

The Rejection at Nazareth (6:1-6)

¹ He departed from there and came to his native place, accompanied by his disciples. ² When the sabbath came he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given him? What mighty deeds are wrought by his hands! ³ Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. ⁴ Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house.” ⁵ So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. ⁶ He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Context

The three miracles in Mark 5 demonstrate the divine powers evident in Jesus’ miracles. Jesus overcomes the life-destroying powers of demonic possession, chronic illness, and death. Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman sought Jesus’ help because they had faith in what they had heard about him. Their faith forms a striking contrast to the reception Jesus receives in his hometown. His ministry there begins as did his initial ministry in Capernaum. Jesus astonishes those gathered in the synagogue with his teaching and healing (vv. 1–2; Mark 1:21–28). Readers might expect an example of healing or exorcism to follow as in Capernaum, but it does not.

As Perkins [591-2] notes: “Jesus’ natural family were excluded from the circle of believers in an earlier episode (3:21, 31–35). That episode establishes the contrast between the Twelve, whom Jesus chose to be with him (3:14); the natural family of Jesus (3:21, 31); and the wider circle of Jesus’ followers, his new family, those who do the will of God (3:35). Jesus’ return to Nazareth, with members of his new family (the disciples; v. 1) raises the question left open in the earlier episode: Will those with familial and social ties to Jesus believe?”

In a similar way, the first major section of Mark (1:14-3:6) concludes with rejection by Pharisees and Herodians. They conspire together to destroy Jesus. Increasingly in Mark, those who reject Jesus are closer to him: First the Pharisees and Herodians, then the people of Jesus’ hometown. Finally, his own disciples will betray him, desert him, and deny him.

The rejection of Jesus at Nazareth presents a strong contrast to the two miracles that preceded it (5:21-43). The healed woman is told, “*Daughter, your faith has made you well*” (5:34). Jairus is told, “*Do not fear, only believe*” (5:36). However, the hometown people have no faith (*apistia*, v. 6 -- also used in 9:24 -- “*I believe, help my unbelief*”). Jesus is unable to do many works of power (*dynamis* -- v. 5, also in v. 2) -- although he does some. The relationship between faith and works of power is a key element of the encounter.

The surprising contrasts lie not so much in his town’s rejection of him (“*A prophet is not without honor ...*,” v. 4) as in his discouragement and ineffectiveness in their midst: “*So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people. He was amazed at their lack of faith*” (vv. 5-6). Up to this point people have always been amazed and fearful in Jesus’ presence. Here Jesus is amazed at them and at the lack of faith he finds in Nazareth. Mark’s readers, no matter how familiar they are with Jesus, might well evaluate the depth of their faith in him in order to allow him to be as effective as he wants to be in their midst.

Commentary

Jesus’ human origins form a road block to the belief that should follow from experiencing the extraordinary wisdom and healing power exercised by Jesus. Reading the episode against the backdrop of honor and shame in peasant villages provides some insight into the hostile reception. Jesus has

stepped out of the status and role in society that he had in the village of 1,600 to 2,000 people.

While many of Mark’s readers are interested in this passage because of its reference to Jesus’ “brothers and sisters” (v. 3), Mark’s own interest lay elsewhere. Mark passes on the account of the hometown folks’ rejection of Jesus for a special reason: to provide an important transition and surprising contrasts at this point of his drama.

Jesus is Rejected at Nazareth

Jesus left Capernaum and travelled southward into the hill country until he came to the village where he had spent his youth and the early years of his maturity. While Mark does not name Nazareth, he has earlier indicated that this was the village from which Jesus came, and it is undoubtedly in view under the phrase “his own country.” Jesus returned to Nazareth as would a rabbi, accompanied by his disciples. The reference to the disciples is important, for during this period Jesus had been concerned with their training in preparation for the mission which Mark reports in 6:7–13.

