Lecture 8: Markan Redaction
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Our consideration of the Synoptic problem and the way redaction criticism can elucidate how Matthew and Luke utilized their sources brings us back to the oldest gospel, that of Mark, to see what we can deduce about his sources and redaction. Of course, we are obviously partially hamstrung in this attempt by the fact that we have no ready access to sources the way we do for Matthew and Luke. But neither are we left entirely helpless.

For one thing, the eschatological discourse of chapter 13 is by far Jesus’ lengthiest speech in Mark. Everywhere else Jesus speaks in brief snippets joined by the narrator’s words. In chapter 13, on the other hand, after a brief dialogue between Jesus and his disciples about the destruction of the temple, we find 524 consecutive Greek words attributed to Jesus. And the fact that both Matthew and Luke preserve the structure of that discourse, albeit with a few modifications, whereas they feel free to rearrange other sayings in Mark’s gospel, suggests that this was a piece of tradition very important in the early church and likely came to Mark already formed, although he also made modifications, such as his insertion of v. 10 - “And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations” - which interrupts the instructions of vv. 9 & 11 about what to do when taken before courts and kings.

Moreover, recall Mark’s aside to the reader shortly afterwards, in v. 14, “let the reader understand,” which is a comment on the code language of “the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be.” This seems to betoken some specific phenomenon the readers would recognize.

Another large section Mark doubtless inherited already formed is the passion narrative of chapters 14-15. These chapters are the most detailed and continuous stretch of narrative in Mark’s gospel. Moreover, as with the eschatological discourse, this narrative is taken up whole by Luke and Matthew, even if they again make their own adjustments. But even here we can detect Mark also modifying the tradition for his own needs.

E.g. in 15.34, with Jesus at the point of death, he exclaims (in Aramaic), “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” after which we find this note: “which translated means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” While Luke lacks feature, Matthew retains it, together with the translation. However, as one might expect, he makes some stylistic changes, such as replacing the cumbersome phrase, “which in translation means,” with the simpler, “that is.” There are a couple other stylistic improvements Matthew makes which aren’t detectable without knowledge of Greek and Aramaic, but suffice it to say that his modifications hold true to the pattern of Matthew improving on Mark’s language.

The important issue here, though, is Mark’s and Matthew’s provision of a translation of the Aramaic phrase. While we might posit that that translation was already embedded in the tradition when Mark received it, comparison of a couple other passages in Mark suggest that he was most likely responsible for supplying it.

First, in chapter 5 Mark reports a scene in which the young daughter of a synagogue leader has died and Jesus has been summoned. Arriving on the scene, Jesus sends everyone out except the girl’s parents and the disciples who have accompanied him. Then, according to Mark’s narrative, “He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which translated means, “Little girl, get up!”’ Once again Mark relays the Aramaic phrase attributed to Jesus and then introduces its translation with the same phrase he uses in chapter 15.

Matthew 15 also carries the story of this dead girl raised to life. But Matthew omits both the Aramaic and its translation, reporting simply what happened: “the girl got up.” Luke, on the
other hand, gives us Jesus’ words, but only in Greek; he omits the Aramaic phrase. On the only two occasions the triple tradition reports Jesus’ words in Aramaic, Mark carries them, whereas Matthew retains the Aramaic in only one case, while Luke has it in neither instance. More importantly, on both occasions Mark introduces the translation of the Aramaic with the same formula.

That formula introducing appears one other time in the Synoptics. In Mark 15 we read: “Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which translated means the place of a skull).” Let’s look at Matthew’s parallel to this report: “And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull)…” Notice first that Matthew has condensed Mark’s statement by joining it with what follows, rather than retaining Mark’s independent clause. Even more important, note that, as we saw him do before, Matthew simplifies the introduction of the translation: “which means.”

Luke likewise refashions Mark’s statement as a dependent clause: “When they came to the place that is called ‘The Skull. . . .’” As we saw Luke do earlier, he bypasses the Aramaic word, “Golgotha,” and simply gives its Greek equivalent, “the Skull.”

So three times Mark gives us Aramaic words plus a translation. Matthew retains two of those, while simplifying the introductory formula, while Luke drops the Aramaic each time. More important, Mark uses the same phrase each time to introduce the translation. The uniformity of the translation formula in three disparate passages hints that Mark is its author.

