

HOLY GROUND:
A Liturgical Cosmology

Contents

Preface	v
Introduction: liturgical cosmology and its importance	1
PART ONE.	
<u>Cosmos</u> – <u>liturgical worldmaking</u>	
1. A hole in the heavens: biblical reorientation in the universe	31
2. The cardinal directions: liturgical reorientation	67
3. Walking on the holy ground: liturgical spirituality	90
PART TWO	
<u>Maps</u> – <u>liturgical ethics</u>	
4. Baptism and the cosmic map	127
5. Eucharist and earth-care	166
6. Sunday, assembly-house, sky	205
PART THREE	
<u>One is Holy</u> – <u>liturgical poetics</u>	
7. Antiliturgica: on the ritual making of false worlds	237
8. The unmapped: three homilies in the wilderness	264
9. One is holy: liturgical theology, liturgical cosmology	290
Indexes	
PART ONE	

Cosmos:

liturgical worldmaking

Fire is both want and fullness.
Coming upon all things,
it will judge and sentence them.

-- Heraclitus

1. A Hole in the Heavens:
biblical reorientation in the universe

A handful of written works might be considered as the world classics of cosmology. Among them, in the Western world, no written philosophical cosmology has had more influence than Plato's Timaeus. Its "discourse of the nature of the universe"¹ has hovered, acknowledged or unacknowledged, on the edge of continuing philosophical and scientific reflection concerning the nature and order of all things from its fourth century B.C.E. origin, through the Renaissance work of Johannes Kepler, right up to current astrophysics.² In dialogue with interpretations of Genesis, the Timaeus has also played a central role in some Christian theological thought — in the work of Alexandrians and Cappadocians in the East and of Boethius in the West, even in the formulations of the Nicene Creed.³ Its teaching that all things form a perfect sphere even shows up as paintings on the walls of medieval churches, God sometimes being depicted as the "demiurge," as Plato calls the maker of all things, measuring out that very sphere. Indeed, among ancient educated people in the Hellenistic world, the Timaeus would have been the most likely work, after Homer, to have been read in Greek.⁴ It is thus no surprise to find references to the Timaeus in the New Testament itself, notably in the letter to the Hebrews (e.g., 11:3, 10), where the ideas of "creation out of nothing" and of that "demiurge," significant Timaeian themes, recur. Furthermore, the Timaeus "was the only dialogue of Plato known in anything near its entirety to the Latin Middle Ages, and therefore it has had the longest continuous influence of any of the dialogues in the West."⁵

We too should take this work seriously. We should do so obviously not for the speculative fruits of its deductive reasoning, many of which will seem ludicrous to us — e.g., souls come from the stars and return to the stars; birds are re-cycled human beings who had “airy” minds in their first life — but as a symbol of massive, engaged human thought about the origin and structure of things. Still, now and then, a line from the Timaeus will stun us with its nearly contemporary insight and remind us why astronomers still read the book. There is, for example, this: “Time, then, and the heaven came into being at the same instant, in order that, having been created together, if ever there was to be a dissolution of them, they might be dissolved together.”⁶ Such a line may sound to us like Einstein or like accounts of the Big Bang.

Unlike what is found in other Platonic dialogues, Socrates appears in this work not as the major voice, the stand-in for Plato’s thought or for Plato’s synthesis of his own work with that of his great teacher, but primarily as interlocutor and as audience. That fact may indicate a certain distancing of Plato himself from the content of the work, a certain relaxation or playing of the mind. In any case, the work represents the later Plato (after 361 B.C.E. and before Plato’s death in 347 B.C.E.), and seems to have been intended as part of a trilogy of works of which we possess only the Timaeus and a fragment of the Critias.

The Timaeus begins with Socrates briefly summarizing the Republic as a way to invite his companions to keep their promise to entertain him with further reflections on the history of all things (17a-20b). Critias, presented as a widely recognized Athenian leader, then proceeds to tell a story about the earliest history of Athens, about its connections with Egypt and its conflict with Atlantis (20c-27b). This story is given as a down payment on the human history — specifically the history of the city and its worthy

wars — which he engages to tell after Timaeus first recounts the origin of the world itself. The bulk of the book is then given over to that account of the generation and order of the cosmos. If Critias is an important Greek leader, Timaeus is another. Timaeus appears as a Pythagorean philosopher, a statesman from the Greek city of Locri in Italy, and an astronomer who “has made the nature of the universe his special study.”⁷ The agreement among the speakers is that Timaeus should first recount the genesis of the cosmos, down to and including the creation of humanity, and that Critias will then again take up human history.

Timaeus’s account is divided into two parts.⁸ Each of these parts is begun clearly (27c-d and 47e-48e), with a strong verbal indication of beginning — “so, now, let us begin” — and with a strong invocation for divine assistance. The first part (27c-47d) considers the great, perfect pattern of all things (Plato’s “ideas,” differently expressed) and the imitation of that pattern by the demiurge in making the things that are generated and visible. The classic four elements — earth, air, fire and water — are discussed, and from their subsequent combinations all else is posited. Timaeus then proposes the great sphere which is all things, discussing the motions of the sun and moon and planets within the sphere of heaven and demonstrating the extent of the observations of such movements in ancient Greek astronomy. He then moves on to speculations on the making of the stars and the birth of time, the birth of the gods, and the making of souls. Lesser gods, “younger gods,” now made the bodies for these souls, not always doing so with perfection. Nonetheless, in imitation of the great sphere of all things, the human head was made — “being the most divine part of us and lord of all that is in us”⁹ — the rest of the body being appended as servant to the head. Then into this head are inserted the organs of the senses, to create the face and front of the head

and to minister to the needs and well-being of the soul. The first and chief of these senses is sight, and the first part of Timaeus's account closes with an encomium on the immense importance of sight.

If the first part proceeds in a way that edges onto narrative and myth — a “likely story” (*μ*), as Timaeus asserts (29d) — the second part of his account (47e-92c) waxes more philosophical. Timaeus begins again. Now he discusses necessity, the dialectic between “the one” and nothing, the passive material receptacle for all generation, and whether there are of necessity many worlds or one world. But here, as well, Timaeus moves from the macrocosmos toward the creation of the human body, just as he is supposed to have agreed to do, just as he did also in the first part of his account. So, he goes on to the affections (*μ*) and, again, to the faculties of sense (), including finally and importantly sight. The treatise then becomes a reflection on medicine and, finally, a brief account of the creation of women (regarded as very much lesser human beings, as recycled cowardly males), sexuality, and the other animals. And so it ends.

Exactly at the juncture of the two parts of Timaeus the astronomer's account of the cosmos, summing up his first part and anticipating the similar movement of the second part also toward the human senses, there is found the little speech in praise of sight (47a-c). The Jowett translation of this speech of Timaeus reads as follows:¹⁰

The sight in my opinion is the source of the greatest benefit to us, for had we never seen the stars and the sun and the heaven, none of the words which we have spoken about the universe would ever have been uttered. But now the sight of day and night, and the months and the revolutions of the years have created number and have given us a conception of time, and

the power of inquiring about the nature of the universe. And from this source we have derived philosophy, than which no greater good ever was or will be given by the gods to mortal man. This is the greatest boon of sight, and of the lesser benefits why should I speak? Even the ordinary man if he were deprived of them would bewail his loss, but in vain. Thus much let me say however. God invented and gave us sight to the end that we might behold the courses of intelligence in the heaven, and apply them to the courses of our own intelligence, which are akin to them, the unperturbed to the perturbed, and that we, learning them and partaking of the natural truth of reason, might imitate the absolutely unerring courses of God and regulate our own vagaries.