On the sabbath day Jesus attended the synagogue and was given the opportunity to expound the reading from the Torah and the Haftarah, the Law and the prophetic portion. The entire congregation was astonished at his teaching, which prompted questions concerning the source of his doctrine and wisdom and of the power which had been exhibited elsewhere in miracles of healing and exorcism. It is possible that the people entertained the dark suspicions voiced earlier by the Jerusalem scribes (3:22). Jesus had not been schooled in rabbinic fashion but had been trained as a manual laborer. His immediate family were well known to the villagers, who judged that there was nothing extraordinary about them that would have led them to expect something unusual from Jesus. What was the source of his wisdom, and who had empowered him to speak and act with such authority? To these questions two answers lie close at hand: the source was God, or it was demonic. Their first impressions of astonishment shaded off to resentment when they recalled Jesus’ earlier vocation and standing in Nazareth. Not knowing the source of his wisdom, they find his office as a teacher offensive. In spite of what they heard and saw they failed to penetrate the veil of ordinariness which characterized this one who had grown up in the village.

What do the hometown people know about Jesus that would lead them to reject him? While there is much that I disagree with in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, by John Dominic Crossan, his social status of *tekton* is enlightening:

Ramsay MacMullen has noted that one’s social pedigree would easily be known in the Greco-Roman world and that a description such as “carpenter” indicated lower class status [*Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 384*]. At the back of his book he gives a “Lexicon of Snobbery” filled with terms used by literate and therefore upper-class Greco-Roman authors to indicate their prejudice against illiterate and therefore lower-class individuals. Among those terms is *tekton*, or “carpenter,” the same term used for Jesus in Mark 6:3 and for Joseph in Matthew 13:55. One should not, of course, ever presume that upper-class sneers dictated how the lower classes actually felt about themselves. But, in general, the great divide in the Greco-Roman world was between those who had to work with their hands and those who did not. [p. 24]

Crossan, using a study by Gerhard Lenski [*Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*], defines the upper and lower classes in an order of importance.

Upper Class	Lower Class
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ruler and Governors • Priests • Retainers ranging from military generals to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peasants -- the vast majority of the population, the crop-raisers • Artisans

expert bureaucrats • Merchants	• Degraded • Expendable
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Crossan [25] writes: “If Jesus was a carpenter, therefore, he belonged to the Artisan class, that group pushed into the dangerous space between Peasants and Degradeds or Expendables...” Crossan also quotes Celsus, a pagan philosopher who wrote “True Doctrine” sometime between 177 and 180 C.E as an attack on Christianity. The great offense of this faith was not the claim that a human could be born of a virgin or that a human could be divine; but the fact that it could happen to a member of the lower classes! “Class snobbery is, in fact, very close to the root of Celsus’s objection to Christianity,” to quote Crossan [p. 27].

Witherington (*The Gospel of Mark*) says something similar:

Notice that they neither dispute that he has wisdom or that he performs mighty works; they are just dumbfounded that it comes from a hometown boy like Jesus. More than just a matter of familiarity breeding contempt, this comes from the ancient mentality that geographical and heredity origins determine who a person is and what his capacities will always be. They see Jesus as someone who is not merely exceeding expectations but rather is overreaching. [p. 192]

Perhaps such “snobbery” is at the heart of the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth. Juel (*Mark*) writes:

The refusal -- or inability -- of Jesus’ neighbors to accept his status confirms what the story has suggested thus far: the world’s standards of judgment appear to run headlong into God’s ways. Jesus does not measure up. The circumstances of his origin allow no way of accounting for the stories about him. His common beginnings do not fit the assessment that he is a prophet. The result is scandal and fear. The reaction of the people from his hometown also suggests that real insiders are not necessarily those who by birth or circumstance are closest to Jesus. In fact, those who ought to know best turn out to be the most incapable of insight. [pp. 92-93]

It was inconceivable to them that God could be at work in the commonplace.

“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?”

The rhetorical question, “*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?*” deserves careful attention both to the text and its meaning. At least in modern American, small towns generally celebrate the success of their native sons and daughters. In the Marcan, the comments of crowd are generally seen as derogatory. What might be the thought behind such a reaction?

