

2.0 The Galilean Ministry

2.1 The Ministry in Galilee (1:14 – 8:30)

This section, which accounts for almost half the Gospel, is made up of three blocks that have a common structure of summary, reference to the disciples and a narrative complex of several stories. It will not be necessary to discuss every item in these blocks in equal detail here and occasionally, it will be more convenient to wander across the boundaries. The material on disciples will be discussed at some length in the context of Mark's teaching on discipleship, for instance. The introductory summaries are relatively straight-forward. The first is a summary of the preaching of Jesus: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the Good News" (1:15). That is to say, it summarises into one convenient phrase the whole teaching ministry of Jesus. The coming Kingdom of God was the focus of the preaching of Jesus. The third summary is equally brief - he went among the villages preaching (6:6b). The middle one (3:7-12) is the longest. Unlike the Baptizer who stayed in one place, the ministry of Jesus is an itinerant one. Its effect however is greater than even the preaching of John. While John drew crowds from Jerusalem and Judea, Jesus draws them even from the surrounding nations (Idumea, Tyre and Sidon, the land beyond the Jordan). At times the press of people is so great that they need to be ready to escape (3:9). The work of preaching is allied to a healing ministry and a ministry of deliverance from evil spirits. It is these evil spirits who threaten to make him known, but Jesus imposes a command to silence. The command to silence is a very notable feature in this first part of the ministry.

The term *narrative complex* may be used to cover a wide range of different kinds of stories in these three blocks. It is quite likely that before Mark even began to write his Gospel, there were in existence individual stories about Jesus in circulation. Since the bulk of them are concentrated in Galilee, it is quite likely that they had their origin there and it is this feature in part at least, which gives the Galilean section of the Gospel a unique feel. In this the origins of the Jesus tradition are very close to the folk tradition. New Testament scholarship made one of its great leaps forward when it decided that it could glean some knowledge by concentrating on the individual stories. The branch of scholarship, which attempted to study these stories, was known as *Form Criticism*. It attempted in the first place to identify the kinds of stories which finally made their way into the Gospels and went on to suggest that they had their most likely origins in the day to day life of the early Church. There are two fundamental types of story in these blocks:

- **Miracle story** is a blanket term that covers three basic types of miraculous deed. The first is the *miracle of healing*; the second is the *exorcism story* in which Jesus casts out an evil spirit. The third type of miracle story is a more generalized one, which covers such events as the multiplication of the loaves or the calming of the storm; these are usually known as *nature miracles*.

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- **Controversy Story** is a story in which Jesus is criticised for some action but emerges victorious from the encounter by turning the tables on his critics.

There are also other types as well as stories that combine features from both, but it will be easiest to discuss these cases through examples.

- **Healing stories:** the cure of Peter's mother in law (1:29-31); the cure of the leper (1:40-45); the paralytic* (2:1-12); the man with the withered hand* (3:1-6); the daughter of Jairus and the woman with the flow of blood (5:21-43); the daughter of the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30); the deaf mute (7:31-37); the blind man (8:22-26).¹
- **Exorcism stories:** the exorcism in the synagogue (1:21-28); the Gadarene demoniac (5:1-20).
- **Nature miracle stories:** the stilling of the storm (4:35-41); the first feeding miracle (6:30-43); walking on the water (6:47-52); the second feeding miracle (8:1-10).
- **List of Galilean Controversy Stories:** The cure of the paralytic (controversy about forgiveness of sins, 2:6-10); eating with sinners (2:15-17); fasting (2:18-22); Sabbath work (2:23-28); Sabbath healing (3:1-6); purity regulations (7:1-23); the request for a sign (8:11-13).

A few observations might be in order at this stage. There are nine healing stories and only two exorcisms. The nature miracles are of two kinds - miraculous feedings and events connected with the sea. The controversy stories concern for the most part points of observance of Jewish Law - ritual purity (with whom can one eat; what are the regulations to be observed about ritual cleanliness?), fasting and Sabbath observance. Healing predominates in the earliest block (four out of the nine occur there), controversy emerges towards the end of the first block (within the setting of miracle stories) but it dominates the final block particularly in chapter 7. The simplest way to approach them would probably be to take an example of each of the types.

