

# Spit in Your Eye: The Blind Man of Bethsaida and the Blind Man of Alexandria

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The account of Vespasian's use of spittle to heal a blind man at Alexandria has long been noted as a parallel to the use of spittle in Mark's healing of the Blind Man of Bethsaida, but little has been made of the temporal proximity of these two stories. Vespasian's healings formed part of the wider Flavian propaganda campaign to legitimate the new claimant to the imperial throne; to many Jewish ears this propaganda would have sounded like a usurpation of traditional messianic hopes. This article argues that Mark introduced spittle into his story of the Blind Man of Bethsaida to create an allusion to the Vespasian story as part of a wider concern to contrast the messiahship of Jesus with such Roman imperial 'messianism'.

**Keywords:** Mark 8, Vespasian, Blindman, Miracle, Messianism

## 1. Introduction

Two of the healing stories in Mark stand out as being peculiarly distinctive. Whereas in all the other Markan healing stories Jesus heals by word of command or mere touch, in those of the Deaf Mute (Mark 7.31–37) and the Blind Man of Bethsaida (8.22–26) he resorts to physical manipulations and the use of spittle. In the former pericope Jesus puts his finger into the man's ears, spits and touches his tongue (7.33); in the latter he spits on the man's eyes before touching them, and has to make a second attempt before the man's sight is fully restored (8.23–25). These atypical elements have been variously identified as magical,<sup>1</sup> medical,<sup>2</sup> or simply typical of the (not least Hellenistic) healing techniques of the day.<sup>3</sup>

1 Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1978) 128; John M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (SBT 2nd series 28; London: SCM, 1974) 76–8.

2 Gerd Theissen, *Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983) 63, 93; John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (SP 2; Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2002) 240.

3 Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: MacMillan, 1952) 354; D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, rev. ed. 1969) 203–4; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1977) 251–2; Morna D.

There is no shortage of possible therapeutic, magical, exorcistic or apotropaic uses for spittle in an ancient healing story; the oddity is that spittle should appear in these two stories and no others in the synoptic tradition.<sup>4</sup> Luke omits this section of Mark altogether, and to the extent that Matthew can be said to have any parallels to these Markan stories (Matt 9.27–31; 15.30–31) he omits any mention of spittle.

The most commonly cited parallel to the use of spittle in the healing of a blind man is the story told about Vespasian in Tacitus *Histories* IV.81; Suetonius *Vespasian* 7.2; and Cassius Dio *Roman Histories* LXV.8, in which Vespasian heals two men in Alexandria in late 69 or early 70. Sometimes this is the sole parallel offered (apart from John 9.6).<sup>5</sup> Sometimes reference is also made to Pliny, Galen or rabbinic sources, but usually for the healing use of spittle rather than as an additional narrative parallel.<sup>6</sup> The most obvious narrative parallel to the use of spittle in the Blind Man of Bethsaida thus remains the Blind Man of Alexandria. But although this is commonly recognized, little is made of the temporal proximity of the two stories. If Mark wrote his gospel in or shortly after 70 CE then he did so when the account of Vespasian's healings was current and topical.<sup>7</sup> This raises the question whether the spittle in Mark's stories is, as most commentators assume, simply something he took over from his source, or whether it is a deliberate allusion to the Vespasian story. The present paper will examine the

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Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1991) 186; Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 383, 389.

- 4 There is also a non-synoptic parallel at John 9.6–7, where the use of spittle is slightly different.
- 5 Taylor, *Mark*, 354; Nineham, *Mark*, 204; Hugh Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, softback ed. 1981) 193; Hooker, *Mark*, 198.
- 6 Cranfield, *Mark*, 251; Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8.26* (WBC 34A; Dallas, TX: Word, 1989) 394–5; Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 240, 256; Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 473 (variously citing Pliny *Natural History* XXVIII.7; and Galen *Natural Faculties* III.7); for a fuller list of potential parallels see Gundry, *Mark*, 389, and Hendrick van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (NovTSup 9; Leiden: Brill, 1965) 306–9.
- 7 For the dating of Mark's Gospel to around or possibly just after 70 CE, see, e.g., Nineham, *Mark*, 41–2; Hooker, *Mark*, 8; Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings* (London: SCM, 1998) 201–2; Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 41–7; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 37–9; and especially Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992) 258–71. On the other hand, Taylor, *Mark*, 31; Cranfield, *Mark*, 8; Anderson, *Mark*, 24–26; and Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SCM, 1985) 1–30 (among others) argue for a date shortly before 70, which would make the Gospel too early to have been influenced by the Vespasian story; Guelich, *Mark*, xxxi–xxxii, dates Mark in the range 67–70, which might just allow Mark to have become familiar with the Vespasian story.

Vespasian story in the context of Flavian propaganda and then argue that Mark was responding to it.

## 2. Vespasian as Healer

Vespasian was sent to Judaea by Nero to put down the Jewish revolt. Nero subsequently committed suicide, thereby triggering a fierce competition for the imperial throne in which Galba, Otho and Vitellius each managed a reign of only a few months. On 1 July 69, the legions stationed in Egypt proclaimed Vespasian emperor, and his Judaeans troops quickly followed suit. Vespasian's main priority was then to consolidate his position, which in November 69 took him to Alexandria, apparently to secure the grain supply while Mucianus led an army on Rome.<sup>8</sup> It was while Vespasian was at Alexandria that he reputedly performed a pair of healings.

All three accounts of these healings agree that Vespasian healed a blind man making use of spittle. According to Tacitus, the blind man threw himself at Vespasian's feet and begged Vespasian to moisten his cheeks and eyes with his spittle, claiming that he had been so directed by Sarapis. Suetonius similarly states that a blind man, who claimed to have been advised by Sarapis in a dream, begged the emperor to restore his sight by spitting on his eyes. Tacitus states that the blind man was accompanied by another man who asked Vespasian to cure his useless hand by stepping on it, and that Vespasian carried out both requests with initial reluctance but eventual success. Suetonius gives a similar account, except that instead of stepping on the second man's hand, the emperor cured a lame man by touching his leg with his heel. The briefer account in Cassius Dio has the blind man accompanied by a man with a withered hand, but again states that Vespasian cured the latter by standing on his hand and the former by spitting in his eye.