So, says Timaeus, philosophy ultimately derives from sight. The very words of his cosmology depend upon sight — wise sight, sight made the basis of reflection, but sight nonetheless. According to him, the wise will take what they see in the orderly progression of the stars in their courses and apply that to their own minds, seeking to follow and imitate such movements in peaceful reason. Similarly, near the end of the second part of his discourse, Timaeus returns to the same theme: let the wise man follow the thoughts and revolutions of the universe, learning the harmonies of the sphere, “so that having assimilated them he may attain to that best life which the gods have set before mankind, both for the present and the future” (90d).¹¹ Summarizing the goal of each part of the discourse, then, the Timaeian praise of sight points both to the scientific basis of his cosmology — observation, followed by deductive reason and mathematics — and to the ethical implications of this cosmological reflection: Let the philosopher’s mind learn and follow what he sees; let the philosopher’s mind imitate

“the absolutely unerring courses of God,”¹² thereby attaining the good life. The praise of sight gives a center to both the structure and the content of this cosmology.

It is, of course, painful to think about that “ordinary man.” Timaeus himself does not spend much breath upon him, briefly running past the one whose blindness might cause him to bewail the loss of even the simple gifts of sight, let alone its philosophical and cosmological heights. For him this non-philosopher does not matter to the argument. Still, the careful modern reader, especially the reader who rejoices in the general tenor of this praise of sight, might be more troubled. In fact, the seemingly thrown-away comment of Timaeus is even sharper than the Jowett translation allows to appear. A more literal translation would read:

But those [gifts of sight] which are lesser, why should we hymn them here?

Those very gifts, even if they are lamented with wailing by the blind person who is not a philosopher are certainly lamented in vain!¹³

The “ordinary man” of Jowett is in fact, in the Greek, a blind man, thus one incapable of being the kind of philosopher Timaeus envisions, incapable of attaining the good life, not able to follow those divine courses in the sky. If such a one bewails the loss of the “lesser gifts” of ordinary vision, certainly that lament is foolish, μ , void of result, in vain. This problem with the cosmology of Timaeus was no problem at all to a worldview marked by the privilege and domination of certain upper-class, physically intact males. To us, however, this one sentence may seem like something of the lament of Beowulf when “everything seems too large” edging into Plato’s attempt at a comprehensive account of the cosmos and Plato’s cosmological ethics.

What shall we do with this lament? And, if the Timaeus is really so important to Western cosmology, what shall we do then with our coherent accounts of all things,

accounts for which the massive achievement of this ancient dialogue may stand as a symbol? Should we really let our uneasiness about the blind and lamenting “ordinary man” trouble us? Even more, is the role given to women in this dialogue — not to mention its idea that all the other animals are lesser and unworthy human beings recycled — a fatal flaw in its thought for us? And what does all this have to do with liturgy?

Mark: broken myths, broken cosmologies

In the Gospel according to Mark the name “Timaeus” appears again.

At the junction of the two major parts of the Second Gospel, between the Gospel’s “Galilee” and its “Jerusalem,” exactly between the ministry narratives and the passion story, there stands the account of a blind man (Mark 10:46-52). He is called “the son of Timaeus.” The name itself strikes us in at least three ways: First, this is the only recipient of the healing ministry of Jesus in the entire Gospel who is given a name at all. The name matters. Second, the name is intensified, this patronymic being repeated both in Greek and in Aramaic.¹⁴ We are strongly invited to note doubly that this person is the son or descendent or heir of Timaeus, just as he himself doubly calls Jesus the son or descendent or heir of David (10:47,48).¹⁵ And third, as many commentators have noted, the name is very hard to place in a Jewish context.¹⁶ It is not a recognized, current Hebrew or Aramaic name. We ought to yield the point. It is a Greek name and, in fact, one with a very specific and recognizable history. Here is the “son” of Timaeus, Plato’s Timaeus, and ironically he is himself blind, crying out in lament, seeing nothing, going nowhere. This cry for help occurs at the very place, structurally, that the lament of the blind man occurs in the Timaeus: at the juncture of the two major parts of the book.

The story, of course, is not some literal historical report. In fact, reading it may help us to see more generally the creative, symbolic intention of much of the Second Gospel. The evangelist could well have received the account of a healing at Jericho or along the road as part of the oral tradition. But it is Mark¹⁷ who supplied the location of the account in the pattern and flow of the Gospel book. And most probably Mark provided the name of the beggar, not as a report of what happened to Timaeus's own descendants but as a symbol and a breaking of symbols, an example of the Gospel's address to our present time. The evangelist thereby made of the account an explicit mimesis and reversal of Plato¹⁸ and made of the Gospel a profound contribution to cosmology.

That mimesis and reversal of Plato becomes the more clear when one notes what the story follows and where it leads. In Mark, the account comes just after the last of the passion predictions, Jesus' words about sharing his cup and his baptism, and his exhortation to his followers not to be like the leaders of the Gentiles (10:32-45). Timaeus and Critias, of course, were such leaders, their attitudes toward women and "lesser" sorts of people examples of the worldview of such tyranny. Now the very descendent of Timaeus is presented as such a lesser sort. But unlike the figure in the Timaeus, this blind beggar does not lament in vain. Throwing off his cloak (the "philosopher's cloak"? is it philosophy itself which is blind?), he comes to Jesus (10:50). Calling Jesus "my teacher," he asks to see. And receiving his sight, he follows Jesus "in the way" (10:52). What follows immediately in the book is the beginning of the Markan passion account, the enacting of Jesus' cup and the baptism of his death. The "way" which Bartimaeus follows is the way into this death, not the unperturbed and reasonable courses of the heavenly bodies. Participation in this way seems to invite us to a different

sort of cosmology, a different view of the constitution of the universe and a correspondingly different estimate of the good life.

One might assume that the figure of Bartimaeus then disappears from the Gospel. His name does not occur again. But given the crucial location of this figure in the structure of the Gospel, the open-ended report of his following on the way and the narrative interest in both his clothing and his sight, it is not impossible to suggest that the evangelist sees this same figure recurring, first as the young man who is following Jesus (14:51; cf. 10:52) and who now runs off naked, then as the young man in the empty tomb, now dressed in a white robe, announcing where Jesus is to be seen (16:5,7).¹⁹ These latter two figures have been linked in recent exegesis of Mark, and the single “young man” has been seen as a type of the newly baptized, of those who are immersed in the death of Jesus in order to be clothed in his life and made witnesses of the resurrection.²⁰ Indeed, the youngest and the newest members of the Christian assembly, by this view, may be wiser and more insightful than Peter or the other leaders. But it may be important to extend this reflection by understanding the “young man” to be none other than Mark’s “son of Timaeus.” Then that beggar has been fully stripped and clothed in the manner of ancient baptisms. Throwing off the cloak of philosophy or of begging, he has come to the teacher (10:50-51) and entered into the way of the catechumen. That way involves more than ideas and reason. It leads to naked need and immersion in Jesus’ death (14:51-52). Finally, this very same figure, now clothed in resurrection life, bears witness to a new use of sight: beholding Jesus “in Galilee” as he promised (16:5-7). This new Timaeus also follows “the absolutely unerring courses of God” toward the “best life,” but those courses are not found in the sky but, hidden under the form of disorder and loss, they are found among us, on the earth, in the way of Jesus

Christ, “seen” in faith. It may very well be that the author of the Fourth Gospel understood Mark clearly here: just after that Gospel reports that the Pharisees have said that “the μ has gone after him” (John 12:19), the narrative continues, “. . . some Greeks . . . came to Philip . . . and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus’” (12:20-21).²¹ Cosmology itself, that old Greek undertaking, is restructured in beholding Jesus, the crucified who draws all to himself.

