

Mark – The First Gospel

007 – *Misunderstood and Misinterpreted – Mark 3:20-35*

All outlines, audio recording of discussions, and works referenced may be accessed and viewed at <http://markthefirstgospel.blogspot.com/> .

First Thoughts

Mark clearly uses a “sandwich” technique to narrate this section. As such this entire passage needs to be read as a singular unit. On the outside (the “bread”) are the stories about Jesus’ family. In the middle a story about scribes’ challenge of Jesus and the nature of his authority interrupts the family episode.

The common thread that runs through this entire passage is that of insiders vs. outsiders. Who is inside Jesus’ new community and who is outside? What is the primary characteristic that determines insiders vs. outsiders?

This passage also includes the “difficult saying” from Jesus regarding blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and the “unpardonable sin” that has always been a source of interpretive concern and sleepless nights for more than a few Christians.

The structure is chiasmic as seen here:

Table 1: Chiasmic structure, Mark 3:20-35. Reading Mark, 3:20-35.

A	20-21	Those akin to him come to seize him
B	22a	Accusation 1: He has Beelzebul
C	22b	Accusation 2: By the prince of demons he casts out demons
C'	23-27	Refutation 2: Satan would not cast out demons
B'	28-30	Refutation 1: Saying Jesus has an unclean spirit is blasphemy
A'	31-35	Jesus’ kin are those who do the will of God

Here the early Christians who constituted the audience of the Gospel learn that to the extent that they are misunderstood and rejected by their families they are following a pattern characteristic of their founder.¹

Family – Part A

20 Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. 21 And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind." (ESV)

1. Jesus goes “home”
 - a. Capernaum or Nazareth?

¹ *Reading Mark, 3:20-35.*

- b. Family “going out” often interpreted as going from Nazareth to Capernaum
 - c. But it can also be taken quite literally: that Jesus was receiving the crowd literally in the outside courtyard and the family literally stepped outside²
 - d. Who is inside? Who is outside?
2. Jesus simply cannot get any respite
 - a. And it turns out that at home, where one might expect to receive comfort, Jesus does not
 - b. Jesus and his disciples are so occupied with the crowd’s needs that they have no time to take care of their own basic needs
 3. Jesus’ family concludes he has become insane – he is no longer thinking clearly
 - a. Obsession; literally, a Messiah-complex(!)
 - b. He is doing things that are starting to bring shame to the family
 - c. He is doing things that may quite likely cause authorities to crack down on him
 - d. Who constitutes “family” here is not yet identified (found in part B)
 - e. They are going to perform an “intervention” on Jesus
 - f. They have the best interests of Jesus in mind, at least from what they can understand
 4. “Seize”
 - a. Can also mean “restrain”, “take hold of”, or “arrest”
 - i. It is used in the account of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest
 - ii. It is a very forcible image
 - b. The family wants to control Jesus’ behavior
 - i. How often do we want to “control” how God acts?
 - ii. Do we think that because we are Christians, we have a say in how God ought to act in the rest of the world?
 - iii. What is our reaction when God acts in ways contrary to our expectations and traditions?
 5. “He is out of his mind”
 - a. This is the view of his family – they do not believe

When someone deliberately tangles with the demonic powers of this world, it can look like madness. I think of women and men who have bravely tried to eradicate prejudice and oppression. They are commonly greeted with the assumption of most people that the established powers will never be displaced, and those who try must be “out of their minds” to make what is surely a futile effort...

It may seem as though the world is mad enough as it is. Does it really need more madness? Yes, but madness of a different kind..., a way of seeing the world that breaks through the rigidities and distortions of our established perspectives. We often hold the illusion that reason is the antidote to the world’s madness, but this approach forgets that reason can be

² *Feasting: Mark*, location 3989.

held in thrall to the world's madness. Mark gives witness to the deeper passion of the Spirit working through Jesus to bind the demonic forces of the world.³

Scribes

22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." 23 And he called them to him and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. 27 But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.

