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Down the Steep Bank

Verticality in Mark 5:1-20*

Juraj Feník

Introduction

Besides his exceptional scholarly work in the area of OT studies, the honoree of this *Festschrift* issue of *Studia Biblica Slovaca*, Peter Dubovský, SJ, has contributed to the writing of a Slovak commentary on Mark (2013) with his analysis of passages in Mark 5. To honor Peter's professional and human qualities on the occasion of his 60th birthday and to acknowledge his enormous contribution to biblical scholarship in Slovakia and internationally, this short essay focuses on an aspect of the story of the Gerasene demoniac in the hope of supplementing Peter's analysis in that commentary.

The emphasis on spatial markers is a well-known feature not only of Mark's Gospel in general, but also of the episode of the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20)¹ in particular, a feature that has been widely addressed in critical scholarship². As part of the general scholarly tendency to recognize the spatial dimensions of this story, Glöckner accurately observes that a number of constructions describing the actions of the characters refer to their entry or exit, their position inside or outside, or their arrival or departure³. A rapid review of the narrative confirms his claim.

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¹ For an example of a recent exegetical attempt to study this pericope, see BONIFACIO, *Personaggi minori*, 99-130.

² For an overview of Mark's geographic and topographic areas, see chapter 5 in the recent monograph STEWART, *Gathered Around Jesus*, or the earlier study by MALBON, *Narrative Space*. For space in Mark 5,1-20, note BOSENIUS, *Der literarische Raum*, 201-202. Note also the now-classic study STAROBINSKI, *The Gerasene Demoniac*, 61-65.

³ GLÖCKNER, *Neutestamentliche Wundergeschichten*, 81-82.

The story begins with a brief statement describing the arrival of Jesus and his disciples (v. 1 ἦλθον) in the region of the Gerasenes. After getting out of the boat (v. 2 ἐξελθόντος), Jesus is met (v. 2 ὑπήντησεν) by a possessed man who comes from the tombs (v. 2 ἐκ τῶν μνημείων). The afflicted man is said to have spent all days and nights in the tombs (v. 5 ἐν τοῖς μνήμασιν) (and the hills) and to run (ἔδραμεν) to Jesus upon spotting him from a distance (v. 5 ἀπὸ μακρόθεν). The unclean spirit is ordered to leave (v. 8 ἐξελθε) the man (v. 8 ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου), and the legion of spirits then begs Jesus not to send them away from the land (v. 10 ἔξω τῆς χώρας). Instead, he is to dispatch them into the swine (v. 12 εἰς τοὺς χοίρους), so that they may enter them (v. 12 εἰς αὐτοὺς εἰσελθωμεν). The unclean spirits are subsequently cast out (v. 13 ἐξελθόντα) and enter the swine (v. 13 εἰσῆλθον εἰς τοὺς χοίρους). As a result of the swines' drowning, the shepherds flee (v. 14 ἔφυγον) and their report draws people of the town (v. 14 ἦλθον) who seek to verify the catastrophe. While they approach (v. 15 ἔρχονται) Jesus, they then suddenly ask him to leave (v. 17 ἀπελθεῖν) their land. As Jesus enters (v. 18 ἐμβαίνοντος) the boat, the healed man asks to accompany him (v. 18 ἵνα μετ' αὐτοῦ ᾗ), but Jesus sends (v. 19 ὑπάγε) him home to his family. The story concludes with the man's departure (v. 20 ἀπῆλθεν) and his testimonial tour in the Decapolis. As this brief analysis shows, the episode includes the element of horizontality, that is, it frequently draws attention to the characters' coming and going. The characters are situated on a horizontal axis and Mark repeatedly describes their movements from point A to point B.

In addition to frequent transitions along horizontal lines, the narrative includes verses that engage the concept of verticality, when individuals are located up and down or move from places above to venues below. These are rather subtle, less in the forefront than the segments operating with the notion of horizontality. It is the verses involving the element of verticality that represent the object of this inquiry. The essay seeks to identify those texts and examine their contribution to the message of the story.