If this reading of the Bartimaeus story is correct, then Mark has intentionally created or borne witness to a hole, a tearing in the fabric of the cosmology of the Timaeus. This hole occurs just at the place where the blind cry out for sight and are ignored, where, for the Christian, the lament is too strong for the cosmological business-as-usual to continue. And it occurs at a place which corresponds, in the Timaeus, to the ethical culmination of the argument, to the turning of the consideration of all things toward the ordering of the life of the wise. Only now the wise -- together with everyone else -- are invited to the wise folly of the cross. And the hole gets even larger.

It would not be true to assert that Mark entirely rejects either the Timaeus or the enterprise of cosmology. After all, the evangelist takes seriously the Platonic book by engaging in this reversal. One can assume that, for Mark, the great sphere, the courses of the heavenly bodies, and the rudiments of medicine -- cosmological assumptions of Hellenistic culture -- were all taken to be more or less as the Timaeus describes them. Even more, one can find a number of parallels between interests of the Timaeus and concerns of Mark. Timaeus asserts, “The father and maker of all this universe is past finding out, and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible” (28c).²² Mark celebrates the “messianic secret.” Only for Mark, that secret focuses around the crucified one, and the utterly impossible thing nonetheless happens (10:27):

people come to know him in faith and the readers of the Gospel book are invited to know the truth of who he is. The Timaeus praises the philosophical importance of sight. For Mark sight is also centrally important (8:18; 9:4; 13:26; 14:62; 16:7). Only for Mark, the seeing can be blind and the blind may be able to see. At last the sight of faith is invited to behold the crucified as the risen one. In the Timaeus, God brings order out of disorder (30a). In Mark this assertion is made the theme of many narratives — e.g., the great chapter of miracles: the stilling of the sea (4:35-41), the healing of the demoniac (5:1-20), the quenching of the woman’s flow of blood (5:25-34), the quieting of the wailing for Jairus’s daughter (5:38-40) — all down payments on the young man in the empty tomb at last announcing the greatest overcoming of disorder. Most importantly, the Timaeus is repeatedly interested in “the heaven” (, 28b and passim.) as the location of the great courses of the heavenly bodies and the principal name for that perfect sphere of all things: “the sensible God who is the image of the intellectual, the greatest, best, fairest, most perfect -- the one only-begotten heaven,” as the last words of the dialogue have it (92c).²³ Mark, too, is interested in “heaven” (e.g., 1:11; 6:41; 8:11; 13:25; 14:62). Only in Mark, the hearers of the Gospel book, along with Jesus, “see” the heavens torn (1:10), and the “son of God” is not the sphere of the sky but is among us, sharing our death (1:1; 15:39), becoming our life.

A hole in the heavens, a tear in the perfect fabric of the perfect sphere, then the Spirit descending like the end of the flood and a voice coming from the heaven: there, at the outset of the book (1:9-11), is an image of the Markan cosmology.

The Gospel of Mark is not a full cosmology. Rather, the book involves, as at least part of its concern, a significant reorientation of Plato’s work. This reorientation takes the “likely story” of Timaeus and deals with it as a “broken myth.”²⁴ Such breaking

receives the terms of the myth and its power to evoke and describe our experience of the world. But the coherent language of the myth, its consequent and contained system, is seen as insufficient, and its power is seen as dangerous. The myth, then, is both true and not true, capable of truth only by reference to a new thing, beyond its own terms. In Mark, that new thing is the word of God and the presence of the Spirit known in the crucified and risen one. In Mark, that new thing is the encounter with the God whom the church has called “the holy Trinity.” And in this broken myth, Bartimaeus and the hole in the heavens function as broken symbols: the philosopher is blind and then a candidate for baptism; the perfect sphere is torn as the triune mercy of God is made known on the earth. These symbols evoke the whole myth, and that account is seen as broken, in need, now referring beyond itself.

In just the same way, at least two other examples of broken cosmological symbols also function in Mark. These symbols arise not from Greek but from Jewish and Middle Eastern provenance. The mustard seed parable (Mark 4:30-32) receives the old cosmic image of the “tree of life” -- the great tree that holds all things into order -- and yet breaks that image to new meaning: the tree of life is an annual bush; the tree of life, making room for all things in its branches, is the cross.²⁵ More extensively, the temple, that ancient symbol of the heart of the cosmos, the navel of all things, is also reinterpreted. The temple is cleansed (11:15-19) and then held under the threat of destruction (13:2). But the cornerstone of a new temple (12:10-11) or its architect and builder (14:58; 15:29; cf. 6:3) is the crucified one. Such use of cosmological symbols exactly corresponds to the Markan use of soteriological terms as well: the Christ, the expected “anointed king,” in Mark comes to serve, not be served, is anointed only for his

burial by an unnamed woman, rules only from the cross, is hailed only in mocking or by his executioner.

Plato, too, remembers human fallibility and mortality. Timaeus reminds his hearers, “I who am speaker and you who are the judges are only mortal men” (29d).²⁶ His conclusion follows: “We ought to accept the tale which is probable — the likely story, the fairly reasonable myth — and inquire no further.” Mark inquires further.²⁷ He uses precisely the failures and holes in the myths to praise the God who comes into our mortality with life-giving, world-holding mercy.

These broken myths invite the reader to explore and use such patterns and themes of world-coherence as may be available to us, but to find the deepest, all-including coherence not in any of our schemes or symbols but in the mercy of God. This broken cosmology makes room for the women, for the lament of the blind or anyone else to whom the world has become too large, for the need of the marginalized and forgotten, for the experience of the utterly disordered world. The Gospel of Mark itself contains several connecting lines out to the cosmos. There is a way in the wilderness (1:2-3). Crowds are drawn from many regions and from the four directions (3:8; 8:9). A new sense exists that all the houses, fields and families of the earth can be seen as home to those who follow Jesus (10:30). But the heavens are torn, and the courses of the stars — while belonging to God — are not necessarily the reliable sign of peaceful reason: the sun can be darkened (13:24; cf. 15:33), the stars can fall (13:25). Order — deep order for all things — is only to be found in the word and promise of God and in the encounter with the risen one.

Such assertions ought not be used by Christians to shut down the undertaking of cosmology, in any of its senses. A Christian in the present time can rightly engage

vigorously in the massive scientific inquiries needed toward an astrophysical account of the structure of things or a biological account of the structure of life, the massive social and political work needed toward shared worldviews, the massive intellectual work needed to elaborate an accurate and responsible ecology. A Christian in the present time can rightly rejoice in the fruits of these labors. These are our versions of the Timaeus. But all of them have holes, silences, inabilities. None of them should be turned into comprehensive worldviews with an utterly consequent ethics implied. That way lies tyranny. Indeed, the Christian experience of the broken symbol makes a proposal to all worldviews, scientific, religious, philosophical: let them be held critically, with room for lament, room for the other, and room for mercy. Our worldviews — perhaps especially our religious worldviews — are not themselves God. Only one is holy.