28 "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" — 30 for they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit." (ESV)

1. Jerusalem to Nazareth or Capernaum is about 100 miles
2. Jesus' actions have offended the authorities in Jerusalem (cf., earlier conflict accounts)
3. As keepers of the Law, the scribes have the authority to determine if Jesus is in conformity with the Law or not, so they come to officially investigate and render judgment
4. Their first official opinion is that "he is possessed by Beelzebul"
 - a. This statement is a more serious charge that also echoes the unbelief of his family
 - i. Mark rhetorically places these together so that the audience can see that Jesus' family and the authorities are both really in the same condition
 - b. This statement is an accusation against Jesus' motivation/source of power
 - c. "Beelzebul" (or "Beelzebub")
 - i. Originated as "Baalzebul", a Canaanite deity⁴
 - ii. "Beelzebub": lord of the house⁵
 - iii. "Beelzebul": lord of the flies, or dung god⁶
 - iv. The scribes may be accusing Jesus of using the power of a foreign god
 - d. The scribes cannot make up their mind
 - i. In 2:6-7 they had silently accused Jesus of blasphemy (i.e., Jesus claiming to be God), now they accuse him of demon-possession
5. Their second official opinion is that Jesus can cast out demons because he is using the power of the chief demon to do so
 - a. This statement is an accusation against Jesus' works
 - b. A consequence of the first accusation

³ *Feasting: Mark*, locations 3846, 3868.

⁴ *UBC: Mark*, additional note for 3:22. C.f., *Complete Jewish Bible*, 3:22.

⁵ *Enhanced Strong's Dictionary*, g0954

⁶ *Ibid.* and *UBC:Mark*, additional notes for 3:22.

When the scribes accuse Jesus of having Beelzebul and of using that demon's power to perform exorcisms, the audience would have understood that the charge was that of practicing magic. Magicians were believed to have gained control of spirits that they could call upon to do their bidding (Smith 1978, 30- 34, 97- 100).⁷

6. Jesus responds with parabolic sayings (parables, argument from analogy)⁸ to refute the second accusation
 - a. Jesus changes the identity of the demonic from “Beelzebul” to “Satan”
 - i. It is not some foreign god, but the adversary alluded to in their scriptures
 - b. First, it is logically impossible for Satan to cast himself out
 - i. If Satan is destroying his own realm, then Satan is already defeated and no exorcisms should be necessary
 - ii. If Satan is defeated, then it is not necessary for Jesus to do his works to invade Satan’s kingdom
 - iii. But the reality is that Satan still maintains strongholds and so he still has power
 - c. Jesus employs the parables of a divided kingdom and a divided house to further explain
 - i. Divided house may be an allusion to his own family
 - d. The parable of the strong man and the thief
 - i. Jesus is the thief; Satan, the strong man
 - ii. Satan is already partially bound
 - iii. Jesus is doing the plundering
 - iv. Jesus is stronger than Satan

The clear implication is that Jesus is the thief who binds the strong man, Satan, in order to plunder his house. Jesus as thief! Jesus binding someone! Jesus plundering a house! I have never seen a stained-glass window featuring this as an image of Christ.⁹

- e. The works Jesus is doing cannot be from Satan
7. Jesus responds to the first accusation with a saying about “unforgiveable” sin
 - a. If the works are not from Satan then where...?

When divorced from this context and viewed generally they raise insoluble questions, well illustrated in the history of the interpretation of this passage.¹⁰

- b. First, all sins will be forgiven; second, all blasphemies too, will be forgiven
- c. However, blasphemies against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven

⁷ Reading Mark, 3:20-35.

⁸ “Parable” in its more popular and traditional sense of stories that Jesus told with some kind of spiritual lesson, but it can also have a technical definition meaning *argument from analogy* (UBC: Mark, additional notes for 3:23; and Reading Mark, 3:20-35).

⁹ Feasting: Mark, location 3837.

¹⁰ NICNT: Mark, 3:28-30.