1 In the hills (5:5)

The plight of the possessed Gerasene is depicted in intense detail, comprising four verses (vv. 2-5) that constitute a parenthesis within the narrative. On three occasions Mark notes the place of his dwelling – the tombs (vv. 2.3.5).

Especially intriguing is the formulation in v. 3 which states that the man had a dwelling in the tombs (ὅς τὴν κατοίκησιν εἶχεν ἐν τοῖς μνήμασιν). Even more noteworthy is v. 5 which describes the man as constantly – day and night – howling and cutting himself with stones in the tombs and in the hills (ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν). The last mentioned venue supplements the information furnished by v. 3 that the man’s home was in the tombs. As Mark has it, then, the possessed man occupied the graves and the mountains⁴. Possibly due to Mark’s threefold emphasis on the tombs, some authors do not even comment on the hills as places where the man lives⁵. One of the hills is further mentioned in v. 11 as a venue by which the swine grazed (πρὸς τῷ ὄρει).

Mountains are mentioned several times in Mark. As a typical biblical location for divine-human encounters, mountain is a place where Jesus appoints twelve apostles (3:13), where he prays (6:46), and where he is transfigured (9:2.9). In addition, Jesus is several times located on the Mount of Olives (11:1; 13:3; 14:26). The same mountain is probably referenced in 11:23 as part of Jesus’ hyperbole on the efficacy of prayer⁶. Mountain is also a place of refuge (13:14)⁷.

Within this overview, Mark 5:5 is unique in its presentation of the mountain as the dwelling place of a possessed man, and the significance of this location can be explained on several fronts. First, by placing the demon-possessed man on a mountain, Mark inverts the traditional concept of the mountain as a place of meeting between God and man. Here the mountain becomes a venue for violent actions of a demon-driven character (ἦν κράζων καὶ κατακόπτων ἑαυτὸν λίθοις), a place of revelation for demonic, not God’s activity. The temporal construction in the beginning of v. 5, “night and day” (διὰ παντὸς νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας), implies that the man had not left the mountainous region prior to his encounter with Jesus, and the verbs of movement ὑπήντησεν (v. 2) and ἔδραμεν (v. 5) apparently designate his first excursions outside that territory.

⁴ Luke’s redaction preserves the mention of the hills at a later point in the story (8:32), but not in the initial presentation of the man’s plight (8:27). Matthew’s version (8:28-34) does not mention the hills at all.

⁵ MOLONEY, *The Gospel of Mark*, 101-102; BORING, *Mark*, 150; IVERSON, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark*, 25-26, 33-34; DUBOVSKÝ, *Marek*, 321-331; PERO, *Liberation from Empire*, 152.

⁶ In Mark 11 Jesus enters Jerusalem and oscillates between Jerusalem and Bethany. By “this mountain” (τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ) in v. 23 either the Mount of Olives or Mount Zion is meant. See, e.g., SÖDING, *Markus*, 326.

⁷ For further discussion, see MALBON, *Narrative Space*, 84-89.

Second, the mountains appear in conjunction with the tombs, and the convergence of the two places indicates the man's separation from society⁸. When Jesus, after the healing, instructs him to return home (v. 19), he replaces the man's dwelling in places of isolation and death among a legion of demons with a permanent sojourn at his home among his family members. And third, by situating the possessed character in the hills, Mark creates a vertical axis in which the man, and so the demons, occupy the top position, as if possessing an authority over the world below. This would imply an apparent superiority over Jesus who approaches the man's territory from below, that is, from the sea. Thus, in contrast to authors like Gundry, who views the mountains as adding a note of danger and exposure to perils of the wild⁹, this essay proposes to interpret this locale as portraying the demoniac, and so, the demons, in an elevated position above other characters in the story, including Jesus. As the subsequent narrative reveals, however, this superiority is only apparent, for the next segment describes the demons' capitulation to Jesus and Jesus' superiority over them, and that in a variety of ways. The story of the demoniac begins in the mountains, but continues with the description of the demons' progressive fall from those hills.

