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“And They Were All Astonished (?)” The Verb ἐκπλήσσω, Competition, and Mark’s Narrative

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He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were shocked (ἐξεκπλήσσοντο). They said, ‘Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.’ ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Mark 6.1-6 is an important passage for both Mark and for later Christianity because of the numerous theological and social themes it relates. In this controversial passage the members of Jesus’ family are introduced, we are told that he has brothers and sisters, and only in this gospel text are we informed of Jesus’ occupation as a carpenter. Here Jesus was rejected in his hometown,¹ and this lack of faith among his neighbors meant that he was unable to demonstrate his powers effectively there. Most important for the current study, Mark 6.1-6 demonstrates significant conflict between Jesus and his townsfolk, as they appear to take genuine offense at him. What exactly is the cause of this friction? While many previous scholars have rightly noted that religious and social tensions permeate the episode, the root causes of this conflict have not been investigated fully.² Furthermore, Mark’s use of the

¹ Mark 6.4. Variations of this important theme also exist in all of the other canonical gospels: Matt. 13.57; Luke 4.24; John 4.44.

² See for example: John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark: Sacra Pagina Volume 2* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 183-89; Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross 1-8* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 289-300; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: The Roots of the Problem and the Person, Volume 1* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 224.

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emotionally charged, often mistranslated, and rare New Testament verb ἐκπλήσσω (appearing only thirteen times across all twenty-seven books) largely has been ignored.

In this paper I will undertake two major tasks. First, I will discuss the key Greek verb ἐκπλήσσω (“struck”/“shocked”),³ which typically is rendered as “astonished” or “amazed” in English translations of this passage. I will demonstrate that such standard modern renderings of this verb in Mark and the rest of the New Testament not only are inaccurate; they also detract from the overall depth and meaning of the passages in which they appear. By examining the use of this verb in Mark and other Greek literature, I will argue that ἐκπλήσσω connotes a much more emotional, visceral response than mere amazement or astonishment. Second, having provided this background, I will show how an accurate reading of this verb can open up new possibilities for interpreting Mark 6.1-6 and other Markan passages where the verb appears. Specifically, I will argue that the verb always highlights emotional confrontations where Jesus does not amaze people in a positive sense. Instead, others are either struggling to follow him or are outright repelled by him, leaving them unsettled, emotional, and shocked. Thus, the verb does not signal compliant acceptance of Jesus, but a more competitive encounter between Jesus and his interlocutors, surrounding the recurrent issues of pedagogy, authority, and social status, which creates significant tension within the narrative.

Ἐκπλήσσω Outside of the New Testament

As stated above, translating the verb simply as “astonished” or “amazed” does not fully relate the complete essence of this verb in most instances. Most commonly in Classical and Koine Greek usage including Second Temple Jewish Literature, when the verb is employed in the active voice it means “I strike” or “expel.”⁴ A secondary meaning in the active voice is “to amaze” or “to overwhelm,” making it a synonym to the usual Greek verb for being amazed, θαυμάζω. However, such a bald and generic rendering of ἐκπλήσσω misses the full force of the verb, which generally connotes stunned amazement with the sense of being driven out of sound mind “by a sudden

³ Walter Bauer, William Arndt, and Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature 2nd Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 243.

⁴ See for example: Thucydides 2.38, Euripides, *Ion* 635.

shock,” making ἐκπλήσσω have a much stronger nuance than θαυμάζω.⁵ In the passive voice the verb ἐκπλήσσω has a different range of meanings as well. The term usually signifies a more intense reaction in the passive, connoting a non-rational or highly emotional response.⁶ Accordingly, Liddell and Scott define the passive verb as “struck with overpowering passion,” suggesting a state that goes beyond mere amazement. Furthermore, when the verb is rendered in the passive, it often is accompanied by a term of emotion (i.e. θυμῶ, χάρω, δαίδω, ἔρω, μισος) indicating that individuals are overcome by feelings of admiration, love, joy, or more often panic and fear.⁷ Thus, when the verb is used in this way it connotes a sense of unchecked passions that may force an individual to act, sometimes rashly.

Most important, the verb ἐκπλήσσω frequently is used in philosophical texts to describe the onset of these emotional disturbances. In some texts the verb connotes being struck in the manner in which uncontrolled passions can affect the pursuit of philosophy. Accordingly, the verb is used to describe the kind of moods or emotional disturbances that are generally irrational and therefore antithetical to philosophical study. Specifically, Plato suggests that we are slaves to our bodies, and when one tries to pursue philosophy, the body prevents us because it is always in need. Plato suggests that the body then “perturbs” or “shocks” (ἐκπλήττει) us, driving us from our studies as if jolted by a noise.⁸ Furthermore, for Plato the verb often

⁵ Cf. *LSJ* 785. For example, in texts of oration the verb is used to demonstrate the kind of action or mood that creates revulsion and revolt. In Antiphon’s *First Tetralogy* the author speaks of revenge and fear that overwhelmed (ἐκπλήσων) the murderer making him forget the risks (2.7). Aeschines in *Against Ctesiphon* states that the Thebans were moved so out of their minds (ἐκπλήξαι) that they revolted (3.256).

⁶ Discussion of the emotions in ancient literature and philosophy has garnered significant attention in recent years, and such scholarly research has persuasively argued that the range and affect of emotions in antiquity may be different from our own modern senses. See Julia E. Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 103-122, 189-200; Simo Knuuttila, *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2006), David Konstan and N. Keith Rutter, *Anger, Spite, and Jealousy: The Rivalrous Emotions in Ancient Greece* (Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Press, 2003); for emotions in the New Testament, see Matthew A. Elliott, *Faithful Feelings: Retinking Emotion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2006), Stephen Voorwinde, *Jesus’ Emotions in the Gospels* (London: T&T Clark, 2011). Although space does not allow for a full discussion of the emotions in antiquity, it is important to note that emotions were a much wider category that encompassed senses beyond love, fear, anger, and joy and could include states such as shame or bewilderment. I am using the terms “emotion” and “emotional” here to provide a somewhat elastic framework that can capture this vast range of sentiments connected to the use of ἐκπλήσσω in the ancient texts.

⁷ For joy and love see Euripides, *Med.* 8, Medea is overcome with a powerful love for Jason that will turn destructive. Cf. Euripides *Hipp.* 34; *Alc.* 1124; Herodotus 3.148. For panic and fear see Herodotus 1.116: “Being struck (ἐκπλαγείν) he sat silent for a while, then after he collected himself with difficulty.” Cf. Sophocles *Phil* 226; *El* 1045. Diodorus Siculus uses the term to describe complete panic (e.g. 10.20, 13.89, 13.106, 13.111).

⁸ Plato, *Phaed.* 66D.