- Did they wonder if Jesus was 'crazy smart,' and then decide that he was just crazy? Earlier in Mark 3:21, Jesus' own family had come to get him because they thought he had “gone out of his mind.”
- In Mark 6:2, the people asked, “*Where did this man get all this?*” Did they decide, like the scribes had in 3:22, that he got it all from a demonic source? This echoes an earlier, similar synagogue scene in 1:21-27 where the question about Jesus' authority was first raised.
- Or is this a very human reaction, because people think they know who Jesus is, they end up asking disdainfully, “Who does he think he is?” Is he not a common worker with his hands even as the rest of us are?

The identity of Jesus is a consistent issue in Mark. In the gospel, we hear the opinions of rulers, religious authorities, crowds, disciples, and family members. Witherington [193] points out the simple

sentence, “*Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary...*” is asking could a child of undistinguished or dubious origins be able to interpret the Torah like this? For the author of Mark, the important question keeps coming around to “who do you -- the reader -- say that Jesus is?” And if you do honor Jesus as a prophet (or more than a prophet), who does that make you? Does it mean new allegiances that supersede traditional country and family values? As you answer those questions, Mark is leading you into a confession of faith.

The additional phrase “the son of Mary” is probably disparaging. It was contrary to Jewish usage to describe a man as the son of his mother, even when she was a widow, except in insulting terms. People were normally referred to as the son of their *father*, e.g., Simon Bar Jonah (Mt 16:16). Juel (*Mark*, 90) writes after discussing some variant readings: “The copyists (and Matthew) recognized the implied insult in speaking of Jesus as Mary’s son: it is an intimation that he was illegitimate (a claim presumed in later Jewish legends and in the Fourth Gospel [John 9:29]).” Rumors to the effect that Jesus was illegitimate appear to have circulated in his own lifetime and may lie behind this reference as well. The rhetorical question of the people indicates that they know Jesus only in a superficial way. They find no reason to believe that he possesses the anointing of God.

Jesus responded with an aphorism to which there are numerous parallels in Jewish and Greek literature. The comparison of his experience to that of the prophets who were dishonored among their own people is ironical. It anticipates his ultimate rejection by Israel and at the same time recalls 3:20–21, 31–35 when Jesus’ family and kinsmen expressed the opinion that he was insane and attempted to halt his activities forcibly.

Miracles and Unbelief

As Mark’s readers would expect, Jesus responds to what people are thinking about him. The proverbial saying “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown” (v. 4) has been expanded with two clauses: “among their kin” and “in their own house.” The original proverb spoke about the “homeland” (*patris*). The qualifying clauses narrow the region down to the prophet’s household and relatives. If this retort is understood as an insult, then Jesus has responded to his critics in kind. Since the miracles in the previous chapter emphasize the importance of faith in those who approach Jesus for healing, the conclusion that Jesus is unable to work many miracles in Nazareth is hardly surprising.

Mark moderates that conclusion somewhat by commenting that Jesus did heal some people (v. 5). It is not Mark’s intention to stress Jesus’ inability when he states that he could perform no miracles at Nazareth. His purpose is rather to indicate that Jesus was not free to exercise his power in these circumstances. The performance of miracles in the absence of faith could have resulted only in the aggravation of human guilt and the hardening of men’s hearts against God. The power of God which Jesus possessed could be materialized in a genuinely salutary fashion only when there was the receptivity of faith. Unbelief excluded the people of Nazareth from the dynamic disclosure of God’s grace that others had experienced.

Apparently Jesus had not anticipated the reaction of the people. The statement that he “*was amazed*” (*thaumazō*) is the sole instance when Mark uses this verb of Jesus. The same verb designates the response of those in the Decapolis to the possessed man’s story about Jesus’ healing (5:20) and to Pilate’s reaction to Jesus’ refusal to answer (15:5) and his early demise (15:44). The term does not imply either faith or insight into Jesus’ identity. In an ironic twist, Jesus is amazed at the lack of faith in his home village.