Tacitus and Suetonius differ over the timing of these events. Suetonius has Vespasian visit the temple of Sarapis prior to the healings, whereas according to Tacitus the healings came first, Vespasian being moved to consult Sarapis as a result of their success.<sup>9</sup> Tacitus and Suetonius concur that Vespasian received a

<sup>8</sup> For more detailed accounts of these events and of Vespasian's strategy see P. D. L. Greenhalgh, *The Year of the Four Emperors* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975); Kenneth Wellesley, *The Year of the Four Emperors* (London and New York: Routledge, 3rd ed. 2000); and Barbara Levick, *Vespasian* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Guy E. F. Chilver, *A Historical Commentary on Tacitus' Histories IV and V: Completed and Revised by G. B. Townend* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 83, argues that neither order is to be preferred; P. Derchain and J. Hubaux, 'Vespasien au Sérapéum', *Latomus* 12 (1953) 38–52 (42–3), think it more likely that the visit to the Serapeum came first. Levick, *Vespasian*, 68, regards it as likely that in either event Vespasian would have consulted Sarapis soon after his arrival in Alexandria.

favourable omen in the temple, but disagree over its nature. They agree that while Vespasian was alone in the temple, he saw a man named Basilides, even though this Basilides was known to be some distance away.<sup>10</sup> In Tacitus's account Vespasian regards this as a favourable divine vision solely on the basis of the name 'Basilides', meaning the son of a king. According to Suetonius, however, Basilides offered Vespasian 'sacred boughs, garlands and loaves', and immediately after leaving the temple Vespasian received letters informing him of the death of Vitellius and the victory of the Flavian forces at Cremona.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless the import of Suetonius's version is much the same as Tacitus's, since the items his Basilides gave Vespasian were symbols of kingship.<sup>12</sup>

Two points stand out: whatever the precise sequence of events and whatever happened in the Serapeum, Tacitus and Suetonius are agreed that Vespasian's healing miracles were closely associated with the god Sarapis and Vespasian's visit to his principal temple, and that the vision granted Vespasian in that temple was a confirmation of his kingship.

The two Roman historians also agree in suggesting that Vespasian's healings helped legitimate his claim to the throne. Suetonius begins his account by remarking that 'Vespasian as yet lacked prestige and a certain divinity, so to speak, since he was an unexpected and still new-made emperor; but these also were given him'. Tacitus states that 'while Vespasian was waiting at Alexandria. . . many marvels occurred to mark the favour of heaven and a certain partiality of the gods toward him'.<sup>13</sup> This prompts the question why a Roman emperor should

<sup>10</sup> (Tacitus *Hist.* IV.82; Suetonius *Vesp.* 7.1)

<sup>11</sup> The identity of this Basilides, variously described as Vespasian's freedman (by Suetonius) or as 'one of the leading men of Egypt' (by Tacitus), has attracted much speculation in modern scholarship, as has the issue of whether the Basilides who appeared to Vespasian in the Serapeum was the same Basilides as the priest who gave Vespasian a favourable oracle on Mount Carmel (Tacitus *Hist.* II.78; Suetonius *Vesp.* 5.6); see Kenneth Scott, 'The Role of Basilides in the Events of A.D. 69', *JRS* 24 (1934) 138–40; idem, *The Imperial Cult under the Flavians* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936) 11–13; Derchain and Hubaux, 'Vespasien au Sérapéum', 40–41, 51–52; Léon Hermann, 'Basilides', *Latomus* 12 (1953) 312–15; Tacitus, who makes much of the name Basilides at *Hist.* IV.82, makes no attempt to identify him with the Basilides introduced at *Hist.* II.78 on Mount Carmel, so Chilver (*Commentary*, 83, 238), is probably correct in regarding the identification of the two men as no more than 'just possible'.

<sup>12</sup> Albert Henrichs, 'Vespasian's Visit to Alexandria', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 3 (1968) 51–80 (61); Franklin Brunell Krauss, *An Interpretation of the Omens, Portents and Prodigies Recorded by Livy, Tacitus and Suetonius* (Philadelphia, 1930) 159; Levick, *Vespasian*, 69; Brian W. Jones, *Suetonius, Vespasian; Edited with Introduction, Commentary and Bibliography* (London: Bristol Classical, 2000) 54.

<sup>13</sup> Suetonius *Vesp.* 7.2; Tacitus *Hist.* IV.81. These and all further translations from Suetonius, Tacitus and Josephus are taken from the Loeb Classical Library editions of their respective works.

seek to bolster his claim to the throne in this way, since there is nothing to suggest that any other emperor ever tried to legitimate his position by healing.<sup>14</sup> The answer is quite complex. Part of it involves identifying what audience these acts were designed to impress. Another part relates to the precariousness of Vespasian's situation as a newly proclaimed emperor at a time when emperors were losing their lives in quick succession.<sup>15</sup> A further part concerns Vespasian's propaganda as a whole. But perhaps the best place to start is with the significance of healing miracles performed at Alexandria in conjunction with the god Sarapis.

