

Mark 1:21-28

²¹ Then they came to Capernaum, and on the sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. ²³ In their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit; ²⁴ he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” ²⁵ Jesus rebuked him and said, “Quiet! Come out of him!” ²⁶ The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him. ²⁷ All were amazed and asked one another, “What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.” ²⁸ His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee.



Image credit: *Jesus in the Synagogue*, unknown artist, Vatican News Service | Public Domain

And so it begins

The first major section of Mark’s Gospel extends from 1:14 to 3:6, and describes the initial phase of the Galilean ministry. Within this section the evangelist records the calling of the first disciples, Jesus’ ministry in and around Capernaum, and a series of controversies which are climaxed by the decision to seek Jesus’ death.

What has already happened so far in Mark’s gospel: Jesus has proclaimed the Kingdom of God is at hand and called the first disciples to follow him. What follows in this first major section is an expose of a new authority present in the world. It will be affirming evidence to the disciples already following Jesus, witness to others who will have to choose, and a challenge to the traditional leaders of Judaism: the scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees. This new authority will be demonstrated over arenas that are the province of God and God alone - which is exactly the point. These arenas include authority over the demonic, illness, leprosy, paralysis, sin, and even the Sabbath itself. Even as the scenes give tangible proof of Jesus’ claim that the Kingdom of God is upon them, there are those who will remain blind or obstinate to the evidence of their own experience. It all begins in Capernaum, a small fishing village on the north end of the Sea of Galilee.

What exactly is it that begins? The “*gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.*” (Mark 1:1) which announces that “*this is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand.*” (v.15) It is now time that what was promised by God through the patriarchs and prophets is being realized in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the one anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism, then revealed as Jesus Christ (*the anointed one*). That was revealed to the first disciples called and now the public ministry begins.

We might well assume that Jesus has begun to teach the disciples, but in these early narratives, Mark’s readers do not learn if there is a program of instruction. We simply read: “*Then they came to Capernaum, and on the sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught.*” (v.21) We are not told the content of the teaching. We might assume it was based on a reading from Scripture as described in Luke 4:16 and following. However, the disciples were witnesses of how he taught (“*with authority,*” vv. 22 and 27), and what effect his powerful teaching had (people are “*astonished*” and “*amazed,*” vv. 22 and 27; the unclean spirit is overwhelmed, v. 26). The repetition of the phrase “with authority” indicates that Mark wants the events of Jesus’ first teaching and first powerful action to be seen as intimately related. He not only speaks with authority — he also acts with power! The “amazed” bystanders acknowledge the teacher’s authority, yet they still have to ask: “*What is this?*” (v. 27).

Mark’s intention here is to make his readers confident in Jesus as teacher and healer. However, the allusion to the people’s amazement (v. 27), which caused Jesus’ reputation to spread throughout Galilee (v. 28), also has another purpose. It is precisely the people’s response of being amazed (1:27 and 5:20), or astounded (2:12 and 5:42) that will eventually bring other hostile forces to seek to destroy Jesus (see 6:14–29, where Herod is threatened by Jesus’ reputation and ends up beheading John the Baptist). Mark wants more from his readers than amazement; he wants them to be alert when Jesus reveals himself in less appealing ways. “*Will you also be amazed when Jesus begins to teach that the Son of Man has to suffer much, be rejected by the chief priests, be put to death, and rise three days later* (8:31)? Will you recognize him for who he is when he hangs on the cross, abandoned by most of his followers who were amazed by his first signs of power?”

Time and Place

The larger section - a few verses beyond our gospel reading - Mark 1:21–34 seems to represent the activity of a single day, or of two days if judged by the Jewish perspective that a new day begins with sunset. Jesus’ sabbath activity includes teaching, exorcism and healing. In comprehensive fashion the acts of God are initiated by Jesus, restoring men to wholeness, but in a manner which occasions both excitement and alarm.

Jesus is accompanied by disciples, likely the four fishermen Jesus had already called to follow: “*they came to Capernaum.*” This is confirmed by Mark 1:29 where Jesus and the four enter the house of Simon and Andrew; it is probable that Capernaum was the town in which all four fishermen lived. It was certainly the home village of Simon Peter whose mother-in-law resided there.

