

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

A YALE BIBLE STUDY

with Allen Hilton

Session Two – “Observing the Opposition”

Mark 1.16—3.34

Mark’s Gospel moves fast. If we’re imagining ourselves in the ancient audience for that first reading in a Roman living room, a mere ninety seconds pass between our Gospeler’s opening proclamation that he brings good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the first major opposition to his work. Wow! That didn’t take long! Immediately after God echoes the narrator’s opening by announcing to Jesus “You’re my son!”, opposition arises. It’s no wonder that the Greek word for “immediately” appears 40 times in this book!

This first resistance comes in the form of a Tempter who attacks Jesus out in the middle of nowhere.

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (1.12-13)

Then, a mere 70 seconds or so later, it happens a second time.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” (1.23)

Mark’s not kidding around. Clearly unseen evil powers will array themselves against Jesus. They show up twice in the first three minutes of the book, and they’ll come back again several times as we read.

Human opposition is a bit slower to reach the scene, but it will come, too. In this session, we will watch how Mark paints those who oppose Jesus. This sort of hostility will weave its way through the whole book, all the way to the crucifixion of chapter 15, so it’s an important thing to understand if we want to “get” Mark’s Jesus.

Let’s read on!

Mark’s Narrative Subtlety

Mark doesn’t get enough credit as an author. That has a couple causes.

First, the church chops up the Gospel.

- Sunday to Sunday, Christians who go to church hear one-paragraph-long readings of scripture. These small bits often track with whatever topic the preacher has chosen, and they often don't pick up where the congregation left off the week before. This can produce in us a fragmented sense of scripture as a collection of good but unrelated stories.
- The very fine practice of identifying memory verses also fragments the scriptures. These "greatest hits" passages shine out from the page, so we want to internalize them. But when we do this, we most often pluck them out of their context and treat them as independent, inspired utterances.

Next, Bible scholars have sometimes tended to treat the Gospels as collections of small bits.

- During the Enlightenment, students of the Bible shifted their attention from the whole story of a Gospel to the individual bits of "tradition" that had been incorporated into the book. Much time was spent imagining how each one got preserved. Practically no attention was paid to the role of the author. He had become a collector – an editor at best. Karl Ludwig Schmidt, an important German scholar of the early 20th century, characterized Mark's work: "He puts pearls on a string."
- In their attempt to identify the actual words and deeds of Jesus – the so-called Historical Jesus – the Jesus Seminar and others have identified which sayings are really Jesus (red-letter), which are likely Jesus (pink), and which are unlikely Jesus (gray). This line of questioning treats mark as a collector, rather than as an author.

More recently, beginning in the late 20th century, the field of New Testament began to treat narrative as a proper field of study for the Gospels. Suddenly scholars were pulling back from the single paragraph ("pericope") and asking about Mark's characters, his plot, his themes – the things a literary critic might study. There are problems with this approach. For one, Mark probably did begin with a stack of oral and written source bits on his table, so his arranging process is not one that most novelists and short story writers use. However, by bringing attention to the fact that this book is a beginning-middle-and-end story, narrative critics have let us appreciate some of Mark's brilliant subtleties.

First Followers

Jesus' remarkable popularity is one thing we might miss reading Mark in short bits. We know that Jesus sought out some followers directly. In 1.16-20, he walks alongside the Sea of Galilee and throws out an invitation. To two pairs of Galilean fishermen, he simply says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people," and Peter follow. These decisions may have been as abrupt as they seem, or they may have prior conversations behind them (Mark compresses!), but in either case they demonstrate the impact Jesus had on people.

"The Calling of the Disciples" is an episode. You've probably heard it before. But let's take a look at the very next passage.

They [Jesus, Peter, Andrew, James, and John] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and

he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. (1.21-28)

It's a great story, right? Jesus teaches very successfully ("they were astounded"!) and suddenly a demon-possessed guy accosts him, right there in the synagogue for all to see. The possessed guy shouts out Jesus' identity (remember last session?), so Jesus shushes him and tosses him out. It's not everyday viewing for us, and it stands out as a spectacle. It teaches us that Jesus is compassionate and powerful. There are a whole lot of things this passage does to us.

When we focus on this one episode, though, we miss things. When pastors preach it or scholars study it for where it might have come up in early Christian memory, we focus on the drama of the synagogue. But there in verses 27 and 28, Mark supplies something many preachers and scholars leave aside as window dressing. "They were all amazed...At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." It turns out that after this episode, Jesus started trending on Galilean Twitter.

This theme continues.

- Next, when Jesus heals Peter's mom, others want in. "That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. (1.32-33)
- Next, after Jesus heals the man with leprosy..."[the ex-leper] went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter. (1.45)
- Next, Jesus got ready to heal in another house, "so many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door." (2.2-3) Then, after he heals the paralytic, "they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'" (2.12)
- Next, "Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them." (2.13)

That, my friends, is a developing theme. By 3.7-8, in fact, Jesus will be a mashup of the Beatles and Tiger Woods: everyone wants access. Look at Mark's description of the crowd that gathered to hear him teach:

Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him...