Although Tacitus recounts a number of tales concerning the origins of Sarapis, the view adopted by most modern scholars is that Sarapis was largely an invention of the early Ptolemies, adding Greek features to an Egyptian cult originally based at Memphis. The Egyptian cult involved the worship of the sacred bull Osiris-Apis, or Osarapis, which became Sarapis in Greek translation. It may have been this god's connections with the underworld and agricultural fertility that made him appear particularly suitable for the grafting on of Hellenistic elements. Sarapis took on the attributes of a number of Greek deities including first Dionysus and Hades, and subsequently Zeus, Helios and Asclepius. He may originally have been intended as a patron deity for the Greek citizens of Ptolemaic Alexandria, but he became particularly associated with the royal family, and thus, perhaps, with a ruler cult.<sup>16</sup> Although Sarapis was probably intended to unite the Greek and Egyptian populations (of Alexandria, if not of Egypt), he failed in this purpose, since he never caught on with the native Egyptian population. He proved more popular with the Greek inhabitants, although his popularity declined towards the end of the Ptolemaic period.<sup>17</sup> By the Roman period, Sarapis's popularity seems to have been on the rise once more, and his cult had long since spread well beyond Egypt, aided, no doubt, by the fact that he was the consort of Isis; both deities had cults in Rome by the time of the late republic.<sup>18</sup> That said, the major rise of the cult of Serapis was to come about through Flavian interest in the god.<sup>19</sup> Vespasian

14 J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, 'Religion', *CAH* 11.984–1008 (986).

15 Richmond Lattimore, 'Portents and Prophecies in Connection with the Emperor Vespasian', *The Classical Journal* 29 (1934) 441–9 (446).

16 Tacitus *Hist.* IV. 83–4; Saratola A. Takács, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 124; Leiden: Brill, 1995) 28; P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1932) 1.202, 206, 211–12, 246–65; Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (trans. Anne E. Keep; London: Methuen, 1973) 245–6; George Hart, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 189–91; Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003) 127.

17 Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 246; Wilkinson, *Complete Gods*, 128; Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 272–3.

18 Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 275; Takács, *Isis and Sarapis*, 29, 56, 70–75, 127–9.

19 Saratola A. Takács, 'Alexandria in Rome', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 97 (1995) 263–76 (274–5); idem, *Isis and Sarapis*, 73–5.

arrived in Alexandria at a time when association with an aspiring emperor could benefit an aspiring god as much as the other way round; the Sarapis cult's support for Vespasian helped both parties, and that may well have motivated the priests of Sarapis to play their part in the Flavian propaganda campaign.<sup>20</sup>

The healings carried out by Vespasian seem designed to demonstrate the close association between the new emperor and the god. Healing was one of the powers long attributed to Sarapis, and the first healing miracle to be attributed to him was restoring sight to a blind man, one Demetrius of Phaleron, an Athenian politician.<sup>21</sup> Vespasian's use of his foot to effect the other healing, whether by standing on the man's hand (as in Tacitus) or touching the man's leg with his heel (as in Suetonius) should be understood in light of the fact that a foot could be seen as a symbol of Sarapis.<sup>22</sup> In some minds Vespasian's two healings might be taken as a sign, not simply that Vespasian enjoyed Sarapis's blessing, but that he was in some sense to be identified with the god.<sup>23</sup> This is in part suggested by the ancient Egyptian myth that the kings of Egypt were sons of Re, the sun-god, and is further borne out by the fact that Vespasian was saluted as 'son of Ammon' as well as 'Caesar, god' when he visited the hippodrome only a short while later.<sup>24</sup>

Presumably the main targets of this propaganda were the population of Alexandria and the two legions stationed there, whose support Vespasian clearly needed to retain. No doubt different people will have understood this cluster of events in different ways. Some may have seen Vespasian as quasi-divine, others as a divinely aided thaumaturge and others as an exceptionally lucky man smiled on by *fortuna* and the gods.<sup>25</sup> In any case the healing miracles and their association with Sarapis seem to have been designed more for eastern than western consumption.<sup>26</sup> This is in part suggested by the way Tacitus and Suetonius describe them. Although Tacitus accepts that the healings took place, even going so far as to cite the continuing existence of eye-witnesses who would have nothing to gain by lying, he nevertheless plays down their miraculous nature, instead emphasizing that the reluctant Vespasian obtained expert medical opinion that the cures

20 Scott, *Imperial Cult*, 9–11; Levick, *Vespasian*, 79.

21 Henrichs, 'Alexandria', 66–7, 71; Takács, *Isis and Sarapis*, 97; Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 207, 256–8; Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 268.

22 Henrichs, 'Alexandria', 69; Jones, *Suetonius, Vespasian*, 56; J. Gagé, 'L'empereur romain devant Sérapis', *Ktema* 1 (1976) 145–66 (152); Levick, *Vespasian*, 69.

23 Takács, *Isis and Sarapis*, 96–7.

24 Henrichs, 'Alexandria', 59, 65; Levick, *Vespasian*, 69.

25 For this variety of interpretations see nn. 23 and 24 above and Lattimore, 'Portents and Prophecies', 446–7; Jones, *Suetonius, Vespasian*, 55; and Russell T. Scott, *Religion and Philosophy in the Histories of Tacitus* (Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome 22; Rome: American Academy in Rome, 1968) 81.

26 So, e.g., Miriam Griffin, 'The Flavians', *CAH* 11.1–83 (5); Scott, *Religion and Philosophy*, 81; Greenhalgh, *Four Emperors*, 246; and Henrichs, 'Alexandria', 75.

were possible by natural means before going on to attempt them. Again, while the two Roman historians suggest that these events indicate that Vespasian enjoyed divine favour and lent him considerable prestige, they show no awareness of the more extravagant significance his association with Sarapis would have had.<sup>27</sup>

What actually happened at Alexandria is another matter. The differences in details between Tacitus and Suetonius suggests that their two accounts are independent of each other and perhaps reliant on variant oral traditions.<sup>28</sup> This, coupled with Tacitus's appeal to eye-witnesses, make it quite likely that the accounts do go back to an actual event.<sup>29</sup> It could well be that, as Tacitus's account hints, this event was carefully stage-managed as a propaganda device, possibly without Vespasian's prior knowledge.<sup>30</sup> One suspects that Tiberius Julius Alexander, the prefect of Egypt, would have been one of the principal stage-managers, along, quite probably, with the priests of Sarapis.<sup>31</sup>

What matters for present purposes is not so much what actually happened as whether some such story started to be spread from the beginning of 70 CE, so that it would be recognized as a relatively fresh piece of imperial propaganda when Mark wrote. The evidence suggests this is likely: Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio, and for that matter Josephus all more or less agree on the dating and occasion of Vespasian's visit to Alexandria, and it is difficult to see what other occasion would have given rise to this story. Moreover, if Vespasian (or his supporters) felt the need to legitimate his accession in this way, it is surely towards the beginning of his reign that such propaganda would have been most useful. There is, however, a problem: Josephus records Vespasian's visit to Alexandria (*J.W.* IV.656) but says nothing about his performing any healings there. Yet if this was being widely promulgated as a piece of Flavian propaganda, Josephus can hardly have failed to hear about it.