This critique of worldviews is urgently needed in the present time. Cosmologies have been constructed which consign whole groups of people, whole parts of the world, whole ranges of species to evil or even to non-being. God or the gods have been made into guarantors of these constructions. Mass murder has ensued. Cosmologies are not all innocent, all of equal value, all beautiful. We need the scientific testing of hypotheses, the experimental vulnerability to actual evidence. But we also need the breaking of symbols, the breaking of myths.

Where are we to find the Christian experience of the broken symbol — or, more, the broken myth, the broken cosmology? Even the Gospel of Mark seems to conclude (16:8) with nobody understanding, except perhaps the young man in the tomb, and with the women running away, silent and afraid. By the end of the Gospel there is no experience to counter the final word of death, except for the very ambiguous empty tomb. But the ending of the Gospel sends the reader or hearer of the book — sends us —

back to Galilee where the risen one is to be seen (16:7), that is, back to the beginning of the Gospel book itself (1:16).²⁸ There, shockingly if we know the Timaeus, we see again that this is a text about another “son of God” than the perfect cosmic sphere. Indeed, we see the heaven itself torn open. And there, after once again coming across baptism and the call to follow, the reader or hearer encounters Jesus in the text, in a synagogue (1:21) and then in a house (1:29), receiving the crowd, teaching, healing. Hearing this text in the house of the church, house of the word, is then the very “seeing” of the risen one which the young man in the tomb promises. Jesus lives in the text as it is present in the assembly. The Gospel book itself, read in the assembly, is the resurrection appearance. The whole assembly comes into the hidden meaning of the story, the now manifest, risen identity of the crucified one. The whole assembly becomes the locus for seeing the torn heavens, receiving the Spirit, hearing the voice of God, being reoriented in the world. Even more, as the text continues the reader or hearer comes to understand that the fragments of bread from Jesus’ great meals (6:30-44; 8:1-10) are still being passed out. Eyes are healed in that shared bread to see the crucified one as risen. Finally, we see that the way of Bartimaeus, the way of baptism, is open also to us. The house, the word, bread, baptism, the “way”: the Gospel of Mark unfolds toward the exercise of the very symbols which give a center to the Christian assembly. The Markan reorientation of cosmology comes to liturgical expression. Indeed, Markan cosmology is a liturgical reorientation, not an ideology, not an idea.

The importance of the Bartimaeus story in the Gospel comes to even greater clarity when one considers that the son of Timaeus is the second blind person to be healed in the story. The first is an unnamed man who is healed in a gradual process (8:22-26) just before the first passion prediction (8:27-9:1). Thus, the three passion

predictions of Mark, those immensely important bearers of the meaning of the book and the meaning of Jesus, are exactly framed by accounts of the healing of the blind. Coming to “see” means coming to understand and encounter God’s mystery in Jesus. Coming to see means coming to understand and encounter the hole in the philosopher’s consequent account of the world. Coming to see means coming to trust that all things are held in the mercy of God. Furthermore, in the first case sight is given as a gift of Jesus just after the disciples have been accused of being “blind” in spite of their knowing of the basketfuls of bread left over, still available to be given away (8:18-21). In the second case, Bartimaeus is healed just after the word about sharing in Jesus’ cup and Jesus’ baptism. And Bartimaeus -- or someone like him, another narrative figure meant to make room for us in the text -- goes on to be stripped, immersed in Jesus’ death and made a witness of the resurrection. The blind coming to see — and with them, we ourselves — are associated with the word about the death of Jesus and with the bread, cup and baptism which hold out that death as a gift of life. That word, that bread and cup, that baptism have their central place in the Christian assembly. To exercise them is to be in the thing to which the Gospel bears witness, to be under the torn heavens, at the place where the mercy of the triune God begins to reconstitute our cosmology. The Christian liturgy, when it is faithful to these central things, holds us in a living cosmological proposal.

Biblical words, contrary words

Mark’s Gospel is not the only biblical text which has a contrary, transvaluative approach to cosmology. And Mark’s Gospel is not the only biblical text where that reversal comes to liturgical expression. Although it is popularly assumed that Genesis

gives us a single cosmogonic account with a single cosmological understanding and that the rest of the Bible simply supports and follows this Genesis account, the truth is much more complex. Many biblical texts are best read as reversals and transvaluations of a great diversity of worldviews. Mark uses and breaks the “likely story” of the Timaeus. But in doing so, Mark stands in the deepest biblical tradition. In other places in the Bible yet other accounts of the origin of the world are presumed. Yet other ways of holding all things in coherence are in play. The biblical business, time and again, seems to be to propose a hole in these systems or to reverse their values while still using their strengths, to turn or re-aim their words toward another purpose. The biblical concern seems to be to break these systems before the encounter with God and to fill biblical liturgy with just that encounter. Such a contrary, subversive word seems the primary cosmological undertaking of the Bible.

Reversal may even have been the purpose of the first creation story in Genesis (1:1-2:3). In that great poem of creation, many things that other cosmogonies called “gods” — the sun and moon created on the fourth day, for example — are created quite secondarily and are peacefully called “good” by the one creator. Furthermore, while other accounts of the origin of all things laid accent upon the deity conquering chaos like an enemy, here the cosmos arises peacefully, at the word of God, with no secondary evil power to overcome. Those reversals of common cosmologies are then given a liturgical base: every week through which we live is made into an image and witness of creation, the seventh day responding to God’s work and rest with rest and praise.

Indeed, by this account, a liturgical transvaluation has been brought to the old Babylonian planetary week. That Babylonian way of marking time, a way known by the “priestly” writer of Genesis 1, was most likely created to reflect the power of the seven

astral “wanderers” known to ancient observers of the sky -- the sun, the moon and the five visible planets -- as well as the ancient four-fold division of the lunar period. If one understood the moon to have four phases, then each of those phases was more or less seven days long, confirming the use of the planetary week. For the Babylonians, the seventh day of this week was, however, an “unlucky day” on which nothing should be done since it would inevitably go wrong. By the first creation account of Genesis, the Babylonian week has been utterly reworked. The days witness to God’s creation, not the power of the planets. The unlucky day has become a “sabbath,” a witness to God’s goodness as greater than any human work. The pattern of doing no work has been maintained but re-aimed. Humankind is invited to refrain from work not out of anxiety but, rather, in rest, witness and praise. Then, if the structure of the universe itself is recalled in course of the days of the week, the movement of the days toward the sabbath enacts the opening of all things toward God. Sabbath is a kind of hole in the old Babylonian sphere of the week.

A certain reversal may also have been the intention of the second creation story (Genesis 2:4ff.). In this story, many of the usual materials of ancient urban and agricultural myth — the garden, the tree of life, the four rivers — have been reworked to become the materials needed to tell of sex and work, sin and sorrow and death, all as background to the ongoing biblical story of God’s promise and God’s mercy. Indeed, the second story also stands in a certain tension with the first story. The cosmos itself is good, made so by the very word of God. But that cosmos is also the theater of sin and death. The way to the tree of life -- the very axis or lynchpin of the cosmos -- is now shut off to humanity, guarded, beyond reach (3:24). The liturgical enacting of this story has always involved the various Jewish and Christian ways of making confession and

praying for or announcing the forgiveness of sin. And while Jews have sometimes seen the embracing of Torah — even the liturgical dancing with Torah (cf. Proverbs 3:18) — as a new access to the tree of life, Christians see coming to Christ and eating his meal as “nesting” in that tree (Mark 4:32; cf. John 15:1-5) and eating from its fruit (cf. Revelation 22:2). The liturgy begins to make accessible what the story forbids.

