
THE GOSPEL OF MARK AND THE JEWISH WAR

In 66 C.E., a rebellion against Rome broke out among the Jews of Palestine. Jewish soldiers, recruited at first from the countryside by leaders of the revolt, fought with whatever weapons they could find. But as the revolt spread to towns and cities, the Jewish population divided. Some refused to fight: in Jerusalem, the priestly party and their city-dwelling allies tried to maintain peace with Rome. Among those who joined the revolt, many were convinced that God was on their side: all were passionately intent on ridding their land of foreign domination. Three years into the war, the future emperor Vespasian and his son, the future emperor Titus, marched against Jerusalem with no fewer than sixty thousand well-trained, fully equipped foot soldiers and cavalry and besieged the city.

Some twenty years later, the Jewish historian Joseph ben Matthias, better known by his Romanized name, Flavius Josephus, who had served as governor of Galilee before joining in the fight against Rome, wrote an account of what he calls "not only the greatest war of our own time, but one of the greatest of all recorded wars."¹ Josephus is the only remaining guide to these events. Other accounts of the war have not survived. Although he is a vivid historian, Josephus is also partisan. Born into a wealthy priestly family of royal lineage, Josephus had traveled to Rome when he was about twenty-six—two years before the war—to intervene with the emperor Nero on behalf of several

arrested Jewish priests. Rome's wealth and military power impressed the young man, who managed to meet one of Nero's favorite actors—a Jew, as it happened—and, through him, Nero's wife, Poppea. Poppea agreed to help with his mission, and Josephus returned to Palestine. There, he says in his autobiography,

I found revolutionary movements already begun, and great excitement at the prospect of revolt from Rome. Accordingly, I tried to stop those preaching sedition . . . urging them to place before their eyes those against whom they were fighting; and to remember that they were inferior to the Romans, not only in military skill, but in good fortune. Although earnestly and insistently seeking to dissuade them from their purpose, foreseeing that the results would be disastrous for us, I did not persuade them. The great insanity of those desperate men prevailed.²

Wherever he traveled, Josephus says, he found Judea—the Hebrew term for what others called Palestine—in turmoil. Guerrilla leaders such as John of Gischala and his followers dedicated themselves to fight for liberty in the name of God. In the spring of 67, John's fighting men, having routed the Romans from Gischala, their provincial city, burst into Jerusalem. There, urging people to join the revolution, they attracted tens of thousands, Josephus says, and "corrupted a great part of the young men, and stirred them up to war."³ Others, whom Josephus calls older and wiser, bitterly opposed the revolt. John and other revolutionaries coming into Jerusalem from the countryside escalated the conflict by capturing "the most powerful man in the whole city," the Jewish leader Antipas—the city treasurer—and two other men also connected with the royal dynasty. Accusing their three prisoners of having met with the enemy while plotting to surrender Jerusalem to the Romans, the rebels called them "traitors to our common liberty" and slit their throats.⁴

Josephus says that he himself served at age thirty as governor of Galilee, before joining in the war against Rome under pressure

from his countrymen, but doesn't explain why he violated his own principles, though he does say that at first he pretended to agree with the rebels in order not to arouse their suspicion. He describes in detail his own battles against the Romans, and how he barely escaped a Roman massacre at the defeated city of Jotapata. Having managed first to hide and then to survive a suicide pact he made with his fellow refugees, Josephus was captured by the Romans. Brought before Vespasian, the Roman commander, Josephus announced that God had revealed to him that Vespasian would become emperor of Rome. Unimpressed, Vespasian assumed that this was a trick Josephus had contrived to save his life. But after Nero was assassinated, and three other emperors rose and fell within months, Vespasian did become emperor. One of his first acts was to order his soldiers to free Josephus from prison. Henceforth Josephus traveled in Vespasian's entourage as interpreter and mediator. He returned to Jerusalem with Vespasian's son Titus when the young general took over command of the war from his father in order to march against the holy city.

By that time, Josephus says, three factions divided the city: the priestly party working for peace; the revolutionaries from the countryside; and contending against both of these, a second anti-Roman party, led by prominent Jerusalemites, "men of the greatest power," who, according to Josephus, wanted to maintain their power against the radicals from the surrounding countryside. Even before the Roman armies arrived, Josephus says, these "three treacherous factions" were fighting among themselves, while "the people of the city . . . were like a great body torn into pieces."⁵ Josephus himself, serving the Roman commander during the siege, stood between two fires: he was bitterly hated by many of his own people as a traitor, and was suspected of treason by the Romans whenever they experienced a setback.