Josephus's silence on this point could be explained simply by the fact that he is writing an account of the Jewish War, not of Vespasian's elevation to the purple,<sup>32</sup> so that having left Vespasian in Alexandria at *J.W.* IV.658, Josephus

27 So also Scott, *Religion and Philosophy*, 80. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (London: SCM, 1998) 595, stress that Tacitus is writing from a sceptical, critical, 'enlightened' upper-class perspective. Ronald Syme, *Tacitus* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1997 [1958]) 1.206, points out that the passage is characteristic of Tacitus's irony.

28 So Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 595–6; contra Henrichs, 'Alexandria', 57, who argues that Tacitus and Suetonius drew on a common source.

29 Although Henrichs, 'Alexandria', 66, 75, is justifiably cautious about the reliability of eye-witnesses; cf. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London: James Currey, 1985) 129: 'Historical truth is also a notion that is culture specific. . . In many cultures truth is what is being faithfully repeated as content and has been certified as true by the ancestors'.

30 Henrichs, 'Alexandria', 65–6; Levick, *Vespasian*, 69.

31 Henrichs, 'Alexandria', 75–6; Scott, *Imperial Cult*, 9–11.

32 See Josephus *J.W.* IV.492–6.

follows Titus's campaign in Judaea, which is more directly relevant to his subject, only returning to Vespasian at *J.W.* V.2.21 where he briefly records the emperor's setting sail from Alexandria on his way to Rome.

Nonetheless a variety of explanations have been offered why Josephus would positively want to avoid telling this story. According to Albert Henrichs, Josephus's pro-Flavian stance would have left him 'no room for the manifest propaganda staged by Tiberius Alexander', since Josephus was anxious to play down any impression that Vespasian was thrusting himself forward as yet another self-seeking claimant to the throne.<sup>33</sup> By itself this seems less than fully convincing, since Josephus could easily have given the story a pro-Flavian slant had he so desired. Barbara Levick suggests that Josephus omitted Vespasian's healings because 'the manipulation of gentile cults in a city notorious for virulent hatred of Jews was repugnant – and puts his own work in the shade'.<sup>34</sup> But this still does not get to the heart of the matter. It was almost certainly a combination of religious and political factors that forced Josephus to omit this story.

First, Josephus's writings indicate that he regarded true miracles as being acts of Yahweh the God of Israel; any other would-be wonders would be the result of mere artifice at best or sorcery at worst.<sup>35</sup> Josephus is happy enough to assign the Flavian success to the providence of Israel's God, but the accounts of Vespasian's healing associate them with the Egyptian god Sarapis, whom Josephus could not regard as a legitimate source of miraculous power.

This leads to an even deeper reason why Josephus could not have included this story. One of the central problems Josephus had to wrestle with in the *Jewish War* was how God could have allowed the fall of Jerusalem, and the answer he came up with was similar to that of the prophets after the Babylonian destruction: God was using a pagan power to punish the Jews for their sins. If Rome had triumphed, it was because God was, for now, on the side of the Romans.<sup>36</sup> To tell a story in which Vespasian was legitimated by an Egyptian god would therefore have been a theological impossibility; it would have undermined Josephus's entire project. Conversely, to have represented the healings at Alexandria as a piece of staged-managed trickery would, as Henrichs suggests, have gone against

33 Henrichs, 'Alexandria', 77–9.

34 Levick, *Vespasian*, 69.

35 Eric Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus' Miracles* (JSNTSup 231; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 24–33.

36 Per Bilde, *Flavius Josephus between Jerusalem and Rome: His Life, His Works and Their Importance* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988) 182–6; James S. McLaren, *Turbulent Times? Josephus and Scholarship on Judaea in the First Century CE* (JSPSup 29; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 56–9; Tessa Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (London: Duckworth, 1983) 78–9, 99.



Josephus's loyalty to the Flavians. He thus had no option but to leave them out altogether.<sup>37</sup>

It seems reasonable to conclude that despite Josephus's silence the story of Vespasian's Alexandrian healings would have been known in the east (as *J.W.* IV.618 perhaps suggests) from early in 70 CE, and in Rome not much later. For one thing, as the next section will discuss in more detail, the Flavian party was actively engaged in disseminating its propaganda. For another, ships regularly transported grain from Alexandria to Rome, and it would be surprising if their crews did not convey news of significant events; any events concerning the claims of a rival emperor would certainly be thought significant in Rome, especially after Flavian forces under Antonius Primus invaded Italy (in September 69).<sup>38</sup> Again, Vespasian himself made the journey from Alexandria to Rome in 70 while Titus was still engaged in the siege of Jerusalem (*J.W.* VII.21), and it would again be surprising if news of events in Alexandria did not travel with him, assuming they had not already done so before. Moreover, the letters of Paul (to Rome) and Clement (from Rome) illustrate how Roman Christians were in correspondence with Christians elsewhere in the empire, and this suggests yet another route by which news of Alexandrian events could have reached a Roman Mark.<sup>39</sup> Yet Mark need not have written quite as early as 70 CE and, despite the traditional view that he penned his gospel in Rome, he may well have been situated somewhere in the east, rather closer to events in Alexandria.<sup>40</sup> Thus if Mark wrote his gospel in the aftermath of the Jewish War, it is highly probable that he would have been aware of the stories concerning Vespasian. But before examining Mark's story of the Blind Man of Bethsaida in light of this, it will be useful to put the Alexandrian stories in the context of other Flavian propaganda.