In any case, if one reads these two stories to imply the absolute pre-eminence of human beings in the scheme of things, as has sometimes been common for Christian interpreters, then other biblical voices exercise the reversal.²⁹ A chain of reinterpretation ensues. The climax of the book of Job (Job 38-42), for example, celebrates God’s delight in all creation, even in Behemoth and Leviathan, those mythological beasts which stand for uncontrollable enmity to order as humans see it. God delights in the creatures quite apart from any relationship these creatures have with human beings.³⁰ The series of questions put to Job, leading him to humility, give great detail to the conditions of wind, sea, sun, stars, clouds, and seven species of wild animals, all rightly and utterly apart from any human domination or use. In Job, as surely as in the work of a modern evolutionary biologist, humankind is part of the natural fabric, not its swaggering, controlling lord: “Look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you” (40:15). Job is a healthy antidote not only to the orthodoxies of Deuteronomy³¹ — the Bible against the Bible — but also to an overly anthropocentric reading of Genesis. Job may be a kind of hole in the creation stories of Genesis, a hole filled with the encounter with God (Job 38:1-3; 40:6-7; 42:5). Job has the greatest room for lament and disorder, for the time when everything seems too large. In addition, its description of the cosmos and the rich variety of life on earth makes room for human beings, but only as respectful and humble participants along with other species. And the

center of the book, the only “answer to Job,” is the encounter with God. That encounter is the central concern of any liturgy.

But the two stories of creation from Genesis, even with the important correction from Job, are not the sum of the matter, not the total biblical word on cosmology, as they are assumed to be. Far from it. We have seen that already with Mark and the Timaeus.

But we might also find it in Psalm 74. There, in a psalm which probably originates in the time of conflict with Greek or Seleucid invading armies but may be earlier, the creation account utilized is itself an account of conflict. Like many of the ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies and unlike Genesis 1, this psalm assumes that the world came into being through a battle between the deity and the chaotic sea, personified as the sea-dragon Leviathan (Psalm 74:12-17). From this victory came tamed water — springs and rivers — but also the body of the earth, the stars and the sun and the seasons. But this mythological language is now turned to radically new purpose. The chaos here is not a primordial sea or sea-creature, but the present chaotic need of an invaded and subjugated people who have a sense of the absence of God. The ancient creative deed of God is itself collapsed into another deed, another conquest at sea: the story of the exodus of the people from slavery. A literal translation of the Hebrew of Psalm 74:14 would read, “You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave it as food to the people in the wilderness.” Leviathan conquered becomes the manna. The exodus of the people to freedom before God becomes an act of new creation. Psalm 74, then, stands in the reinterpetive chain of biblical texts, beginning with the “Song of the Sea” in Exodus 15, which use the mythological language of creation through conflict to praise God’s acts for salvation.³² But here that language is also used for beseeching. The hole in the

mythic cosmology is the present bleeding need: “the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of violence. Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame; let the poor and needy praise your name” (74:20-21). God is asked to create ordered cosmos again. Lament and intercessory prayer are the liturgical forms taken by this reorientation of a mythic cosmology.³³

But if one is tempted to turn a liturgical understanding of “world” into lament alone, the contrary word can be found in another psalm. Psalm 136 similarly places the creation of the cosmos, of earth, sea and great lights (136:5-9), next to God’s acts for salvation (136:10-24), but does so as a prayer of thanksgiving. Here the liturgical refrain — “for the mercy of God endures forever” — points in faith to the grounds of both creation and salvation. Faith trusts in that mercy as the unifying principle of cosmic order. All creatures that eat (136:25) participate in this mercy. Thanksgiving at table thus brings the community to stand within ordered cosmos, in the company of “all flesh.”

This consideration of texts with cosmological import could continue. The myth of the Canaanite storm god making the fruitful land hovers behind some biblical passages (e.g., Psalm 104), only now that creator is YHWH, the God of Israel who covenants with the people as holy witnesses. The trans-national wisdom movement gets connected to the idea of God’s creative word, and Lady Wisdom, the great Wise Woman, then appears as God’s architect and builder in making the cosmos, the mythological house of seven pillars (e.g., Proverbs 9:1; cf. Baruch 3:32-34). Only now this wisdom exactly corresponds to Torah, to the wisdom of the law given to Israel and so appearing on earth (Proverbs 9:4-6; Baruch 3:36-37). Fragments of yet other mythological cosmologies appear throughout the Bible (cf. Genesis 6:1-4; Revelation 12:7-13), but they are

integrated within the great intention of the story: to bear witness to the judgment and mercy of God holding all things. Time and again a diversity of cosmologies are received into the biblical tradition. Then, by the addition of a few elements,³⁴ by the juxtaposition of a contrary text, by a mimesis and reversal of values, by a tear or a hole, these cosmologies are re-aimed, reoriented. And time and again, this reorientation has a liturgical expression — the sabbath, thanksgiving at table, lament and beseeching, embracing Torah, use of the broken myth as a psalm or a prayer — inviting the people to stand in the reordered cosmos before the holy God.

The New Testament carries this general biblical pattern of reinterpretation yet further, with christological and trinitarian purpose. When the reinterpretation has to do with cosmology, a liturgical expression frequently lies close to hand. Thus, two of the most important cosmological texts of the New Testament — John 1:1-18 and Colossians 1:15-20 — involve re-workings of prior material. The Johannine prologue uses the Jewish wisdom tradition together with the Greek —speculation to speak of the cosmic meaning of Jesus Christ. Further, the opening words of the book (“In the beginning . . .”) probably intentionally mimic and reinterpret the opening words of the first creation story of Genesis. Colossians makes use of many “likely stories,” not least of all the Timaeus.³⁵ And, most scholars agree, both texts are hymns, fragments from the liturgical life of early churches.

Similarly, old Jewish or proto-Gnostic son-of-man speculation stands behind the vision in Revelation 1. Only now it is the crucified-risen one who holds the seven stars — those old astronomical pillars of the universe, the seven planeta — in his hand (1:16). Christ stands at the center of the cosmic order, and the churches echo and present this cosmic order (1:20) insofar as their meetings -- their liturgies -- are filled with the seven

spirits from before the throne of God (1:4). This vision constitutes a radical re-use of apocalyptic speculation about the structure of the cosmos around a mysterious semi-divine figure. Now the whole vision can be taken as an articulation of the meaning of Sunday or Lord's day assembly (1:10), even for a lonely exile remembering the assemblies, in touch with the assemblies only by letter. Sunday assembly means the encounter with the cosmos-holding risen one, the communion of the churches with each other, the cosmic significance of the churches, the judgment of the churches on the basis of their fidelity to this vision.³⁶

Jewish apocalyptic also stands behind Paul's eschatological reflections on the world in Romans 8:15-27. Only now this apocalyptic language has been turned to speak of what it means for the assembly to pray in the Spirit and in Christ, in the midst of a world filled with suffering.