Supporting a conclusion along those lines is an instance in which Mark attempts to explain to his Gentile audience phenomena that are native to Palestine. That occurs when Jesus and the Pharisees debate the Jewish practice of ritual washings. Matthew and Mark, who alone carry this report, introduce the dispute in similar terms, setting the scene with the arrival of Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. And they agree on the substance of the dispute: that at issue was the disciples’ failure to follow the “traditions of the elders” by properly washing.

It shouldn’t surprise us to find that Matthew has condensed Mark’s introduction into the following words, “And noticing that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them . . . .” Matthew folded the report about the disciples into his introduction to the Pharisees’ question. He omits Mark’s repeated but obscure reference to “eating with defiled hands,” and picks up, instead, the explanation of that phrase Mark offers, “without washing them,” incorporating that into the Pharisees’ question.

But notice that Mark’s interpretation of that phrase, “without washing them,” is preceded by a formula similar to what introduces translations of Aramaic phrases elsewhere: “that is.” And that is not the full extent of the elucidation Mark’s gospel provides, for we find after this a rather substantial aside: “For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.”

What begins as a specific definition of what it means to “eat with defiled hands” blossoms into a wide-ranging comment about Jewish rituals, clearly addressed to non-Jews, since it speaks not only what the Pharisees do, but also what “all Jews do.”

This sort of elaboration was more probably composed by Mark than already embedded in the tradition he inherited, since it accords with his tendency towards “verbosity,” and because it goes far beyond a simple clarification into a lengthy explanation of Jewish practices.

Accordingly, there is also strong reason to suspect that the translation of the Aramaic words in chapters 5 and 15, which share the same formulaic introduction, even though they are in
disparate places, are equally from Mark. And that means that not once, but twice in the Passion Narrative, Mark has made a modification for the sake of clarity, just as he does elsewhere in his gospel.

Again, because we lack a copy of Mark’s source for the Passion Narrative, it is tenuous to make more sweeping comments about his redaction of this tradition. And yet, the signs we detected of Mark’s redaction in the eschatological discourse makes it likely that his modifications to the Passion Narrative went deeper than translations of Aramaic phrases.

As for other sources Mark likely had at his disposal, we can identify some collections of stories or sayings that likely came to Mark already assembled.

E.g. early in the first main section of Mark’s gospel, in chapter 4, stand 5 parables formed as a unit. These parables are introduced with the statement, “He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them…” (v. 2), and it concludes with the summary, “With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.”

These verbal bookends make it clear that this is not intended as a narrative of Jesus’ teachings on a particular day, but as a sample collection of parables. Mark likely inherited this “sampler” as an already formed literary unit, given that he generally doesn’t fashion this sort of a neat collection, and given that vv. 11-12, which provide a theory about Jesus’ use of parables, appear to have been inserted secondarily.

Similar examples of what were likely preformed units are certain collections of miracle stories in Mark, such as the series found in chapter 1, close on the heels of Jesus’ call of four disciples (Simon, Andrew, James and John) on his return from his temptations in the wilderness. Mark 1:21-45, which was included in your reading assignment for today, narrates a series of four healings, highlighted alternately here in blue and red. The first of these reports the exorcism of a demon-possessed man, the upshot of which is that the crowds are astounded at Jesus because of his power even over evil spirits.

The second healing reported is of Simon’s mother-in-law, who suffers from a high fever. The following verses report crowds surging to Jesus that evening, at which time he healed a variety of ill or demonically possessed individuals. The final story is of a leper who came to Jesus and found healing.

While this collection of healing stories may, itself, seem unremarkable, what unites them is notable, especially the temporal phrases that form these reports into a sequence. The initial verse reads, “They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.” After the exorcism that follows, v. 29 introduces the next scene with, “As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.”

Following Jesus’ healing of Simon’s mother-in-law, the introduction to the next episode states, “That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.” And so here we have a report of a single day of healings.