### 3. Vespasian, Propaganda and Prophecy

Here the issue is not the later propaganda put about after 70 once Vespasian had secured his throne,<sup>41</sup> but the stories circulating in and around 69

37 Although Henrichs, 'Alexandria', 79–80, argues that hints of these Alexandrian events survive at *J.W.* IV.618 and VII.123, the first alluding to Tiberius Alexander's propaganda efforts on Vespasian's behalf and the second to the fact that Vespasian and Titus spent the night before their Triumph in the temple of Isis in Rome.

38 Wellesley, *Four Emperors*, 132.

39 For an elaboration of many of these points, and a wider discussion of communications between Christians and other groups around the Roman Empire, see Michael B. Thompson, 'The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Christian Generations', *The Gospel for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (ed. Richard Bauckham; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) 49–70.

40 For a post-war Syrian provenance for Mark, see Theissen, *Gospels in Context*, 258–71.

41 On which see John Nicols, *Vespasian and the Partes Flavianaë* (Historia 28; Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1978) 95–6.

when he was still trying to gather support. That such stories were being deliberately spread for propaganda purposes is illustrated by the rumour that Vitellius intended to swap the postings of the legions assigned to Syria and Germany, a change that would have been highly unpopular with the troops currently stationed in the east. This rumour was almost certainly false, but it was just as certainly effective in helping to secure the loyalty of the eastern legions.<sup>42</sup> Of more immediate interest, however, are the various prophecies and portents associated with Vespasian's rise to power; here there is space only for a brief description of the most relevant.<sup>43</sup>

Of these, the only one from around this time that Tacitus narrates is an oracle from the god of Carmel, expounded by a priest named Basilides.<sup>44</sup> The god of Carmel promised Vespasian success in whatever he might be planning, and according to Tacitus, this was soon being widely talked about among Vespasian's troops; it was presumably effective in helping to persuade them that fate was on Vespasian's side.<sup>45</sup> It may also be that in consulting the oracle of a local deity Vespasian was trying to wrap himself in the mantle of Alexander the Great, who had consulted an oracle at Siwah in the Libyan desert four hundred years before.<sup>46</sup>

Another prophecy of Vespasian's success was that of Josephus, who prophesied that Vespasian would become emperor.<sup>47</sup> Josephus himself tells us so at *J.W.* III.399–404; IV.623, but this prophecy is also mentioned by Suetonius *Vesp.* 5.6 and Cassius Dio *Rom. Hist.* XV.4.<sup>48</sup> Josephus's purpose in making the prophecy, or at least in telling his readers about it, seems to have been to justify his change of sides and to demonstrate that he was a true prophet who foretold the Roman victory in advance of the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup> At the time, Josephus may have been more concerned to ingratiate himself with his captors; but whatever Josephus's motives, another indication that Vespasian enjoyed divine favour would certainly

42 Greenhalgh, *Four Emperors*, 130; Nicols, *Partes Flavianaes*, 96.

43 For a fuller treatment see Lattimore, 'Portents and Prophecies'; Nicols, *Partes Flavianaes*, 96–8; and Scott, *Imperial Cult*, 3–19.

44 Tacitus *Hist.* II.78; cf. Suetonius *Vesp.* 5.6. On the issue of whether this was the same Basilides who subsequently appeared to Vespasian in the Serapeum at Alexandria, see n. 11 above.

45 Scott, *Imperial Cult*, 8.

46 So Takács, *Isis and Sarapis*, 98, and idem, 'Alexandria in Rome', 273. Henrichs, 'Alexandria', 55–8 more plausibly argues that this function was fulfilled by Vespasian's visit to the temple of Sarapis in Alexandria.

47 The timing of this prophecy is disputed; Suetonius places it after the oracle at Carmel, contrary to Josephus's own assertion. Levick, *Vespasian*, 43, 67, argues that despite what his account suggests Josephus cannot have made this prophecy as early as 67, when Nero was still alive, since this would have led to his execution; cf. Rajak, *Josephus*, 186–7, and Nicols, *Partes Flavianaes*, 93.

48 For possible reasons why Tacitus is silent on Josephus's prophecy, see M. Gwyn Morgan, 'Vespasian and the Omens in Tacitus "Histories" 2.78', *Phoenix* 50.1 (1996) 41–55 (45).

49 Rajak, *Josephus*, 188.

have suited the Flavian public relations agenda in 69, and the Flavian party would surely have circulated it. Neither Cassius Dio nor Suetonius appear to be dependent on Josephus's account, so the story of his prophecy clearly did circulate independently of the *Jewish War*.<sup>50</sup> It was clearly apparent to the Jewish revolutionary authorities who had despatched Josephus to Galilee that he had changed sides and that he was being well treated by his captors, and this is further circumstantial evidence for the early circulation of this tale.<sup>51</sup>

Although distinct from it, Josephus's own prophecy is not unrelated to his claim that many of his fellow countrymen had been misled into revolt by an oracle 'to the effect that at that time one from their country would become ruler of the world' (*J.W.* VI.312). In fact, Josephus goes on to say, this oracle referred not to a Jewish ruler, but to Vespasian, who was acclaimed emperor while he was on Jewish soil (*J.W.* VI.313–14); becoming 'ruler of the world' is much the same thing as becoming 'master of . . . land and sea and the whole human race', which is what Josephus claims to have prophesied for Vespasian in *J.W.* III.402. Beyond a general reference to sacred scripture, Josephus does not specify what oracle he has in mind; on the face of it he appears to be referring to Jewish messianic expectations.<sup>52</sup> In any case, Josephus was not alone in this reinterpretation, since something very similar can be found in Tacitus *Hist.* V.13 and Suetonius *Vesp.* 4.5. The question again arises how early this interpretation of events became current. Two considerations would suggest a date around 69. The first is again that Tacitus and Suetonius preserve accounts that look independent of Josephus. The second is that it was precisely then that the Flavian cause needed surrounding with the aura of divine approval. Once Vespasian was safely installed in Rome, reports of portents and prophecies 'abruptly cease[d]'.<sup>53</sup> Conversely, while Vespasian was still making his bid for the throne, the Flavian party did all it could to ensure that such favourable propaganda was widely spread, as the Mount Carmel oracle illustrates.<sup>54</sup>

This suggests both that the accounts of Vespasian's healings at Alexandria were circulated in the context of portents and prophecies purporting to show that

50 Rajak, *Josephus*, 191.

51 *J.W.* III.438–42. That Josephus's change of sides was well known is indicated by the care with which he justifies his actions; see Rajak, *Josephus*, 171–2.