Many different cosmologies fill the pages of the Bible. They do not necessarily cohere or agree. No single, comprehensive biblical cosmology can be found. No "doctrine of creation" can be presented as biblically founded if it also utilizes a closed system and supposedly perpetual "orders of creation." No detailed eschatology can be asserted to be revealed if it is essentially about something other than the encounter with the Spirit now, here. What can be found, widespread in the cosmic accounts of the Bible, is the critique and reversal in these accounts, the hole in any perfect cosmic sphere. For the scriptures, none of the various candidates for central cosmic principle can be adequate — not the perfect sphere, not the ruling planets, not the conquering god, not the dominant role of humanity, not the end of time, not the logos, not the son-of-man, not the tree of life. But the cosmologies suggested by all of these can be received if they are turned, if their terms are re-used to speak of the living God, if the

community encounters that living God through all the gaping holes in their cosmological fabric. For Christians, that encounter is with the triune God, with the Spirit and Voice presenting Jesus through the tear in the heavens, with day of the resurrection as an eighth day, with the crucified one as logos or as tree of life or as son-of-man, holding all things into mercy, known and tasted in the power of the Spirit. For Christians that encounter with the triune God takes a communal, liturgical form.

One should be careful in making this assertion about a “hole” in cosmologies. The assertion could be taken to mean that one cannot speak of God, when one is discussing any worldview, except as the “God of the gaps,”³⁷ the God projected by us to fill in any place where our ignorance has not yet allowed us to go. On the contrary, the God who comes through these biblical holes holds the entire cosmos in mercy, allows diversities of cosmic descriptions, but is guarantor of none of them. The God who comes through these holes is not a God beyond the spheres, but one known in our midst, on the ground, amid all the conditions of the world. The God who comes through these holes is the God of the burning bush. Precisely because of that encounter, “the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). It is God and God’s beloved, real world that are holy, not our theories of world-coherence.

There are commonalities between the diverse biblical cosmologies as they are held under critique. They generally assert that the earth itself and all the “luminaries” are good and beloved by God; that this life is the theater of sin and grace, death and life; that history matters and moves in a direction; that the structures of things, including the stars, had a beginning and may have an end; and that all creatures — animate and inanimate — stand before God. But the actual order and description of these things differ. It is as if our cosmologies are among our human cultural treasures, “the glory

and the honor of the nations” (Revelation 21:26). These treasures, in their rich diversity, are welcome to be carried into the city which finds its center in God and the Lamb. At the same time, they will be sifted, judged: “nothing unclean will enter it” (21:27). The great diversity of the cosmologies of the Bible invites Christians to a new openness toward diverse world descriptions and, in our time, toward a vigorous pursuit of scientific cosmology. But the critique of the Bible — and the judgment at the gates of the city — also invite us to a critical stance toward these cosmologies and their consequent ethics. Only one is holy.

The liturgy is biblical

The primary biblical work on cosmology involves continuous reorientation. Several of the major biblical examples of such reorientation have concrete liturgical expression: word, bread, cup, baptism in Mark; sabbath for Genesis 1; Sunday assembly for Revelation 1; confession and forgiveness for Genesis 2ff.; then prayer, songs and psalms, laments and thanksgivings at the table. Also in the manner of its cosmological work — of its worldmaking — the liturgy is biblical.³⁸

Take the account of Jacob’s dream of the ladder as a final example, following the reinterpetive trajectory of this story through several biblical texts. According to the Genesis narrative (Genesis 28:11-22), when Jacob put his head upon the stones at Bethel, he dreamed that the place where he lay was filled with God and the signs of God. A stairway or ramp -- a Mesopotamian ziggurat, most likely -- extended between earth and heaven. On it the angels of God were ascending and descending, making Bethel the very center of a kind of commerce with the divine. Jacob could see this commerce, this series of exchanges that, according to many religions, takes place invisibly at temples

and holy shrines. Bethel, in the classic role of the temple, was a place for perceiving the structure of the cosmos, a navel of the world, the cosmic omphalos.³⁹

But the imagery of the narrative is also unlike the expectations of many shrines. God, whom we would expect to find at the top of the ramp, housed in the hut which was closest to heaven and receiving the intermediary angels, stands "beside" Jacob (28:13), promising presence and blessing without intermediary. The angels have become indicators of the importance and holiness of the place, not commerce-bearers. The structure of this cosmos differs from our expectations. When Jacob awakens, he proclaims, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." Such awe belongs conventionally to holy places. Here, however, the awe is heightened because of the surprising character of this God: "Surely YHWH"-- not just any deity -- "is in this place -- and I did not know it!" (28:16).

Of course, the story functioned once as the foundational cult-narrative of a particular Israelite shrine, the "house" or temple at Bethel. This cult-center, which may have had a Canaanite pre-history, played an important role in many Old Testament stories, being associated with Abraham (Gen. 12:8), Jacob, Deborah (Judges 4:5), Samuel (1 Samuel 7:16) and finally the northern kingdom of Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:29-33). It was to Bethel that Amos came (cf. Amos 7:13) to proclaim again a surprising view of God and of worship: "Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs . . . But let justice roll down like waters" (Amos 5:22-24).

The surprising proclamation of Amos stands next to the surprise already present in the narrative of Jacob's dream: God is not captured in our cult, not manipulated by our cult-conceptions, not resident at the top of our ladder of sacred exchange, not the

guarantor of our own cosmology. Rather God is far more awesome than we thought, present in promise to the littlest and most wretched ones, and transforming our holy places to be places of the encounter with God's presence, promise and justice, in ways we had not expected.

But the surprise is not over. This story of Bethel, the "house of God," with its unexpected critical turns, hovers behind a passage found in John's Gospel. In the Johannine narrative of the gathering of the first disciples (John 1:35-51), Nathanael has already confessed that Jesus is "rabbi" and "son of God" and "king of Israel." Jesus responds to this series of holy titles with an even more astonishing assertion. "You will see greater things than these," he says. "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son-of-Man" (1:49-51). There is that opened sphere again, the hole in the system of the Timaeus in its Johannine form. There is that "son-of-man" again, reworked. And there is the echo of Jacob's dream, the hole in the cosmology of temples. For the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is himself Bethel. In him is the cosmological key, the gate of heaven, the awesome place, the holy exchanges, the very presence of God beside the poor and wretched. He is the one at the bottom of the ladder, overwhelming yet accessible to needy humanity. What humanity has longed for in shrines and temples, is found in an utterly new way in him. From this new Bethel, new lines run out toward the structure of things.

The idea of Jesus as the holy place recurs in the Gospel of John, with ever new surprise and with continuing liturgical import: Jesus' body, crucified and risen, is the new Temple (2:19-22). The Father is to be worshiped, not on the Samaritan Mt. Gerizim nor the Jerusalem Temple-mount, but wherever the Spirit is poured out in the presence of the truth of the Son (4:19-26; cf. 14:6). The water which is to flow from the Temple to

water the wilderness is the Spirit and water from his heart (7:37-39). And all of this is said of the crucified-risen one, for he is that "house" or "dwelling place" (12:32; 14:3), the source of water and the Spirit (19:28-37; 20:22). Wherever the community gathers in this house, around this water, under this Spirit, it will have its conception of God, of cosmos and of holy places radically transformed, in a way that accords with the great biblical tradition of Bethel. The community will encounter the holy Trinity, will be drawn into its very life, and will discover how this one God is "for us," standing with the wretched and needy, and drawing us all out of death into ways of justice and life.