And there is one more temporal phrase to come, in v. 35, which leads us into the next day: “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”

What makes this series of temporal phrases noteworthy is that we do not find these kinds of chronological links between scenes again until we come to the Passion Narrative. Mark typically just places events in a series, giving the impression of moving through time, without providing explicit temporal links between events. The fact that here we find these in this series of reports suggests that Mark inherited this set of stories already structured this way, even as the temporal
Another indication that Mark received this narrative as an already assembled sequence is that
in it the person Mark otherwise calls Peter is designated solely by his name of “Simon” – both in
the story about his mother-in-law, where it appears twice, and later, in v. 36, when Jesus has
gone out early in the morning to pray, and we are informed that “Simon and his companions
hunted for him.” The fact that “Simon” is used uniformly in this section, against the pattern
throughout the rest of Mark, suggests this name was part of this account before Mark received it.

So there are strong indications that this first string of miracle stories was a narrative Mark
found already developed.

At other times, Mark seems to have inherited several stories strung together sharing a
common theme. E.g. Mark 2.1-3.6 contains a series of 5 stories, each of which centers on a
dispute with religious leaders. In 2.1-12 Jesus is in a house, surrounded by people. And so men
who bring a paralytic for healing are forced to dig through the roof of the house to lower their
friend’s palette before Jesus. Upon seeing the man, Jesus says, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”
This raises the eyebrows of some scribes in the crowd, whom Jesus perceives to be thinking,
“Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”
To demonstrate his authority to forgive sins, Jesus tells the man to take up his bed and walk. So,
this story highlights a conflict between Jesus’ claim to dispense forgiveness and official doubts
about that.

Conflict continues in 2.13-17, where Jesus raises suspicions by freely associating with tax
collectors and other ne’er-do-wells, prompting the scribes and Pharisees to ask, “Why does he
eat with tax collectors and sinners?” The story concludes with a pronouncement by Jesus:
“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not
the righteous but sinners.”

Conflict over eating gives way to conflict about fasting in vv. 18-22, where questions arise as
to why Jesus’ disciples do not fast, while the disciples of John and of the Pharisees do. Jesus
initially responds with a metaphor: “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is
with them.” As long as Jesus, the bridegroom, is present, the disciples cannot fast. Jesus then
picks up another metaphor: old garments cannot be patched with new cloth or else, when the
new cloth shrinks, it will tear the garment worse; similarly, new wine must be poured into new
wineskins, for it would burst the old, ruining both the wine and the skins. These verses thus deal
with disputes about Jewish fasting customs.

Vv. 23-28 move from disputes about fasting to a dispute over working to satisfy hunger on the
Sabbath. As Jesus’ disciples walk through a field one Sabbath, they casually pluck and eat heads
of grain, leading to charges by the Pharisees that the disciples are breaking the Torah by working
on the Sabbath. Jesus’ response is to point to an occasion David is said to have plundered the
bread that the Torah reserved for the priests. And then he utters a memorable pronouncement:
“The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man
[here probably = humankind] is lord even of the sabbath.”

The final story in this collection, 3.1-6, carries on the motif of disputes concerning the
Sabbath, which Jesus is accused of violating by healing a man on the Sabbath. Jesus’ defense is
that certainly one cannot be faulted for doing good and healing on the Sabbath.

From this point on the stories move in another direction. However, these five stories hang
together as a collection of what are called “controversy stories,” each of which is linked to the
previous one by shared motifs, such as eating or not eating, and Sabbath observance. And while
these are joined as if they were a series of events taking place one after the other, the artificiality of this is clear when we examine the introduction to each story.

The first story, the healing of the paralytic, is introduced with “When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.” Chapter 2 had Jesus leaving Capernaum to wander throughout Galilee, so the notation of his return makes sense in the sequence of events.

The next story, in 2.13-17, has Jesus leaving Capernaum again: “Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them.” -- While walking with the crowd, he comes upon a tax collector named Levi, and accompanies him home for a meal, although the narrator doesn’t tell us where that is and (as we’ll see shortly), there are reasons to ponder the relationship of this scene to the preceding call of Levi. Jesus’ meal at a tax collector’s home occasions a debate with the “scribes of the Pharisees,” who criticize Jesus for eating with sinners. The events these verses report are not necessarily placed here because they are the next notable thing Jesus did. Rather, they are placed here because they contain a similar dispute with the Jewish authorities.