2 Fell on his knees (5:6)

The man's first reaction upon his encounter with Jesus is expressed by the verb *προσεκύνησεν* – the demoniac fell down on his knees¹⁰. Speaking representatively for many, Onyenali notes that *προσκυνέω* “describes an attitude of humbling, submission, worship, or adoration ... in particular towards a sovereign

⁸ While vv. 3-4, which describe abortive attempts to tame him, hint at his interaction with other human beings, who possibly came out of villages to the mountains in order to subdue the wild man, his dwelling places mentioned in v. 5 – tombs and hills – imply that he lived cut off from human contact. In addition, life in the tombs implies residence in places of impurity, for which see LAPKO, *Čistý a nečistý*, 307-312.

⁹ GUNDRY, *Mark*, 249. Also DONAHUE – HARRINGTON, *Mark*, 164.

¹⁰ Whereas Luke preserves the act of prostration (8:28), Matthew (8:28-34) fails to indicate it. The man's gesture represents a striking contrast to his untamable behavior described in the beginning of the story. PESCH, *Das Markusevangelium 1,1-8,26*, 287 notes: “Während bislang niemand den Tobsüchtigen zu bändigen vermochte, unterwirft er sich *Jesus* sofort”. Similarly GUELICH, *Mark 1-8:26*, 279.

ruler, God, or the gods”¹¹. According to Breuer, this reaction can be explained “von Mk 3:7-12 her über die Erzählernotiz der über die Grenze Galiläas hinausgehenden Bekanntheit Jesu ...”¹². Since crowds from the Transjordan (3:8) are included among the witnesses of Jesus’ miracles, it is very likely that the possessed man on the other side of the Jordan had already heard about Jesus’ power from these people prior to his own encounter with Jesus, which would explain his act of submission at his first meeting with the acclaimed miracle worker.

While the verb *προσκυνέω* occurs only at one other verse in Mark – in 15:19 the soldiers make a mocking adoration of Jesus before his crucifixion (*τιθέντες τὰ γόνατα προσεκύουν αὐτῷ*) – , the demoniac’s act of prostration is to be included in a series of Markan texts in which Jesus is presented as receiving some form of reverence as signaled by the use of several verbs. It is especially accounts of those seeking aid from Jesus that involve some sort of falling to the ground. Thus, we have a leper, who falls to his knees (1:40 *γονυπετῶν*) as he asks for purification. The same verb appears in the story of a rich man, who kneels before Jesus (10:17 *γονυπετήσας*) before asking his question on the condition for inheriting eternal life. Jairus is portrayed as falling to Jesus’ feet (5:22 *πίπτει πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ*) when he seeks Jesus’ intervention on behalf of his dying daughter, as is the sick woman, who falls down before him (5:33 *προσέπεσεν αὐτῷ*). Finally, the Syrophenician mother also falls at Jesus’ feet (7:25 *προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ*) and asks for an exorcism of the impure spirit from her daughter. Besides the help-seekers, impure spirits also are said to fall down before Jesus (3:11 *προσέπιπτον αὐτῷ*) upon sighting him. While it may be justified, following Breuer¹³, to see differences in meaning among these terms, the acts performed by the above characters unquestionably imply a hierarchical relationship between the petitioner and the helper, that is, all these characters, whether motivated by fear or reverence, acknowledge Jesus’ superiority by falling down before him.

The possessed man’s gesture of prostration before Jesus, probably a sign of the demons’ fear of their impending destruction, must also reflect this hierarchical coordination in which the demoniac is portrayed as acknowledging

¹¹ ONYENALI, *The Markan Proskuneo*, 79. See also BLATZ, *Die Semantik der Macht*, 264 n. 226.

¹² BREUER, *Die Wundererzählungen*, 258.

¹³ BREUER, *Die Wundererzählungen*, 258-259.