52 This is how it appears to be taken by Scott, *Imperial Cult*, 8; and Greenhalgh, *Four Emperors*, 130; a contrary view is taken by Rajak, *Josephus*, 191–4 and Per Bilde, 'Josephus and Jewish Apocalypticism', *Understanding Josephus: Seven Perspectives* (ed. Steve Mason; JSPSup 32; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 35–61. Rajak argues convincingly that Josephus did not regard Vespasian as the Jewish Messiah, but that is not to say that the oracles he accuses his fellow countrymen of misunderstanding were not understood by them as messianic.

53 Scott, *Imperial Cult*, 19.

54 On the spread and success of Flavian propaganda in general, see Nicols, *Partes Flavianaee*, 96–8; Scott, *Imperial Cult*, 7–79; and Takács, *Isis and Sarapis*, 95–6.

Vespasian enjoyed divine favour, and that to Jewish ears, at least some of this Flavian propaganda would have sounded quasi-messianic, in the sense of a usurpation of Jewish messianic hopes.

#### 4. The Blind Man of Bethsaida (Mark 8.22–26)

Responding to Flavian propaganda is clearly not the sole purpose of Mark 8.22–26. The pericope clearly performs several other functions. For one thing, it forms a pair with the story of Blind Bartimaeus, thus framing the Markan travel section.<sup>55</sup> It also forms a pair with the other spittle story, the deaf-mute at Mark 7.31–37, exhibiting striking similarities in both structure and vocabulary.<sup>56</sup> As a pair, these two stories may be intended to indicate fulfilment of Isa 35.5–6.<sup>57</sup> They also seem to relate to the continuing deafness and blindness of the disciples (Mark 8.17–18).<sup>58</sup> Finally, the two-stage healing of the blind man immediately precedes Peter's Confession (Mark 8.27–30), and is often seen as both commenting on that story and sharing structural features with it, the point being that Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah is analogous to the blind man's perception of people as walking trees.<sup>59</sup>

At first sight, the similarities between the healing of the Blind Man of Bethsaida and that of the Blind Man of Alexandria are not great, the most striking being that spitting on the blind man's eyes is part of the cure in each case. Both stories also have in common the fact that the healing was carried out because it was requested of the healer, but that is hardly an unusual feature of ancient healing stories. The responses to the request are almost antithetical: Vespasian is initially reluctant to carry out the healings, but is persuaded to do so publicly with

55 Hooker, *Mark*, 197, 200; Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 258; Bas M. F. van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary* (trans. W. H. Bisscheroux; JSNTSup 164; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 79–80.

56 See Taylor, *Mark*, 368–9; Cranfield, *Mark*, 263; and Robert M. Fowler, *Loaves and Fishes: The Function of the Feeding Stories in the Gospel of Mark* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981) 105–7.

57 Taylor, *Mark*, 352; Nineham, *Mark*, 202, 217; Cranfield, *Mark*, 254; Guelich, *Mark 1–8.26*, 398–9; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 476–7; Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 242, 258; but note the suggestion made by Hermann, 'Basilides', 315, that Vespasian's healings of a blind man and a lame man could also be taken as a fulfilment of Isa 35.5–6.

58 Taylor, *Mark*, 370; Cranfield, *Mark*, 254; Hooker, *Mark*, 184, 198; Guelich, *Mark 1–8.26*, 391, 399, 430, 433–4; Fowler, *Loaves and Fishes*, 107–12; Karl Kertelge, *Die Wunder Jesu im Markusevangelium: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Studien zum alten und neuen Testament 23; Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1970) 164.

59 The structural parallels between Mark 8.22–26 and Mark 8.27–30 are set out in R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935) 90–1. For various views on what Mark intended by the juxtaposition of these two passages, see Johnson, 'Blind Man', 379–83; Nineham, *Mark*, 218; Anderson, *Mark*, 204; Hooker, *Mark*, 198.

the possibility of gaining credit for them; Jesus shows no reluctance but is careful to carry out the healing in private. This could be a deliberate contrast on Mark's part, but need not be so, since both Jesus' willingness and his desire for privacy are common Markan themes.

For Mark to be responding to Flavian propaganda he would have to have included the spittle for that purpose, even if he based the pericope on his tradition or another source. Many commentators simply assume without argument that the Blind Man of Bethsaida was taken over from tradition.<sup>60</sup> Sometimes, this may be due to an interest in discovering an underlying historical miracle in Jesus' ministry.<sup>61</sup> Sometimes the similarities between the two spittle stories (Mark 7.31–37 and 8.22–26) is given as grounds for supposing that they were drawn from an earlier source.<sup>62</sup> It is, however, characteristic of Mark to deploy pairs of stories exhibiting a similar structure and vocabulary. Within Mark 4–8 the other obvious examples would be the two feeding stories and the two sea-crossing miracles.<sup>63</sup> Later in Mark similar parallels can be seen between Jesus sending two disciples to fetch a colt (Mark 11.1–7) and Jesus sending two disciples to prepare for the Passover meal (Mark 14.12–16).<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps the main reason for supposing that Mark took the Blind Man of Bethsaida from a source is the alleged 'lack of characteristic Markan vocabulary' in 8.22b–25.<sup>65</sup> Yet each verse of the pericope contains at least some vocabulary that is reasonably common in Mark.<sup>66</sup> Again, in each verse one can discern language

60 Cranfield, *Mark*, 263–4; Anderson, *Mark*, 202–3; Gundry, *Mark*, 420; Guelich, *Mark*, 429, 435–6.

61 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 2. *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 690–4; Twelftree, *Miracle Worker*, 300–301; Twelftree's principal argument for historicity is the application of the criterion of embarrassment to the use of spittle.