Christian liturgy, at its best, has continued this tradition of Bethel. The liturgy has held Leviticus and Amos together, the enacting of sacred signs of God together with the prophetic denunciation of worship without justice. The liturgy has been a place where ordinary expectations of God have been invited into the surprise and transformation of grace, where our god-projections have been met by the judgment, the grace and the life of the holy Trinity, where our attempts at exchange with the deity have been invited instead to become occasions to give ourselves to our neighbor. The liturgy has depended on the sense that the holy place occurs wherever the community gathers around the crucified and risen Christ, present in word and sacrament. The liturgy has seen the reading and preaching of the scriptures and the celebration of the eucharist as Bethel-stones, as awesome places of the presence of the triune God who gathers all fearful Jacobs into promise and life. Indeed, these central matters that invite us into the broken cosmology of Bethel are themselves broken symbols, a universal word which is a specific story, an intimate meal to which all are welcome, a bath that makes us unclean with the unclean.⁴⁰ The liturgy has understood the angels as hovering about these "places" of word and sacrament, not as intermediaries but as markers of the cosmic

centrality and holiness of the place. We indicate this presence by our song together with the angels in the gloria in excelsis of the word-service and in the sanctus at the table.

The liturgy has welcomed participants into this Bethel-assembly by immersing them in the water and Spirit which come from the crucified, by bringing them to the new birth of baptism. Because of the unexpected grace of the God of this Bethel -- the way this God is present in the world, at the bottom of the ladder -- the liturgy has turned its participants toward God's beloved world, oriented them in a cosmos held in mercy: in intercession for all things, in sending food and money to those in need, in sending the community itself to be body-of-Christ for the world.

We may rightly ask ourselves if the liturgy we are celebrating in our Sunday assemblies is such a Bethel, such a "house of God."⁴¹ The question will not only be an inquiry about how much awe is experienced in the meetings of our congregations. It will also be an inquiry about whether or not our conceptions of God and of cosmos are undergoing a transformation by the encounter with the surprising grace and truth of the Trinity. When our worship services have instead become conventional ways of "going to church," with our own identities and worldviews and commerce with the divine as the accented centers of the event, they may run the risk of being more like Mesopotamian ziggurats than like Jacob's surprising Bethel. The same may be true if our services are primarily romantic pageants of the ways we imagine the middle ages or "Bible times" to have been or consumer gatherings for entertainment and for the sales of religion, dealt with as if it were a commodity, or sacred dramas reinforcing a single, hieratic ideology, as if in a time out of time.⁴²

But the word and sacraments of Jesus Christ are surprisingly resilient. Allowed some presence in our assemblies, they will call us to the surprise of a reoriented cosmos.

If we lay down our head on them, even a little, they will be Bethel-stones for us, full of the presence of the triune God and enabling a new view of the world. One of the medieval wooden churches of Norway, located in Uvdal in Numedal, has, since shortly after the Reformation, had these painted words on the wall, surrounding the whole assembly: “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” It is a remarkable promise, pointing to the cosmic location of a little assembly before God’s mercy.

One final biblical image will help. It is the image in which this book is wrapped. When, in the Revelation to John, the sixth seal has been opened and almost all of the apocalyptic terrors coming upon the earth have been revealed, a pause is called. An angel ascends from the rising of the sun, halting all the damage which may be coming to earth and sea and trees, until all the servants of God are marked with God’s seal (Revelation 7:1-3). The marking angel calls to the wind-holding angels, “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal upon their foreheads.” The surprising promise of the Revelation text seems to be that the well-being of the earth itself is tied to the well-being of the “sealed,” those seemingly powerless ones in the structure of things who are held in God’s treasuring hand. Earth, sea and trees are spared for the sake of the continued marking of this assembly of God’s servants, just as, in Abraham’s argument, Sodom should be spared for the sake of the ten righteous ones (Genesis 18:32).

No Christian community ought easily claim that it is the source of the well being of the earth. Nonetheless, by the grace of Jesus Christ, the liturgical community is a community around that “seal of the living God.” The mark of God is made on the body of the baptized through baptism itself. The seal of God comes also, received again and

again, in the word and in the holy communion, marking the community which hears and eats and drinks, turning us all into beggars and so into receivers of mercy. The assembly is at least one place where the innumerable multitude should begin to gather “before the throne and before the Lamb,” and where the sealing should continue to be extended to “all tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9). The Revelation then gives to that assembly a surprisingly cosmic location. And the voice of the angel invites the assembly of this seal to join in the spirit of the great, saving prohibition: “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees!” As the seal extends to more and more people, as we ourselves receive the seal in the liturgy, we are drawn into the care of the earth, the sea and the trees, made to participate in the holding back of the destructive winds.

A hole in the heavens, a little community of the powerless as cosmic protection, a ziggurat upside down, Leviathan beloved of God, Leviathan given away to the Israelites in the desert, the cosmic tree as an annual bush, the cosmic omphalos of the temple as a crucified man, a bush aflame but not consumed, holy ground all around — these are symbols of cosmological reorientation in the Bible. What is the structure of this cosmos? The structures are many, depending upon the diverse treasures of diverse cultures. These treasures all are welcome to express the biblical worldview, as long as they also are ready to be inverted, broken, criticized, reoriented. And, for current culture, such an urgency of critique makes the biblical cosmological reorientation remarkably consonant with experimental science in our time, though not with scientism, not with “science” held as a fully coherent, unbroken system. Only one is holy.

Sabbath, the eighth day, thanksgiving with all flesh at table, lament, the bath that assembles us with others, the bread that brings us to see, the word of the cross, the word of forgiveness, the seal of the living God — these are liturgical forms for the encounter

with God, the encounter which is at the heart of the biblical reorientation to the cosmos.
The place on which you are standing is holy ground.

Now we need to ask, in some detail, how our liturgies actually bear this responsibility and how we may sing and walk together on this holy ground.

Notes

¹ Timaeus 27c: .. Jowett translation in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., The Collected Dialogues of Plato (New York: Pantheon, 1961), 1161. Greek from Platonis Timaeus et Critias (Leipzig: Teubner, 1888).

² Timothy Ferris, The Whole Shebang (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 11, 24, 40, 170, 171, 206.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem: Timaeus and Genesis in Counterpoint (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

⁴ D. T. Runia, Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 57: “the Timaeus was the only Greek prose work that up to the third century A.D. every educated man could be presumed to have read.” Bas van Iersel and Jan Nuchelmans, in “De zoon van Timeus en de zoon van David,” Tijdschrift voor Theologie 35 (1995), 107-124, also assert that “between 100 before Christ and 100 after Christ no single dialogue of Plato drew as much interest as did the Timaeus” (118).

⁵ Pelikan, 23.

⁶ Timaeus 38b; Jowett translation in Hamilton and Cairns, 1167.

⁷ Timaeus 27a; Jowett translation in Hamilton and Cairns, 1161. Cf. 20a.

⁸ Some scholars see three sections: 29d-47d, 47e-68e, 69a-92c; cf. Pelikan, 25, note 14. But the text itself calls attention to only the two divisions we note here, doing so especially with the twice-repeated invocation of divine help (27c; 48d).

⁹ Timaeus 44d; Jowett translation in Hamilton and Cairns, 1173.

¹⁰ Hamilton and Cairns, 1174-75.

¹¹ Jowett translation in Hamilton and Cairns, 1209.