- d. What is it? The scribes were saying (continuous action), “He has an unclean spirit”

This solemn warning must be interpreted in the light of the specific situation in which it was uttered. Blasphemy is an expression of defiant hostility toward God... The scribal tradition considered blasphemy no less seriously than did Jesus. “The Holy One, blessed be he, pardons everything else, but on profanation of the Name [*i.e.* blasphemy] he takes vengeance immediately.” This is the danger to which the scribes exposed themselves when they attributed to the agency of Satan the redemption brought by Jesus. The expulsion of demons was a sign of the intrusion of the Kingdom of God. Yet the scribal accusations against Jesus amount to a denial of the power and greatness of the Spirit of God. By assigning the action of God to a demonic origin the scribes betray a perversion of spirit which, in defiance of the truth, chooses to call light darkness. In this historical context, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit denotes the conscious and deliberate rejection of the saving power and grace of God released through Jesus' word and act... The failure of the scribes to recognize him as the Bearer of the Spirit and the Conqueror of Satan could be forgiven. The considered judgment that his power was demonic, however, betrayed a defiant resistance to the Holy Spirit. This severe warning was not addressed to laymen but to carefully trained legal specialists whose task was to interpret the biblical Law to the people. It was their responsibility to be aware of God's redemptive action. Their insensitivity to the Spirit through whom Jesus was qualified for his mission exposed them to grave peril. Their own tradition condemned their gross callousness as sharply as Jesus' word. The admonition concerning blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is not to be divorced from this historical context and applied generally.¹¹

- e. If the works are not from Satan, the power has to be from God, through the Holy Spirit
- i. To reject the proper source of Jesus' works and call good evil, to continue to do so in light of all evidence, is to end up actually thinking evil is good

It is one thing to stick to one's tradition. It is another to deny the possibility that God might have something new to say, even if it comes through your presumed enemy.¹²

8. In what ways might we be like the scribes in misinterpreting and misattributing God's work and power in the world today?
- a. What do we think of other Christian groups that hold to different theologies?
 - b. What do we think of other religious groups?
 - c. What do we think of non-religious people?
 - d. Can God speak truth and work his will through people not like us, with whom we disagree, with whose proclamations and lifestyles we might disagree, with those that may even appear antagonistic to the idea of God?

¹¹ NICNT: Mark, 3:28-30.

¹² Feasting: Mark, location 3751.

Family – Part B

31 And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. 32 And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." 33 And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" 34 And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." (ESV)

1. The family story, interrupted at verse 21, now resumes
2. They went out to seize Jesus, and they are now standing outside
 - a. Is Jesus inside or outside; did the family travel?
 - i. The “sandwich” rhetoric makes it seem like a long time has passed between the first and second parts, but if read consecutively much time needn’t have passed
 - b. A crowd is sitting around Jesus: probably sitting outside
 - c. “Standing outside” – outside the crowd, rather than outside a house
 - d. Maybe it’s meant to be metaphorical – that Jesus is “outside” the traditional boundaries of what is considered appropriate, *and* the family is “outside” the circle of genuine family of Jesus
3. A message is communicated from the family to Jesus
 - a. The crowd is so large they cannot get through, nor can their voices travel that far
 - i. Probably not inside a house, but outside to accommodate the crowd
4. Jesus responds rhetorically, i.e., he asks a question he himself answers
 - a. It is a question the audience, including us, are invited to answer for ourselves, too
 - i. Bloodline defining family is particularly important in ancient world
 - ii. Tribalism is still a core pillar in many societies
 - iii. What kind of “tribalism” do we see in modern Western societies?
 - iv. Maybe we don’t place as much importance on biological family but are we just as tribal in other ways?
 - v. Does “our tribe” define “family” for us? How might this story speak to us today?

Yet even the most loving families have their limitations. It is possible for such families to become ingrown, to share abundantly among themselves, but not to see beyond their own family circle to the immensity of human need that stretches all about them.¹³

- b. Those “inside” Jesus’ family are not related by blood; those “outside” are
- c. Family is defined by behavior; not by blood, tribe, nationality, or doctrine
 - i. In this specific case, it is the act of gathering around Jesus to listen to him
 - ii. Vs. his family who come to try to control him

¹³ *Feasting: Mark*, location 4051.