In the Marcan outline the rejection at Nazareth is intimately related to the subsequent mission of the Twelve (6:7–13). The tension between faith and unbelief permeates both accounts. Moreover in 6:11 there is a distinct indication that the disciples will also experience rejection. By situating these two incidents at this point in his Gospel the evangelist shows that unbelief is the context in which the

Christian mission advances and that rejection is an experience common to the Lord and the Church. This point had immediate relevance for his own hard-pressed community. It is probable that he recognized in the juxtaposition of rejection and mission a pattern confirmed in the rejection of Jesus by the nation, climaxed by crucifixion and resurrection, which created the apostolic mission.

Some Thoughts on Faith and Miracles

There is a common thread in Christian thinking that inextricably link the “degree” of faith with how/if prayers are answered or miracles delivered. In the Markan gospel the problem is not a matter of whether they have enough faith but that they have no faith.

Elsewhere in Mark, a person's faith is not necessarily tied to the success of a miracle. Sometimes faith is not mentioned at all. Sometimes the faith of the restored one's friends or family is noted, or, as in Mark 9:24. Sometimes it's a matter of “I believe; help my unbelief!”

Stoffregen compiled this interesting list of 15 healing miracles (including exorcisms) in Mark and 5 nature miracles – and their relationship to faith.

- 1:21-28 healing in the synagogue -- faith not mentioned
- 1:29-31 healing Peter's mother-in-law -- faith not mentioned
- 1:32-34 healing all the sick -- faith not mentioned
- 1:40-45 healing a leper -- faith not mentioned
- 2:1-12 healing a paralytic -- Jesus sees(!) the faith of the four friends
- 3:1-6 healing a withered hand -- faith not mentioned
- 4:35-41 calming the storm -- disciples' lack of faith mentioned
- 5:1-20 healing the Gerasene demoniac -- faith not mentioned
- 5:21-24a, 35-43 healing Jairus' daughter -- Jairus is told to believe
- 5:24b-34 healing the bleeding woman -- “Your faith has made you well”
- 6:5-6 healing a few in Nazareth -- Jesus is amazed at their unbelief
- 6:30-44 feeding the 5000 -- a hint of the disciples' lack of faith
- 6:45-52 walking on water -- disciples' hard hearts mentioned
- 6:53-56 healing the sick in Gennesaret -- faith not mentioned
- 7:24-30 healing the Syro-Phoenician's daughter -- faith not mentioned, but perhaps illustrated by her reply to Jesus
- 7:31-37 healing a deaf-mute -- faith not mentioned
- 8:1-10 feeding the 4000 -- a hint at the disciples' lack of faith
- 8:22-26 healing a blind man -- faith not mentioned
- 9:14-29 healing the epileptic -- Jesus says: “All things can be done for the one who believes.” The father expresses partial belief: “I believe, help my unbelief”
- 10:46-52 healing blind Bartimaeus -- “Your faith has made you well”
- 11:12-14, 20-24 cursing the fig tree -- Jesus tells the disciples after the miracle: “If you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

Faith is not mentioned in most of the miracles in Mark.

Faith implies actions. Without faith in Jesus, the people did nothing. It may be that the people's lack of faith revealed itself in the fact that they didn't seek Jesus' help. They didn't bring their sick for healing. They didn't bring their children for his blessing. They didn't come to listen to his teaching. What differences should it make if parishioners believe Jesus is present at Mass or in ministry? Or in one's own life? A secular criticism of many Christians is that they are “functional atheists” -- they live and

function as though there were no God. Could that lack of faith keep one from reaping as many benefits as God would give?

This interpretation can be supported by the word *atimos*, translated “without honor.” The basic meaning of the root time is to “put a price or value on”. We “honor” those things and people on whom we place a high value. The fact that Jesus felt “dishonored” by the people means that they did not value him. He was just a carpenter. He was just the son of Mary. He was just one of the siblings. He was nobody important. Why should they bother to bring their sick to him?