Josephus describes in fine detail the siege of Jerusalem, including the horrors of the famine induced by Roman blockades, in which, he says, "children pulled the very morsels that their fathers were eating out of their mouths, and, what was more pitiable, so did the mothers do to their infants."⁶ Even old peo-

ple and children were tortured for stealing food. Finally, when the Jewish armies could hold out no longer, Roman soldiers entered the city and swarmed over the great Temple. Titus and his staff, apparently curious, entered the Holy of Holies, the sacred room where the ark of the covenant was kept. Roman soldiers looted the treasury, seizing its priceless gold furniture, the golden trumpets, and the massive seven-branched lampstand; then they set the Temple afire and watched it burn.

Later that night they hailed Titus's victory and in triumph desecrated the Temple precincts by sacrificing there to their own gods. Having devastated the Jewish armies, they raped, robbed, and massacred thousands of Jerusalem's inhabitants and left the city in ruins. Josephus, writing from his Roman retirement villa ten to fifteen years later, no doubt hoped not only to express his anguish but also to exonerate himself for collaborating with those who destroyed Jerusalem when he wrote,

O most wretched city, what misery so great as this did you suffer from the Romans, when they came to purify you from your internecine hatred!⁷

Whatever Josephus's motives, his writing conveys a powerful impression of the factions that divided Jerusalem, as well as of the horrifying devastation that the city's inhabitants suffered.

What makes these events important for my purpose in this book is that the first Christian gospel was probably written during the last year of the war, or the year it ended.⁸ Where it was written and by whom we do not know; the work is anonymous, although tradition attributes it to Mark, a younger co-worker of the apostle Peter. What we do know is that the author of Mark's gospel was well aware of the war and took sides in the conflicts it aroused, both among Jewish groups and between Jews and Romans.

Mark was writing, after all, about a charismatic Jewish teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, who thirty-five years before had been executed by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, apparently on charges of sedition against Rome. Of all that his followers later

claimed to know about him, these charges and his crucifixion are the primary facts on which both Jesus' followers and his enemies agree. None of the surviving accounts of Jesus is contemporaneous with his life, though many people told and retold stories about him and recounted his sayings and parables. Dozens—perhaps even hundreds—of accounts were written about Jesus, including the long-hidden accounts found among the so-called secret gospels discovered at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945.⁹ But of these numerous accounts, only four gospels are included in the New Testament. The great majority of those who told and wrote about Jesus did so as his devoted admirers, some even as his worshipers. But others, including Josephus himself, as well as the Roman senator Tacitus, writing c. 115 C.E., mention Jesus and his followers with hostility or contempt.¹⁰ Yet nearly all of these, advocates and adversaries alike, placed Jesus of Nazareth and the movement he started within the context of “the recent troubles in Judea.”

According to Mark, Jesus protested at being arrested “like a robber” (Mark 14:48). The author of Luke, writing some ten to twenty years later, says that Jesus was charged, like those crucified along with him, as a robber (Luke 23:40).¹¹ This Greek term *lēstēs*, literally translated “robber” or “bandit,” was in the early first century a catchall term for an undesirable, a troublemaker or criminal. Josephus, however, writing after the Jewish war against Rome, most often uses the term to characterize those Jews who were inciting or participating in anti-Roman activities or in the war against Rome itself.¹² I agree with many other scholars that Jesus himself is unlikely to have been a revolutionary,¹³ although each of the four gospels indicates that the Jewish leaders who brought him to Pilate accused him of claiming to be “king of the Jews.” According to Mark, Pilate's soldiers, aware of the charge, mocked and abused Jesus as a would-be king of the Jews; apparently the same charge was inscribed over his cross as a warning to others that Rome would similarly dispatch anyone accused of insurrection.