Doing “the will of God” becomes another sign of spiritual kinship, one not to be taken lightly. Thus, pursuing God’s will offers the potential to strengthen and transform all relationships dramatically. However, if the text is any indication, it may also create distance from those whose blood runs in a disciple’s veins. The gospel nurtures familial relationships even as it can divide them.¹⁴

- d. This story might be an example of what it means to “hate family” and “leave family”
 - i. Jesus experienced it himself – the will of God and demands of family can sometimes be at odds

The Markan emphasis is twofold: (1) Doing the will of God will look crazy to some people—often to one’s own relatives; and (2) those whose relatives misunderstand their Christian commitment find a new family in the Christian community, just as Jesus did.¹⁵

- e. This is Jesus’ final response to the charges that he is insane and possessed by a demon
 - i. Jesus is doing God’s will
 - ii. It might seem a rather nonsensical argument to us but—

The clinching argument against the charge of practicing magic is the claim that Jesus and his family “do the will of God.” This was a common argument made by ancient miracle workers who were accused of being magicians... In the ancient world, the pious instrument of the gods distinguished herself or himself from the magician by insisting that whereas the magician forced the gods to do the magician’s will, the pious miracle-worker did only the will of the gods. Thus, when the author of Mark portrays Jesus and his followers as those who “do the will of God,” he is relying on commonly accepted modes of argumentation to make his point. Such a defense was a necessary component of any biography of a wonder-worker in antiquity because the person that one group claimed as a holy man would inevitably be regarded as a magician by competing groups...¹⁶

- 5. Jesus’ response also gives us another hint as to gender relations within the family of God (i.e., church)
 - a. The crowd communicate, “Your mother and your brothers are outside”
 - b. Jesus ends with, “For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother”
 - i. Jesus brings in “sister” out of nowhere implying strongly that among his disciples were women

¹⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 3911.

¹⁵ *Reading Mark*, 3:20-35.

¹⁶ *Reading Mark*, 3:20-35.

Whereas Mark's context is a patriarchal one, through the use of "sister" and "mother" the writer declares the presence of women in the ministry of Jesus...

This group is not patriarchal. Mothers have a vital role to play. God is now the head of the household. This group is not male exclusively. It includes sisters who are on par with brothers in the work of Jesus.¹⁷

- ii. Jesus seems to deliberately omit "father" implying strongly that there is no place for a singular authority (other than God himself), patriarchy, or hierarchy to be seen in his new family structure

In declaring, "Here are my mother and my brothers" (v. 34), Jesus also does not mention "father." First-century-CE society was rooted in a patriarchal (male-rule), patrilineal (male-descendency), patrinomial (male-naming), and patrilocal (male-placement) society. What an assault this is to concepts of family embedded in Mark's society! Although the following quote is related to Luke's community, it is still apropos in addressing the social hierarchy in Mark's day just a decade earlier: "The status of a woman was tied to that of a male relative. Her identity and social belonging were situated outside of her self and her gender." Mark's Jesus attempts to reconfigure this gender order.¹⁸

Summary

Just as none of us chooses our biological brothers and sisters, so we must beware of obsessive selectivity in relating to our sisters and brothers in Christ. Indeed, throughout the Gospels Jesus continually extends the boundaries of his spiritual family to a variety of public sinners, persons who are left behind physically, mentally, spiritually, and economically in one way or another.¹⁹

The true members of his family are not his blood kin waiting outside, asking for him, but those crowding round him now, seeking the will of God. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (v. 35). By redefining family, the Jesus of this text defines church.²⁰

The will of God is something he identifies later in Mark when a scribe asks him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" (12:28). Christ answers that the first commandment is to love God with all that we are and that the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves.²¹

¹⁷ *Feasting: Mark*, locations 4007, 4020.

¹⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 4012.

¹⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 3916.

²⁰ *Feasting: Mark*, location 3940.

²¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 4059.