¹² Timaeus 47c: μ μ μ

¹³ Timaeus 47b: , , μ μ ; μ μ μ .

¹⁴ “Bartimaeus,” presented here as if it were a given name, uses the Aramaic prefix “bar,” meaning “son of,” with the Greek name “Timaeus.” Van Iersel and Nuchelmans, *op. cit.*, also discuss the striking name and its likely connotations to those who knew something of Greek philosophy, but they do not consider the actual contents of the Timaeus nor the structurally interesting location of the lamenting blind man in Timaeus 47b. See also Mary Ann Tolbert, Sowing the Gospel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 189 note 21.

¹⁵ The first of the times that the blind beggar calls out to Jesus, the name is in the exact and strikingly unusual order that is used in first naming him. The reader is thus invited to see that the “son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus” is meeting the “son of David, Jesus,” and so to understand, at the least, that one who carries the central identity of Greek philosophy and cosmology is calling out in need to the one who carries Jewish and biblical messiahship. See van Iersel and Nuchelmans, 113.

¹⁶ See Earle Hilgert, “The Son of Timaeus: Blindness, Sight, Ascent, Vision in Mark,” in Elizabeth Castelli and Hal Taussig, eds., Reimagining Christian Origins (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996), 191.

¹⁷ We do not know the name of the author of this Gospel, called the “Second Gospel” but most likely the first example of this genre, nor do we know that author’s gender or number. This book will nonetheless call that author by the conventional name, hoping that the readers remember that this “Mark” could well be a community or a particular woman or man.

¹⁸ Dennis R. MacDonald, in the suggestive work The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 2, calls such mimesis used in reversal a “transvaluative hypertext” which “not only articulates values different from those in its targeted hypotext but also substitutes its values for those in its antecedent.” While MacDonald very helpfully suggests several — perhaps too many? — such transvaluations of Homeric texts in Mark, he misses this passage from Plato. He nonetheless articulates well (pp. 7-8) the criteria needed to establish that we are actually dealing with “intertextual referencing:” accessibility, analogy, density, order, distinctiveness, interpretability. At least five of his six criteria are strongly met by our proposal of linking the Bartimaeus story with Timaeus 47b. MacDonald is also helpful in directing our attention to the Hellenistic — as well as the Hellenistic Jewish — cultural context of Mark. So, “accessibility:” Plato’s Timaeus would have been part of the evangelist’s world.

¹⁹ At the least, Bartimaeus is the very first of a series of important marginal figures who now appear in the Markan passion account as counterparts to the misunderstanding disciples, figures who are beginning to understand the way of Jesus: Bartimaeus himself, going into the passion story and opening up the way for these figures, then the providers of the colt (11:6), the scribe who asks the good question (12:34), the widow in the temple (12:41-44), the anointing woman (14:9), the young man in the garden (14:51-52), Simon of Cyrene (15:21), the centurion (15:39), the women who come to the tomb (16:1), and the young man in the tomb (16:5). See van Iersel and Nuchelmans, 113.

²⁰ See Gordon Lathrop, Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 176.

²¹ K. Hanhart, The Open Tomb, A New Approach: Mark's Passover Haggadah (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 125-126.

²² Jowett translation in Hamilton and Cairns, 1161-2.

²³ Jowett translation in Hamilton and Cairns, 1211. See also 31b.

²⁴ "Myths are stories that investigate the nature of the world . . ." Robert Bringhurst, A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and their World (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1999), 288. "Once the story is known, a single image or even a single word can evoke it." Ibid., 47. For the "broken myth," see Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith (New York: Harper, 1957), 52-54. For this idea applied to myths and symbols in Christian liturgy, see Gordon Lathrop, Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 27-31, and Holy People, 69 and 177 n.50.

²⁵ See below, chapter 9.

²⁶ Jowett translation in Hamilton and Cairns, 1162.

²⁷ Actually, to be fair, Plato inquires further as well. Plato's interest, especially expressed in other dialogues like the Phaedrus or the Symposium, does really lie in continually finding the truth in dialogue, while for him the myth can only repeat its monologue over and over. My colleague, John Hoffmeyer, in a personal communication, has written, "Plato's caution against further inquiry is a warning against trying to find a μ that could somehow shake off its vulnerability. It is not an admonition to rest content with the μ . On the contrary, the Platonic task is to expose (and re-expose and re-expose) the μ to the 'never-ending story' of . . ." The problem is that the widely known Timaeus, largely narrated not by Socrates but by a Pythagorean, was dealt with as final, all-encompassing myth by the Neoplatonists and others who used it.

²⁸ For the significance of this assertion for eucharistic meaning and practice, see below, chapter 4.

²⁹ The biblical cosmology should thus be seen as involving a dialogue of voices, not a monologue, and can be interestingly compared with other accounts of the origin of the universe which involve such dialogue. Cf. Dennis Tedlock, ed. and trans., Popul Vuh (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 211.

³⁰ Monica Rosemary Schmidt, “Remembering the Humility of Job,” unpublished senior thesis, Davidson College, 1999.

³¹ The comforters of Job, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, speak lines that are directly dependent on Deuteronomic ideas. But God says to these comforters, “My wrath is kindled against you . . . for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” Job 42:7.

³² See Holy Things, 27-28.

³³ Christians using this psalm may well remember another fish given away in the wilderness as food (Mark 6:38; 8:7; cf. John 21:9). Indeed, in the ancient church a fish, the sign of chaos tamed to be life-giving food, was often a eucharistic symbol. And, for Christians, the encounter with the resurrection is an encounter with God’s new creation, the making of order for all things through the conquest of death itself. Still, the situations of chaotic need continue. And the prayer of lament will thus continue to arise that the God who made summer and winter and all the luminaries, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, would once again make life-giving order.

³⁴ Note that Psalm 29, for example, could be regarded as a Canaanite song except for the name YHWH and the final verse, 29:11. Those additions reorient the meaning of the psalm.

³⁵ Eduard Lohse, Colossians and Philemon (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1971), 41-61. The Timaeus regarded the sphere of the cosmos itself as the visible image of the invisible God (92c). The Timaeus regarded the cosmos as a living body (31b). Colossians supplies Christ and the church in these places.

³⁶ Lathrop, Holy People, 26.

³⁷ This term is usually traced to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s letter from prison, dated May 25, 1944. See Letters and Papers from Prison (London: SCM, 1953), 102-104. Bonhoeffer’s unfinished reflections remain a useful challenge to any Christian reflection.

³⁸ For other ways in which the liturgy of Christians may be said to “be biblical,” see Lathrop, Holy Things, chapter 1, and Holy People, chapter 1.

³⁹ For the cosmic significance of temples one might also consider the heavenly model after which the tabernacle was to be patterned (Exodus 25:40) and the long tradition of speculation about the meaning of the garments of Aaron (Exodus 28; 39).

⁴⁰ On the central matters of Christian liturgy as “broken symbols,” see Holy Things, chapter 4.

⁴¹ Further elaboration on this theme may be found in Gordon W. Lathrop, “How Awesome is This Place: The Lutheran Book of Worship and the Encounter with God,” in Ralph R. Van Loon, ed., Encountering God: The Legacy of the Lutheran Book of Worship for the 21st Century (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 1998), 40-51.

⁴² For a discussion of these and other enacted conceptions of the Christian assembly for worship, see Lathrop, Holy People, chapter 1.