracle, and authority.

³⁸ In fact, in those stories that Mark shares with Matthew and Luke, Mark is almost always the longest. While his prose remains simple, he includes many details that have caused some to characterize him as “realistic.” See Donahue, *Gospel in Parable*, 195. Of course, his level of detail cannot approach that of the modern novel if it hoped to be performed orally in a single sitting.

detail: there was Satan, there were some animals, and there were angels. Cormac McCarthy's power relies heavily on allusions to other texts with which the reader is already familiar. Outside an audience raised with the Christian eschatological tradition, the phrase the "world to come" would be next to meaningless, and the image of a bull "rolling in the dust... like an animal in sacrificial torment" would not evoke our inchoate understandings of Levitical sacrifices. A secular reader might not be able to point to these texts to know why they are affected by these phrases, but these texts are nonetheless part of their cultural DNA.

The goal of this section is to explore how this concept of "wilderness" would have struck the audience with the cultural DNA expected by Mark, and thus to make explicit the "work" this setting is doing for Mark's narrative. To do this will require a (very) brief introduction to the goals of Mark's narrative as a whole, a brief look at setting in Mark's narrative, and finally a discussion of wilderness passages in Mark.

Mark's Meaning

Many good and conflicting literary analyzes of Mark have been written.³⁹ Like most literary works, Mark's message resists reduction into slogans, so no interpretation can claim finality.⁴⁰ Unlike many literary works, Mark's narrative is distinctly episodic, leading many to doubt the overall literary unity of the whole.⁴¹ That said, some themes

³⁹ See, Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: 2008), and David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie *Mark As Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), among others.

⁴⁰ Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 7.

⁴¹ Robert R. Beck, *Nonviolent Story: Narrative Conflict Resolution in the Gospel of Mark* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 40-43.

are *relatively* consistent throughout these studies of Mark's narrative. While this preliminary discussion of these themes will be woefully inadequate, it will provide necessary context for interpreting Mark's use of wilderness.

Cosmic Struggle: Kingdom of God Vs. Kingdom of Satan

The problem with the world from Mark's point of view—indeed, from the point of view of all the evangelists—is that the world of the Creator God is under the illegitimate rule of Satan.⁴² This rule is evident in the power of demons throughout the world, as well as the presence of oppressive regimes. Satan is the “strong man” who needs to be bound for the world to be free.⁴³ The people of Israel desperately await the “Kingdom of God” to come and defeat the Kingdom of Satan. They are, in short, waiting for the Lord to come on his way (1:2-3).

Who is Lord?: Caesar Vs. Jesus

Satan's dominion extends outside of the realm of demons, and he can oppress humans through more means than just direct demon possession. The most obvious manifestation of Satan's presence is the oppressive powers of Rome. The Emperor in Rome—who claims to be a god and *Lord*—is an illegitimate ruler like Satan. Ultimately, it is not the

⁴² Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 64-65.

⁴³ See also Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 100. Interestingly, Tolbert argues for a double meaning to this passage. Jesus's house is also divided on account of the disciple's lack of faith. Hence, when Judas betrays him, he is sent away “bound” (15:1) to Pilate, and his house—that is, his disciples—scatter. This section, in light of the later narrative, highlights the struggle between Jesus and the power of Satan evident in the Roman imperium. Of course, this defeat of Jesus and the division of his house is only illusory; yet Jesus does not regather his disciples within the narrative of Mark. The imperative for unity is thereby placed on the audience. They must be faithful to Jesus where the disciples—at least within the story—were faithless and thus divided his house.

Emperor of Rome who is the true Lord of the cosmos, but Jesus. “Jesus and the rule of God are portrayed in Mark as an alternative to the Roman emperor and the Roman Empire.”⁴⁴ Some commentators have observed that Mark’s passion reflects a Triumphal Procession for a Roman Emperor.⁴⁵ Jesus is not, however, a Lord like any other.

Who is Jesus?: Prophet, Messiah, Military Leader

In my estimation, the message of the Gospel of Mark centers around the identity Jesus, who is viewed as an actual, historical person. Robert C. Tannehill argues for the overall coherence of Mark’s narrative centered around Jesus’s Identity.⁴⁶ He is the Lord whose path is made straight (Mark 1),⁴⁷ Messiah (8:29), King of the Jews (15:26), and the Son of God (1:1; 5:7; 15:39). Stories like the transfiguration (9:2-12) and walking on water (6:45-52) serve to reinforce this exalted and puzzling view of Christ.

On the other hand, Jesus is not the Messiah that was expected by most Israelites. They were accustomed to military Messianic movements that were subsequently crushed by Rome.⁴⁸ The expectations the disciples place on Jesus seem to be the work of Satan (8:33), for Satan exercises his rule even in the hearts of the Israelites and their leaders. Jesus’s rule will be different (10:42-45). As a result, Jesus conflicts with the current

⁴⁴ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark as Story*, xiv.

⁴⁵ Thomas E. Schmidt, “Mark 15.16-32: The Crucifixion Narrative and the Roman Triumphal Procession,” *NTS* 41 (1995): 1-18.

⁴⁶ Robert C. Tannehill, “The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology” pp. 161-187 in *The Shape of the Gospel: New Testament Essays* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007).

⁴⁷ Tolbert contests that Jesus is the “voice crying in the wilderness” who makes the path straight, not John. Jesus is not, therefore, the “Lord.” See Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 244-46. Many commentators, however, disagree. Adela Collins is typical here: “Most immediately, the “Lord” in this quotation is to be identified with Jesus...the sequence of events in the narrative of this passage implies that John prepares the way for Jesus.” Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 137.

⁴⁸ Ulrich Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1963), 56-58.

leadership of Israel as much as he does Rome, for Jesus's goal is not to overthrow Rome but an oppressive form of leadership that stems from Satan and infects Rome and Israel both. Jesus knows that he has to suffer to complete his goal, but his disciples cannot accept this (8:31-33; 9:38-50; 10:35-45). As a result, Jesus has an interest in keeping his messianic identity secret from those who cannot properly understand it.⁴⁹ He will not accept violent rebellion (14:46-49).

What do we do now?: Fear or Faith

If the identity of Jesus is the primary "message" that the Gospel of Mark sends to its readers, then "what are you going to do now?" is the primary question it asks them. Tolbert argues that the parable of the Sower in chapter 4 guides the audience to identify all the characters with one of the types of "ground" that respond to the "word" being sowed in them.⁵⁰ The audience is constantly sifting through different responses to Jesus, trying to sort the characters into one of the four categories. The Scribes and Pharisees are those from whom Satan takes the seed. The rich man (10:17-31) is the one for whom the cares of this world strangle the seed. The disciples are the rocky ground (4:40; 6:52, etc.). Finally, certain minor characters are the exemplars that respond favorably to the reign of

⁴⁹ Since William Wrede's book *The Messianic Secret*, the secrecy of Jesus's identity in Mark has been a widely recognized and diversely interpreted phenomena. For the purposes of this study, this debate cannot be treated here. However, it should be noted how closely the wilderness and secrecy motifs cohere. Jesus goes to the wilderness to avoid crowds, to be alone, and to pray. He is constantly withdrawing by himself (κατ' ἰδίαν) for the same reasons. In addition, those who are commanded to be quiet are typically in the wilderness; demons are most often the ones silenced and demons tend to be in the wilderness. The primary exception is Jesus's command to Peter to be silent (8:30) "on the way," presumably because he has a satanic misunderstanding of Jesus's identity, and thus is more aligned with the demons than we typically think (8:33).