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connotes emotional weakness, terror, or a sense that one inappropriately is driven by uncontrolled passions.⁹ In describing the natural situations where one might feel pity, Aristotle suggests that one is not capable of such a disposition if they are ἐκπεπληγμένοι (“shocked,” or perhaps “panic-stricken”) being overcome by emotion.¹⁰ Plutarch connects the term to “untrained and evil dispositions” in people who are envious of the success of others, making them incapable of positive admiration. Instead they only possess a misguided sense of “being shocked” (ἐκπληττόμενην) at the success of others.¹¹ Lastly, when the stoic Epictetus discussed the necessity of a tranquil mind in *Discourses* 2.9.16, he described being emotionally perturbed (ἐξεπλάγημεν) as a primary obstacle to philosophy.¹² In all cases, the philosophers connect the verb to strong emotions that could prevent the individual from acting rationally.

The Septuagint, Philo, and Josephus provide valuable context for use of the verb in Mark as well. Here the term often is employed to represent a jarring event usually brought on by conflict and competition between God and his people against outsiders and unbelievers. For example, when ἐκπλήσσω is used in the Septuagint, the emphasis is on trusting in God and having awe for his unfathomable power, while also delineating the limits of human wisdom. For example, in Ecclesiastes 7.16-17 the reader is warned not be too righteous nor too wise, “lest you be struck senseless (μήποτε ἐκπλαγῆς).” Similarly, in the Wisdom of Solomon (13.4), those who worship idols are struck dumb and perturbed (ἐκπλαγέντες) by the power of God. Here the verb connotes a sort of ignorance and obstinacy that prevents people from knowing the truth. In addition, in 2 and 4 Maccabees persecutors are continually dumbstruck by the power of God working through the faithful and the martyrs.¹³ The original context of each of these examples indicates that the verb ἐκπλήσσω was employed to convey a meaning beyond mere amazement or astonishment. There is an almost violent sense of being struck and shaken, suggesting that a momentous happening has occurred.

⁹ For weak emotions: *Leg.* 2.659A; for terror: *Apol.* 32D, *Leg.* 2.698D, *Rep.* 4.436E; for uncontrolled passions: *Rep.* 3.390C. Plutarch also suggests that emotions often are the forces that drive people (*De Recta* 1).

¹⁰ Aristotle *Rhet.* 2.8.6.

¹¹ Plutarch, *De Recta*, 39F. Interestingly, Plutarch sets the terms θαυμάζω and ἐκπλήσσω in opposition in this passage. Whereas θαυμάζω was used to connote the proper disposition of mind to admire philosophical lectures, the use of ἐκπλήσσω was the opposite.

¹² Cf. Epictetus *Diss.* 4.4.10. In *Diss.* 3.22.25 Epictetus praises the cynic who is not perturbed (ἐκπλαγέντα) by terror when he must report the truth.

¹³ 2 Macc 7.12; 4. Macc 8.4, 17.16.

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Philo uses the term only four times, but his use of ἐκπλήσσω shows consistency with the tone and meaning of the verb as discussed above. Philo employs the active verb only once, and here it conveys a sense of stunned incredulity or shock. In *Moses* 81, Philo describes the miracle of God turning the Nile to blood, which was “about to cause shock” (ἔμελλε δ’ἐκπλήττειν) in Egypt. In the passive he uses the verb to describe the strong reactions of individuals who are shocked and perhaps unable to process or to put into words what had just happened to them. For example, in *On Joseph* 218, when the sons of Jacob discover that their bags are filled with gold and fear a death sentence upon returning to Egypt, the brothers go back to the city and they are “confounded” (συγκεχυμένοι) and “shocked” (ἐκπεπληγμένοι) by what happened. Here Philo also emphasizes the emotional weight of the scene by mentioning that the brothers showed “emotions” (πάθους) in this difficult situation.¹⁴

Josephus uses the verb over fifty times in both the active and passive voice, and it is perhaps here that one finds the broadest context for Mark’s use of the verb. Like the Septuagint and Philo, Josephus often deploys the verb when relating situations where miracles, prophecies, and direct interventions or interactions with God occur. For example, in narrating the story of Moses witnessing the burning bush and communicating with God, Josephus describes Moses as “shocked” (ἐκπεπληγμένος) at what he had seen and heard (*Ant.* 2.270).¹⁵ Josephus also utilizes the verb to describe situations of stress where people were out of their minds because of danger or a sudden turn of events.¹⁶ When relating the perils of the unstable climb to reach the top of Masada, Josephus noted that it was able to shock (ἐκπλήξαι) even the brave (*Bell.* 7.419). Lastly, ἐκπλήσσω also is used to describe several scenes where stunning events are accompanied by strong emotions including love, hate, and sorrow.¹⁷ For example, Josephus explains how Jacob fell into servitude under Laban, because he was helplessly “struck” (ἐκπέπληκτό) by love after seeing the beauty of Rachel (*Ant.* 1.288). While Josephus uses the verb in a number of different contexts, he uniformly applies the term as a way to highlight critical and controversial events in

¹⁴ In discussing the indescribable marvels of the Temple in Jerusalem, Philo mentions that foreign visitors are awe-struck (ἐκπλήττονται) by the beauty and grandeur (*Spec. leg.* 73). Interestingly, the term is also used in one of Philo’s anecdotes about Diogenes of Sinope. When Diogenes is about to be sold in a slave market he makes an insult about the masculinity of a potential buyer. The buyer is “put to shame” (δυσωπηθέντα) and others were “struck” (ἐκπλήττεσθαι) by the boldness of Diogenes.

¹⁵ For other examples involving forms of divine intervention, see *Ant.* 3.82, 6.56, 10.211, 12.110. Josephus also describes the striking generosity of Vespasian and Titus in almost godlike terms as well in *Ant.* 12.128.

¹⁶ See *Ant.* 12.308, 16.403; *Bell.* 3.452, 4.233.

¹⁷ See *Ant.* 4.66, 6.290, 15.61, 16.75, 17.110.

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his works. In doing so, the verb is able to signal and delineate certain situations that are particularly striking or noteworthy in his accounts.

To summarize, the use of the verb ἐκπλήσσω consistently is employed throughout the antecedent and contemporary literature as a way of demonstrating a reaction to a particularly striking or jarring event. Furthermore, Mark also often links the verb to highly charged situations that convey a sense of anxiety, confusion, and emotion, especially when it is used in the passive voice. Thus, the specific nuance of the verb relates more than a general sense of amazement or wonder, as it represents a situation that is particularly extraordinary and emotional. This perhaps is illustrated best in the numerous examples from the Jewish sources where the verb is employed in a high stakes competitive environment to describe the power, miracles, or inestimable might of God. Lastly, the fact that Mark intentionally employs this verb when discussing individuals who are too disturbed to accept Jesus' authority is striking. Much like the philosophical texts describe the emotional element of hearing, the very act of hearing Jesus activates an emotionally charged reaction. In the case of the synagogue at Capernaum, individuals are initially struck, but later were moved to believe because of additional factors. Alternatively, in Nazareth the people are never able to overcome the first reaction, and the emotions remain unrestrained as they refuse Jesus' authority as a teacher. Given these observations, I would suggest that ἐκπλήσσω generally should not be rendered as "astonished," but as "shocked" or perhaps even "offended" depending on context, since these all relate the more emphatic nature of the verb.

