

## Mark 3:20-35 Commentary

### A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 3:20-35

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This is a Markan "sandwich" story in which one story is embedded in another. In each instance of this story structure, the purpose is to make the stories comment on each other. Therefore, we want to pay attention to the way in which the story that begins with Jesus' family coming to get him and ends with the redefinition of his family frames the controversy with the scribes who come down from Jerusalem saying that he was possessed by the devil. The classic instance of this structure in Mark is the embedding of the story of the woman who touched Jesus' garment in the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter (5:21-43). Other instances are the embedding of the story of the fig tree in the cleansing of the temple (11:12-25), the anointing at Bethany in the plot of the chief priests and scribes (14:1-11), and the trial before the Sanhedrin in the account of Peter's denial (14:53-72). This interweaving of stories is characteristic of Mark's storytelling. In this instance, the controversy with the scribes over their accusation that the spirit empowering Jesus' exorcisms is Beelzebub is embedded in the story of Jesus' family coming to get him. Both groups share a common conclusion that Jesus is crazy. His mother and brothers think that he's lost his mind and the authorities think an evil spirit has possessed him. Thus the two-fold negative assessment about the spirit that is inspiring Jesus is the core issue of this story.

Jesus' response to the scribes is the longest extended speech in Mark's story to this point. In this speech, the storyteller as Jesus addresses the audience as the skeptical scribes. This audience address business in biblical storytelling invites some explanation. In the telling of a story, the storyteller essentially presents or "becomes" the character that is speaking, especially when there's a long speech. In Mark almost all of the major speeches are speeches by Jesus. When Jesus speaks, that is, when the storyteller speaks Jesus' words and makes Jesus present, the audience is invited to become, that is to occupy, the character Jesus is speaking to. This is a basic difference between drama and storytelling. In most dramas, the characters address each other on the other side of the "fourth wall" where the audience is seated. In storytelling, there is no "fourth wall." Most of the time, storytellers address the audience as the characters in the story. For example, in Jesus' long address to the disciples in chapter 13, the audience is addressed as Jesus' disciples and is invited to identify with the disciples and to "become" one of the disciples listening to Jesus on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Temple. This dynamic happens with virtually all of the long speeches that Jesus has in the course of the gospel.

It is relatively easy to identify who the audience is invited to "become" by paying attention to the story. In this instance, the audience is addressed as the scribes who had come "down" from Jerusalem, that is, who had come down from the mountains of Jerusalem in the south into Galilee in the north. The earlier, shorter instances of audience

address in Mark's story are John the Baptist addressing the crowd in the wilderness (1:7-8), Jesus addressing the audience as the scribes in the healing of the paralytic (2:8-10a), Jesus addressing those who asked why his disciples don't fast (2:19-20), and Jesus addressing the audience as the Pharisees in the two controversies about working on the Sabbath: the disciples harvesting grain by rubbing it in their hands (2:23-28) and Jesus healing the man with a withered hand (3:1-6). Thus, in these early stories, the audience is addressed as various Jewish groups who are challenged by Jesus' actions that "break the law."

Our story is the climax of this series of conflict stories. It is the most intensely polarized story in this series in which Jesus accuses the scribes of an unforgivable sin. And it ends with the highly intimate moment between Jesus and the audience in which those listening are invited to identify themselves as members of Jesus' family. Thus the dynamics of audience address here are highly charged. The audience is invited to make two decisions: 1) if the spirit in Jesus is the spirit of the devil or the Holy Spirit and 2) if they want to identify themselves as members of Jesus' family. This story intensifies the conflicts that have been brewing and requires the audience to decide about the controversies that Jesus has generated over Sabbath law, fasting, his authority to forgive sins, eating with unclean persons, and accepting a tax collector as a disciple.

It is important to notice that the audience is invited to identify with issues that are highly specific to the Jewish community of the first century. Sabbath law was only an issue for Jews for whom the observance of the Sabbath distinguished them from "the Gentiles." So also eating with unclean persons was a distinctively Jewish issue, as was fasting and the authority to forgive sins. The probability is then that Mark was speaking to an audience that was predominantly Jewish in its identity and for whom these controversies were very important. Thus, "conservative" Jews argued that all of these laws should be rigorously observed while more "liberal," often Hellenistic, Jews would argue that these laws were an unnecessary barrier to more cordial relationships with their Greek and Roman neighbors.