⁵⁰ See Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 127-175. That said, Tolbert believes Mark has a much less exalted idea of Jesus than most commentators believe. They are not so much responding to Jesus' identity as to his announcement of the coming of the kingdom of God.

God, especially women (7:24-30; 12:41-44; 14:3-9, etc.). Fear is the primary trait that stops characters from responding to Jesus with proper faith.⁵¹

By the end of the narrative, the audience will have slotted women into the “good soil” category.⁵² But in the gospel’s jarring twist ending, these women do not respond with faith when faced with the resurrection, but with fear (16:8). Thus the angel’s (or unnamed man’s) command to “go and tell” is at risk of being unfulfilled (16:7). Obviously, it *was* fulfilled; the audience is hearing the story now and likely knew the story previously. Hence, the ending of Mark’s gospel creates cognitive dissonance for the audience, knowing that *someone* did “go and tell,” but seeing no character within the narrative with the faith to fulfill that calling. In this way, Mark challenges the audience to become the vital link. “You’ve accompanied Jesus all the way through the story,” Mark seems to say, “Will you be the one who goes and tells, or are you afraid too?”⁵³

Setting

Because Mark intends to claim that a particular historical person, Jesus, is King of the Jews, Lord, Son of God, and Messiah of Israel, Mark’s narrative is inexorably linked to the world in which that actual, historical person lived. This setting provides the stage on which Mark believes his drama really did happen—a cosmic clash between the powers of Satan and the powers of God—but located in Galilee and Jerusalem. It is mythic, and it is particular.

⁵¹ See Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 121-22, 125-26.

⁵² Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 296-298.

⁵³ Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 299.

This mythic element of the story has led some structuralist commentators like Elizabeth Struthers Malbon to conduct detailed analyses of Mark's setting. While her application of Levi-straussian methods is suspect, the attention to detail in this study is superb, and her book makes a compelling case that Mark's settings are organized in opposing pairs.⁵⁴ The first of these pairs is where I will begin my analysis.

Galilee Vs. Jerusalem

The gospel of Mark opens on the Jordan river, itself a suggestive location for the border between wilderness and the promised land. Jews come to John the Baptist from all over the Judean countryside and Jerusalem (v.5). Mark exaggerates by suggesting that everyone (the "whole") of these regions come to be baptized by John into repentance (1:4-5). These are, ironically, the same regions that will call for Jesus' execution. In contrast, only one person comes to John from the region of Galilee, Jesus himself. Rather than return to his respective region, Jesus stays in the wilderness fasting. He enacts the true repentance that the regions of Judea failed to embody.⁵⁵ Thus, Galilee stands in contrast with Jerusalem.

The division between Galilee and Jerusalem roughly organizes the two halves of the Gospel. The first half (1:14-10:52) is characterized by Jesus's seemingly aimless wanderings around Galilee, proclaiming the Kingdom.⁵⁶ After 10:1, Jesus arrives in

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986). See her chapter on topographical space, pages 50-105.

⁵⁵ See Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 53-56.

⁵⁶ Where exactly to draw the halfway mark is a point of debate. The narrative shifts as soon as Peter recognizes Jesus in 8:29, causing the first prediction of Jesus' death. Yet, before Jesus begins his march to Jerusalem, the highly significant transfiguration scene occurs (9:1-12). Only after taking one last trip through Galilee (9:30) to teach his disciples does Jesus cross over to Judea (10:1). Tolbert locates the decisive shift at 10:52, right before Jesus arrives at Jerusalem. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 120. This seems

Judea to journey ever closer to his fate. Though the narrative ends in Jerusalem and its environs, the story projects a future for Jesus and the disciples in Galilee (14:28; 16:7). Jesus will “go ahead” of his disciples there. This means that, overall, the story begins in Galilee and moves towards Jerusalem, and then projects back from Jerusalem a return to Galilee.⁵⁷ The contrast of these two locations runs throughout the entire narrative.

Galilee Wanderings: *Journey as Setting*

The interim of Mark’s story takes place “on the road” (ὁ ὁδός). This “road” or “way” itself constitutes a setting that weaves through all others, taking on different characteristics depending upon Jesus’ destination. Despite the fact that much of Mark is a travel narrative, Jesus’s travels remain geographically nonsensical.⁵⁸ This reveals that Mark’s Jesus is not so much navigating a physical landscape, but a symbolic landscape. Mark is not interested in how close two locations are—whether it would make sense to travel from one to the other—but in the symbolic freight each location holds. What is important is whether each location is on the gentile side of the sea of Galilee or on the Jewish one. Mark points out that Jesus crossed “to the other side” to indicate these shifts in symbolic location (4:35; 5:1; 5:21; 6:45; 8:13).⁵⁹

wise, as the healing of two blind men form an *inclusio* around this entire transitional section (8:22-25; 10:46-52). Malbon, however, prefers to place the shift at 10:1, as least as far as the Markan spatial sequence is concerned. Malbon, *Narrative Space*, 30-34, 142.

⁵⁷ See Malbon, *Narrative Space*, 20-25.

⁵⁸ Malbon, *Narrative Space*, 15.

⁵⁹ Malbon correctly critiques the tendency to equate “Galilee” with gentile land and “Judea” with Jewish. Both are parts of the Jewish homeland, but Galilee—especially the sea of Galilee, forms a mediator between Jewish and gentile territories, and Jesus transgresses even the Galilean boundaries. See Malbon, *Narrative Space*, 43-44.

Inhabited Space vs. Uninhabited Space

Uninhabited spaces in the Gospel of Mark are those places typically portrayed as chaotic.⁶⁰ Wilderness and water, especially the seas, were viewed as places where chaos ruled, and thus also Satan and his demons.⁶¹ That Jesus has authority in these places, then, is striking. He at the very least does not succumb to Satan in the Wilderness, and afterwards consistently returns to a “deserted place” to pray and rest. In addition, he seems to have sovereignty over the chaotic seas (4:35-41), much like the sovereignty God displays in Genesis 1.

Jesus’s sovereignty over inhabited spaces, however, is deeply questioned from the very beginning. The demons, who are the inhabitants of the wilderness, listen to Jesus when he silences them precisely because they know who he is (1:24). Humans, on the other hand, do not know who Jesus is (1:27), and thus often do not listen to his commands to be silent, nor to his commands to tell. This contrast is driven home by Jesus’s speech about a “prophet without honor” and the subsequent execution of John in chapter 6. John’s death as the other character in the narrative closely associated with the way of the wilderness is foreboding. Satan’s hold is not truly strongest in the wilderness,

⁶⁰ The transfiguration mountain is the exception to this rule (9:1-12). Nonetheless, the Exodus echoes in this story, complete with the rebellion below (vv. 14-29) place this story squarely in “the wilderness.” The two poles of Mark’s concept of wilderness are thus clear; it is a place where people rebel and God’s rule seems thin, but it is also a place of divine encounter.