62 Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 476–7; Kertelge, *Wunder Jesu*, 163.

63 On which see Fowler, *Loaves and Fishes*.

64 See Taylor, *Mark*, 536.

65 Johnson, 'Blind Man', 374.

66 With the overall Markan frequencies shown in brackets: 8.22: ἔρχομαι (84), φέρω (15), τυφλός (5), παρακαλέω (9), ἄπτομαι (11); 8.23: χεῖρ (24), τυφλός (5), ἔξω (10), κόμη (7), ἐπιτίθημι (7), ἐπερωτάω (25), βλέπω (15); 8.24: ἀναβλέπω (6), λέγω (204), βλέπω (15), ἄνθρωπος (56), ὄραω (7 + 43 × εἶδον), περιπατέω (9); 8.25: πάλιν (28), ἐπιτίθημι (7), χεῖρ (24), ὀφθαλμός (7); 8.26: ἀποστέλλω (20), οἶκος (13), λέγω (204), κόμη (7), εἰσέρχομαι (30).

67 For example, Mark often uses φέρω (8.22) in the sense of people bringing someone to Jesus for healing (Mark 1.32; 2.3; 7.32; 9.17, 19, 20). Those who come to Jesus for healing often beseech (παρακαλέω) him for help (Mark 8.22; cf. 1.40; 5.23; 6.56; 7.32). The same word (ἀναβλέπω) is used of recovery of sight both at Mark 8.24 and in the Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10.51, 52). The combination of ὄραω/εἶδον + the participle of περιπατέω to describe someone seeing someone else walking (Mark 8.24) is used also at Mark 6.49, while

being used in a way that Mark uses it elsewhere.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the passage is hardly lacking in characteristically Markan parataxis. That said, the passage also contains words that are very rare or even hapaxes in Mark. Some, such as δένδρον in 8.24 may be explicable on the basis of subject-matter; similarly διαβλέπω and τηλαυγῶς in 8.25 may be used because the writer wants to stress that after Jesus' second attempt at healing him the man can now see clearly at a distance.<sup>68</sup> But ὄμμα and ἐπιλαμβάνομαι + χεῖρ in 8.23 are harder to explain, given that the more usual Markan usages would be ὀφθαλμός and κρατέω + χεῖρ (Mark 1.31; 5.41; 9.27).

For present purposes there is no need to establish that Mark lacked a source, but only that he is likely to have redacted or rewritten whatever source he used to create the parallel with the Vespasian story.<sup>69</sup> Such a source would conform to the normal miracle-story pattern far better if it contained a single-stage healing involving only the laying-on of hands; the need for two stages to the healing is unique in the surviving Jesus tradition. Since this two-stage healing serves to prefigure the following pericope, it is likely to be the product of Mark's redaction, resulting in the distribution of his source's non-Markan vocabulary between 8.23 and 8.25. What the blind man asks for in 8.22 is simply to be touched; if the original healing consisted purely of Jesus laying his hands on the man's eyes then his action would correspond precisely to the request. On the second attempt Jesus repeats the laying on of hands but not the spitting, and this is sufficient to bring about complete success. The spitting thus seems curiously redundant.

This is equally true of the spitting at 7.33. As Guelich observes, 'The text does not say why Jesus spit [*sic*] or what he did with the spittle'.<sup>70</sup> It might be supposed that Mark could have strengthened the contrast with Vespasian's healings by making more of the spittle here, but this would not have suited his purpose. The Alexandrian spittle healing was paired with that of a man with a disabled limb, not a speech or hearing impediment, so having spittle applied to the man's tongue or ears in 7.33 would not have created a particularly clear allusion to Vespasian (Mark 3.1–6 would form a closer parallel to Vespasian's other healing, and contains a implicit critique of royal power with its closing reference to the Herodians; see

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the contrast between seeing and perceiving used by the alternation of βλέπω and ὁράω (Mark 8.24) is reminiscent of the same contrast at Mark 4.12 (cf. the juxtaposition of the same two verbs at Mark 8.15).

68 See Taylor, *Mark*, 372. For alternative accounts of the vocabulary of seeing in this passage, see Johnson, 'Blind Man', 376–8, and Joel Marcus, 'A Note on Markan Optics', *NTS* 45 (1999) 250–6.

69 Kertelge, *Wunder Jesu*, 162, argues that Mark has transferred to Jesus features of a story of healing a blind man otherwise used in a Hellenistic environment; this suggests the intriguing possibility that Mark's source was a version of the Vespasian healing story, its closest known Hellenistic parallel.

70 Guelich, *Mark*, 394.

also 8.15). The fact that Jesus' spitting at 7.33 is so inconsequential strengthens the case for its being a redactional insertion to maintain the parallelism with the Blind Man of Bethsaida, but it is only in the context of the healing of a blind man that Mark's audience could be expected to make the link with Vespasian. Moreover, Mark's purpose is better served by creating the Vespasian allusion just before Peter's Confession; the point of the allusion is to contrast messianic claims, not healing prowess (see below). It thus appears that wherever the other details of the Deaf Mute and the Blind Man of Bethsaida came from, spitting in the blind man's eye was introduced by Mark to create an allusion to the contemporary story of the Blind Man of Alexandria, and the same word *πτύσας* used at Mark 8.23 was inserted into Mark 7.33 to maintain the parallelism between the two stories.