Θαυμάζω in Greek Literature and Mark

Also worthy of note is the fact that Mark uses many different verbs in the gospel that both typically and appropriately are rendered as amazed or astonished in English translations.¹⁸ Perhaps most relevant is θαυμάζω—the usual Greek verb for expressive amazement—which appears four times in the text (5.20, 6.6, 15.5, 15.44). When Mark uses θαυμάζω instead of ἐκπλήσσω, the weight of meaning is a little different and the mood of the scene shifts. Usually, the sense of θαυμάζω is not being out of one's mind with emotion as with ἐκπλήσσω, but of marveling and of surprise without a specific mention of excessive or uncontrolled passion. In classical usage, the

¹⁸ These include ἐξίσταμαι "I am beside myself" (2.12; 3.21; 5.42; 6.51), ἐκθαμβέω "I am utterly amazed" (9.15), θαμβέω "I am amazed" (10.24, 32; 16.5, 6), ἐκθαυμάζω "I am grudgingly amazed" (12.17).

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word connotes surprise or astonishment accompanied by a sense of doubt.¹⁹ Perhaps most interesting is the use of θαυμάζω in philosophical texts that employ the term to describe a sort of questioning astonishment that must be overcome to pursue philosophy.²⁰ This is an appropriate reaction according to the platonists, since anyone seeking reason should have an inherent inquisitive wonder that challenges accepted popular interpretations of phenomena. Thus, one could have astonishment about the wondrous mysteries of nature, gods, and divine laws.²¹ In fact, Plato describes this sense as “the beginning of philosophy,” as moving beyond such astonishment signals that one has started on the path towards training in virtue.²² The stoics also connect θαυμάζω to the development of a virtuous mind in a unique way. Stoics consistently argued that the sage who has attained virtue is consistent and unfailing in knowledge. Therefore, astonishment and wonder at sudden phenomena no longer happen to the wise, since they alone can understand the real nature of events that would be surprising or a marvel to everyone else.²³

The verb also is used to render many Hebrew terms connoting astonishment, surprise, and the miraculous in the Septuagint.²⁴ Most relevant here is the consistent use of the verb to describe astonishment of something that is hard to believe or impossible for anyone except God.²⁵ These usages also remain consistent in the Apocryphal texts, where the mysterious power of the divine is a marvel.²⁶ Likewise, Mark’s nearer contemporaries Philo and Josephus use the term to describe miraculous and astonishing events from Jewish history, relating God’s ineffable wonder.²⁷ Naturally, Philo has a platonic flavor to his use of the term as well, connecting the process of wondering and astonishment to the quest for knowledge and virtue.²⁸

The examples considered here, and especially those from philosophical texts have some interesting alignments with Mark’s use of the verb. The meaning of θαυμάζω expresses astonishment with an overtone of reservation and disbelief. However, philosophers do not describe it as a stubborn and vicious disposition.

¹⁹ This meaning goes back as far as Homer (*Od.* 1.190). See Herodotus 8.37; Sophocles, *Oed. Tyr.* 777; Pausanias (2.5.7, 3.36.3, 6.2.10, 10.18.5) also adds a sense of surprise.

²⁰ Plato, *Prot.* 326e; Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.2.7.

²¹ Cf. Plato, *Leg.* 12.657c.è

²² Plato, *Prot.* 261b; *Theaet.* 155d. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* 1.982b

²³ Diogenes Laertius, 7.123. The Latin term *admiror* (I wonder or marvel) is used as the equivalent describing this stoic precept. See Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.14.

²⁴ For an extensive list and discussion, See *TDNT* 3.29-46.

²⁵ For example, Gen 17.17, 18.12; Ex. 34.10; Job 5.9, 9.10, 37.16, 42.3.

²⁶ See, Sir 47.17; Jdt 10.7, 19, 11.2; Tob 11.16; 2 Macc 7.20.

²⁷ For example, Josephus, *Ant.* 6.290, 9.182; Philo, *Vit. Mos.* 1.180, 206; *Op. Mund.* 49, 90, 106; *Spec. leg.* 3.188.

²⁸ Philo, *Plant.* 80; *Gig.* 37; *Op. Mund.* 7, 45

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Rather, it suggests a discriminating mind that is open to questioning and potential change. For example, when people hear the account of the demoniac who is cured in Mark 5, the townsfolk are “amazed” by what they hear, and later in the gospel when he returns to the area in 7.31-37, people are open to his teaching. The element of surprise is also apparent when Jesus is “surprised” or “amazed” at the unbelief of the people in his hometown in 6.6, operating to juxtapose the unbelief and misunderstanding of the people with Jesus’ authority and his comprehension of God’s visible power. The last two examples occur in chapter 15 and both involve Pilate. First, he is amazed (or surprised) by Jesus’ lack of defense in verse 5, and then in verse 44 the verb is used when he “wondered” whether Jesus was dead on the cross. Both examples map onto contemporary Greek usage of the verb very well. In the first example, Pilate is surprised by Jesus’ silence, and the governor’s actions suggest that his amazement included an element of doubt about the charges against Jesus. Chapter 14.55-57 states that there were no witnesses against him in the council, and false charges were made. After Pilate interrogates him, he understands that the charges were made out of jealousy (15.10) and he is convinced of Jesus’ innocence (15.14-15). Mark’s use of θαυμάζω here is striking because it suggests that Pilate actually has a positive reaction to Jesus, and we might even read the verb to intimate that the governor was impressed or drawn to Jesus. Thus, the Roman authorities who should revile Jesus has a more favorable reaction of amazement, while Jesus’ coreligionists are instead shocked.²⁹ The second example relates more of a sense of wonder for the divine, presumably because Jesus died so quickly on the cross. In all cases, θαυμάζω conveys no sense of anger or fear explicitly in the story, just surprised amazement. Alternatively, ἐκπλήσσω has negative connotations for philosophers, signaling a mind clouded by unbridled passion which differentiates its semantic range from θαυμάζω.

Ἐκπλήσσω in Mark’s Narrative

In the instances where Mark uses ἐκπλήσσω, many of the same themes discussed above continue. Most important for the present study, ἐκπλήσσω only appears in the passive voice in the New Testament, implying that the verb always has the force of unchecked and powerful emotions linked to intense or uncontrolled feelings. Likewise, in the five instances where the verb occurs in the gospel, there is tension brought on by competition and conflict between Jesus and his conversation

²⁹ Thanks to the editor for suggesting a strengthening of this point.

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partners centered on issues of power and authority. This creates a prevailing mood of great confusion, shock, and often anger, rather than simple astonishment.