Perkins [592] builds on this idea:

Since Galilee was prosperous during this period, Jesus and his family were not impoverished tenant farmers or day laborers. But his status as a local craftsman would have been considerably lower than that of a member of the educated class, who could devote himself to learning the Law. Villagers commonly resent those who attempt to elevate their position above that to which they are entitled by birth. The attempt by Jesus' family to stop his wandering and public preaching in 3:21 implies that from the perspective of the village, Jesus was thought to be dishonoring his family.

Faith opens us up to receive what God wants to give us. Sometimes it may be the miraculous. Sometimes it may be crosses. As the next part of the gospel indicates, sometimes the faithful and empowered disciples will meet with success and sometimes with rejection. Jesus' powerful presence doesn't guarantee “success”.

Notes

Mark 6:1 *his native place*: the Greek word *patris* here refers to Nazareth (cf Mark 1:9; Luke 4:16,23–24) though it can also mean native land.

Mark 6:2 *astonished*. Mark frequently uses this term to express the crowd's reaction to Jesus (*exēplēssonto*). In 1:22 and 11:18, the amazement is over Jesus' teaching in general. In 7:37, it is in reaction to his healing work. In 10:26, it is the reaction to his teaching about the difficulty of the wealthy entering the Kingdom. The term need not indicate belief, but simply astonishment.

Mark 6:3 *Is he not the carpenter*. This is actually a question in Greek that expects a positive reply. He worked as a “craftsman” (*tekton*), a term often rendered “carpenter,” because woodworking is the most likely referent (supported by widespread tradition in the early church associating Joseph with carpentry, though in 1 Kgs 13:19 (LXX) the term refers to a stone craftsman). The passage then lists members of Jesus' family.

Significant strands of the Marcan textual tradition agree essentially with the Matthean formulation: “Is this not the son of the carpenter? Is not his mother called Miriam?” (Mt. 13:55). Moreover, against the allegation of Celsus that Jesus was only a carpenter Origen answered forthrightly that in none of the Gospels accepted by the Church was Jesus himself designated a carpenter. While the textual question is so complex that equally competent interpreters have adopted differing points of view, it seems preferable to adopt the text of the uncials in which Jesus is designated “the carpenter, the son of Mary.” The variant reading was apparently conformed to the text of Matthew in the interest of the virgin birth and perhaps to avoid the attribution of a menial trade to Jesus when to do so in the Graeco-Roman world would be to invite scorn.

***the son of Mary*.** This reference is unusual because normally the son's father would be named, in this case, Joseph. It may allude to Jesus' unusual birth and show an awareness that Mary was Jesus' mother in a way that Joseph was not his father. It also might simply indicate that Joseph was then deceased. Or

it may well meant to give offence and refers to a questionable birth.

The brother of: Mark 6:17 uses the term brother for the half-brothers, Herod and Philip, who were Herod's sons by different mothers. Therefore, it is not possible to tell whether the brothers and sisters of Jesus are biological children of Mary or her stepchildren. Mark is not interested in specifying the precise relationship between Jesus and his other siblings. The townspeople are scandalized by the human origins of Jesus, whom they know as a carpenter.

they took offense. This term (*eskandalizonto*) is important in the NT; it refers to someone "tripping over" or "stumbling over" an idea so as to fall in rejecting it (see 4:17). Figuratively, it means being offended at something. It connotes a lack of belief.

Mark 6:4 A prophet is not without honor except in his native place. This proverb appears in all the synoptic versions of this scene (Matt 13:57; Luke 4:24). Comparing himself to previous Hebrew prophets whom the people rejected, Jesus intimates his own eventual rejection by the nation especially in view of the dishonor his own relatives had shown him (Mark 3:21) and now his townspeople as well.

Mark 6:5 not able to perform any mighty deed. Jesus did not perform many miracles in Nazareth because the people were not in a frame of mind to appreciate their significance, and might attribute them to the wrong source, as 3:22 suggests.

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