This suggestion is reinforced by the parallel functions of the Blind Men of Bethsaida and Alexandria. The story of the Blind Man of Alexandria is part of a propaganda effort designed to legitimate Vespasian as a royal figure favoured by the gods, identified with Sarapis and as son of Ammon. The story of the Blind Man of Bethsaida leads straight into Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah, followed not long after by the Transfiguration at which God declares Jesus to be his son. The similarity between the two stories thus lies not only in the common use of spittle to cure blindness, but also in the ideological contexts of which these stories form a part.

Over the course of the travel section framed by the two healings of blind men, it becomes clear to Mark's audience, if not to the still partially sighted disciples, that Jesus' kingship is not to be of the worldly kind exemplified by Vespasian. This is already hinted at by the mutual rebuke of Peter and Jesus at Mark 8.31–32; it becomes more explicit in the rebuke Jesus gives in response to the request of James and John to have the places of highest honour in his kingdom: 'You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you' (Mark 10.42–43a). The saying could well apply to Roman or Roman-appointed authorities in general,<sup>71</sup> but in the immediate aftermath of the Jewish War the Flavians would surely be the most obvious target. The contrast in healing styles between Jesus and Vespasian in the first healing of a blind man is thus mirrored in the contrast between their ways of being messianic or quasi-messianic sons of a god in material between Mark's two blind man stories.<sup>72</sup>

71 See, e.g., Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1987) 55–7.

72 This would also be congruent with the suggestion of R. S. Sugirtharajah, 'Men, Trees, and Walking: A Conjectural Solution to Mk 8.24', *ExpT* 103 (1995) 172–4, that seeing men as trees walking in Mark 8.24 may be an allusion to Jotham's parable in Judg 9.7–15, the only OT passage that mentions trees moving about. The Jotham parable is a satire on Abimelech's kingship over Shechem and is, Sugirtharajah suggests, critical of the institution of kingship in general. It may be, however, that the proposed allusion is too subtle to be plausible, since

There are traces of an implicit Jesus–Vespasian contrast elsewhere in Mark’s Gospel. Mark’s opening words certainly echo earlier Christian tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures, but they also echo the language of imperial propaganda. In particular, the word εὐαγγέλιον was used of announcements of victories in battle or the accession of emperors; in the plural it is the word Josephus uses of the good news of Vespasian’s accession at *J.W.* IV.618. If the words υἱός θεοῦ are original to Mark 1.1 then it may or may not be significant that they are the Greek equivalent of the title *divi filius* often applied to Roman emperors;<sup>73</sup> it surely is significant, however, that the only human being to apply these words to Jesus is the centurion in charge of Jesus’ crucifixion. Vespasian’s army crucified many Jews in the course of its campaign;<sup>74</sup> in contrast Jesus dies on a Roman cross, at which point the centurion declares not the emperor but Jesus to be υἱός θεοῦ (Mark 15.39).<sup>75</sup>

Gerd Theissen fastens on precisely the aspects of Vespasian’s propaganda identified above in arguing that Mark 13 fits the background of events in 70 CE. According to Theissen:

Vespasian could be regarded in the East as a ruler who usurped messianic expectations and legitimated himself through prophets and miracles. It made no difference that he himself was a modest man. As a usurper, he had to rely on loud and vigorous propaganda. The warning against pseudo-messiahs in Mk 13.21–22 could have been formulated against the background of such a ‘propaganda campaign’ for the victorious new emperor, who created peace by subduing the Jews and whose legitimacy was supported by signs and wonders. In that case, the pseudo-messiahs would not have been leaders of the revolt against the Romans, nor would they represent expectations based on memories of those leaders. On the contrary, what was being criticized was the usurpation of religious hopes by the Roman ruler who demolished the uprising.<sup>76</sup>

If Mark was indeed writing in or shortly after 70 and responding to imperial propaganda in this way, then he was surely aware of the stories about Vespasian’s stay in Egypt. In that context, to include a story about Jesus healing blindness by spitting in someone’s eye was to invite comparison with the similar story being told

there is a complete absence of any verbal similarity: Mark’s walking trees are described as δένδρα . . . περιπατοῦντας, whereas the movement of Jotham’s trees is indicated by the phrase πορευόμενα ἐπορεύθη τὰ ξύλα (*Judg* 9.8 LXX).

73 So van Iersel, *Mark*, 91.

74 Josephus, *J.W.* V.446–52; *Life* 420–1.

75 Mark would hardly be alone among NT authors in taking a critical stance towards imperial Rome; quite apart from the obvious case of Revelation this has also been claimed, for example, for Matthew and Paul. See, e.g., John Riches and David C. Sim, ed., *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (JSNTSup 276; London, New York: T&T Clark International, 2005); and Richard A. Horsley, *Paul and the Imperial Roman Order* (Harrisburg, London, New York: Trinity Press International, 2004).

76 Theissen, *Gospels in Context*, 266–8.



about Vespasian. This is not to suggest that the allusion to Vespasian was the main point of Mark's healing story, or the only factor that shaped it. But it is striking, not simply that both stories employ the spit motif, but that they operate within similar yet contrasting and competing symbolic universes.

## 5. Conclusion

That stories about healing blind men with spittle should independently arise around 70 CE in both Mark's Gospel and Roman propaganda would be something of a coincidence. The coincidence becomes all the more striking given the parallel function of the stories: the Blind Man of Alexandria is a story that served to help legitimate Vespasian's claim to the imperial throne, a claim also supported by various prophecies including Josephus's reinterpretation of Jewish messianic expectations. The Blind Man of Bethsaida leads into Peter's confession of Jesus as the messiah, but a messiah apparently misconceived in emperor-like terms. Even if this were mere coincidence it seems likely that Mark's audience would hear one story in terms of the other, but it seems even more likely that there is no coincidence and that Mark deliberately shaped the Blind Man of Bethsaida with the Blind Man of Alexandria in mind.