The narratives that we know as the New Testament gospels were written by certain followers of Jesus who lived through the

war, and who knew that many of their fellow Jews regarded them as a suspect minority. They wrote their own accounts of some of the momentous events surrounding the war, and the part that Jesus played in events preceding it, hoping to persuade others of their interpretation. We cannot fully understand the New Testament gospels until we recognize that they are, in this sense, wartime literature. As noted before, the gospel we call Mark (although we do not know historically who actually wrote these gospels, I use their traditional attributions) was written either during the war itself, perhaps during a temporary lull in the siege of Jerusalem, or immediately after the defeat, in 70 C.E.¹⁴ Matthew and Luke wrote some ten to twenty years later, each using Mark as his basis and expanding Mark's narrative with further sayings and stories. Most scholars believe that John wrote his gospel, perhaps in Alexandria, about a generation after the war, c. 90–95 C.E.¹⁵

Only one of Jesus' followers whose writings were later incorporated into the New Testament—Paul of Tarsus—wrote before the war and could, of course, say nothing about Jesus in relation to it. Paul mentions little that concerns Jesus' biography, repeating only a few "sayings of the Lord" (Acts 20:35).¹⁶ What fascinated Paul about Jesus' death was not the crucifixion as an actual event, but what he saw as its profound religious meaning—that, as he says, "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3), that he became an atonement sacrifice, which, Paul believed, transformed the relationship between Israel's God and the whole human race. If he knew the charges made against Jesus—that he was one of many Galileans whom Josephus regards as troublemakers¹⁷ for fomenting rebellion against Rome—Paul apparently regarded these charges as so transparently false or so irrelevant that they needed no rebuttal. Paul died c. 64–65 C.E. in Rome, executed, like Jesus, by order of Roman magistrates.

The catastrophic events of 66–70 permanently changed the world in which Jews lived, not only in Jerusalem, where charred rubble replaced the splendid Temple, but also for Jews throughout the known world. Even those who had never seen Jerusalem knew that the center of their world had been shattered. The

hardships and humiliations of defeat exacerbated long-standing divisions within the scattered Jewish communities, some of which had persisted around the eastern Mediterranean for as many as two hundred years, since the time when the armies of the Jewish leader Judas Maccabeus had driven out the Syrian dynasties established by Alexander the Great and had restored the Jewish state. In 65–70 C.E., these divisions were most obvious between those who had advocated war with Rome, and the priestly party, which had worked to keep the fragile peace. In the aftermath of the war against Rome, power relationships among various groups within the Jewish communities scattered around the world from Alexandria and Antioch to Rome shifted to meet the changing situation. In Jerusalem itself, now that the Temple was gone and thousands had been killed or had fled, the priestly class lost much of its influence as other parties jockeyed for position.

The war and its aftermath polarized followers of Jesus, too, in relation to other Jewish communities. Followers of Jesus had refused to fight in the war against the Romans, not because they agreed with Josephus and others that the Romans were invincible, or because they hoped for financial or political advantage. Jesus' followers believed that there was no point in fighting the Romans because the catastrophic events that followed his crucifixion were signs of the end—signs that the whole world was to be shattered and transformed (Mark 13:4–29). Some insisted that what they had seen—the horrors of the war—actually vindicated his call "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near" (Mark 1:15). Mark shares the conviction, widespread among Jesus' followers, that Jesus himself had predicted these world-shattering events—the destruction of the Temple and its desecration:

And as he came out of the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, rabbi, what wonderful stones, and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down. . . . But when you see the abominable sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the

reader understand!), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains (Mark 13:1–14).

This was exactly what had now happened. Others believed—and some dared to say—that these very catastrophes occurred as an angry God's punishment upon his own people for the crime of rejecting their divinely sent Messiah.

In any case, Mark insists that Jesus' followers had no quarrel with the Romans but with the Jewish leaders—the council of elders, the Sanhedrin, along with the Jerusalem scribes and priests—who had rejected God's Messiah. Mark says that these leaders now have rejected Mark and his fellow believers, calling them either insane or possessed by demons, the same charges that they directed against Jesus himself.

Mark takes a conciliatory attitude toward the Romans, although it was known that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had sentenced Jesus to death. Nevertheless, the two trial scenes included in this gospel effectively indict the Jewish leaders for Jesus' death, while somewhat exonerating the Romans. Mark virtually invents a new Pilate—a well-meaning weakling solicitous of justice but, as Mark depicts him, intimidated by the chief priests within his own council chamber and by crowds shouting outside, so that he executes a man he suspects may be innocent.