¹ The stories marked with * contain elements of controversy story also.

2.2. A Healing Story (1:29-31)

The elements that make up the typical healing story are quite simple. A person in need of healing approaches Jesus or is in Jesus' company; a request is made for healing either by the person themselves or by someone else on their behalf, Jesus replies to the request either by a word or a gesture or both, the healing takes place instantly, the response of the person healed or the bystanders is recorded. A very simple example of a typical healing story is that of Peter's mother in law (1:29-31).

(a) The Text

[29] As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. [30] Now Simon's mother-in-law² was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.³ [31] He came and took her by the hand⁴ and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

(b) Commentary

Even though it is only three verses long, it contains the major elements of the healing story. "And immediately he left the synagogue, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever..." Jesus comes into the presence of the sick person: "and immediately they told him of her..." The request for healing is made on behalf of the sick woman by the members of her family. "And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up..." In a healing gesture, Jesus takes her by the hand and helps her to sit up in the bed; no doubt, in the original, it was also accompanied by some words of encouragement. "And the fever left her; and she served them..." The cure of the woman is instant: as a sign of her total healing, she takes her place in the work of hospitality to a guest.

2 According to 1 Cor 9:5 Peter's wife was accustomed to going with him on missionary journeys.

3 *At once* suggests either informing Jesus of her condition or hoping for a healing; alternatively, it may suggest excusing an apparent lack of hospitality.

4 A gesture in healing stories which is a characteristic of Mark (cf. 9:27).

2.3 The Exorcism Story

The exorcism is akin to the healing story, but there is a slightly different focus, since it involves not merely healing bodily illness but it brings the exorcist into contact with the hostile powers of the spirit world. It follows more or less the outline of the healing story except that there is usually something to prove that the demon has left, e.g., a loud cry or the person falls down etc. The story of the Gadarene Demoniac ([5:1-20](#)) is typical.

(a) The Text

[1] They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes.⁵ [2] And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs⁶ with an unclean spirit met him. [3] He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; [4] for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. [5] Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. [6] When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; [7] and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” [8] For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” [9] Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion;⁷ for we are many.” [10] He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. [11] Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; [12] and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” [13]

⁵ This place identification is problematic. Matthew refers to [Gadara](#), while Mark and Luke refer to [Gerasa](#). Both places are very far from the Sea of Galilee to fit coherently with the story. Whatever the exact location, the herd of swine indicate Gentile territory.

⁶ Tombs, as being ritually unclean, were commonly regarded as appropriate dwellings for demons and the possessed.

⁷ *Legion* was used in Aramaic and Hellenistic Greek to indicate a large number. The sufferer’s reply here, giving a number (a Roman legion was usually about six thousand men) rather than a name, suggests that he knew himself to be prey to a whole multitude of impulses before which he felt powerless.

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So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. [14] The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. [15] They came to Jesus and saw⁸ the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. [16] Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. [17] Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood.⁹ [18] As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. [19] But Jesus refused, and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord¹⁰ has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” [20] And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis¹¹ how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

(b) Commentary

This is Mark’s masterpiece of an exorcism story. Since demon-possession was very much feared in the ancient world, it was difficult to move the hearers with any thing like compassion for the possessed person, but see how Mark succeeds in moving us to genuine pity for this man. Jesus’ crossing to the far side of the Sea of Galilee entailed entry into pagan territory. Another indicator of the strangeness of these people to a Jewish listener would have been the presence of the large herd of pigs grazing; to Jews, these were unclean animals and their presence near a town would have been a sign that the people themselves were not God-fearing Jews. Mark devotes three verses to describing the situation of the poor demented human being (vv.3-5). He is a person of immense strength who inspires fear and terror; all attempts to bind him have proved fruitless. His condition has made him an outcast from the human community - he lives “among the tombs” in a

8 The Greek word used here, *theōréō* (θεωρέω) means *to have a good look at*. The description of the man is from the point of view of an observer.