⁶¹ “It is evident that in these stories the sea is understood as in the Old Testament; it is the manifestation of the realm of death.” Mauser is arguing for a connection between the wilderness theme and the sea stories (4:36-41, 6:45-53). He helpfully points out the exorcism language in the first scene, as Jesus “rebukes” (ἐπετίμησεν) the storm just as he does the demons. In the second scene the disciples fear Jesus is a ghost. While not by itself conclusive, it “is noteworthy that Syriac Sinaiticus reads δαιμόνιον in 6.49 instead of φάντασμα. . . . Apparently the sea, like the desert, was regarded as a dwelling-place for demons.” Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 126-27. It is possible to overstate the dominance of the chaos theme in characterizing these lands, particularly in the Old Testament. See fn. 64 below.

but in the places where humans dwell, the temple (11:17), and even the human heart (7:1-23).

Focus: The Wilderness

Wilderness (ἔρημος) for Mark is a much more specific term than the English “wilderness.” Any uninhabited land can be considered “wilderness,” particularly by Americans. This sometimes even extends to the oceans!⁶² For biblical authors, however, wilderness tends to denote deserts, arid and semi-arid land—more specifically like our “wild west” than wilderness.⁶³ The land that lies beyond the Jordan is wilderness *par excellence* because of its association with Israel’s history. In contrast, most of the so-called American wilderness is forest. A translation that more accurately depicted the geography would be “wasteland,” but this has the unfortunate consequences of implying that these areas are valueless and beyond God’s concern. This is not the biblical position, either.⁶⁴ The following sections will explore the meaning of the different terms Mark uses for uninhabited spaces.

Mark 1: John and Jesus in the Wilderness

⁶² A google of the phrase “ocean wilderness” reveals many results, including from news sources like the BBC. For example: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-44970671>.

⁶³ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Retrieving the Community of Creation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 109. However, Mauser observes that a “deserted place” for Mark can be the relatively well cultivated area around Capernaum (1:35). Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 103. Indeed, a “deserted place” can have green grass (6:39). Nonetheless, these places are tied to the wilderness proper by their solitude, by the references to the Exodus tradition, and perhaps by the lack of available food (6:35-36).

⁶⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 112-115. Bauckham argues that these spaces are “negative” in the sense that they are hostile to humanity, but that “bad for humanity” does not mean “evil” for the biblical authors. Rather, the creator God had provided non-human creatures their own habitat, just as he had provided humans theirs.

The wilderness was a place with complex associations for first century Jews. On the one hand, it was utterly inhospitable to human life, filled with dangerous beasts, and the unique domain of Satan and his demons. On the other hand, the Law was given in the wilderness, and though the forty years wandering was a punishment, that period also constituted a period of intimacy with God for the people of Israel. In the wilderness God was present every day at the basic level of sustenance, fostering trust.⁶⁵ In the land, there was a risk of “forgetting” the Exodus and basing national security and identity in power.⁶⁶ Elijah, the second greatest of the prophets, spent much of his life in the wilderness. The greatest prophet, Moses, never left it. King David also exhibited ties to the wilderness in his two wandering periods (1 Sam 21:1-31:13, 2 Sam 1:1-2:1; 2 Sam 15:13-19:15) Quite simply, the wilderness is where Israel came to be Israel.

Thus, despite its utter inhospitality, many first century Jews expected the wilderness to play a key role in the restoration of Israel. It was a place of new beginnings for the true remnant of God’s people, where God would woo his people back to him as he had done at first (Hosea 2:14-23). Thus, communities like the Qumran moved off to the border of the wilderness to await the Messiah.⁶⁷ Military-based messianic movements exhibited a predictable pattern, too. The leader would go out to the wilderness to gather his troops, and then march on Jerusalem.⁶⁸ There was no better place to inaugurate the eschaton than in the wilderness.

⁶⁵ Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 21-25.

⁶⁶ Deuteronomy 8 is representative, especially 8:3. That Jesus quotes this verse in the temptations scenes of Matthew and Luke shows that this understanding of wilderness was still operative in New Testament times, though we must use caution when reading Matthew and Luke back into Mark.

⁶⁷ Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 58-61.

⁶⁸ Mauser *Christ in the Wilderness*, 56.

This is the context in which John appears in the wilderness. Mark draws explicitly on prophetic traditions in Isaiah and Malachi, setting up the two controlling settings of the first half of Mark: the wilderness and the “way.” John proclaims that the Messiah is coming soon, and so the people should come out to the wilderness to repent.⁶⁹ The practice of baptism recalls the waters of Exodus, even as the Jordan signals entrance into the promised land. John’s clothing reflects that of Elijah, as does his call to repentance.⁷⁰

This scene is freighted with meaning through the wilderness setting, the allusions it allows to Israel’s history, and the expectations it sets in the minds of the audience. At best a modern reader will understand that John is a “rustic” man. Indeed, our tendency to focus on characterization causes the average person to read these details about John’s garments as a suggestion of his personality. But these details have little to say about his psychological make-up at all. They locate him within a messianic pattern the people of Israel knew well; Elijah comes first, and then the messiah comes in power. John’s own words indicate this (1:7). If we understood on a gut level the symbolic role wilderness played in the life of Israel, this passage would strike us more powerfully.

The next major mention of the wilderness comes in v. 12. Jesus has just been confirmed to be messiah by a sign from heaven. Unlike Matthew and Luke, this sign does not seem to be seen or heard by anyone other than Jesus and, by extension, the audience. There is not even an indication that John recognizes Jesus (v. 9, cf. Matt 3:14; John 1:29-

⁶⁹ In fact, proper repentance is return to the desert. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 90-98. Mauser argues that the reference to both “baptism” and “cup” in 10:38 are references to bearing God’s wrath. Hence, Jesus’s “repentance” does not end in the geographical wilderness, but continues even unto the cross. Thus, Jesus is in the wilderness state until the end of the story, following the way of repentance which is a return to the wilderness. Conversely, that the rest of the baptized do not go out to the wilderness is deeply suspect.

⁷⁰ For a fuller discussion of the similarities between John and Elijah, see Collins, *Mark*, 141-146, esp. 145.

34)! Thus, in the first break with the expected Messianic pattern, the Messiah goes *unannounced* into the wilderness. There will be no gathering of troops, no military march. This first wilderness wandering remains a secret.

Though the actual scene in the wilderness lasts only two verses, it contains a wealth of exegetical oddities. Why does the Spirit “cast out” (ἐκβάλλει) Jesus into the wilderness, a term for rather violent expulsion?⁷¹ Why mention that Jesus is “with the beasts”? While it is difficult to answer this second question with certainty, it is clear that Mark expects the beasts to have some sort of symbolic significance. The presence of Satan, angels, and beasts obviously connects the cosmic and earthly dimensions of the story,⁷² and there is a wealth of Old Testament stories set in the wilderness for some period of time involving the number “40.” The question is which text (or texts) Mark wishes to evoke.