The dispute about fasting (2.18-22) is introduced with, “Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said….“ While it is possible that those bearing this question came during the dinner dispute at Levi’s house, more likely this is a separate occasion on which a dispute arose over Jewish practices. They are linked both by the dispute format and the theme of food.

Certainly a different time and place are assumed in the next section (vv. 23-28), which is introduced this way: “One sabbath he was going through the grain fields…..” Yet another situation is assumed in 3.1-6, which begins, “Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand.”

So the introductions to these stories themselves tell us something about this collection: namely, that it is an assemblage of stories united by their theme of controversy over Jewish practices and associated settings (e.g. meals, sabbath). Most likely this set of stories came down to Mark already in this form. And there are a couple other indications here of how these stories were handed down in the form used by Mark.

E.g. the dispute over Jesus dining with tax collectors and sinners (2.13-17) begins, as I noticed, with Jesus leaving Capernaum for the sea of Galilee: “Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them.” -- The last time Jesus walked along the sea of Galilee (in 1.16-20) he called four men to follow him as disciples: “16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.”

Even though Mark 2.13 reports that Jesus went out beside the sea and taught the crowds that surrounded him, nothing is reported about what Jesus taught. Instead, Mark depicts Jesus walking beside the sea and calling another disciple, according to the pattern of chapter 1: “As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him.” -- And yet, unlike the story of the call of the four in chapter 1, that is not the heart of the action. Rather, the call of Levi, the tax collector,
becomes the backdrop for a dispute at yet another place: the house of Levi, where Jesus is surrounded by “tax collectors and sinners.”

In fact, the scene of the dinner is introduced rather abruptly. One minute (in v. 13), Levi responds to Jesus’ call to follow him; the next (v. 14) Jesus is eating a meal in Levi’s house. It seems likely that a story about Levi’s call to discipleship, parallel to the story of the call of Peter, Andrew, James and John beside the sea of Galilee, has been prefixed to the story of the controversy that arose at Levi’s house on some occasion. As a result, this second story gets to its main action (the dinner discussion) by placing Jesus in three different settings: traveling to the Sea of Galilee to teach the people, calling Levi while walking by the Sea, and dining in Levi’s house. I.e. the introduction to this story collapses three different stories: Jesus teaching the crowds beside the sea, Levi call to follow, and a story about Jesus dinnning at Levi’s house, with no temporal connection linking the final two incidents.

This is a good example of how stories were shaped and joined in the process of handing them down. Most likely Mark received this collection in the sequence we find them. Indeed, comparison with story collections of other sorts from the ancient world indicate that clusters of like stories were commonly handed down together because the similarity of the stories naturally paired them.

And yet, even beyond the hints that Mark inserted phrases into such collections, more important is the evidence that Mark arranging stories according to the order he wanted. The clearest and most remarkable evidence for that comes from an occasional odd itinerary.

After Jesus has miraculously fed a crowd in chapter 6, and just before Mark’s story of him walking on the sea, we find the following report: “Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd.” -- Given that this verse speaks of going to the other side, and given that Bethsaida is at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, we must conceive of Jesus and his disciples leaving from somewhere in the south, which correlates with the previous story being set in a desolate area of the sort that was the southern end of the Sea of Galilee.

However, at the conclusion of this story, after Jesus has walked on the water and joined the disciples in the boat, we read the following: “When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat.” Rather than having them land at Bethsaida, as the introduction to these verses states, they veer off to the west, landing at Gennesaret. Why would an author indicate that they were going to one site and have them wind up at another, without notifying us that they had changed plans? Most likely it was because the scene reported subsequently was traditionally linked to Gennesaret rather than Bethsaida.

Another instance of odd itinerary through the juxtaposition of two stories appears in chapter 7, where v. 24 reports that Jesus “set out and went away to the region of Tyre,” up north on the Mediterranean coastline, where he exorcised a demon from a young girl. V. 31 then reports his return journey: “Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.” And so, the route posited for Jesus’ return was going “by way of Sidon (north of Tyre!) towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.” What’s striking is not simply that this is a bizarre route, but also that nothing is reported along the way. If Jesus returned “by way of Sidon” and then traveled through Galilee to get to the Decapolis, is it the case that nothing worth reporting happen along the way? Or is it, more likely, that the author’s interests have placed these originally separate stories side-by-side, resulting in this peculiar itinerary? Indeed, the regions of Tyre and Sidon, on the one hand, and Decapolis, on the other, are Gentile areas, and Mark evinces a special concern for Jesus’ attitude
towards Gentiles as part of his stress on the gospel being offered to Gentiles. So here again we have evidence of Mark rearranging sources to construct his story.