9 The awe induced by the sight of the cured demoniac gave way quickly to the conviction that Jesus was a dangerous person to have around the district.

10 *Lord* here refers to YHWH, not Jesus.

11 *Dekápolis* (Δεκάπολις - Greek: *Decapolis* or *Ten Towns*). These seem to have been a loose federation of towns and villages; there is no evidence that they were ever an administrative unit or legal entity.

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cemetery, again, it would have been considered an unclean and dangerous place for a Jew to live. All that comes from the cemetery are the howls of pain. His possession by the demon also entails an amount of self-destruction – “bruising himself with stones.”

Jesus appears and the man rushes towards him and recognises him as “Jesus the Son of the Most High God” (v.7). The conversation between Jesus and the demon-possessed man is a model of Jesus’ respectful approach to suffering humanity. He is in total possession of himself, unafraid. The man gives his name as “Legion”; no doubt, the Jewish audience might also have interpreted this as a humorous aside at the expense of the occupying Roman army. There is a similar irony in the fact that the Legion of devils, when given the opportunity to choose a new home for themselves choose to migrate to the pigs, but in so doing, they provoke such a commotion in the pigs that they “self-destruct” by rushing head-long down a cliff into the lake. Compassion for the pigs or even worry about the loss to their owners is beside the point! The swine-herds rush off to tell the story in the town and the people come out to see what has happened, amazed to see the victim “clothed and in his right mind” sitting at the feet of Jesus. However, they don’t want any one with such powers hanging around their town, particularly if there are any more pigs around! The man who has been cured wishes to follow Jesus, but is quietly and firmly sent back to pick up the threads of normal life. The one who had been demon possessed becomes the first “foreign missionary” in the Gospel of Mark (v.20), just as the Samaritan woman becomes the first missionary in the Fourth Gospel.

2.4. The Nature Miracle Story

The miraculous feeding stories (6:30-43; 8:1-10) have a common structure - a situation in which people are hungry and food is not available because the place in which they are is far away from places in which food can be obtained; over the small quantity of food at their disposal, Jesus says the prayer of thanksgiving, gives it to the disciples to hand out to the crowd; every one has enough to eat and as a sign of the miraculous origin of the food, there is an abundance left over. A couple of points here are of some significance. The theme of God providing food for his people in the desert goes back to the Exodus story, but it was also associated with the prophet Elijah, who was the great wonder-working prophet. The actions of Jesus over the food - took, looked up to heaven, blessed, broke the bread and gave it to them - have very definite connections with the Christian Eucharist.

The two remaining stories, stilling the storm (4:35-41) and (6:47-52) walking on the water) have also common elements. In the absence of Jesus (either physical absence in the case of walking on the water, or simply that since he is asleep, he seems to ignore their plight), the disciples are terrified at the storm or find it difficult to make headway against the wind and waves. Jesus either comes to them or wakes up, and by his presence, calm is restored.

2.5 Controversy Stories

These all concern points in which Jesus is in dispute with the religious leaders of the Jews over points of observance of the Law or about his own authority to heal or to forgive sins. The opponents are [Pharisees](#) or Scribes. The controversy stories are essentially dialogues, in which an opposing point of view is presented but Jesus wins the argument by means of a well-turned phrase. In some cases, the editor seems to have included a controversy story within a healing story. We shall take the *dispute on fasting* ([2:18-22](#)) as a typical example of a controversy story.

(a) The Text

[18] Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting;¹² and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" [19] Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom¹³ is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. [20] The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away¹⁴ from them, and then they will fast on that day. [21] "No one sews a piece of unshrunk¹⁵ cloth on an old cloak;¹⁶ otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. [22] And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

12 The original fast may have been that of John's disciples in mourning after the execution of their leader. The phrase *the Pharisees* has been attracted here from the second half of the verse. The only statutory fast was that on the Day of Atonement. Pharisees used fast on Mondays and Thursdays (Luke 18:12).