The moral of this story is clear: If we consume Mark in bite-sized morsels, we miss the exponential growth of Jesus' crowds. But no one in that ancient Roman living room could have missed it. They would have noticed how wildly popular Jesus and how fast that happened. They may have been bolstered by it, as we'll see later.

There's a lot at stake in noticing such things, because missing the massive, exponential growth of Jesus' crowds in the first three chapters makes us miss another part of Mark's narrative subtlety: why do these Jewish leaders so dislike him?

Observing the Opposition

The way Mark paints Jesus' opponents offers us one of those brilliant subtleties.

Mark 1.21-26

[Jesus, Peter, Andrew, James and John] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught...

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. *They were all amazed*, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'

At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Mark 3.1-6

Here are some questions that might help you read closely:

Compare the two stories. How are they alike? What is different? What are our options for explaining the major difference?

Again [Jesus] entered the synagogue,

and a man was there who had a withered hand.

[The Pharisees] watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him.³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.'⁴ Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent.⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

⁶*The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.*

If you were to skip across paragraphs of a novel and find a much different reality than the earlier pages had built, you would imagine that something important had happened in the story within the intervening paragraphs. That's what we should imagine here. But what?

How big was Jesus' entourage when he walked in a Capernaum synagogue in 1.21?

How big was Jesus' entourage when he returned to that synagogue in 3.1?

Track the change between the first and second episode through the following verses: 1.32, 1.45; 2.1-2, 2.13; 3.7-9.

In light of these verses, what has changed between 1.21 and 3.1 that might explain the Jewish leaders' silence at Jesus' Sabbath miracle in 1.21-28, compared to their violent response in 3.1-6?

Taking all this into account, what motivated the Pharisees' opposition? (Choose One)

- a. A zeal for the proper obedience to Moses' Law
- b. Jealous

To grade your answer, consider Pilate's reaction when the Jewish leaders handed Jesus over to him in Jerusalem:

Now at the festival Pilate used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' ¹⁰For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over. (Mark 15.6-10)

What motive does Pilate discern in the Jerusalem priests' prosecution of Jesus?

The Significance of This Subtlety

This subtle (in 1—3) and then very direct (in 15.10) characterization of Jesus' opponents would have been important to Mark's audience. After all, the Roman Emperor himself has recently launched a legal assault that has grabbed up and executed their very own favorite Christian leader, Peter. Surely their non-Christian neighbors are buzzing about how this group is up to no good, how they offend Roman authorities, how the powers that be should do away with them.

Into that confusion after the carnage of Nero, after losing their beloved leader, we should imagine that this audience would beam in on Jesus' opposition. Why was he arrested? What was he charged with? Why did authorities imprison and execute him? What was behind the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus?

In the crowded room where all those questions were swirling, Mark subtly dismantles the guilt of Jesus. He portrays a turf battle, in which the Pharisees' and then the Chief Priests' case against Jesus is ill-motivated – driven by professional envy, rather than legal purity. To top it all off, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate himself identifies that nefarious motive as he tries Jesus at the Jewish leaders' behest.

Picture yourself in the room with Mark's embattled, fearful faithful folk. How would Mark's portrait of Jesus' popularity and his opponents' case against him help you?

Finish

We come away knowing that Mark does many powerful-but-subtle things "for those who have ears to hear." So, let's listen closely as this author continues to unfold the life of Jesus to us. And as we listen, let's keep our eyes on the way Mark spins his characters

with his ancient audience in mind. We get to look over their shoulders and, with the Holy Spirit's help, imagine that he's talking to us, too.

For Next Time

Four Stories, One Storm, and Three Saves (Mark 4—5)

Jesus was a master teacher, and he famously used stories (parables) to drive home truth that mattered. But we shouldn't imagine Mark's Jesus as guru at the top of a mountain waiting for inquirers. Immediately after speaking parables to a large crowd in Mark 4, Jesus stills a storm on the Sea of Galilee and then calms storms in three human lives in Mark 5. In this session, we will focus on a Jesus who speaks AND acts.

Preparation:

- Read the Parable of the Sower (just Mark 4.3-9) carefully and well, as if you've never heard it before. Why do you think Jesus tells that particular story at this point in the action? If you only had these 7 verses, what would you think he is talking about? How does Mark's insider explanation (Mark 4.13-20) line up with your perception of the story?
- Ask the same kind of question for the other three parables. Why does Jesus talk about shining or hiding a lamp, seed that grows unnoticed, and a small seed that becomes a large tree?
- Read Mark 5 and watch how Jesus casts out a demon, heals a woman who has a mysterious hemorrhage, and raises a young girl from death. What do we learn about Jesus through these episodes?