And this brings us to the heart of the issue in terms of Markan redaction. We’ve been able to isolate some of his sources and show how he made minor changes in them, but we are in no position to do the kind of redactional analysis with Mark that we can with Matthew and Luke, since we can identify some of their sources, whereas we are largely in the dark on that issue with Mark.

And yet, given the kinds of arrangement of materials visible in Matthew and Luke, we know that while modification of words is an salient feature of redaction, the way the evangelists arrange their stories is equally significant. We’ve already noted that Matt organizes his teaching material into five blocs, and that Luke and Matthew both – though especially Luke – transfer material found at one spot in Mark to another. So it is reasonable to suppose that Mark also organized his sources in order to construct the message he wished to convey.

In fact, recall that Mark’s gospel is divided geographically according to Jesus’ activities outside Jerusalem and those within it, and that the first major unit is punctuated by three instances of Jesus calling or specially designating disciples. Likewise, the second major unit features three instances of Jesus advising his disciples that suffering and death await him, to which they respond by either disputing or ignoring his words. This repeated scenario also plays into the theme of discipleship, inasmuch as Mark sounds the note that true discipleship is possible only with “inside information” of a certain type. As you’ll recall, he provides as bookends for this section stories about Jesus healing blind men, thus granting them clarity of sight. Similarly, only by contact with Jesus is understanding of his mission possible.

Recall also that the final story of chapter 8 serves as a bridge between the first and second units, with the disciples displaying their lack of insight into Jesus in their quandary over what Jesus might mean by his warning, “beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod,” leading to Jesus’ exasperated question in the closing verse, “Do you not yet understand?” And so there are signs of a purposeful structure in this gospel that doubtless go back to Mark’s arrangement of the materials he received.

Zooming in from the bird’s eye view to specific passages, there are further indications of Mark arranging the individual pericopes for effect, using especially an organizational device called “intercalation.” You can think of this as a sandwich structure: Mark begins one story, but then puts it on pause to tell another story before finishing the first. This is what Nickel refers to as “narrational anticipation,” but it’s more than just foreshadowing; it’s Mark’s signal that two stories should be read together, one shedding light on the other.

A prime example is the way Mark orders events around the pericope of Jesus’ cleansing the temple, in comparison to the parallel reports in Matthew and Luke. You might recall, since we’ve looked at this before, that Mark has Jesus ride into Jerusalem triumphantly, at the end of which he enters the temple for a quick view of what’s going on there. Again you might recall, Matthew’s and Luke’s reports of Jesus’ entry lack this. Instead, Matthew has a report about Jerusalem abuzz with the news that Jesus had come for Passover, while Luke reports Jesus lamenting Jerusalem’s unresponsiveness to him. Matthew and Luke then relate the pericope of Jesus cleansing the temple, but Mark has something before that: a report of Jesus cursing a fig tree on the way back into Jerusalem. Here’s how that pericope reads: “On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but
leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it.”

While Luke lacks this pericope, Matthew carries it, but only after the report of the cleansing of the temple. And there are two other significant differences. As we’ve noted, whereas Mark attributes the absence of figs to the fact that it was not the season for figs, Matthew omits this note, making Jesus’ behavior appear less rash. Of course, this is matched by other Matthean modifications, such as a much more condensed version – things we’ve seen before. But these aren’t the primary issue at the moment. More striking are the different conclusions we find attached to these accounts.

As we’ve noted previously, Mark reports simply that the disciples heard Jesus’ curse of the fig tree, while Matthew focuses on what happens to the fig tree due to Jesus’ curse: “And the fig tree withered at once.” Why does Mark lack this report? Well, as you know, he doesn’t. Following the pericope of Jesus cleansing the temple, Mark and Luke report a plot hatched by the Jerusalem religious leaders. Only after that does Mark return to the fig tree, with the report, “In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.” Then Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” -- Jesus responds to the astonishment at what has happened by exhorting his disciples to have faith in God and telling them that even a mountain can be moved, if one has faith.