The word used for “beasts” (θηρίων) is the same as that is used in the Septuagint in Genesis 1. Is Mark portraying Jesus as a new Adam, in right relation once more with the wild beasts? This view does a good job of explaining Satan’s role in the temptation story. Satan is present to try and tempt Jesus away from a proper relationship with God, just as the serpent was present in the garden. Hence, the wilderness is a sort of new Eden. The number “40,” however, would suggest that Mark’s focus is on other stories in Israel’s history, particularly the Exodus and Elijah stories.

⁷¹ Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 98. Collins argues that this is reminiscent of the Spirit of God miraculously transporting Elijah, Elisha, and Ezekiel. Collins, *Mark*, 151. If so, it is unclear if Mark’s intention here came across to his first-century audience, given that both Matthew and Luke soften the verb (cf. Matt 4:1; Lk 4:1).

⁷² Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 4.

Against this positive interpretation of the beasts, Ulrich Mauser asserts that the scene establishes an enduring conflict between Jesus and Satan that runs the course of the narrative. Hence, it is not here mentioned that Satan leaves Jesus (cf. Lk 4:13; Matt 4:11).⁷³ The beasts, then, are not a fortuitous sign, but an extension of the hostility of the desert that will accompany Jesus through his entire ministry.⁷⁴ The battle lines in the desert are set between Jesus and his troops—the angels—and Satan and his allies—the beasts. Though Jesus' ability to cast out demons and calm chaotic storms later in the gospel demonstrate that Jesus *did* beat Satan in what is traditionally understood as the realm of the demons, Satan also controls the house of God. This battle in the wilderness thus finds its fullest fulfillment in the cleansing of the temple, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. Even after these events, the battle will still continue in the hearts of Christians. The angels will preserve them just as they preserved Jesus in the wilderness.⁷⁵

Mauser has argued for the role of Hosea 2:12-17 in shaping Mark's wilderness account.⁷⁶ Israel will be called out to the wilderness and the relationship between God and God's people will be renewed. In the next verse, the wild animals are restored as well (2:18), for violence among animals is not cleanly distinguished from violence among humans:

⁷³ Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 100. It is also common to note a connection to Psalm 91:11-13. Susan R. Garrett makes this observation, arguing that the wild beasts are wilderness dangers from which Jesus was protected. Susan R. Garrett, *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 57. Collins argues that we should focus on the Qumran community's reception of Psalm 91, especially its use to ward off demons. Collins, *Mark*, 151-53. In my opinion, the tendency to connect the passage to Psalm 91 reads Matthew and Luke too much back into Mark.

⁷⁴ Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 101. See also Isaiah 13:20-22. Here, beasts are implicitly connected to demons.

⁷⁵ Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 111, cf. Mk 13:13b.

⁷⁶ Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 45-47.

In that day I will make a covenant for them
 with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky
 and the creatures that move along the ground.
 Bow and sword and battle
 I will abolish from the land,
 so that all may lie down in safety. (NIV)

Richard Bauckham gives support to such an argument through a close reading of texts like Isaiah 11.⁷⁷ Bauckham sees the three groups present with Jesus in the desert—Satan, beasts, and angels—on a spectrum from foe to friend.⁷⁸ Like humans, animals are caught somewhere in between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, awaiting the Messiah to come and bring the reign of God to them, too.

Given the quotation of Isaiah earlier in the chapter, the allusion to Elijah tradition in John, and the potential influence of the Hosea tradition, it is best to let these texts inform our evaluation of the beasts. All of these texts portray the beasts as threats to human life, but there is little suggestion that they are fundamentally allies of Satan. Rather, the messiah is sovereign over the animals and will restore their proper relation to human beings as they enjoyed it in the garden. Indeed, there was a “common Jewish idea that the beasts are subject to the righteous man and do him no harm....”⁷⁹ Most tellingly, both Isaiah and Hosea connect human peace and peace among animals. If, as many have argued, Mark is arguing for a peaceful Messiah over and against a military one, is it too far-fetched that he too connects human and animal peace? Through his faithfulness, Jesus is restoring order to the entire cosmos.

⁷⁷ Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 120-24.

⁷⁸ Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 126-29.

⁷⁹ D.E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), 64.

Deserted Places

Mark's use of the term ἔρημος, "wilderness," as a noun is quite rare. It occurs only in chapter 1, and a related noun ἐρημία occurs in 8:4. Far more common for Mark is the adjectival ἔρημος τόπος, "deserted place." On the face of it, it is unclear why Mark uses these different terms. Mauser argues that ἔρημος τόπος is distinctly Markan, and ἐρημία comes from earlier tradition.⁸⁰ The insertion of ἔρημος τόπος into these various stories, then, suggests Mark "has a certain intention in using it." He argues that ἔρημος τόπος speaks of Jesus's withdrawal from the public, and is thus closely related to other places of retreat—the sea and mountains—and to the phrase κατ' ἰδίαν (alone/by himself). Apparently, frequent withdrawal from public spaces for prayer marks the way of the wilderness Messiah.

The noun use of ἔρημος could also be explained by reference to earlier tradition. It is apparent from Matthew and Luke's account of the temptation that at least one other account of Jesus's temptation was circulating. Both Matthew and Luke use ἔρημος (Matt 3:1; 4:1; Lk 3:2; 4:1). Perhaps, then, Mark's audience would already have been familiar with the story, and thus associated the noun use of ἔρημος with the specific desert in which John preached. If so, Mark's use of "wilderness" here most closely mirrors modern American usage: a place "untrammelled by man."⁸¹ ἔρημος τόπος could refer to the perfectly cultivated land outside of Capernaum, but *the* wilderness was the land beyond the Jordan. Nonetheless, all these places are linked by their primary feature of solitude.

⁸⁰ Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 104-107.

⁸¹ Wilderness Act, 16 U.S.C. § 1131-1136 (1964), 2(C).

What concerns Mark is not that these places have never been affected by human civilization, but that Jesus and the disciples can be alone.

Jesus first withdraws into a “deserted place” to pray (1:35). Soon after beginning his ministry, however, these places are no longer solitary. He gains such a following that he is unable to enter cities, and the crowds find him even in these deserted places (1:45). Hence, Jesus is denied the solitude that the wilderness first meant for him. These places were meant to be restful for Jesus and the disciples from all the “coming and going” of being with the crowds (6:31), but they become a scene for some of Jesus’s greatest works, particularly the provision of bread (6:35-44). This feeding in particular has strong Exodus echoes. Jesus sits the people down in groups as Moses arranged the Israelites judicially (cf. Ex 18). Then he provides bread as God did in the wilderness (Ex 16).

Jesus, however, does not stay to bask in his popularity. He is not like the Messiah pretenders before him, who amassed armies in the wilderness. He dismisses the crowds and sends his disciples away on a boat (6:45), just as they had come on a boat to be alone (6:32). Now lacking the ability to remain hidden both in inhabited and uninhabited places, the sea becomes a useful “deserted place” for Jesus, though even on the sea he sometimes has company (4:36).