13 The word is common in the Old Testament (Isa 54:4; 62:4; Ezek 16:7; Hos 2:19) in contexts where YHWH is groom and Israel his bride. From such contexts the idea developed that the Messiah is also a bridegroom. The problem here is whether Jesus referred to himself as bridegroom, or whether this is the view of the primitive Christian community. Jesus implies that the Kingdom of God has arrived and therefore it is not the time for fasting and mourning, but for joy. In short, there is no explicit claim to messiahship here.

14 A violent death seems to be meant here.

15 The phrase means a piece of cloth that has not been treated.

16 The garment was an outer cloak, generally of goat or camel hair.

(b) Commentary

The core of the story is in vv.18-20. The situation is a day of religious fasting, which is observed by both the Pharisees, and the disciples of John the Baptist. In Jewish religious tradition, there were several days of fasting, such as the [Day of Atonement](#). It is also probable that there were other days observed by various religious groups. The fasting and ascetic practice of the Baptist was well-known and we are familiar from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:16-18) with the fasting of groups such as the Pharisees. Jesus did not appear to set a high premium on fasting: in fact, the distinctive mark of his ministry is *table-fellowship*. To eat with people in Palestine in the time of Jesus was to lay oneself open to sharing life with them, since food shared symbolized the sharing of life. Jesus eats not only with the disciples, but also with publicans, sinners, Pharisees and even with crowds of people (the feeding miracles). For the strictly-observant, rules regarding eating were very important: one had to be sure that the food served at table was *kosher*, that is to say, prepared according to all the meticulous requirements of the dietary laws.

The challenge to Jesus is “since everyone else is fasting, why don’t you and your disciples fast?” In other words, it is a question about his piety. The answer of Jesus is interesting. “And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast’” (2:19). That answer asserts that life in the present moment of Jesus’ presence is to be understood as a wedding feast. The image of kingdom as the wedding feast returns quite frequently in the Gospels (e.g. Cana, the parable of the wedding garment) and Jesus probably did compare himself to the “bridegroom” (e.g. his comparison of himself and John the Baptist - John 3,29: “He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full” or the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids). What he is saying is that fasting is not an appropriate way for celebrating the approach of the kingdom of God. However, if we continue to read the next verse, we notice something else. Mark 2:20 states, “The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.” This envisages a time in which fasting will be appropriate, a time when “the bridegroom is taken away.” That is, after the death of Jesus, fasting will once more become an appropriate form of behaviour for the disciples of Jesus. This verse was probably not original, as it envisages a different sort of situation from the first. The life-setting of v.19 is the historical ministry of Jesus; the setting of v.20 is *the situation of the Church after the resurrection*.

Mark is conducting a controversy on two fronts. The first, which looks back to the historical Jesus, is a justification of his original attitude to fasting. The second probably takes up a situation in the early community, which has rediscovered the symbolic value of fasting. One might imagine that “the traditionalists” in the Church rejected fasting out of hand and justified their stance on the basis of the behaviour of Jesus. The Church with the

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assurance of Jesus' Spirit to address new situations in new times, is arguing that fasting "in the days when the bridegroom is taken away", that is to say, probably an annual fast as a prelude to the Easter celebration, is a reasonable innovation and justifies it by putting on the lips of Jesus words it believes he would now speak to the Church in the new situation. This should be a warning to us to read the controversy stories in the Gospels with an eye to two different situations - the situation of the historical Jesus (Galilee 28-30 CE) and the situation in which the church now lives. This is particularly necessary when we read the lengthy controversy material in Mark 7.

Mark takes up a collection of various sorts of stories about Jesus, particularly miracle and controversy stories and skilfully organizes them to present a picture of Jesus who is powerful in word and deed, but over whom the shadow of opposition is beginning to fall. The attractive picture of a wonder-worker begins to give way to one in which he is a source of controversy to the extent that his enemies are already preparing to plot against him. Some of the stories (e.g. the stories of miraculous food and of opposition) also show signs of how they were used at a later stage in the preaching of the community.