Now let us address the specifics of this story. The charge of the scribes who had come down from Jerusalem is the most serious accusation of Jesus to this point in the story. Earlier major accusations were the scribes' charge of blasphemy when Jesus pronounced the forgiveness of the paralytic's sins (2:7) and the Pharisees' scandal over Jesus working on the Sabbath that generated a plot to kill him (3:6). In this story the scribes' accusation is that Jesus is a demonic figure who is operating by the power of the spirit of Satan. Jesus' response is equally polemical. His charge that they are guilty of an unforgivable sin is a very serious charge. This is a highly intense conflict, the culmination of all the conflicts that have preceded it. Therefore, it is appropriate to tell this with high-volume and a highly conflictual tone. It would be hard for you to overdo the degree of conflict that's present here.

There are two themes to the argument. Jesus' first response to the scribes' accusation is that it isn't possible for an ally of Satan to be attacking Satan. It's an internal contradiction. If there is such intense spiritual division in the house of Satan, then the house is divided and cannot stand. The same implication is present in the parable of the strong man. You can't raid and plunder a strong man's stuff unless you first bind the strong man. Satan's stuff is being plundered, in the healing of sickness, leprosy, paralysis, and withered limbs. The only way in which that's possible is if an opponent of Satan is overpowering him.

The other theme is that their pronouncement calling Jesus' actions the actions of Satan is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It is calling the Holy Spirit the spirit of Satan. That constitutes blasphemy. Jesus' pronouncement is very serious. I remember a student who reported that a person had come to him and said, "I can never be forgiven. I've been condemned to hell. I am condemned by God forever because I cursed God." The person had said some version of "God damn it." I explained the character of blasphemy and that cursing did not constitute blasphemy. Jesus didn't encourage cursing either but he did not pronounce cursing as an unforgiveable sin. Calling the Holy Spirit the spirit of Satan, on the other hand, could be considered as blasphemy. So he went home and explained blasphemy to the person. The explanation actually changed his life because he had thought he was under an eternal sentence of condemnation.

Mark's story returns to the issues of Jesus' family. This story is the first introduction to the theme of Jesus' family that continues throughout the Gospel. In this instance, his mother and his brothers think that he's crazy and have come to seize him and take him home because he's gone out of his mind. Later, when Jesus speaks and teaches in his home synagogue in Nazareth, people are offended at him and do not accept him (6:1-6). At the end of the story, the implication is that Jesus' mother, the mother of Jesus' brothers, James and Joses (6:3), is one of the women at the cross (15:40-41), at his burial (15:47), and in the empty tomb after the resurrection (16:1). That is, Mark implies that Jesus' mother had been with him and served him in Galilee and had come up to Jerusalem with him. In other words, Jesus' mother changed her mind about her son.

In this initial story, however, the conflict between Jesus and his family is explicit. When his mother and his brothers call for him and want to talk to him, the implication is that they're going to grab him and take him home. But when those who were sitting around Jesus say, "Your mother and your brothers are outside," Jesus does not go out to meet them. The fact that he doesn't go outside to talk to his mother and his brother is a sign of significant family alienation. Just as he rejected the accusation of the scribes, he also rejects his family's conclusion that he is out of his mind.

The impact of this concluding story is also shaped by the dynamics of audience address. In the response to the charges of the scribes (3:23-29), the storyteller as Jesus addresses the audience as the scribes. In this concluding story Jesus is addresses the storyteller's

audience as those sitting around him. In fact, this scene may reflect the primary context in which Mark's Gospel was told, that is, of a storyteller with people sitting around him. But regardless of the seating arrangements of Markan storytellers and their audiences, when storyteller says, "Here are my mother and my brothers," he's gesturing to those who are sitting around him who are then addressed as members of Jesus' family.

The invitation of the story is, therefore, to become a part of Jesus' spiritual family, what we might call a Jesus groupie. The story redefines the character of a family not as biological descent but as spiritual identity. Jesus then invites everyone who listens to this story to become part of his family. The overall dynamic of both the telling and the interpretation of this story is to establish a close, intimate, familial relationship with Jesus. It also creates significant alienation from the scribes who were significant authorities for first century Jews. That's the invitation of the story and its impact.

How are the two stories related? The stories of Jesus' family and the Beelzebul controversy are the climax of the first major section of the Gospel (1:1-3:35). It is a point of decision for the listeners. What is Jesus' spirit? Is it a demonic spirit, or the Holy Spirit? Is he right about these issues about which there has been such intense controversy and conflict? Who is your family? Is your primary identity tied up with your biological family or with your spiritual family? The invitation of this story is to identify with Jesus' spiritual family and to enter into this unique relationship with him. In effect, it is an invitation to become a disciple of Jesus. It is also an invitation to hang around and hear the rest of the story.