Other first-century writers, Jewish and Roman, describe a very different man. Even Josephus, despite his Roman sympathies, says that the governor displayed contempt for his Jewish subjects, illegally appropriated funds from the Temple treasury, and brutally suppressed unruly crowds.¹⁸ Another contemporary observer, Philo, a respected and influential member of the Alexandrian Jewish community, describes Pilate as a man of “ruthless, stubborn and cruel disposition,” famous for, among other things, ordering “frequent executions without trial.”¹⁹

Mark's motives with regard to Pilate are not simple. Insofar as he addresses his narrative to outsiders, Mark is eager to allay Roman suspicions by showing that Jesus' followers are no threat to Roman order, any more than Jesus himself had been. Mark may also have wanted to convert Gentile readers. Yet Mark is pri-

marily interested in conflicts *within* the Jewish community—especially conflicts between his own group and those who reject its claims about Jesus.

Despite the hostility and suspicion he and his movement aroused among both Jews and Gentiles, including, of course, the Romans, Mark wrote to proclaim the “good news of Jesus of Nazareth, Messiah of Israel” (1:1). Yet Mark knows that to justify such claims about Jesus, he has to answer obvious objections. If Jesus had been sent as God's anointed king, how could the movement he initiated have failed so miserably? How could his followers have abandoned him and gone into hiding, while soldiers captured him like a common criminal? Why did virtually all his own people reject the claims about him—not only the townspeople in Galilee but also the crowds he attracted on his travels throughout Judea and in Jerusalem? And wasn't Jesus, after all, a seditionist himself, tainted in retrospect by association with the failed war, having been arrested and crucified as a rebel? Attempting to answer these questions, Mark places the events surrounding Jesus within the context not simply of the struggle against Rome but of the struggle between good and evil in the universe. The stark events of Jesus' life and death cannot be understood, he suggests, apart from the clash of supernatural forces that Mark sees being played out on earth in Jesus' lifetime. Mark intends to tell the story of Jesus in terms of its hidden, deeper dynamics—to tell it, so to speak, from *God's* point of view.

What happened, Mark says, is this: Jesus of Nazareth, after his baptism, was coming out of the water of the Jordan River when “he saw the heavens torn apart and the spirit descending like a dove on him” and heard a voice speaking to him from heaven (1:10–11). God's power anointed Jesus to challenge the forces of evil that now dominate the world, and drove him into direct conflict with those forces.²⁰ Mark frames his narrative at its beginning and at its climax with episodes in which Satan and his demonic forces retaliate against God by working to destroy Jesus. Mark begins by describing how the spirit of God descended upon Jesus at his baptism, and “immediately drove him into the wilderness,

and he was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan, and was with the animals, and the angels ministered to him" (1:12-13). From that moment on, Mark says, even after Jesus left the wilderness and returned to society, the powers of evil challenged and attacked him at every turn, and he attacked them back, and won. Matthew and Luke, writing some ten to twenty years later, adopted and elaborated this opening scenario. Each turns it into a drama of three temptations, that is, three increasingly intense confrontations between Satan and the spirit of God, acting through Jesus. Luke shows that the devil, defeated in these first attempts to overpower Jesus, withdraws "until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). Luke then says what Mark and Matthew imply—that the devil returned in person in the form of Judas Iscariot to destroy Jesus, initiating the betrayal that led to his arrest and execution (Luke 22:3). All of the New Testament gospels, with considerable variation, depict Jesus' execution as the culmination of the struggle between good and evil—between God and Satan—that began at his baptism.

Satan, although he seldom appears onstage in these gospel accounts, nevertheless plays a central role in the divine drama, for the gospel writers realize that the story they have to tell would make little sense *without* Satan. How, after all, could anyone claim that a man betrayed by one of his own followers, and brutally executed on charges of treason against Rome, not only *was* but still *is* God's appointed Messiah, *unless* his capture and death were, as the gospels insist, not a final defeat but only a preliminary skirmish in a vast cosmic conflict now enveloping the universe? The final battle has not yet been fought, much less won, but it is imminent. As Jesus warns his interrogator at his trial, soon he will be vindicated when the "Son of man" returns in the clouds of heaven (Mark 14:62); here Mark has Jesus recall one of the prophet Daniel's visions, in which "one like a son of man" (that is, a human being), comes "with the clouds of heaven" and is made ruler of God's Kingdom (Dan. 7:13-14). Many of Mark's contemporaries would have read Daniel's prophecy as predicting the coming of a conqueror who would defeat Israel's foreign rulers.