Though Mark ceases to use the ἔρημος family of words after 8:5, many events still occur “privately” and thus pick up on the theme of the solitary and secret Messiah. On the ocean, Jesus dismays that his disciple still “don’t understand” (8:17-21). After this, Peter recognizes Jesus as the messiah (8:29), but Jesus commands him to remain silent about his identity, and then reveals that the messiah must suffer (8:30-31). Peter is unable to accept this message (8:32).

Later, Jesus takes only an elite group of disciples up to a mountain privately to pray (9:1). Here his glory is revealed along with Moses and Elijah, both men of the desert (9:4). Peter is once again afraid (9:5-6). Jesus enters the privacy of a house and implies that his disciples were too weak to cast out a demon because they didn't pray and fast (9:28-30). He then teaches them about the suffering Messiah, but they do not understand and are afraid to ask him (9:31-32). Jesus teaches just the twelve about himself one more time, but they fail to understand (10:33-37)

Towards the end of the gospel, Jesus takes his disciples privately up to the Mount of Olives. Just as the one man of Galilee contrasted with the many from Jerusalem in chapter 1, so the Mount of Olives is outside Jerusalem standing opposite the temple mount (13:3). They return to the mount of Olives, where Jesus predicts Peter's denial (14:26-31). They then go even further to Gethsemane, and Jesus exhorts his elite group of disciples to keep watch before going off entirely on his own to pray (14:33-34). They fail both to keep watch and to pray (14:37-41). Eventually, they all scatter.

Though the crowds follow Jesus into the deserted places, and though his disciples follow him up to the mountains, the end is just like the beginning. The many who first seemed to repent fall away. The Messiah walks alone into a deserted place. The Messiah alone prays and fasts. The Messiah alone withstands the testing of Satan.⁸²

Conclusion

⁸² Beck, *Nonviolent Story*, 45, makes a useful observation that allows us to connect Gethsemane and the wilderness thematically. In Mark's plot, John and Judas both serve as catalysts for action, one for its opening and the other for its closing. These catalysts are then immediately followed by temptation/testing, one of Jesus in the wilderness, and the other primarily of the disciples in the garden.

When Jesus predicts the disciples falling away, he gives them the promise that he would go ahead of them into Galilee (Mk 14:28). This promise is reiterated in 16:7 to the women at the tomb, but they are too afraid to report to the disciples. The narrative ends with this tension. The Messiah who alone withstood the testing of Satan is extending a second chance to his disciples, but it remains to be seen if anyone will take it. Will Jesus again be the lone Galilean? The audience is invited to fill in the rest of the narrative with their own life, following Jesus and “telling” about him when everyone within the narrative has failed.

Wilderness, the “deserted places,” and other isolated spots play a key role in this narrative. They conjure all sorts of expectations in the audience, both through biblical allusions and via critique of other wilderness-based Messianic movements. They serve to dramatize the isolation of the Messiah, even while they are the places where the Messiah is most clearly revealed. They are places of testing, places of solitude, places of repentance, and places of divine encounter. They are places of prayer that grant the power to cast out demons and defeat the temptations of Satan. They are places where Satan and the servants of God do battle. Most importantly, they are places of Israel’s renewal. Repentance means following the Messiah on his “way” first through the wilderness, but in the end, no one other than the audience has tracked the full journey.

American Wilderness and the Wild West

However different the American concept of wilderness is to the ancient Jewish mind, Americans can resonate with a lone hero emerging out of a Judean desert. Even that sentence betrays some of our concept of wilderness. Why is it a “lone” figure that

resonates with us, and why must it be a harsh and dry environment like the desert? It is true that Jesus is alone in Mark's prologue, much like the heroes of modern westerns, but is his isolation key to the meaning of his sojourn in the desert, and if so, does it mean the same thing as the loneliness of a modern western hero? The answer, like all answers in adaptation, is both yes and no.

Wilderness and the American Mind: The Concept of Wilderness in General

America has had an interesting history with “wilderness” among western civilizations. American attitudes toward wilderness were first formed in a European crucible—where most land had long since been tamed and turned into pasture. The ideal of European civilization was in turn contrasted with the “wild” of uninhabited lands—that is, lands uninhabited by *Europeans*.⁸³ The end result is that wilderness was set on a spectrum with European civilization as two antipodes. Eden was the pastoral, Christianized garden of European fancy, “wilderness” was the untamed, sinful thicket of New World forests. The American Puritans imbibed this ideology deeply, and it is clearly visible in the works of early American authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne; everything evil happens in the forest.⁸⁴

Of course, later American authors began to see the wilderness as an American distinctive. To a young nation struggling to find an identity as noble as the tradition-freighted old world, this uniqueness was critical.⁸⁵ The Old World may have cathedrals,

⁸³ The traditional narrative of struggle between righteous settlers and the “wild” natives is powerfully portrayed and critiqued in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

⁸⁴ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (London: Yale University Press, 1982), 39-40.

⁸⁵ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 67-83.

but the New World has mountains—the *mysterium tremendum*—the world as the Creator God fashioned it. It was here Americans could encounter God.⁸⁶ Motivated by the ugliness of cities and the Industrial Revolution, wilderness slowly became the national pride of the American people. The rugged frontiersman struggling against the thicket was the American *par excellence*, and thus the cult of wilderness was born. The city was often viewed as old and degenerate, so wilderness and human society were still viewed as antipodes, but now the evaluation was generally in favor of “pure” wilderness. For those bound irreducibly to city life, this concept of wilderness has now been commercialized by brands like REI. Those privileged enough within urban society to take vacations often sojourn in these wildernesses to rest, to rejuvenate, to leave the hustle and bustle of bureaucratic society. Here we can encounter challenge, testing our mettle and boy-scout resourcefulness—our preparedness. The wilderness represents a meritocracy of individuals, one of the last places men (and it is typically men) can be tried and triumph on equal grounds.⁸⁷

The difficulty with this source of nationalistic identity is that it rapidly disappeared. It was increasingly relegated to an increasingly remote the western frontier, giving rise to the frontier myth and an idolization of cowboy society.⁸⁸ This western frontier was itself tenuous, more tenuous, in fact. “America had an eastern frontier for over two hundred years but a western frontier for only four decades.”⁸⁹ By the time

⁸⁶ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 74. For an account of “the complex of attitudes toward man, nature, and God known as Transcendentalism” (84) see pages 84-95.

⁸⁷ “The cowboy emerges from the wilderness, so he is closest to Nature, the most free and equal.” Will Wright, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory* (London: SAGE, 2001), 5.

⁸⁸ Wright, *The Wild West*, 6.

⁸⁹ Wright, *The Wild West*, 6.