Teaching and Authority

Mark concentrates upon a single Sabbath when Jesus’ synagogue teaching provoked a reaction from the people present. The two words that describe the people’s reactions are: *ekplessomai* (v. 22) and *thambeo* (v. 27) – “astounded” and “amazed.” The first term, more literally means “be besides oneself” – or in the slang, “to be blown away!” It comes from something that is so incomprehensible that one’s mind can’t fathom what has been experienced. These are not terms of faith. In Mark’s gospel we will come to learn that miracles never produce proper faith.

What is it about Jesus that amazed them? A number of related possibilities exist in our text: his new teaching, his authority, the way he related to the man with the unclean spirit, or the way Jesus commands and the spirit obeys. The evangelist has no immediate interest in the precise content of

Jesus' message; its general thrust is sufficiently indicated by Mark 1:15 which summarizes Jesus' proclamation during this initial phase of the Galilean ministry. His primary emphasis is on the authority of Jesus' teaching and the response of the people, whose astonishment conveys the impression of real alarm. Jesus' word, presented with a sovereign authority which permitted neither debate nor theoretical reflection, confronted the people with the absolute claim of God upon them. Jesus' teaching recalled the categorical demand of the prophets rather than scribal tradition.

The word used for "authority" (*exousia*) is normally explained as "power." However, its primary meaning is "freedom." In the LXX the use of the word implies the "unrestricted sovereignty of God." The life of Jesus is characterized by *exousia* (freedom; ability; power; authority) in numerous ways: his teaching is distinguished by its authority different from that of the scribes, as Mark affirms, but Matthew demonstrates, with the Sermon on the Mount. Later in this gospel, the opponents of Jesus will ask him both about the right (authority) of forgiving sins which in Judaism is reserved to God alone and about his right to cleanse the temple.

But that is not the only distinction between Jesus' teaching and the scribe's teaching. The difference is also described as "new (*kainos*) teaching," in verse 27. Scribes (*grammateus*) were originally the people who copied the scriptures. They became experts in the law (or "lawyers") and soon their explanatory role became one of the sources of teaching about the Jewish faith and tradition. There is a sense that their authority came from their detailed understanding of scriptures and tradition. Richard Jensen (*Preaching Mark's Gospel*, 48) describes this contrast in authority: "Scribal authority was based on their ability to recite the opinion of many Rabbis on a given topic. Jesus' word had authority because when he spoke, it came to pass." Williamson (*Mark*, 50) says it a little differently:

They [the scribes] taught with erudition, but Jesus taught with authority. Jesus interprets the Scripture as one who has the right to say what it means. Furthermore, his teaching has no need of external support, whether from Scriptures or elsewhere; his word is self-authenticating, not like that of the scribes.

Something Prophetic

William Lane offers an interesting distinction in the way to consider the idea of "authority."

"It has been argued that the contrast expressed between authoritative and scribal teaching implies that Jesus "taught with Rabbinic authority, and not like those who were unordained." On this understanding the authority of an ordained rabbi to proclaim decisions is opposed to that of inferior teachers who could appeal only to the chain of tradition passed on from one informant to another. This view fails to appreciate the more-than-prophetic note which is present in Mark's account where the accent falls upon the alarm occasioned by Jesus' teaching. The authority in view is not merely the power to decide, but to compel decision. In contrast with rabbinic exposition, with its reference to the tradition of the elders, here was prophecy. The authority with which Jesus spoke presupposes a commission and authorization from God inseparable from the proclamation of the kingdom drawn near. In the presence of Jesus men are disturbed, and this disturbance is the precise act of fishing to which Jesus had called the four fishermen." [72-73]

Something New

The word *kainos* is not restricted as a reference to something that did not exist before, e.g., the new teaching was something unheard of before. It can also refer to something that is "fresh". Brian Stoffregen recounts this gem: "*A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People*, Edited by Nathan Ausubel, contains this wonderful story (51):

“Usually the orthodox rabbis of Europe boasted distinguished rabbinical genealogies, but Rabbi Yechiel of Ostrowce was an exception. He was the son of a simple baker and he inherited some of the forthright qualities of a man of the people.

“Once, when a number of rabbis had gathered at some festivity, each began to boast of his eminent rabbinical ancestors. When Rabbi Yechiel’s turn came, he replied gravely, “In my family, I’m the first eminent ancestor.”

“His colleagues were shocked by this piece of impudence, but said nothing. Immediately after, the rabbis began to expound Torah. Each one was asked to hold forth on a text culled from the sayings of one of his distinguished rabbinical ancestors.

