

The Gospel According to Mark, 1:21-28: Authority Over Demons

“21 And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. 22 And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. 23 And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, 24 ‘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.’ 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ 28 And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.” (Mark 1:21-28, ESV)

I. The Holy and the Unholy

Matthew tells us that Jesus made Capernaum his home base for a time, in fulfillment of prophecy, after the arrest of John the Baptist (Matt. 4:12-17). As faithful Jews, Jesus and his disciples attended synagogue on the Sabbath, the day the Lord commanded to be kept holy (Exo. 20:8).

The synagogue had been established after the exile as a place of worship and dissemination of Torah. Although not as holy as the temple, a synagogue was considered a holy place of prayer, worship, and study. The holy scrolls containing the scriptures of the *Torah* (Law), the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and the *Ketuvim* (Writings) were kept in a chest in a side room. Synagogue buildings were usually located by a river or other water source because those who were ceremonially unclean were normally required to purify themselves before entering (Schürer, II.2, pp. 69-70). The land upon which a synagogue stood remained holy even if the building was torn down. The land could never again be employed for secular use, and the building materials could not be repurposed (Edersheim, p. 260).

It is striking that on this holy day, in this seemingly holy place, sat a man¹ hosting a demon who appeared quite undisturbed. Notice how the scribes (a.k.a. “teachers of the law”), who would normally address the synagogue on the Sabbath, are contrasted with Jesus in v. 22. Generally speaking, the scribe-led synagogue religion of the day posed no threat to Satan and his kingdom.² But in Jesus something greater than the synagogue is here; something **greater even than the temple (Matt. 12:6)**. The unclean spirit is confronted with **“the Holy One of God” (v. 24)**. God has appeared in flesh, and the kingdom, the rule and authority of God has come near in him, and this is too much holiness and too much divine presence for a denizen of Hades to tolerate.

The prevalence of accounts of demon-possession in the gospels has occasioned skepticism. But such skeptics, seeking to suppress the truth, try to turn this great evidence of the divinity of Jesus on its head. The unclean spirit was not manifested in the presence of the mundane. You would not recognize him in the marketplace, not even in a house of worship. The demon was only “triggered” by the extraordinary spiritual power and holiness of Jesus:

“[Such] an eruption of demon power against the ministry of the Saviour ought not to be thought amazing. It was but the critical and inevitable clash of the white light of perfect holiness and truth against the gross darkness of error and deceit. It was the unavoidable collision of the unhindered power of the Holy Spirit, manifested through a sinless life, with the opposing power of Satan. It was impossible for the Son of God to be in the vicinity of evil power, and not expose it, and challenge it” (Unger, p. 79).

¹ The ESV and most modern versions say, “*immediately* there was...a man...” in v. 23. This has led some to conclude that the man barged in after Jesus finished teaching. However, the Greek word translated *immediately* [*euthus*] is not found in the vast majority of Greek manuscripts, including two of the earliest uncial codices (Alexandrinus and Ephraemi Rescriptus). The word is also lacking in the parallel passage in Luke 4:31-37. Mann omits it (p. 212).

² In fact, in many cases the scribes and synagogue rulers unwittingly did the Devil’s bidding by opposing Jesus and his disciples (see Matt, 6:2; 6:5; Mark 3:2; 6:1-6; 12:38-40; 13:9; Luke 13:14; John 12:42; Rev. 2:9; 3:9).

II. The Teaching of Jesus

What did Jesus teach that exposed the demoniac? And why was Jesus allowed to waltz into town and preach on his first Sabbath in Capernaum? Let's look at the last question first. Travelling scribes and rabbis and other notable teachers were often invited by the ruler of the synagogue to expound a text from the scriptures. We have a picture of how that looked from the Gospel According to Luke. Just before coming to Capernaum, Jesus had preached in the synagogue at Nazareth, his hometown:

“16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. 17 And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

**18 ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.’**

20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’” (Luke 4:16-20, ESV)

In this passage Isaiah foretold that the Lord would send a Messiah to his people to, if I may sum up, “set things right”. He would liberate the people from the reign of Satan and sin, which is the cause of deprivation, bondage, disease, and oppression. By dealing with sin Jesus would restore the people to the Lord's favor so they would be healed and provided for and liberated. At the same time he would strip Satan of his power, plunder his kingdom, and reduce it to rubble.

We don't know for sure what specific text Jesus preached from at Capernaum, but we do know from other passages the consistent theme of his message. Especially at this early period, the burden of the teaching of Jesus was that God's kingdom rule is near *in him*. The ethics of the kingdom, the parables about the nature of the kingdom, the necessity of faith in Jesus, all may be subsumed under the general idea that the kingdom rule of God has come near in Jesus. And the concomitant of establishing the rule of God is the destruction of all other. Now we have the answer to our first question: **“You have come to destroy us!” (v. 24, Beck).**³ The threat posed by the very presence of Jesus forced a confrontation with the demoniac.