Mark 1.22

The first use of the verb in Mark occurs at 1.22, when Jesus teaches in the synagogue at Capernaum.

They went to Capernaum and when the Sabbath came he entered the synagogue and taught. They were shocked (*ἐκπλήσσοντο*) at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out “what have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth?” Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the holy one of God. But Jesus rebuked him saying “be silent and come out of him.” And the unclean spirit convulsing in him and crying in a loud voice came out of him. They were all amazed (*ἐθαμβήθησαν*), and they kept asking one another, “what is this? A new—teaching with authority?” He commands even the spirits and they obey him. At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. Mark 1.21-8

As is often the case in such Markan episodes, the reader is not told what Jesus says or teaches specifically, but congregants are “*ἐκπλήσσοντο*” (shocked, offended) because of the teaching. Here Mark explicitly states that the reaction is linked to Jesus’ teaching “as one having authority,” and “not as the scribes” (1.23). This phrasing is very important because the reaction of the synagogue is more complex and negative than the usual English rendering of “astonished” or “amazed” would imply.³⁰ Presumably any Jewish layman could speak in the synagogue if invited to do so,³¹ thus, the mere fact that Jesus stood and spoke in the congregation apparently was not the issue. Instead, I would suggest that friction is created by the presence of an unknown who is bringing a new teaching that differs from that of the scribes, creating an underlying sense of competitive tension from the outset of his ministry that will unfold throughout the gospel. In fact, the belief that Jesus has true authority over the

³⁰ Part of the problem here is the fundamental semantic meaning and weight of “amazement” in English, which always carries a more positive tone. Because of this, English speakers will never hear the more serious, negative, and combative weight of *ἐκπλάσσω* if it is rendered as “amazed.”

³¹ Donahue and Harrington, 183.

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establishment (scribes, Pharisees, priests, etc.) is a major theme in Mark that recurs often (1.27, 2.10, 3.15, 6.2, 6.7, 7.37, 10.26, 11.18, 11.28, 11.29, 13.34).³² Gundry suggests that this is such a preoccupation for Mark that omitting the teachings of Jesus in these accounts is intentional.³³ In other words, there is no evidence that what Jesus taught in Mark 1.21-28 and 6.1-6 was blasphemous or novel in first century Judaism, rather Mark is a competitive tension by stating that Jesus' embodiment of authority is what caused the initial emotional shock.³⁴

The remainder of the passage (1.24-28) is what provides better context and resolution to the episode. The people do not recognize Jesus for who he is at first, and the result is initially affront and denial. The narrative turns "just then" as the man with the unclean spirit enters. Even though the members of the synagogue are unsure about Jesus, the spirit possessing the man identifies Jesus publicly as "the holy one of God." Furthermore, the verbal banter between Jesus and the spirit and the exorcism itself make it clear that Jesus does have real power and authority, exceeding that of the scribes. Interestingly, once Jesus has cast out this spirit, the tone of the episode moderates as indicated by the change in verb from ἐκπλήσσαντο to ἐθαμβήθησαν in verse 27. After witnessing Jesus' interaction with the spirit and the exorcism, the people's shock gives way to amazement ("What is this? A new teaching—with authority!") since Jesus provides evidence to justify his public claims.³⁵

This passage signals the end of the opening preface that introduces Jesus, John, and the Apostles, with 1.21 marking the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee. Most important, at the outset of the passage Mark is employing ἐκπλήσω intentionally to signal the preliminary spark of competition and conflict that will play out in the remainder of the text. Jesus is depicted as the outsider who presents a rival teaching. While the actual content of the teaching is not provided, the congregation experiences it as a competition between the established synagogue authorities defined as the scribes

³² Interpreters have noted that the abrupt transition in this story is awkward and this has led several to speculate that Mark reworked a traditional miracle story to create an account celebrating Jesus' pedagogical superiority. See Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, 43; Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1976), 341; Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 171; Donahue and Harrington, 83.

³³ Gundry, 73.

³⁴ The use of ἐκπλήσω to intimate a lack of openness versus θαυμάζω which connotes more of a positive amazement is an important illustration of Mark's development of competitive literary tension.

³⁵ Interestingly, this passage seems to differ from Mark's usual pattern that Jesus' miracles are brought about by the faith of the people, and that miracles are not done in order to create faith in Jesus. However, in this case, Jesus only wins over the congregants after he performs his miracle. Mark is careful to note that his teaching preceded his work of power, and we may presume that the possessed man came forward because he alone was moved by what he heard. For discussion of Mark's focus on faith preceding miracles, see Donahue and Harrington, 250.

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and Jesus, whose origins and claims to authority are unclear to the crowd. As with the philosophical texts discussed above, the use of ἐκπλήσσω signals the audience's unsettled and emotional disposition, which prevents them from understanding Jesus at all in the beginning. Those who should understand who he is remain unenlightened and confused while outsiders—including evil spirits in this case—have full awareness. After the exorcism, the people come to appreciate Jesus' teaching and are “amazed” as signaled by the use of the verb θαυμάζω.³⁶

Mark 6.1-6

As suggested at the beginning of the article, perhaps the most significant and detailed passage where the evangelist employs ἐκπλήσσω is Mark 6.1-6. Reading the passage one immediately notices the strong, apparently negative reaction of Jesus' audience. The traditional readings state that the people in the synagogue are “amazed” or “astonished” as if they are prepared to accept Jesus' teachings,³⁷ but for some reason they still are unbelieving. The list of five questions that the crowd asks beginning with “where did he get these things” also indicates the rising indignation of those assembled. However, modern translations and commentaries tend to spin the story in a more positive light. This odd dichotomy occurs in part because translators and commentators have glossed over the nuanced meaning of verb ἐκπλήσσω, undermining the competitive overtones present in the passage. Here I would argue that the audience is not amazed with Jesus, they are “shocked” and insulted by him, making disbelief a natural result.³⁸

³⁶ In spite of this, the crowds apparently still have not identified Jesus as Messiah. For discussion, see Yarbro Collins, 174.

³⁷ For example: ASV, ESV, KJV, NASB, RSV: “they were astonished;” GNT, NIV: “they were amazed;” CEB: “many who heard him were surprised;” NRSV: “many who heard him were astounded.” Modern commentators also suggest that the synagogue initially responds to Jesus favorably, reading ἐκπλήσσω as a positive reaction. See: Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (New York: MacMillan, 1955), 298-99; Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Books, 2002), 212; Meier, 225; Adela Yarbro Collins suggests that the initial reaction to Jesus in this and all teaching episodes where the verb is employed, the people's response is positive. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 288, 290.