And yet, Mark’s report of the withered tree serves as more than a simple lesson about the power of faith. By splitting the cursing and withering of the tree into two halves, Mark sandwiches between them the pericope of the temple cleansing and that of the plot against Jesus. By intercalating this material, Mark lets us read it in light of the story of the fig tree. Just as the fig tree stands under a curse, so also does the temple and its officials, both for their operation of the temple and for their murder of Jesus.

Another example of Mark’s use of this device is in chapter 3, where Mark alone carries this report of an incident that occurred when great crowds were massing to see Jesus: “When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” On the heels of that report stands the following: “And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.”

Then Jesus utters the following ominous statement: “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”

To this Mark appends his own explanation, telling us why Jesus said this: “For they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.” -- I.e. Mark makes clear for us readers that by attributing Jesus’ deeds to an “unclean spirit,” the scribes slandered the Holy Spirit, who was the true cause of Jesus’ deeds. Thus, slandering Jesus, says Mark, has serious consequences.

Significantly, following this, Mark returns us to a scene involving Jesus’ family: “Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?”
looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

As for Matthean and Lukan parallels, Luke uses several of these pericopes in modified forms, but scatters them in various places, rather than retaining the sequence found in Mark. Matthew, on the other hand, follows Mark’s sequence, but inserts a significant number of additional pericopes that are general conflict narratives involving disputes between the Pharisees and Jesus. Mark, however, provides a tighter focus by, above all, placing visits from Jesus’ family at both the beginning and end of these verses. And in both places, the role of Jesus’ family is sinister: they’re out to shut Jesus down, to remove him from public, if possible. As a result, Jesus’ family – in the bookend stories of this narrative – form a parallel to the scribes who accuse Jesus of having an unclean spirit, and whom Jesus charges with blasphemy against the Spirit.

In fact, when Matthew and Luke parallel this section, they set the stage for it by having Jesus heal a demoniac. Here, e.g., is Matthew’s parallel: “22 Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see. 23 All the crowds were amazed and said, “Can this be the Son of David?” 24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.”

For Matthew, this dispute is ignited by an exorcism. In Mark, by contrast, the dispute is unprovoked; Scribes simply show up from Jerusalem and start libeling Jesus. Their approach and that of Jesus’ own family is one-and-the-same. And this gives depth of meaning to Jesus’ comments at the end of the passage, when Jesus’ family stands outside asking for him: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” -- Mark shows Jesus as rejected not only by the religious leaders of his day, but also by his family, in which context Jesus talks about closer ties with those who are aligned with his purposes.

Several other examples of intercalation appear in Mark, but these two examples will suffice. The crucial question is, of course, how does Mark interweave all the nuances he infuses into the text by his arrangement so as to convey to his readers his vision of Jesus and what it means to follow him? We’ll explore that question next session.

But before concluding, I want to say a word about Nickel's comments on why someone like Mark would write a gospel. He discusses this, in fact, in the early pages of today’s chapter that I did not assign. And yet, I want to say a word about this because he made similar statements in the chapter you read for last session.

In both places he offers several speculations that are particularly untenable. E.g. Nickel suggests that the evangelists wrote because of the growing mortality of first century Christians, especially the eyewitnesses, and thus out of a desire to preserve a record. But this is undermined by the way the evangelists themselves modified the traditions. If they were simply interested in preserving an enduring record, their changes in Jesus’ words are inexplicable. And of course, this objection applies equally to Nickel's contention that they wrote to “protect Jesus traditions from corruption.” The evangelists show no interest in simply preserving what they had received.

Similarly problematic is his assertion that they wrote to provide a “corrective to distort-ions” by providing a standard for proper faith and practice. If so, they provided three different standards, and at least Matthew registers severe objections to Mark’s lax attitude towards Torah observance. In fact, if Matthew is trying to correct distortions, it is distortions of the sort he has
found in Mark. The notion that the three of them wrote with a unified purpose such as this is untenable.

Nickel is on firmer ground in saying that they wrote to address the needs of their own communities, whether those had to do with facing persecution, understanding their relationship to the main body of Judaism, or fortifying faith. What Mark’s address to his community is the large part of what we’ll trace in the next few sessions.