While at first glance the gospel of Mark may look like histori-

cal biography, it is not so simple as this, for Mark does not intend to write history, as Josephus had, primarily to persuade people of the accuracy of his account of recent events and make them comprehensible on a human level. Instead Mark wants to show what these events mean for the future of the world, or, in the scholarly jargon, eschatologically. Mark and his colleagues combine a biographical form with themes of supernatural conflict borrowed from Jewish apocalyptic literature to create a new kind of narrative. These gospels carry their writers' powerful conviction that Jesus' execution, which had seemed to signal the victory of the forces of evil, actually heralds their ultimate annihilation and ensures God's final victory.²¹

Many liberal-minded Christians have preferred to ignore the presence of angels and demons in the gospels. Yet Mark intends their presence to address the anguished question that the events of the previous decades had aroused: How could God allow such death and destruction? For Mark and his fellows, the issue of divine justice involves, above all, the issue of human violence. The gospel writers want to locate and identify the specific ways in which the forces of evil act *through certain people* to effect violent destruction, above all, in Matthew's words, "the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah" (23:35)—violence epitomized in the execution of Jesus, which Matthew sees as the culmination of all evils. The subject of cosmic war serves primarily to interpret human relationships—especially all-too-human conflict—in super-natural form. The figure of Satan becomes, among other things, a way of characterizing one's actual enemies as the embodiment of transcendent forces. For many readers of the gospels ever since the first century, the thematic opposition between God's spirit and Satan has vindicated Jesus' followers and demonized their enemies.

But how does the figure of Satan characterize the enemy? What is Satan, and how does he appear on earth? The New Testament gospels almost never identify Satan with the Romans, but they consistently associate him with Jesus' Jewish enemies, primarily Judas Iscariot and the chief priests and scribes. By placing

the story of Jesus in the context of cosmic war, the gospel writers expressed, in varying ways, their identification with the embattled minority of Jews who believed in Jesus, and their distress at what they saw as the apostasy of the majority of their fellow Jews in Jesus' time, as well as in their own. As we shall see, Jesus' followers did not *invent* the practice of demonizing enemies within their own group, although Christians (and Muslims after them) carried this practice further than their Jewish predecessors had taken it, and with enormous consequences.

Yet who actually *were* Jesus' enemies? What we know historically suggests that they were the Roman governor and his soldiers. The charge against Jesus and his execution were typically Roman. The Roman authorities, ever watchful for any hint of sedition, were ruthless in suppressing it. The historian Mary Smallwood observes that rounding up and killing troublemakers, especially those who ignited public demonstrations, was a routine measure for Roman forces stationed in Judea.²² During the first century the Romans arrested and crucified thousands of Jews charged with sedition—often, Philo says, without trial. But as the gospels indicate, Jesus also had enemies among his fellow Jews, especially the Jerusalem priests and their influential allies, who were threatened by his activities.

The crucial point is this: *Had Jesus' followers identified themselves with the majority of Jews rather than with a particular minority, they might have told his story very differently—and with considerably more historical plausibility.* They might have told it, for example, in traditional patriotic style, as the story of an inspired Jewish holy man martyred by Israel's traditional enemies, foreign oppressors of one sort or another. The biblical book of Daniel, for example, which tells the story of the prophet Daniel, who, although threatened with a horrible death—being torn apart by lions—nevertheless defies the king of Babylon in the name of God and of the people of Israel (Dan. 6:1–28). The first book of Maccabees tells the story of the priest Mattathias, who defies Syrian soldiers when they order him to worship idols. Mattathias chooses to die rather than betray his devotion to God.²³

But unlike the authors of Daniel or 1 Maccabees, the gospel writers chose to *dissociate* themselves from the Jewish majority and to focus instead upon intra-Jewish conflict—specifically upon their own quarrel with those who resisted their claims that Jesus was the Messiah. Within the gospels, as we shall see, the figure of Satan tends to express this dramatic shift of blame from “the nations”—*ha goyim*, in Hebrew—onto members of Jesus' own people. The variation in each gospel as it depicts the activity of the demonic opposition—that is, those perceived as enemies—expresses, I believe, a variety of relationships, often deeply ambivalent, between various groups of Jesus' followers and the specific Jewish groups each writer regards as his primary opponents. I want to avoid oversimplification. Nonetheless it is probably fair to say that in every case the decision to place the story of Jesus within the context of God's struggle against Satan tends to minimize the role of the Romans, and to place increasing blame instead upon Jesus' *Jewish* enemies.