³⁸ Many also suggest that the synagogue initially responds to Jesus favorably, reading ἐκπλήσσω as a positive reaction. See: Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (New York: MacMillan, 1955), 298-99; Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Books, 2002), 212; Meier, 225; Adela Yarbro Collins suggests that the initial reaction to Jesus in this and all teaching episodes where the verb is employed, the people's response is positive. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A*

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Unpacking this verse also illustrates the importance of this scene to the overall narrative. First, it is notable that the accounts of Jesus teaching in 1.21-8 and 6.1-2 obviously are similar in many respects. In both passages, Jesus taught in the synagogue and the crowds initially react the same way, with shock and apparent skepticism evidenced by the verb ἐκπλήσσω. Both accounts also imply that something about Jesus' teaching creates this reaction.³⁹ Neither Markan passage explicitly tells us what Jesus was preaching about, or why the people were shocked, only that they were. More to the point it is unclear why the people would be "amazed" in a positive sense by what Jesus was doing based on the information that Mark provides in these verses. As stated above, the key is that the people misrecognize Jesus' true identity and his authority to teach in both accounts, making shock and affront a more predictable reaction. The difference is that in chapter 1 the people of Capernaum come to terms with his teaching and his authority as something that stands in contrast to the teaching of the scribes—especially after the unclean spirit announces Jesus' identity and Jesus performs a sign. Alternatively, in chapter 6 the people of his hometown never accept Jesus' attempt to compete with synagogue authorities, because they do not realize his identity. As a result, no supernatural occurrence accompanies the event.

In light of this background, we now have a clearer explanation of why Jesus' listeners ask, "Where did he get these things? What is this wisdom that has been given to him?"⁴⁰ Jesus' neighbors would recognize him as one of their own, making it almost necessary to misrecognize his true identity given the social framework. In addition, they would not expect a peasant to have access to education and wisdom, as it generally was understood that these things belonged to the upper classes and then there was a link between wisdom and teaching.⁴¹ Furthermore, Jesus' occupation of carpenter or craftsman actually had a negative connotation indicating illiteracy and lower-class status that was essentially at the bottom of the vast peasant class.⁴² The rhetorical

Commentary, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 288, 290.

³⁹ It is important to note that the performance of miracles is not what causes this reaction. Witnesses are struck by Jesus' teachings even before they see a sign performed.

⁴⁰ Donahue and Harrington (79) note that Mark sets up an unusual paradox since he casts Jesus as a great teacher but provides few specific examples of his teaching. Alternatively, the other synoptics intentionally backload many of these accounts with detailed sayings of Jesus.

⁴¹ For example: Job 33.33, Prov 4.11; Wisdom of Solomon 6.9; Ben Sirah 4.23-5. Ben Sirah 9.17-8 seems to perfectly echo the tension that we see in Mark. "A work is praised for the skill of the artisan; the people's leader is proved wise by his words." In short, the categories of artisan and his skills are mutually exclusive from the leader and his wisdom. Upper class Romans also sought to limit access to wisdom for lower classes. See Juvenal, *Satires* 3.153; Cicero, *On the Agrarian Law*, 1.1; Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 104-114.

⁴² See: MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 114-5; John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 23-26; Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 223-7.

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questions that they ask about Jesus' family only further serve to demonstrate their shock and confusion at the situation. They know his family and their social class, and this knowledge would allow them to conclude that he had no claim to religious authority. This is clearly demonstrated in the text when the people state that his brothers and sisters are "here with us." In identifying the family as part of the community, the synagogue is able to use them to prove their case against Jesus, especially since he has already rejected his family as true kin in chapter 3.21-22. In a sense it seems that the people are insulted by Jesus' perceived social breach, and they are returning the insult in kind by using his own family against him.

After presenting this setting, the verb ἐπλήσσω is given greater context in verses 6.3b-6.6. Unlike at Capernaum where the people eventually have a positive reaction of amazement, in Nazareth the initial emotional shock has given way to a more settled disposition of feeling insulted, as Mark relates that the people "took offense at him" (ἐσικανδαλίζοντο ἐν αὐτοῦ). In response, Jesus utters his famous line about prophets being rejected in their hometown. While all four of the canonical gospels preserve a version of this saying,⁴³ it is Mark alone that includes "among their own kin" as part of the passage. Adding this phrase emphasizes that Jesus' family does not support him, and that they implicitly agree with the crowds who are against him.⁴⁴ Lastly, once Jesus had admitted defeat in his hometown synagogue, the text relates that he could do "no deed of power there." Mark connects the faith of the audience to his capacity for performing miracles and it was their inappropriate reaction that prevented them from receiving the full benefits of Jesus' teaching.⁴⁵ Finally, Mark uses the standard Greek verb for astonishment θαυμάζω to describe Jesus' response. Here the evangelist is trying to draw a sharp distinction between the kind of disbelief or emotional disturbance that the people are feeling with the more measured disappointment felt by Jesus.⁴⁶ The townsfolk are in an uncorrectable emotional state, but Jesus is just plain surprised.

This scene is meant to highlight the genuine skepticism about Jesus' integrity and authenticity, highlighting the gulf that is developing between himself and those who should believe. Accordingly, the episode also represents an important turning

⁴³ Matthew 13.57 is nearly identical to mark, as it only lacks the line "among his own kin." John 4.44 says that "a prophet has no honor in his own country." Luke 4.24 preserves the most basic version: "no prophet is acceptable in his own country," but it is combined with the line "doctor, cure yourself" (Luke 4.23). The Gospel of Thomas includes the same doubled saying as Luke, but with a reversed order, "no prophet is acceptable in his home town, a doctor does not heal those who know him" (*Gos. Thom.* 31).

⁴⁴ Donahue and Harrington, 185.

⁴⁵ See Donahue and Harrington 185-6 for discussion. Mark mentions that he could only "lay hands upon a few sick people" but this apparently does not count as a mighty work.

⁴⁶ For discussion, see Donahue and Harrington, 186.

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point for the narrative as the use of the verb ἐκπλήσσω signals a tension-filled episode that ushers in a complete reversal of fortune for Jesus. After a successful initial missionary journey where Jesus had performed several miracles, he returns to Nazareth for the first time since leaving at the end of chapter 3. While performing miracles in non-Jewish territory, the power of Jesus is widely acknowledged, people are amazed (5.20, 5.42) and crowds gather around him (5.15, 5.21, 5.24). His disciples follow him demonstrating that he is now a successful teacher worthy of respect and attention.⁴⁷ Therefore, at the beginning of chapter 6, Jesus' social capital is high and we should expect the positive events to continue. While those in his hometown should take pride in Jesus' success, they will remain unsympathetic and skeptical,⁴⁸ and their shock and incredulity seemingly are confirmed by his inability to perform miracles before them. Thus, the widespread acceptance of Jesus described in chapters 1-5 is juxtaposed with the rejection that happens among his own people, making the setback even more biting. This episode signals two further important turning points in the narrative as well since Jesus now will never return to his hometown and he also will never teach in a synagogue again. While this could indicate that Jesus did not compete effectively in synagogues dominated by scribes and Pharisees, Mark instead uses this as a logical departure point for an expansion of Jesus' ministry, and especially among the gentiles where he can further develop and refine his reputation as a great teacher.⁴⁹

Mark 7.37

After Jesus leaves his hometown in 6.6, his mission continues to expand both geographically and in messianic scope. Over the next three chapters Jesus performs many miracles on a grand scale and his reputation increases, which likewise creates a commensurate rise in conflict between Jesus and his opponents. In fact, 6.6b-8.26 is described as a narrative section where contestation and conflict reignite and then

⁴⁷ The disciples play no particular role in this episode, but the fact that they witness his rejection is valuable for two reasons. First, they will witness similar rejections in later episodes and they themselves eventually will question Jesus' teachings and then ultimately deny him. Second, this narrative element fits Mark's motif of elevating the reader who will understand what is unfolding, while those around Jesus who should understand continue to fail.