McCarthy writes, it was restricted to the ironic category of a Designated Wilderness—a place regulated and tended by humans so as to be unregulated and untended.⁹⁰

McCarthy, Wilderness and the Wild West

Though the concept of “wilderness” is distinct from the “wild west,” the two are deeply interconnected.⁹¹ The setting of the western is a particular instance of “wilderness,” with only the occasional road or town to break it up, and the cowboy’s identity rests in the hardy wilderness. The wild west is similarly a meritocracy of skill, particularly skill with horses and guns, and both the wilderness seeker and the lone rider shun the safety-net of society.⁹² Most basically, the wild west is defined similarly to the way wilderness is defined—the lack of some negative and controlling “civilization.” Of course, the “wild” in “wild west” often describes its inhabitants—it refers to the violence

⁹⁰ Cronon’s classic essay “The Trouble with Wilderness” highlights this paradox. See William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” pp. 69-90 in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 9-11.

The sense of the faded west is clearest in McCarthy in the soliloquies of *No Country for Old Men*, but shows up in the loss of the wolf in *The Crossing*, and the diminishment of the last ranches in *Cities of the Plain*.

⁹¹ And they are concepts still operative in American politics today. The current (November 2018) issue of National Geographic sports a cowboy riding in a western landscape on its cover. It reads “The Battle for the American West: In the wide open protected spaces of the west, the question endures: Whose land is it anyway?” Of course, the battle is over the official designation of these lands—so evocative of the wild west—as protected “wilderness.” Though wilderness is the official legal designation, the wild west and wilderness are often thought of interchangeably. Wright asserts that the western overtook the original frontier myth of the east. Wright, *The Wild West*, 6.

⁹² Wright observes that the individualistic myth of the cowboy hero typically has the protagonist lack any sort of aristocratic status. He is defined by the wilderness, not his job, and thus is an icon of equality. Wright, *The Wild West*, 6.

of men unregulated by law and order.⁹³ Nonetheless, the toughness of the inhabitants of the wild west is borne of the toughness of the land.⁹⁴

McCarthy's protagonists in his *Border Trilogy* seem to have imbibed this nostalgia for "the west," particularly the cowboy way of life. Since this reality is dying in America, they project this desire for a "natural" way of life on Mexico, and journey into its wildernesses. These adventures, however, do not map cleanly on the modern mythologizing of the wild west. McCarthy is nothing if not realistic, and his stories stand in a similar relationship to the Wild West narrative as Mark stands to the traditional Jewish narrative of the Wilderness Messiah. To some extent, they accept the Wild West/Wilderness Messiah as a true ideal, but they can only do so by turning the values of the traditional story on its head.

Realistic Landscape and Divine Encounter

⁹³ One of the biggest differences between the popular concept of wilderness and of the "wild west" is that the wilderness must be free of all humans whatsoever, while the "wild west" need only to lack the law and order of civilization. Those who advocate a "pure" wilderness free of human inhabitants often ignore that this land was once inhabited before the American government kicked off the natives. The "wild west," however, is perfectly comfortable with populating its wilderness with supposedly savage human beings. Humans can be sufficiently wild so as to belong and in fact enhance the drama of this western landscape. The protagonist tests his mettle both against the land and against those humans who often are not quite considered human. McCarthy largely avoids this racism, for his violence seems a universal human trait, characterizing western civilization, the Natives, and the roadside bandits all the same.

⁹⁴ This, perhaps, is the biggest difference between the *landscape* of "wilderness" and the "wild west." Wilderness is defined by the lack of the comforts of civilization, but it need not be land hostile to human life. The settings of the wild west are stereotypically arid, vast, and demanding. Thus the "wild west" magnifies the themes of resourcefulness and self-reliance present in the American concept of wilderness. Western characters are not trying to encounter God in the maze of a forest that so naturally lends itself to cathedral imagery. They are down to earth and hardy, encountering only incidentally the sublime and transcendental so important to the American wilderness. After all, as exalted individualists, encountering something "larger than oneself" would cut against the grain of their identity, unless, like the wilderness landscape, that "larger than oneself" facilitated self-reliance. McCarthy's western wilderness is uniquely re-transcendentalized by the almost divine violent impulse of the world. See "Realistic Landscape and Divine Encounter" below.

Intense familiarity with the western landscape is a hallmark of modern Westerns. Real place names are given, realistic distances are traveled, and specific plants and animals are constantly being encountered. There is a longing for a landscape prior to suburban sprawl that drives this realism. The landscape carries such importance in Westerns precisely because the creation of a wild heterocosm is how Westerns express their preference for a different form of life. Every beautiful description of an unpaved red-clay bend around the mountains is a repudiation of a well-paved and bureaucratic society.⁹⁵

On the surface level, this treatment of landscape could not be more distinct from Mark, whose landscape lacks any sort of realistic detail. In fact, such beautiful and detailed rendering of the land of Judea is likely to support the very blood and soil nationalism that Mark was trying to deconstruct, just as the western landscape became a source of nationalistic identity for Americans. But Jesus transgresses the boundaries of Judean lands by constantly crossing over into Gentile territory and performing miracles there. Moreover, Mark's landscape is less populated by natural realities than by political and cosmic ones. Apart from "the wild animals" of 1:12, creatures really only play a role in the exorcism of Legion (5:1-20)—a story that resonates with cosmic realities. The most significant reference to flora is the split episode of the fig-tree (11:12-25), which serves as a metaphor for the destruction of the temple.

This is undoubtedly a difficulty, but McCarthy's texts provide some resources for overlaying the cosmic landscape of Mark and the realistic landscape of modern Westerns.

⁹⁵ Wright would argue similarly, but on different grounds. The vibrant and endless "open frontier" is a necessary component of the western myth. It is symbolic of the limitless resources individualist market economies assume must exist in order to function. Wright, *The Wild West*, 6-8. Thus, though the wilderness is critical of the industrial east, it nonetheless is a myth supporting a certain type of consumptive society.

The first resource is simply that McCarthy's realistic landscapes are often swallowed by realities bigger than themselves. The red-clay in an instant becomes transcendent in the crimson sun-set, depicting a violence larger than the landscape itself. In a paradigmatic example, John Grady Cole and Rawlins stray into the "dark electric" of the sky:

They rode out on the high prairie where they slowed the horses to a walk and the stars swarmed around them out of the blackness. They heard somewhere in that tenantless night a bell that tolled and ceased where no bell was and they rode out of the round dais of the earth which alone was dark and no light to it and which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that they rode not under but among them and they rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing. (30)⁹⁶

In addition, The characters often fall asleep and have dreams that transfigure the landscape, especially mountains, into hotbeds for symbolism.⁹⁷ There is a liminality between the physical and spiritual landscapes of McCarthy's stories, which allows spiritual meaning to supervene on his detailed physical descriptions. Secondly, McCarthy also has a border-crossing motif. Though the ideological division of the traditional western runs geographically east to west,⁹⁸ McCarthy's symbolic space extends north to

⁹⁶ It's worth noting how words like *tenantless* reinforce the solitude in McCarthy's depiction of the Wilderness. Phrases like "a bell that tolled and ceased where no bell was" play doubly on this lack of civilization. A common feature of civilization is presented—the church bell—and then negated. This sense of a phantasmal civilization at once lifts the landscape into cosmic reality, and implies that Cole and Rawlins are haunted by what they are leaving behind. They will not, in fact, find the sort of civilization they are looking for, but a new country inhabited by a new violence, into which they are introduced more as thieves than anything else.