III. The Authority of Jesus

The people were “astonished” at the preaching of Jesus. The Greek is very strong; the people were “struck” with awe; they were stunned by what they heard. According to William Lane, **“the accent falls upon the alarm occasioned by Jesus' teaching ... In the presence of Jesus men are disturbed...”** (Lane, pp. 72-73). Jesus confronted people with a stark decision, which is summarized in an earlier verse: **“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15, ESV).**

The teaching of the scribes, with whom Jesus is contrasted, consisted mainly of the exposition and application of the Torah. The interpretation was based on appeals to the teachings of the great rabbis passed down orally. The following is a sample:

³ Brooks states: “The second sentence, however, could be an assertion rather than a question: ‘You have come to destroy us!’ (Brooks, p. 51)

“Judah b. Tema [end of second century A.D.] said: Be strong as the leopard and swift as the eagle, fleet as the gazelle and brave as the lion to do the will of thy Father which is in heaven. He used to say: The shameless are for Gehenna and the shamefast for the Garden of Eden” (Barrett, p. 168).

Jesus, on the other hand, spoke as a prophet, from the direct authority of God through the Holy Spirit. By registering the reaction of the congregation prior to the manifestation of the demoniac, Mark is clear that the authority of Jesus was evident in his charismatic preaching itself, apart from any miracles he worked. Even before Jesus cast out the demon (the first miracle Mark records), the authority of his word made an impact on the people of the synagogue.

“The word that Mark uses of Jesus’ **authority**, *exousia*, is a preeminent term in his presentation of Jesus ... [*Exousia*] typically designates supernatural authority in literature immediately prior to the Christian tradition” (Edwards, p. 55).

The unclean spirit greeted Jesus with a shriek and a culturally understood statement of opposition that sounds strange to us: “**What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?**” (“literally, ‘What is there in common to us and you?’”) (Mann, p. 212). The same basic idea is found in Judg. 11:12; 2 Sam. 16:10; 1 Kings 17:18, etc. It means basically, “We don’t have anything to do with one another, for we are in opposition. Go away and leave me alone!” Demons often exhibit supernatural knowledge, and this one recognized Jesus as “the Holy One of God,” the Son of David who would defeat death itself (compare Psalm 16:10 and Acts 2:14-40). He knew that “**The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil**” (1 John 3:8). Jesus silenced the demon and cast him out with a simple command. He had no need of the usual amulets, spells, incantations, and appeals to various deities that were used in the exorcisms of the day (both Jewish and Gentile).

Mark uses a different word to describe the reaction of the synagogue to Jesus’ authority over the demon: “The word is *thambeō* ‘to be astonished, amazed, to be terrified, to be frightened.’ Their amazement was mingled with fright and terror” (Wuest, p. 34). The words characterizing the reaction of the people vary among the translations due to textual differences (in the case of the KJV and NKJV) and grammatical decisions by translators. But the basic idea is the same. The teaching of Jesus is “new,” different in that it comes with supernatural authority. By the same authority he casts out demons with ease.

The result of the exorcism was that Jesus’ “**fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee**” (v. 28, ESV). But no conversions are recorded. This may mean no more than that Jesus gained a reputation as a powerful exorcist. In fact, the teaching and miracles of Jesus increase opposition to Him from men in seats of power, as the visible expression of Satan’s kingdom (Mark 3:6, 22). Thus the long shadow of the cross plays out from end of Mark almost to the beginning, to his first conflict with the forces of darkness. It is this road he must travel in order to defeat death, the devil, and sin. But Mark has shown that Jesus has the power and authority to conquer every foe because his words and deeds are from God.

References

- Barrett, C. K. - The New Testament Background: Selected Documents. (S.P.C.K., 1956/ Harper & Row, 1961)
- Beck, William F. - The New Testament in the Language of Today [The Four Translation New Testament]. (Concordia, 1963/World Wide Publications 1966)
- Brooks, James A. - Mark [New American Commentary, v. 23]. (Broadman, 1991)
- Edersheim, Alfred - Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ. (Hodder & Stoughton, 1876/Eerdman’s, 1987)
- Edwards, James R. - The Gospel According to Mark (Pillar New Testament Commentary). (Eerdman’s, 2002)
- Lane, William - The Gospel According to Mark (New International Commentary on the New Testament). (Eerdman’s, 1974)
- Mann, C. S. - Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary [Anchor Bible, v. 27]. (Doubleday, 1986)
- Schürer, Emil - A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Christ, Second Division, Vol. 2. (T&T Clark, 1890/Hendrickson, 2014)
- Unger, Merrill F. - Biblical Demonology: A Study of the Spiritual Forces Behind the Present World Unrest. (Scripture Press, 1952, 1970)
- Wuest, Kenneth S. - Mark [Wuest’s Word Studies From the Greek New Testament, v. 1]. (Eerdman’s, 1950, 1973, 1989)