Jesus' superiority, possibly his divine majesty. By noting the demoniac's falling to his knees before Jesus, the evangelist situates these two heroes on a vertical axis, with the demons below and Jesus above. The demons' position on the ground indicates their submission to Jesus.

My suggestion is that the man's position on the ground (below), in addition to conveying the demons' subordination to Jesus, can be read as a deliberate contrast to his residence in the hills (above). The kneeling and the man's former dwelling place in the hills are the poles of a vertical axis created by the evangelist, and the kneeling posture is a sign of the man's downfall from his elevated position on the hills. Jesus' powerful presence, his arrival in the land of the Gerasenes, brings „down“ the possessed man, who formerly lived „above“. By describing the man as prostrating himself before Jesus, the evangelist operates with the notion of verticality and moves the man on a vertical axis from a point above to a point below. The demons suddenly find themselves below the hills and below Jesus.

3 Most High God (5:7)

The evangelist's work with the notion of verticality can also be detected in the demons' address Ἰησοῦ υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου in v. 7. It is widely acknowledged that the formulation θεὸς ὑψίστος echoes the Hellenistic “most high god” concept and often appears on the lips of the Gentiles in biblical writings¹⁴. The superlative ὑψίστος creates a vertical axis in which God occupies the most elevated position and possesses authority over the whole universe¹⁵. By implication, the title involves God's dominion over all the characters in the story, including the demons. In light of its semantics, the adjective can be related to the mention of the mountains – these are by their nature high – with the proposal that ὑψίστος shows God as higher than the mountains occupied by the possessed man.

¹⁴ E.g., the list in CRAGHAN, *Gerasene Demoniac*, 532. In the NT the adjective ὑψίστος occurs in two senses: as a reference to God (Mark 5:7; Luke 1:32.35.76; 6:35; 8:28; Acts 7:48; 16:17; Hebr 7:1) and as a designation of the highest spheres of heaven in the construction ἐν τοῖς ὑψίστοις (Matt 21:9; Mark 11:10; Luke 2:14; 19:38). This vocabulary is typical for Luke's writings.

¹⁵ E.g., FOCANT, *Marc*, 202: “Du point de vue des juifs, le titre ... manifeste le souveraineté de leur Dieu sur toute la terre ...”.

By relating Jesus to this most high God through the category of sonship (υἱός), the demons reveal Jesus' filial relationship with God, implying that Jesus possesses the same authority as the Most High. Jesus as the son of the most high God stands in his authority above the demons. The adjective ὑψιστος describing the most elevated position of God can also be read in relation to the posture of kneeling taken up by the demoniac. While the unclean spirit finds himself in the lowest position on the ground, God occupies the highest place in heaven, and the two constitute opposite vertical poles.

4 Down the steep bank (5:12)

The most conspicuous vertical element appears in v. 13 which describes the pigs' rushing down a steep slope and their drowning in the sea. The segment (vv. 12-13) underlines Jesus' authority over the demons by employing terminology that points to his superior status: the demons have to ask (παρεκάλεσαν)¹⁶ Jesus to send (πέμψον) them into the swine, while Jesus permits (ἐπέτρεψεν) them to enter a new host. After formulating the exit of the demons and their entry into the swine, the evangelist in the second half of v. 13 describes their catastrophic end. In an evident collective suicidal move¹⁷, the herd, driven by the demons, rushes down the steep slope and drowns in the sea. The prepositional phrases εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν and ἐν τῇ θαλάσῃ¹⁸ indicate that the pigs have reached their destination and these constructions stand in line with other locative phrases that reference the demons' dwelling places. Thus, the ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου of v. 8 preceded by the command ἔξελθε reveals that the demons reside in the possessed man. The construction ἔξω τῆς χώρας in v. 10 is the supplement of the negative

¹⁶ BLATZ, *Die Semantik der Macht*, 259: "Das Verb παρακαλέω stellt die Unterordnung [of the demon] heraus ...".

¹⁷ SÖDING, *Markus*, 152. LANE, *Mark*, 186: "Therefore, Jesus allows the demons to continue their destructive work, but not upon a man".