“One after another the rabbis delivered their learned dissertations. At last it came time for Rabbi Yechiel to say something. He arose and said, “My masters, my father was a baker. He taught me that only fresh bread was appetizing and that I must avoid the stale. This can also apply to learning.”

“And with that Rabbi Yechiel sat down.”

An Unclean Spirit

In their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit (v. 23). Strangely the NAB does not translate *euthys* – the first word in the sentence. The word means “just then,” “suddenly” or “immediately.” In the NAB translation it seems as though the man was just there. But the Greek *euthys* implies a sudden entrance into the synagogue like bursting upon the scene. This follows immediately upon Jesus’ teaching with authority that amazes listeners. The “suddenly” that divine power (*exousia*) is confronted by the corrupting power of a person is possessed by an unclean spirit. Was he part of the crowd listening to Jesus’ teaching who suddenly stood up and cried out? Did he come in off of the street? In any case, suddenly, we have the “holy one of God” on the holy day (sabbath) in the holy place (synagogue) meeting an “unclean spirit.” It is a dramatic moment somewhat lost by not translating one word.

What was an unclean spirit/person doing in the synagogue on the Sabbath? The man’s personality had been damaged to the point that the demonic power had usurped the man’s being, and spoke through him. The disturbance which Jesus brings was expressed in the excited response of this man, who sensed in Jesus a threat to his very existence.

“*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!*” His cry of terror, expressed in v. 24, is laden with the language of defense and resistance. The demoniac does not confess the dignity of Jesus, but uses the accepted terms of opposition in the attempt to disarm him. The initial expression is a common formula in the OT within the context of combat or judgment, and is roughly equivalent to “you have no business with us—yet.” While one might read it as an opponent realizing combat will lead him to defeat, there is ample OT usage to indicate that this is a “throw down” with the tone, “So, you think you have come to destroy us?”

While the NAB translates v.24 as a question, other translations hold that it is not a question but a declaration: “You have come to destroy us.” The note of conflict implied is important, for the demonic power understands more clearly than the people the decisive significance of the presence of Jesus. In the question “What have you to do with *us*?” it is natural to find a reference to all of the demonic powers who shall be destroyed by Jesus.

However, Ched Myers (*Binding the Strong Man*) offers a different interpretation: “Upon whose behalf is the demon pleading? It can only be the group already identified in the conflict theme – the scribal

aristocracy whose space (social role and power) Jesus is threatening.” [p. 142] So, it is also distinctly possible that the demoniac identifies himself with the people present and speaks from their perspective – this regards the agitation of the demon in the light of the dismay and turmoil in the synagogue. Jesus’ presence entails the danger of judgment for all present.

Demonic Knowledge

That the demonic powers possess a certain knowledge of Jesus’ identity is clear from the cry of recognition, “*I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*” This statement of recognition, however, does not stand alone. It is part of a larger complex of material exhibiting a striking difference between the forms of address employed by the demoniacs and the titles used by ordinary sick individuals. The latter group appeals to Jesus as “Lord” (7:8), “Teacher” (9:17), “Son of David” (10:47–48) or “Master” (10:51). The demoniacs, however, address Jesus as “the Holy One of God” (1:24), “the Son of God” (3:11) or “the Son of the Most High God” (5:7), expressions which identify Jesus as the divine Son of God. The contrast in address is an important characteristic distinguishing ordinary sickness from demonic possession, and reflects the superior knowledge of the demons. Some scholars make the distinction that the recognition-formula is not a confession, but a defensive attempt to gain control of Jesus in accordance with the common concept of that day, that the use of the precise name of an individual or spirit would secure mastery over him.

This is perhaps why Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit with the words, “*Quiet! Come out of him.*” (v.25) The defensive address of the demon was powerless before the sovereign command of Jesus. In contrast, exorcists of that same period identified themselves by name or by relationship to some deity or power, pronounced some spell or performed some magical action, Jesus uttered only a few direct words, through which his absolute authority over the demonic power that had held the man captive was demonstrated. The unclean spirit convulsed the possessed man, and with a loud shriek left him.

Jesus’ silencing of the demon has cosmic dimensions—the sustained encounter of the Son of God with Satan. The silencing and expulsion of the demon is the sign of the kingdom which Jesus has come to initiate. To have allowed the defensive utterance of the demon to go unrebuked would have been to compromise the purpose for which Jesus came into the world, to confront Satan and strip him of his power. As such, this initial act of exorcism in the ministry of Jesus is programmatic of the sustained conflict with the demons which is a marked characteristic in the Marcan presentation of the gospel.