This is not to say that the gospel writers simply intended to exonerate the Romans. Mark surely was aware that during his time, and for some thirty years after the war, the Romans remained wary of renewed sedition. Members of a group loyal to a condemned seditionist were at risk, and Mark probably hoped to persuade those outsiders who might read his account that neither Jesus nor his followers offered any threat to Roman order. But within Mark's account, the Romans, even the few portrayed with some sympathy, remain essentially outsiders. Mark tells the story of Jesus in the context that matters to him most—within the Jewish community. And here, as in most human situations, the more intimate the conflict, the more intense and bitter it becomes.

Mark opens his narrative with the account of John's baptizing Jesus and relates that at the moment of baptism the power of God descended upon Jesus, and “a voice spoke from heaven, saying ‘This is my beloved son’” (1:11). At that moment, all human beings disappear from Mark's narrative and, as we have seen, the spirit of God drives Jesus into the wilderness to encounter Satan, wild animals, and angels. Recounting this episode, as James Robinson notes, Mark does not depart from events in the human,

historical world but signals that he wants to relate these events to the struggle between good and evil in the universe.²⁴ Mark's account, then, moves directly from Jesus' solitary struggle with Satan in the desert to his first public appearance in the synagogue at Capernaum, where

immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught as one who had authority, and not as the scribes (1:22).

There Jesus encounters a man possessed by an evil spirit who, sensing Jesus' divine power, challenges him: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" (1:24). According to Mark, Jesus has come to heal the world and reclaim it for God; in order to accomplish this, he must overcome the evil powers who have usurped authority over the world, and who now oppress human beings. So, Mark says,

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, and they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? New teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee (1:25-28).

Even in this first episode, the astonished crowds recognize that Jesus possesses a special authority, direct access to God's power. Jesus' power manifests itself especially in action, since Mark does not here record what Jesus taught. Even in this first public challenge to the forces of evil, Mark shows how Jesus' power sets him in contrast—and soon into direct conflict—with the scribes commonly revered as religious authorities. Mark's point is to demonstrate that, as he says, Jesus "taught as one who had authority, and not as the scribes" (1:22).

Throughout this opening chapter, Mark emphasizes that Jesus healed "many who were sick with various diseases" and "drove

out many demons" (1:34). He traveled throughout Galilee "preaching in the synagogues and casting out demons," for, as he explains to Simon, Andrew, James, and John, who gather around him, "that is what I came to do" (1:38).

During his next public appearance, as Mark tells it, the scribes immediately took offense at what they considered his usurpation of divine authority. In this episode Jesus speaks to a crowd pressed together so tightly that when four men came carrying a paralyzed man,

they could not get near him because of the crowd; so they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven" (2:4-5).

By pronouncing forgiveness, Jesus claims the right to speak for God—a claim that, Mark says, angers the scribes:

"Why does this man speak this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (2:7).

According to Mark, Jesus, aware of the scribes' reaction, immediately performs a healing in order to *prove* his authority to his critics:

And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said, "Why do you question thus in your hearts? . . . But so that you may know that the Son of man has power on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, rise, take your pallet, and go home." And he rose, and immediately picked up his pallet and went out before them all, so that they were all astonished, . . . saying, "We never saw anything like this!" (2:8-12, emphasis added).

When Jesus first appeared proclaiming "Repent: the Kingdom of God is at hand!" he must have sounded to many of his contemporaries like one of the Essenes, who withdrew to the wilder-

ness in protest against ordinary Jewish life. From the desert caves where they lived in monastic seclusion, the Essenes denounced the priestly aristocratic leaders in charge of the Jerusalem Temple—men like Josephus and those he admired—as being hopelessly corrupted by their accommodation to Gentile ways, and by collaboration with the Roman occupiers. The Essenes took the preaching of repentance and God's coming judgment to mean that Jews must separate themselves from such polluting influences and return to strict observance of God's law—especially the Sabbath and kosher laws that marked them off from the Gentiles as God's holy people.²⁵

But if Jesus sounded like an Essene, his actions violated the standard of purity that Essenes held sacred. Instead of separating himself from people who polluted themselves by "walking in the ways of the Gentiles" (*Jubilees* 1:9), Jesus chose for one of his disciples a tax collector—a class that other Jews detested as profiteers who collaborated with the hated Romans. Indeed, Mark says, "There were many tax collectors who followed him" (2:15). Instead of fasting, like other devout Jews, Jesus ate and drank freely. And instead of scrupulously observing Sabbath laws, Jesus excused his disciples when they broke them:

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way, his disciples began to pick ears of grain. And the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God . . . and ate the sacred bread, . . . and also gave it to those who were with him?" (2:23–26).

