

Mark 3:20-35

Readings Patristic and Political

STRUCTURE AND QUESTIONS

In some ways a classic ‘Markan Sandwich’ – 20-21 Family / 22-30 Scribes / 31-35 Family – with a ‘suspension of narrative’ about the family, this is one of the less well integrated examples in that both family stories can stand alone, though they clearly also work together. It also forms the end of the first ‘action’ section – with the next chapter going on to the parable of the sower.

The two main ‘classic questions’ about the text concern the apparent negative light in which Jesus family – particularly Mary – is portrayed, and the nature of the unforgivable ‘sin against the Holy Spirit’. Also somewhat problematic is the rather enigmatic brief parable about ‘binding the strong man’

PATRISTIC OBSERVATIONS¹

On Mary

The fathers tend to link this text with Lk 11:27-28

Mary is more blessed in receiving the faith of Christ than in conceiving the flesh of Christ. For to the one who said, “Blessed is the womb, which bore you!” he himself answered: “Blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep it. (Augustine *De Virginitate* 3)

On the Sin against the Spirit

Once again and intertextual thread is used – this time linking to 1 Cor 12:3

No one who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit can imagine saying “anathema” to Jesus. No one in the Spirit would deny that Christ is the Son of God, or reject God as Creator. No believer would utter such things contrary to Scriptures, or substitute alien or sacrilegious ordinances contrary to moral principles. But if anyone shamelessly blasphemes against this same Holy Spirit, he “does not have forgiveness, either in this world or in the world to come.” (Novatian *De Trinitate* 29)

On binding the Strong Man

The House is that of Satan who is the strong man, the ‘plunder’ is those entrapped by Satan, the stronger man is Christ, who binds Satan, thus liberating those he has ensnared.

The adversary enticed humanity to transgress our maker’s law, and thereby got us into his clutches. Yet his power consisted only in tempting the human will toward trespass and apostasy. With these chains he bound up the human will. This is why in the economy of salvation it was necessary that he be bound with the same chains by which he had bound humanity. It would be through a man that humanity would be set free to return to the Lord, leaving the adversary in those bonds by which he himself had been fettered, that is, sin. For when Satan is bound, man is set free; since “none can enter a strong man’s house and spoil his goods, unless he first bind the strong man himself.” (Ireneus *Adversus Haerases* 5.21.3)

¹ Cf. T.C. ODEN – C.A. HALL *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture II: Mark*, Downers Grove, 1998, 44-50.

A POLITICAL READING

Ched Myers, in *Binding the Strong Man* entitles this section “Campaign Climax: Jesus Declares Ideological War”²

Jesus’ family

Myers notes that the term κρατέω in v. 21 is used elsewhere in terms of ‘take into custody’ – for Myers this would in part be for his own protection. Myers remarks

We might well be sympathetic [...] for surely to them it was lunacy for a marked man to continue to provoke the highest authorities in the land. He was courting disaster, and they wished to protect him – as well as their family reputation.³

However this passage represents a “repudiation of the kinship system”⁴ in as much as Jesus is challenging the old structures and seeking to create a “new kinship model, based on obedience, not to family or clan or patriarch, but to God alone”⁵

Sin Against the Spirit

Myers, seeing forgiveness as having a this world dimension of liberation from debt, remarks

Jesus [...] now deals the final blow to the debt code: blanket pardon. But there is one exception: mistaking the work of the Holy Spirit as that of Satan.⁶

And he quotes Segundo

The real sin against the Holy Spirit is refusing to recognise, with “theological” joy, some concrete liberation that is taking place before one’s very eyes.⁷

Binding the Strong Man

This is, of course, the title of Myers work. Myers has already argued for a connection between the scribal authorities and the demonic forces in his interpretation of the opening healing in 1:21ff.⁸ For Myers the idea of exorcism symbolises a political liberation from oppression. The previous passage indicates that the corrupt religious regime cannot put its own house in order without crumbling. In this passage, a “thinly veiled political parable”, Jesus “likens his mission to criminal breaking and entering”. The link with religious authorities is, Myers argues, indicated both by the use of the word “house” and by the reference to the strong man’s ‘possessions’ which is used elsewhere in Mark only in reference to the temple vessels (11:16).⁹ It should be noted that Myers has Jesus in conflict with the oppressive Roman authorities later in the Gospel.¹⁰

Anthony Milner, Nov 2009

² C. MYERS, *Binding the Strong Man*, New York, 2008 164-168

³ *Ibid.*, 167-8

⁴ *Ibid.*, 167

⁵ *Ibid.*, 168

⁶ *Ibid.*, 167

⁷ J.L. SEGUNDO “Capitalism versus Socialism: Crux Theologica” in R. GIBELLINI, ed., *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, Maryknoll, 1979, 254, quoted in MYERS, 167.

⁸ MYERS, 141-143

⁹ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

¹⁰ Cf. e.g on 5:1-21, *Ibid.*, 190-194.