The People’s Response

“*The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.*” What must they now think when they witness this new demonstration of authority in the word of command to the demon? His word was a simple command. The familiar prologue, spells or incantations, or other symbolic actions were missing. There was only the word. There was no category familiar to them which explained the sovereign authority with which Jesus spoke and acted. Their astonishment is reflected in the question, “*What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.*” They do not fully understand who Jesus is or what his presence means, but they cannot avoid the impression of having been confronted by a word invested with power to which there were no analogies in their experience. Here was a teaching qualitatively new in the authority with which it laid hold of men. And the people were alarmed.

What Was The Fame That Spread?

Our text ends by saying that Jesus’ fame was spreading. Interestingly, the word for fame (*akoe*) could also have been translated as rumor, reports, knowledge, or story. In any case, what were they saying about Jesus? We don’t know. Whatever it was, it both attracted people to seek out Jesus as we will hear

in the coming gospel readings, but it also so offended some that they will seek to kill him. What the people saw and heard and reported to others, was it more than just that Jesus taught a new teaching with authority, that he had the power to exorcize demons? What Jesus said and did disrupted the world – for some it was a good disruption. Others preferred the status quo.

The report concerning the enigmatic bearer of the authoritative word went forth at once into the surrounding region. The disturbance of men by God had begun.

A Reflection

Ben Witherington III (*The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*) concludes his section on these verses with:

What one notices about Jesus' behavior is that he is never worried about becoming unclean or sick by fraternizing with or touching the spiritually or physically or morally unclean. Indeed, he seems to have gone out of his way in some cases to minister to them. Not surprisingly this behavior offended those who were part of the holiness movement of that day – the Pharisaic movement. The question a text like Mark 1 raises for us is: Are we more concerned with public opinion and with not offending some people by being compassionate to society's outcasts, or are we more concerned with helping those in the greatest need in our society? The answer to this question in Jesus' case seems obvious from the very outset in Mark. Jesus did not particularly care whom he scandalized if he believed he was doing God's work and helping to bring in God's dominion. He was also more concerned with who got the cure than who got the credit. [p. 95-6]

Notes

Mark 1:21 Capernaum: Identified with the ruins at Tel Hûm on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum is one of the few sites specified by Mark as a center of Jesus' preaching and healing activity. After Jesus began his ministry, he moved to Capernaum. Capernaum had a synagogue which had been built with the sponsorship of the local centurion (Luke 7:2–5). While in Capernaum, Jesus healed several people and taught in the synagogue. The city, however, eventually received a scathing denunciation when Jesus condemned its stubbornness as worse than Sodom's (Matt 11:23–24). [AYBD 866]

Mark 1:22 astonished: *ekplēssomai* – Mark employs a variety of terms to express the astonishment of the multitude and the disciples at the word and deed of Jesus. The response to Jesus' words and deeds has overtones of fear and alarm; it reflects an awareness of the disturbing character of his presence.

authority: *exousia* freedom; ability; power; authority [EDNT 2:9]

Mark 1:23 unclean spirits: *pneumati akathartos* – a common Jewish expression for a demon. In Mark, his usage seems point to a thematic use: “that opposed to the holy.”

Mark 1:24 What have you to do with us: this same basic expression appears in Jesus' response to his mother Mary at the wedding in Cana

the Holy One of God: Some scholars find a connection between the designation “Jesus the Nazarene” and “the Holy One of God” on the basis of the LXX tradition of Judg. 13:7 and 16:17: in LXX^B Samson is designated “the holy one of God” (ὁ ἅγιος θεοῦ) while in LXX^A he is designated a Nazirite (ναζιραῖος θεοῦ). They argue that Jesus was first designated a Nazirite and Holy One of God, and the later Greek tradition evoked the relation with Nazareth.

Mark 1:25 Quiet! : The Greek word *phimōthē ti*, *be silent* (25), is better translated as ‘be muzzled’: it is both strong and blunt, like ‘shut up’ in modern colloquial English.

Mark 1:27 *amazed*: *thambeo* – “be beside oneself, be overwhelmed, be astonished” [EDNT 1:420]

Mark 1:28 *fame*: *akoē* (act of) hearing, (faculty of) hearing, report, preaching [EDNT 1:52]. It is not clear how to translate this word in the context of the passage. Differing translations include the following: rumor, reports, knowledge, story and more.

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