⁴⁸ Gundry, 289; Morna Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark, Black's New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 152.

⁴⁹ Eric Stewart notes that Mark's description of space is very important to the gospel narrative. The cities and their synagogues are places where Jewish authorities watch and challenge Jesus. Since this confrontation has not gone Jesus' way, he needed to move outside of the locations. Eric Stewart, *Gathered Around Jesus: An Alternative Spatial Practice in the Gospel of Mark* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 189-194.

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expand.⁵⁰ Mark begins this conflict section by inserting two accounts that set up the mood and plot of the gospel that will unfold. First, in 6.7-13 Jesus gives the Apostles cynic-tinged instructions about carrying nothing with them on their missionary journey.⁵¹ Now without the security of home and family, Jesus and his Apostles were about to begin their itinerant mission that will ramp up through much of the remaining text until the final mission to Jerusalem. Second, in 6.18-29 Mark includes the account of the death of John the Baptist, which reinforces the looming danger that remains unresolved since his shocked neighbors rejected him. By linking the rejection in Nazareth and the expansion of the mission outside of Galilee to the death of the Baptist, Mark seems to foreshadow Jesus' own passion,⁵² making the use of the verb ἐκπλήσσω a powerful marker of dramatic action in the narrative.

The competitive strain in the narrative builds further when direct confrontations with the Pharisees over pedagogy start to develop (7.1-23), marked by the use of ἐκπλήσσω. Jesus travels into the gentile territories of Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis performing many signs among them, culminating in the healing of the deaf man with a speech impediment at 7.32-7.⁵³

They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech and they begged him to lay his hands on him. He took him aside in private away from the crowd, and he put his fingers into his ears and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one, but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were shocked beyond measure (ὑπερπερισσῶς ἐξεπλήσσοντο) saying, “He has done everything well, he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” (7.32-37)

This passage has some interesting parallels that link it to the first appearance of ἐκπλήσσω in the gospel. Both scenes also feature the frequently used Markan

⁵⁰ See Yarbro Collins, 341-2.

⁵¹ See: Lucian, *Peregr. mort.* 10; Epictetus *Diss.* 3.22; Diogenes Laertius 6.49; Abraham Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1977), 14-5, 132-3. Yarbro Collins notes an analogy, but denies that this is an established motif in Mark (298).

⁵² Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (New York: Random House, 2000); 397-8; Yarbro Collins, 303; Donahue and Harrington, 226; Jay, 205-229.

⁵³ While these regions are frequently referenced as non-Jewish territory, there is debate about whether the deaf man was gentile or not. While this is often presumed since the Syro-Phoenician woman is described as Greek, Mark never mentions the ethnicity of this man. Donahue and Harrington, 237; Yarbro Collins, 369; Gundry 382-3.

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element of secrecy, where Jesus orders silence as part of the commission of a miracle.⁵⁴ In 1.25 Jesus tells the unclean spirit to be silent and come out of the man after it has identified Jesus as the Holy One of God and in 7.36 the enthusiastic crowd is warned about silence when they insist on loudly broadcasting Jesus' miraculous abilities.

Naturally, both episodes are public healing scenes as well and in each, the crowds are "shocked" by what they have witnessed. In these passages, one must presume that the people are stunned and confused by what they see, as vividly curing ailments would be shocking.⁵⁵ In addition, one could argue that the context and the use of ἐκπλήσσω may signal that these are emotional events and there is some underlying fear in these two passages. In 1.21-8 Jesus is discoursing with demons, practicing exorcism, and representing a challenge to the authority of the scribes, all of which create a tense and anxious atmosphere. Somewhat similarly, 7.32-37 is actually the sequel to Jesus' initial visit to the Decapolis where he contends with Legion, and the gentiles also are frightened by Jesus and his power. In 5.17 the people beg him to leave their town because they were afraid and apparently did not fully comprehend what they witnessed. Afterward, the man who was exorcised of Legion spread the word and people were amazed (ἐθαύμαζον) at what Jesus had done (5.20).⁵⁶ This prelude then sets up the situation for Jesus' return to the Decapolis with an already extant reputation for miracle working. Lastly, this scene also has a parallel to 6.1-6 as well, as the people know of Jesus and his reputation when he returns to his home and family. However, this episode features a positive reversal with the opposite outcome of 6.1-6: the people accept him instead of rejecting him.

While there are similarities here, the differences in this latter Decapolis episode are quite significant. The use of ἐκπλήσσω denotes that the crowd is completely unbridled—the people simply cannot quell their enthusiasm and obey Jesus. Mark describes the crowds as "shocked beyond all measure" (ὑπερπερισσῶς ἐξεπλήσσοντο), indicating that people are out of their minds and lacking emotional control in light of

⁵⁴ Several interpreters have suggested that the apparent secrecy motif may simply be a literary tool used by Mark to emphasize that Jesus' ministry and the enthusiasm for it could not be contained. See Frank Matera, *What Are they Saying about Mark?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) 18-37; Marcus, 479-80; Yarbro Collins, 374-5; Gundry 391. I would also suggest that the calls to silence add further drama to the passages since such commands are issued primarily to the few who have both experienced and understood Jesus' true identity in the gospel.

⁵⁵ This reaction to a miracle also has remarkable similarities to the use of ἐκπλήσσω in the Septuagint, Philo, and Josephus, when the verb is employed to show how people do not know how to rationally comprehend miracles and interactions with the divine.

⁵⁶ It should be noted that Mark generally does not use the term θαυμάζω to describe the witnesses' reaction to Jesus' performance of a miracle or a teaching. Rather he often uses this verb to express reactions of non-eyewitnesses when they hear of Jesus' deeds (5.20, 15.5, 15.44). The only exception is 12.17 where the Pharisees are amazed by Jesus' teaching about the emperor's image on the denarius.