¹⁸ In an interesting departure from scholarly and translational consensus, VETTE, *The Son of Man and the Sea*, 11 n. 26 has recently proposed that ἐπνίγοντο in v. 13 is a passive and the ensuing ἐν τῇ θαλάσῃ is an instrumental dative with the resulting translation "[they were] drowned by the sea". This reading, however, does not change the basic import of the sentence – the swine end up in the sea. BOLT, *Jesus' Defeat of Death*, 145 aptly notes that by falling to "the underworld through this watery portal, the swine are portrayed as meeting the fate from which the disciples were rescued in the previous scene [Mark 4,35-41]".

ἵνα μὴ αὐτὰ ἀποστείλῃ and formulates the demons' wish for a continued occupation of the land. The repetition εἰς τοὺς χοίρους (v. 12), εἰς αὐτούς (v. 12), and εἰς τοὺς χοίρους (v. 13) casts the pigs as the demons' new host. By having the herd end up in the sea, the evangelist shows that their residence in the possessed man, in the land, and in the swine has been replaced by their destruction in the waters.

More importantly, the prepositional phrases εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν and ἐν τῇ θαλάσῃ stand in contrast to the locative ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν (v. 5) and the juxtaposition of the two locales serves to create a vertical dimension – from the top of the hills the demons, inhabiting the swine, fall into the depths of the lake. The journey of the demons is described as a progressive downfall. They first occupy the hills (v. 5), then prostrate themselves on the ground before Jesus (v. 6), and finally are plunged into the lake (v. 13). It is by now evident that verticality is an important dimension in the story of exorcism, supplementing the horizontal line. By describing the swine as rushing down the slope into the lake, the evangelist envisions the exorcism not only as a horizontal event in which the demons leave the man and enter the swine but also as a vertical one, for the outcome of their rout, though perhaps not contemplated by Jesus¹⁹, is conceived as a fall into the depths. At the end of the story the demons find themselves at exactly the opposite point from their starting line – below in the sea as opposed to the above in the hills. It can be proposed that the demons fall twice: for the first time when they encounter Jesus and bow down before him and the second time when they fall into the lake. In both instances, by implication, Jesus' superiority is affirmed – he remains above, while the demons are below.

5 Sitting (5:15)

The last example of Mark's use of verticality is found in the description of the healed man's condition in v. 15. When people from the neighbouring villages, instigated by the shepherds' report, come to see what happened, they find the

¹⁹ According to FRANCE, *Mark*, 231, “there is no suggestion that Jesus intended, or even expected, the demons to drive the pigs into the water ...”. COLLINS, *Mark*, 271, on the other hand, believes that Jesus foresaw that the swine would go mad, hence his permission to the legion to enter the swine.

man sitting, clothed, and in sound mind. Such a description, as scholars typically note²⁰, creates a stark contrast to the man's previous uncontrollable raging about depicted in the beginning of the narrative. In v. 15 the man is first of all found sitting (*καθήμενον*), which is a reversal of his self-destructive bruising with stones (v. 5). In addition, when the initial presentation speaks about the impossibility to bind (v. 3 *δέσσει*) and tame (v. 4 *δαμάσαι*) the possessed hero, his sitting position shows that he has been tamed and sits peacefully.

For the purposes at hand, it may be suggested that the sitting position fulfills yet another function, namely, it is a part of a vertical axis in which the healed man occupies a position below and Jesus, by implication, a position above. This is obviously not explicit in the text, but such a conclusion can surely be drawn from the evangelist's description of the man as sitting. Sitting implies that the man is on the ground, that is, below all other characters, including Jesus. In this regard, Luke's version is more instructive, for the third evangelist explicitly states that the people found the healed man sitting at the feet of Jesus (8:35 *εὗρον καθήμενον τὸν ἄνθρωπον ... παρὰ τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Ἰησοῦ*). The man's sitting position indirectly points to Jesus' authority over him, authority further demonstrated by the refusal to permit the would-be follower to join the ranks of his disciples (v. 19). At v. 15 the evangelist's work with verticality is again subtly present, as he portrays the man sitting and Jesus, by inference, as above him. Such a reading permits yet another proposal. As Mark describes the outcome of Jesus' exorcistic action, he positions both involved parties in a place below – the swine end up in the sea and the healed man is seated on the ground. Through this strategy revolving around an imaginary vertical axis, he leaves Jesus in a position above and the man and the demons at a place below, whereby Jesus' authority and dominance over these characters subtly emerges.