Here Jesus dares claim, as precedent for his disciples' apparently casual action, the prerogative of King David himself, who, with his men, broke the sacred food laws during a wartime emergency.

Claiming divine and royal power while simultaneously violating the purity laws, Jesus, at the beginning of his public activity,

outrages virtually every party among his contemporaries, from the disciples of John the Baptist to the scribes and Pharisees.

The next time Jesus entered the synagogue on a Sabbath, Mark says,

a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored (3:1–5).

Instead of postponing the healing for a day, Jesus had chosen deliberately to defy his critics by performing it on the Sabbath. Seeing this, Mark says:

The Pharisees went out, and immediately conspired against him with the Herodians [the party of King Herod], how they might kill him (3:6).

For Mark the secret meaning of such conflict is clear. Those who are offended and outraged by Jesus' actions do not know that Jesus is impelled by God's spirit to contend against the forces of evil, whether those forces manifest themselves in the invisible demonic presences who infect and possess people, or in his actual human opponents. When the Pharisees and Herodians conspire to kill Jesus, they themselves, Mark suggests, are acting as agents of evil. As Mark tells the story, Jesus has barely engaged Satan's power before his opponents "conspired . . . how they might kill him" (3:6).

Mark suggests that Jesus recognizes that the leaders who oppose him are energized by unseen forces. Immediately after this powerful coalition has united against him, Jesus retaliates by commissioning a new leadership group, "the twelve," presum-

ably assigning one leader for each of the original twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus orders them to preach and gives them "power to cast out demons" (3:13).

This escalation of spiritual conflict immediately evokes escalating opposition—opposition that begins at home, within Jesus' own family. Mark says that when Jesus "went home . . . his family . . . went out to seize him, for they said, 'He is insane [or: beside himself]' " (3:21).²⁶ Next "the scribes who came down from Jerusalem" charge that Jesus himself "is possessed by Beelzebub; by the prince of demons he casts out demons" (3:22). Jesus objects:

"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 is coming to an end. 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" (3:23–27).

According to Mark, it is apparently the "house of Israel" that Jesus sees as a divided house, a divided kingdom. Jesus openly contends against Satan, who he believes has overtaken God's own household, which he has come to purify and reclaim: Jesus wants to "bind this enemy" and "plunder his house."

As for the scribes' accusation that Jesus is possessed by the "prince of demons," he throws back upon them the same accusation of demon-possession and warns that in saying this they are sinning so deeply as to seal their own damnation (3:28–30). For, he says, whoever attributes the work of God's spirit to Satan commits the one unforgivable sin:

"Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven to human beings, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the holy spirit is never forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin"—because they said, "He is possessed by an evil spirit" (3:28–30).

Mark deliberately places these scenes of Jesus' conflict with the scribes between two episodes depicting Jesus' conflict with his own family. Immediately after this, the Greek text of Mark says that members of the family, who had previously declared him insane and had tried to seize him (3:21), now come to the house where he is addressing a large crowd and ask to see him. Jesus repudiates them:

And his mother and brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him, and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you." And looking around at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and brothers! For whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (3:31–35).

Having formed a new family, and having appointed twelve new leaders for Israel to replace the old ones, Jesus has, Mark suggests, "re-formed God's people." From this point on, Jesus sharply discriminates between those he has chosen, the inner circle, and "those outside." He still draws enormous crowds, but while teaching them, he offers riddling parables, deliberately concealing his full meaning from all but his intimates:

Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him . . . and he taught them many things in parables. . . . And when he was alone, those who were around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "*To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive; and they may hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven*" (4:1–12, emphasis added).

Although he often criticizes the disciples—in 8:33 he even accuses Peter of playing Satan's role—Jesus shares secrets with them that he hides from outsiders, for the latter, he says, quoting Isaiah, are afflicted with impenetrable spiritual blindness.²⁷