⁹⁷ Steven Frye notes that McCarthy uses frames and dreams to "unsettle the reader's faith in a distinctly perceivable world." Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 13.

⁹⁸ "The images of the myth always distinguish between honest, decent westerners and greedy, selfish easterners. The frontier West is always seen as potentially civil and just, while the urban East is always seen as irredeemably corrupt. The villains in the West want to monopolize all the property, preventing a civil market of equal owner-workers. But these villains, usually from the East, can be defeated in the West by strong, honorable individualists – the cowboy hero – because of the open frontier." (Wright 5). Interestingly, there are depictions of honest men both north and south of the border in McCarthy, as

south across the U.S and Mexico border. The protagonists cross this border at least three times in each book, and the action in *Cities of the Plain* centers around Cole's effort to bring someone across the border. In the first two books, United States comes to represent the new bureaucratic society the characters are trying to escape, much as the threats to Jesus and his disciple's way of life come from the Judean bureaucracy. Mexico's landscape becomes the (thwarted) promise of freedom for McCarthy's characters, just as Galilee and the lands beyond the sea of Galilee become the home of the Jewish Messiah (though here too the promise of a new way of life is not realized by any character within the narrative).⁹⁹ McCarthy's realistic rendering of the American landscape does not lend itself to the frontiersman nationalism that has typified the American appraisal of wilderness, for it is in just as much tension with the traditional rendering of American wilderness as Mark is of the traditional rendering of the wilderness Messiah. Could the Jewish/gentile border of the sea of Galilee function similarly in an adaptation of Mark?

The Wild Protagonist

Perhaps the first thing one notices about McCarthy's work relative to that of other modern Westerns is the suffering of his protagonists. The wilderness is a place for human

there are depictions of the greedy, with few references to their place of origin. Any sort of geographical split of good/evil is false in McCarthy. Violence is universal, as is fraternity. It is simply the instruments of violence that change on the various sides of the border.

⁹⁹ McCarthy here is engaging another myth often associated with Mexico—the “Infernal Paradise”—in which the heights of violence and the depths of fraternity are projected by an Anglo author onto the Mexican land. At times McCarthy seems to fall unreflectively into this myth, but it is telling that his protagonists do not finally end up in Mexico, but on a ranch in Texas. In addition, *All the Pretty Horses* can be read as a coming-of-age novel for John Grady Cole, where the story-book ideals he projects on Mexico are slowly negated. McCarthy *may*, therefore, have an interest in adhering closely to this myth in his characterization of Mexicans and the Mexican landscape, so that he can in turn reverse its expectations. If so, he probably could have done so more clearly. See Daniel Cooper Alarcón, “All the Pretty Mexicos: Cormac McCarthy's Mexican Representations” in *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions* ed. James D. Lilley (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

brutality to be explored,¹⁰⁰ and his characters are as often the victims as the perpetrators. Characters survive only through agonizing physical trials that leave them cut and maimed.¹⁰¹

Of course, violence is part of the “wild west” aesthetic.¹⁰² These mythic protagonists are supposed to be hard and hardy, so of course brutal physical trials are present. These trials are presented to the protagonists in the “wilderness” so that they can show off their strength. The wilderness is a place of testing that allows the mythic hero to shine through confident utilization of their own powers, typically with a horse and a gun. The conflict with Mark’s depiction of wilderness is readily apparent. Here, it is not the individual’s skill that sustains them, but rather an abiding trust in God. One is after radical dependence, not transcendent independence.

Thus, one of the differences in McCarthy’s work that makes his wilderness concept more suitable to adapting Mark’s is that his protagonists’ suffering is foregrounded relative to their triumph over the trials. Suffering functions to make his main characters sympathetic—he does not woo us with their skill alone. Nonetheless, the point of a traditional Western protagonist is not to be a developed and sympathetic character, but a larger-than-life archetype of a near impervious male.¹⁰³ Suffering—especially the debilitation and dependency that follows a major wound—undercuts the ethos of the gunslinger, revealing them as another human dependent on structured society

¹⁰⁰ Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 9.

¹⁰¹ John Grady Cole is beaten repeatedly, lacerated in a cafeteria fight, shot, and eventually must cauterize his own wounds with a gun barrel heated over a campfire. His companion Rawlins fares no better.

¹⁰² Wright, *The Wild West*, 2.

¹⁰³ Wright, *The Wild West*, 143-157.

for life. Their skill, however developed, does not make them impervious. John Grady Cole is unmatched with horses, and his companion Blevins is a dead-eye capable of slaughtering law enforcement even in his youth. But the “wilderness,” which is in fact just the widely inhabited Mexican countryside, has the last laugh. Those characters that survive are not those who have the most skill. Everyone is capable. Those who survive either get plain lucky,¹⁰⁴ are bailed out by the powerful within society,¹⁰⁵ or benefit from the hospitality of strangers.¹⁰⁶ The characters who most closely resemble the rough-riding protagonists of modern westerns—Blevins and Boyd Parham—end up dead, often in the middle of the supposed “wilderness” where bureaucratic law enforcement has taken them to execute with impunity. Indeed, everything that resembles “the wild” ends up dead. The first third of *The Crossing* present Billy Parham trying to save the last wolf of which he is aware, to return her to a safe location. She is brutally killed for entertainment.¹⁰⁷

However skilled McCarthy’s characters are, then, they remain pervious to forces greater than them, perhaps even a God.¹⁰⁸ His characters are powerful, no doubt, just as David was a great warrior and Jesus was both clever and capable of casting out demons, but they succeed or fail by a “will” outside themselves. Nonetheless, McCarthy’s deity is not Israel’s loving and patient God. It is a bloody and violent impulse at the heart of

¹⁰⁴ Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 199-201. Though Cole wins this knife fight against a more skilled opponent by sacrificing his safety, the same strategy finally fails him in *Cities of the Plain*, when no bureaucratic power or doctor is available to save him from his wounds.

¹⁰⁵ McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 202-209. In fact, it is Cole’s “enemy” in the story who buys him out of jail.

¹⁰⁶ Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 272-273, 300-307. Boyd Parham is saved first by villagers who take him into their care for no particular reason, and then by a doctor who does the same.

¹⁰⁷ McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 113-122.

¹⁰⁸ Frye, *Understanding McCarthy*, 34.

reality best represented by a bull writhing in sacrificial torment.¹⁰⁹ An adaptor could use McCarthy to present a modern story set in the wilderness that is simultaneously about the virtues of the protagonist and the nature of some further entities arranging their lives, but they would have to baptize his vision of the divine and in the process reformulate his depiction of the crimson wilderness. This violent force brought out by the wild in McCarthy finds its closest parallel to Mark's Satan. The trial of Jesus in the wilderness makes apparent not the character of the Creator, but the nature of the cosmic struggle between Satan and God.