Conclusion

The present study has investigated the notion of verticality in Mark's episode of the Gerasene demoniac, joining a group of works that focus on spatial indicators in Mark. While the horizontal dimensions of the story are easily noticed, as characters often change locations along a horizontal line, the vertical

²⁰ FOCANT, *Marc*, 199; SÖDING, *Markus*, 152.

dimension is less evident. The aim here has been to foreground the oft-unnoticed vertical imagery.

Reading the narrative with a view to its vertical indicators has yielded the following. By portraying the possessed man as dwelling in the mountains (v. 5), that is, in elevated places, the evangelist might be pointing at the apparent superiority of the possessing demons over Jesus, superiority that is quickly reversed when the man prostrates himself before Jesus (v. 6) in an act of submission. This portion of the narrative describes the man's, and so the demons', fall from the height of the mountains to the ground below Jesus' feet. The demons' recognition of Jesus as son of the Most High (v. 7) positions God at the most elevated line of a vertical axis and closely aligns Jesus with him, implying that these two characters are located above everybody else, including the demons themselves. The most evident vertical element is the descent of the possessed swine to the bottom of the sea, which indicates that the demons meet their fate at the lowest point on a vertical scale, with all other characters remaining above. Finally, the play with verticality is also present in Mark's description of the healed man as sitting, which implies his submission to Jesus and Jesus' dominance.

In light of the above, it may be proposed that the evangelist uses verticality in the service of his christological message – Jesus' defeat of the demons. The Gerasene demoniac is a story in which the demons begin above (in the mountains) and end up below (at the bottom of the sea), the healed man positions himself below Jesus as he sits at his feet, and Jesus, son of the Most High, remains in his supreme position as Lord over all.

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Summary


Mark's Gospel abounds in spatial references which situate Jesus and other characters in various venues. Spatiality plays an important role in the episode of the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20), and scholars have especially noted the evangelist's employment of horizontal movements, as Mark periodically moves his characters on horizontal lines. This is to be seen chiefly in the entrances and the exits of various characters, especially the demoniac. This essay aims to unearth the vertical dimension of movement in the story, arguably less noticeable than the horizontal one. It shows that in several verses of the story Mark moves his characters on a vertical line from above to below in order to convey their subjection to Jesus. This use of verticality underlines his christological message – Jesus' victory over the demons.

Keywords: fall, Gerasene demoniac, hill, kneeling, verticality.

Zhrnutie

Markovo evanjelium oplýva priestorovými údajmi, ktoré situujú Ježiša a iné postavy na rôzne miesta. Priestorovosť hrá dôležitú úlohu aj v príbehu o Gerazskom posadnutom (5,1-20) a vedci si zvlášť všimli Markovo použitie horizontálnych posunov, pri ktorom tento evanjelista presúva jednotlivé postavy na horizontálnej úrovni. To sa dá jasne vidieť najmä na vstupoch a výstupoch jednotlivých postáv, hlavne nečistých duchov. Táto esej sa snaží odhaliť vertikálnu dimenziu pohybu, ktoré je menej pozorovateľná. Štúdia ukazuje, že v niekoľkých veršoch príbehu Marek presúva postavy na vertikálnej úrovni zhora dole, aby ukázal ich podrobenie sa Ježišovi. Toto použitie vertikality podčiarkuje jeho kristologické poslanstvo – Ježišovo víťazstvo nad démonmi.

Kľúčové slová: pád, Gerazský posadnutý, vrch, kľaknutie, vertikálnosť.

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