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what they had witnessed.⁵⁷ The inclusion of ὑπερπερισσῶς (beyond all measure), also is striking since it occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. The linkage of these two rare terms indicates that this is a critical turning point providing dramatic weight of the gospel.⁵⁸ First, Jesus' attempt to quell the enthusiasm backfires, as the more he ordered them to be quiet, "the more zealously they proclaimed it" (7.36). The use of ἐκπλήσσω in this curious situation again suggests more than mere amazement, as Mark is connecting events to unbridled emotions. Thus, there is consistency with contemporary philosophical writings that deploy the verb to denote shock and perturbation caused by excessive emotions that inhibit proper mental dispositions. While the audience is accepting of Jesus' authority, their emotional reaction seems to prevent a settled disposition and they actually disobey. This scene also highlights that there is a very different form of competition happening. The enthusiastic and unbridled acceptance of the gentiles stands in contrast to his closest disciples who demonstrated their lack of understanding in the face of remarkable deeds and teachings, including feeding the five-thousand (6.36-44), walking on water (6.47-52), and a very public competition with the Pharisees (7.1-13). While the Twelve still do not know who Jesus truly is, outsiders begin to recognize him immediately (6.54-56, 7.25) and proclaim his ministry in ways his intimates do not.

Mark 10.26

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!" And the disciples were surprised (ἐθαμβοῦντο) at these words. But Jesus said to them again "Children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God." They were greatly shocked (ἐξεπλήσσαντο) and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God, for God all things are possible." (10.23-27)

The passionate tension attending the verb ἐκπλήσσω helps to set a dramatic backdrop that is marked by many references to high emotions in this episode and the surrounding scenes. Jesus' apparent disappointment with his disciples grows

⁵⁷ The language may also suggest that the witnesses are a little confused or even annoyed that Jesus asks them to be quiet about what just transpired, making ἐκπλήσσαντο an appropriate term.

⁵⁸ Hooker, 186

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throughout the “journey narrative” in 8.27-10.45, which takes Jesus and his disciples from the villages of Caesarea Philippi to Mount Hermon, through Galilee, beyond the Jordan, and finally on the road to Jerusalem.⁵⁹ Throughout the journey section, the disciples continue to struggle in their understanding as they follow Jesus. Finally, in 10.23-7 the tension reaches a boiling point surrounding his instruction on wealth. Just before he utters his controversial teachings, he already is “indignant” when the disciples are stern with the children in 10.13-14. At this point Jesus actually becomes angry with James and John in 10.41, since the apostles continue to quarrel childishly and remain immature in their understanding. Likewise, in 10.28 the frustration of the Twelve is particularly palpable, highlighting the continued misunderstandings of those who should be the most able to recognize and appreciate Jesus. Thus, the semantic force of the verb ἐκπλήσσω also implies that Peter and the rest of the disciples are not settled in their dispositions and understandings of their mission, and they seem to be wavering.

Mark 10.26 is part of Jesus’ larger teachings on social justice that includes the topics of divorce and wealth. Here Jesus’ famous warning that “it will be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to gain the kingdom” seems to be something of a breaking point for the disciples. After such a dramatic statement, the apostles are shocked (ἐξεπλήσοντο), and they ask “who can get the kingdom then?” In the narrative, Peter’s question follows Jesus’ command to the rich young man to go and sell all of his possessions in order to follow him (10.22), setting up an important discourse on true discipleship. Peter and the others around Jesus represent this next stage of discipleship since they already had given everything up to be with him. Like the townsfolk in Mark 6.1-6, the disciples are reacting to more than just a potentially unpopular message. The response relates to the social strain presented by Jesus’ authority and his position as a member of the peasant class who is now polemicizing against the establishment and tradition.⁶⁰ The passage serves to reiterate the significant sacrifices that are necessary for discipleship including abandonment of home, family, and possessions. Clearly, Jesus is putting forth a divisive idea that would compete against conventional wisdom, creating anger and confusion, but not mere

⁵⁹ Examples of high emotion permeate the journey narrative. For example, immediately after the first passion prediction, Jesus rebukes Peter (8.33), three of them are terrified and speechless at the Transfiguration (9.2-8), they quarrel over rank (9.33-35), try to prevent others from doing works in Jesus’ name (9.38-41), and attempt to stop children from coming to Jesus (10.13-14).

⁶⁰ Jesus’ stance on wealth has clear analogies to cynicism. See Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 24-25; Francis Gerald Downing, *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition*, JSOTSS (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988).

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amazement.⁶¹ However, Peter's incredulity is not necessarily because of a personal loss of wealth or even family. Rather, Jesus' statement about the difficulties of reaching the kingdom for one who "has wealth," (τὰ χρήματα ἔχοντες) actually leaves the disciples "struck with fear" (ἐθαμβοῦντο).⁶² I would suggest that the disciples are afraid because even someone that seemed like a good candidate for discipleship and that Jesus "loved" (10.21) is turned aside. Since the disciples are far from perfect in Mark's gospel, it seems that Peter and the other disciples may even be asking if anyone can be saved,⁶³ and if the costs are worth the rewards.

Mark 11.18

The final use of the verb ἐκπλήσσω occurs after Jesus' itinerant journeys have ended in Jerusalem. In spite of the uneven progress he had made with the disciples up to his arrival in the city, his triumphal prophetic entry into Jerusalem marks an unexpected reversal in the action. The Twelve, bystanders, and the crowds obediently provide him with all elements needed for a messianic entrance. The narrative goes on to feature a very public competition between Jesus and the establishment, setting in motion the events that will fulfill his passion predictions.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves, and he would not let anyone carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "It is not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of robbers.'" And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was shocked (ἐξεκπλήσσετο) by his teaching." (11.15-19)

⁶¹ The common Mediterranean understanding was that the rich were blessed and that wealth was a sign of divine favor, making Jesus' message seem counterintuitive in light of popular beliefs about wealth as a signal of divine favor. See Deut. 8.18, 28.1-14; Prov. 10.4; Job 42.10. Alternatively, there were many contemporary authors who argued that wealth was not a sign of virtue or divine favor (i.e. Epictetus, *Diss.* 2.9.15, 2.17.23, 4.7.14, 4.9.1) or could even be a distraction and something to avoid (i.e. Lucian, *Nigr.* 12, 14; *Epp. Apoll.* 2, 4-7).

⁶² Mark 10.23. The Greek verb θαμβέω is another term related to astonishment or amazement. This particular verb connotes an amazement that causes fear. See *TDNT* "θαμβέω," 3.4-7; *LSJ* "θαμβέω," 783.

⁶³ See C.S. Mann, *The Anchor Bible: Mark* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1986), 402.