The Solitary Wilderness Vs. Society

Settings gain their meanings not just by themselves, but by their location in a network of settings outside themselves. Mark pits Judea and Galilee against each other, and McCarthy's characters hope the Mexican "wilderness" will be an escape from all the bureaucratic regulation represented by the encroaching city populated by cars instead of horses. When it comes to wilderness, its most obvious opposite are those places already inhabited.

In a certain sense, Mark is closer to the traditional Western than he is to McCarthy when it comes to the solitary nature of Wilderness. The western protagonist is stereotypically a lone protagonist who gains companions over the course of the story. Like Mark, they start out an isolated protagonist. In contrast, McCarthy's characters almost always go out to the wilderness in pairs. Cole and Rawlins, Parham and the Wolf, Billy and his brother, and finally Billy and Cole. Yet the ideological content

¹⁰⁹ McCarthy's depiction of violence is clearest in the character of the Judge in *Blood Meridian*.

communicated by these pairs is closer to Mark than the lone protagonist of a stereotypical western, for neither Mark nor McCarthy mythologizes isolation. Though both Jesus and McCarthy's protagonists desire solitude, the total isolation of the cross or the loss of companions is crushing for both. This is nowhere clearer than in the ending paragraph of *The Crossing*, when Billy has lost even the companionship of a broken and grotesque dog:

He walked out. A cold wind was coming down off the mountains. It was shearing off the western slopes of the continent where the summer snow lay above the timberline and it was crossing through the high fir forests and among the poles of the aspens and it was sweeping over the desert plain below. It had ceased raining in the night and he walked out on the road and called for the dog. He called and called. Standing in that inexplicable darkness. Where there was no sound anywhere save only the wind. After a while he sat in the road. He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept. He sat there for a long time and after a while the east did gray and after a while the right and godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction. (301-302)

For McCarthy's characters, desiring to escape the oppression of bureaucratic structures and industrial society does not mean "going it alone." They are not trying to escape to an individualist paradise, but by riding off in pairs they are trying to reclaim a way of friendship and free sociality that the wilderness represents to them.¹¹⁰ In a similar way, Mark's wilderness represents a simpler and purer time for Israel as a nation.

¹¹⁰ The peculiarity of McCarthy's work is not that he encourages the embodiment of a new sociality. Wright recognizes that the cowboy myth offers the hope of a new social order built on an open frontier. Wright, *The Wild West*, 1. What is peculiar to McCarthy is that his relationship to that individualism is much more complicated. In *All the Pretty Horses*, the character who most clearly wears the individualist esthetic—Blevins—is in fact an insecure youth that clings to the older boys. In *The Crossing* the isolation of the individual wolf lacking her pack is lamented, and the plot of *Cities of the Plain* is entirely centered around John Grady Cole trying to find himself a wife. The new sociality shown by McCarthy is one best exemplified by the hospitable Mexican villages the protagonists often rely upon for survival. Also peculiar to McCarthy is that his form of new sociality finally fails for his individualist protagonists. Rawlins leaves, the wolf dies, Boyd dies, and finally even John Grady Cole dies, leaving Billy to wander the world alone.

Yet, McCarthy's characters almost always end up alone. Rawlins leaves Cole before he rides back into Mexico. For Billy, the wolf dies, Billy's brother abandons him and dies, and Cole dies in his arms. The border trilogy rather ends with Billy wandering about alone, much like the implied ending of Mark where Jesus returns to Galilee with no disciples to meet him. In McCarthy, this ending is actual, and thus calls more. The audience is summoned to do what the characters in the story could not; to join Jesus in his wilderness solitude, to pray vigilantly instead of falling asleep, and to form a society that *can* accept Jesus when Judea cannot.

Conclusions

For Will Wright, the "Cowboy Myth" reinforces American independence, market individualism, and meritocratic equality,¹¹¹ but McCarthy stands in tension with these values. His characters, though they reject large-scale society, nonetheless embody a new form of sociality that involves fleeing from the reality dominated by the industrial market. Though they are undoubtedly skilled, it is not their skill but outside forces that determine their fate. Finally, though they long for the west of the old, they do not find it. In many other ways McCarthy runs against the grain of modern westerns. He includes violence as a basic part of human nature, but soberly evaluates its disastrous consequences. He encourages love of a beautiful wilderness, but it is the Mexican wilderness and not the American that receives his most intimate treatment.

Mark too stands in tension with the common "wilderness messiah" narrative of his time, preaching a non-violent gospel. Even more than this, Mark inverts a Christian

¹¹¹ Wright, *The Wild West*, 193.

audiences' expectations for a Jesus story, portraying the disciples as mostly failures and even the faithful women as falling short. Both receive elements from the tradition before them, but they adapt these traditional stories to their own purposes. Any adaptor of Mark would do well to study their techniques and to heed how their depictions of wilderness aid them in their goals.

A Call to Adapt

The goal of this study has been to highlight the complexities of adapting a particular gospel, Mark, into a modern form of story-telling. It has done so first through suggesting the complexity of just one dimension of Mark's story, his use of wilderness, and comparing it to Cormac McCarthy's use of wilderness. This study has tried to note both the opportunities and difficulties a modern audience's familiarity with the western wilderness motif would present for an adaptor, and has suggested that McCarthy's subversive relationship to traditional western themes provides an interesting opportunity for an adaptor to modify the techniques of modern storytelling to approximate Mark's force.

To some extent, the constraints of this study have been artificial. In the creative process of adaptation it may very well arise that features of Mark's story not addressed by the wilderness motif will fit well into an American understanding of wilderness, and many of the themes which inform Mark's treatment of wilderness may be better treated in other dimensions of the story. This is in fact inevitable. While American audiences are familiar with a solitary hero riding out of the desert, they will not likely hear Mark's uniquely messianic overtones—nor will they see the wilderness as a place of national

renewal. To capture this dimension of meaning, the adaptor will need to use other elements of the story in conjunction with the wilderness setting to infuse wilderness with meaning it would not otherwise have. Perhaps the low clay mountains could be described with language reminiscent of castles, or the sun a crown. Perhaps the adaptor could take their cue from Matthew and Luke and give Satan lines, tapping the resources of modern characterization. Whatever the solution, there will be no one-to-one correspondence between the original and the adaptation—fidelity demands change for a new audience with new problems and reactions.

As Linda Hutcheon argues, adaptations ought always be works with their own integrity, even when they—like Mark’s ending—rely on familiarity with earlier versions of the story for their effect. There can be no replacing the earlier work, though there can be integrative engagement with it, engagement that requires wrestling with the original text, creatively working through both continuity and change. Both the tendency of preachers and adaptors to treat the four canonical gospels as a repository of independent “episodes” to be selected at their leisure overlooks this integrity. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with a canonical form of adaptation, just as there is nothing wrong with the historical scholarship of form and source criticism, but such approaches mean that authors do not wrestle with *Mark*. His voice goes unheard. This gospel needs a new generation of adaptors who will hear his voice and heed his command: “*go and tell.*”

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