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A final critical illustration of Mark's use of the verb ἐκπλήσσω appears at the end of this passage, where great emotion and conflict truly dominate the scene. According to Mark's account, Jesus had not performed miracles or done any teaching in Jerusalem before overturning the tables of money-changers and driving out those who were selling and buying in the temple. Rather it is very much Jesus' outburst that introduces him the crowds in the city. In fact, even before Jesus entered Jerusalem he cursed the fig tree with no fruit on it (11.12-14), indicating that his angry and unsettled state from 10.42 had continued to foment. Also worthy of note is the fact that competition is ramping up as Jesus is leveling both a spiritual and socio-economic attack on the temple by his actions. Beyond the disruption of economic business, Mark also mentions that Jesus "would not permit anyone to bring anything through the temple (11.16)." Interestingly, only Mark includes this controversial line indicating that Jesus prevents the temple from functioning at all, barring access for pilgrims and their offerings.⁶⁴

After his dramatic actions Jesus shames the temple authorities and the crowds by paraphrasing scripture: "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers" (11.17). Again, it is apparent that everyone present is experiencing some negative emotions in light of what they had just witnessed. The people naturally would be shocked and offended (ἐπλήσσετο) signaling perturbation that would give way to stunned anger, frustration, and confusion. Accordingly, the authorities too are afraid of Jesus and are driven to murderous rage (11.18). Above all, context demonstrates that this is not a wondrous marveling or astonishment at Jesus. He has disrupted the very operation of the temple and scolded those who are present and participating. Furthermore, the danger and drama of the overall scene suggests that the sentiment of the crowd would in no way reflect a positive reaction to Jesus. Lastly, one may consider this scene something of a final tipping point in the Gospel. Mark is employing ἐκπλήσσω here to emphasize just how emotionally charged and dangerous the situation is. Jesus is more than a charismatic teacher and occasional nuisance to the authorities; he is now a fully disruptive force that undermines Jewish ritual and cult. The tension between Jesus and the authorities has fully developed as Jesus' actions have now given Jewish leadership what they were apparently looking for, "a way to kill him."

⁶⁴ Matthew removes this line completely in his redaction of the story. For discussion, see Yarbrow Collins, *Mark*, 530, who suggests that Jesus prohibited only certain kinds of vessels from entering the Temple. Fredriksen has argued that Mark does not have an understanding of how large the Jerusalem Temple was, and that it would be impossible to prevent people from carrying things through it and worshipping. Moreover, the vastness of the complex would mean that few people would have witnessed what Jesus was doing. Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 232.

Excursus: Ἐκπλήσσω and Θαυμάζω in the Synoptics

While Mark deploys ἔκπλησσω and θαυμάζω five times each in the gospel, in the other synoptic gospels the ratio in which each verb is used is rather different. Matthew uses θαυμάζω seven times (8.10, 8.27, 9.33, 15.31, 21.20, 22.22, 27.14) and ἔκπλησσω four (7.28, 13.54, 19.25, 22.33), while Luke uses θαυμάζω thirteen times and ἔκπλησσω only three times (2.48, 4.32, 9.43).⁶⁵ Overall, each verb maintains the same semantic range across all three of the Synoptic Gospels.

Starting with Matthew, the first use of ἔκπλησσω is in 7.28 at the conclusion of the Sermon of the Mount. The people who witness the sermon are “stunned” and silent because Jesus spoke as one with authority. Unlike in Mark where Jesus’ teachings are sparing, he teaches extensively in the Sermon on the Mount, providing specific instructions that would cause emotional disturbance among his listeners. The reaction is bewildered silence and perhaps even anger after hearing Jesus’ controversial teachings on topics such as meekness, anger, piety, and wealth.⁶⁶ The next two uses of ἔκπλησσω are direct retellings of stories from Mark. The first is Matthew 13.54, which is paralleled to Mark 6.1 when Jesus is rejected in his hometown.⁶⁷ The second is Matthew 19.25, which is a reworking of Mark 10.17 where Jesus warns about salvation for the rich. Lastly, Matthew 22.33 is a passage that has no Markan parallel. Here the crowds are stunned and perhaps angry when Jesus contradicts the Sadducees over the issue of resurrection.

In Luke, Jesus’ teaching usually is met with admiration and marveling marked by the use of the verb θαυμάζω. Therefore, Luke uses ἔκπλησσω less frequently than the other gospels. The first of the three instances of ἔκπλησσω in Luke represents a passage with no parallel elsewhere. In Luke 2.48 twelve year old Jesus was missing for three days and Mary and Joseph were “shocked” at Jesus’ treatment of them. Luke 4.32 is a direct parallel to Mark 1.22 where Jesus teaches in the synagogue at Capernaum and the people are stunned by his teaching. Luke also remains faithful to

⁶⁵ Acts employs θαυμάζω six times and ἔκπλησσω only once. John uses θαυμάζω six times (3.7, 4.27, 5.20, 5.28, 7.15, 7.21), but does not include ἔκπλησσω at all.

⁶⁶ The teaching on wealth, and in a sense much of the egalitarian teaching in the Sermon on the Mount looks like an expansion of Mark 10.23-27. Both passages also describe the audience reaction using ἔκπλησσω.

⁶⁷ Luke does not use this verb in his parallel. Luke’s account is expanded greatly and the content of Jesus’ teaching is much more specific. Furthermore, the final reaction to Jesus’ teaching is much different.

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Mark's resolution of the confrontation, stating that the people are eventually won over and amazed by Jesus. The final use of the verb is in 9.43 when Jesus heals the boy with seizures. Jesus publicly rebuked the demon that afflicted the boy and healed him, and the people were "stunned at the greatness of God." This use of the verb is much more in line with philosophical texts and the Septuagint's use of the verb, where individuals are "stunned" by the indescribable power of God.

Conclusions

A close reading of Mark demonstrates that the evangelist employs the verb *ἐκπλήσσω* strategically in his gospel as a means of highlighting critical points of competition within the narrative. In all instances, the authority of Jesus (or the perceived lack thereof) consistently factors into each of these accounts, creating a dramatic encounter between Jesus and his audience. Jesus speaks and acts as one who has ultimate authority, but the disciples, Pharisees, his family, and the crowds do not necessarily understand where this authority comes from nor are they all convinced that he has a right to it. Since Jesus is not part of the traditional religious powers, his words and actions are either problematic or enthralling, and they pose a challenge to the existing religious powers. This results in striking narrative twists where Jesus goes from remarkable highs to unexpected lows.

A second related point is that *ἐκπλήσσω* connotes a powerful and potentially competitive situation and there is always high emotion present in the scene. After a full evaluation of the use of the verb *ἐκπλήσσω* in Mark's gospel I believe that traditional translations of "astonished" or "amazed" undermine the strength and full meaning of the term. While such readings generally connote a positive response to Jesus' teachings, it is clear that the reactions of the audiences are much more complicated. In all five occurrences of the verb in Mark the people are shocked, emotional, and outside of rational thought when faced with Jesus' teachings and actions. Far from being amazed, the people are stunned by Jesus' perceived lack of respect for social convention, his apparent apathy towards family responsibility, his unfounded and inexplicable teachings, and his dangerous powers. In recognizing that *ἐκπλήσσω* is generally used in ancient literature to relay a sense of stunned confusion or shock, the reader can then put the encounters between Jesus and his listeners into better context.