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The Synoptic Gospels

Modern scholarship has reached the consensus that no sources whatsoever from the earliest days of the Jesus movement have survived. Neither Jesus nor his immediate Galilean followers have left us a firsthand depiction of the lifetime of Jesus, of his preaching and healing, or of the Jewish and Roman reactions to him. There is a second consensus as well – that the group that coalesced around Jesus was one of several such dissident movements in the tense and polarized environment of first-century Roman Palestine. Precisely the position taken by Jesus and his followers on the burning issues of the day – war against or accommodation to Rome, the key demands of the divine–human covenant, and authoritative leadership within the Judean community – is unfortunately not available to us today.

In the view of modern New Testament scholars, the four canonical Gospels were composed during the second half of the first century or perhaps even a bit later, many decades after the events they depict. In those intervening decades, much had happened in Jewish Palestine and within the small but rapidly expanding Jesus movement. Two developments are especially noteworthy – the first in the larger Jewish ambiance and the second within the young Jesus movement itself. In the year 66, the Jews of Palestine mounted a major rebellion against their Roman overlords. This rebellion was a serious affair; suppressing it necessitated Roman deployment of vast resources and took four years to complete. Nonetheless, by the year 70, the rebellion was suppressed, with large-scale loss of Jewish life and property, with the capital city and religious center of Jerusalem destroyed, and with the Jerusalem temple in ruins.

The implications of this uprising and defeat for subsequent Jewish life and for the budding Jesus movement were profound.

Within the Jesus movement itself, the significant development was the emergence of Paul – not a member of the original Jesus circle – into a position of leadership and the development of a distinctively Pauline approach to the movement and its objectives. Paul – whose views will be closely analyzed in Chapter 2 – saw the mission of Jesus in new and more universal terms. God had sent Jesus to implement an expanded covenant that would encompass gentiles as well as Jews. The results of this internal development were momentous for the growing Jesus movement, for the Palestinian Jewry that by and large rejected Jesus, and ultimately for the successors of this Palestinian Jewry over the centuries.

The Gospels were composed subsequent to these two developments and were undoubtedly influenced by them, although precisely how constitutes the great dilemma of modern New Testament scholarship. The four Gospels are generally divided by scholars into two subgroups: the Synoptic Gospels – Mark, Matthew, and Luke – on the one hand, and the rather distinct Gospel according to John, on the other. Mark – it is widely agreed – is the earliest of the three Synoptic Gospels and served as one of the foundations for Matthew and Luke. In addition, Matthew and Luke are said to depend on a now-lost collection of the sayings of Jesus, with both Matthew and Luke working their preexistent materials into somewhat divergent compositions.[1] While all four Gospels, and especially the Synoptic Gospels, strive to locate Jesus firmly within his immediate Palestinian Jewish ambiance, their narratives were surely impacted by the subsequent developments we have noted, although the precise nature of this impact cannot be ascertained. We shall focus on the three, more straightforward and interrelated, Synoptic Gospels.

The earliest of the three Synoptic Gospels – it is now widely agreed – is Mark, generally dated to the late 60s or early 70s of the first century, that is to say, approximately four decades subsequent to the Crucifixion. The locale for the composition of Mark is uncertain, although few scholars identify Palestine as the author's home base. What is relatively certain is that the author was not an eyewitness to the events he depicts, meaning that his sources were oral or written testimonies to the lifetime of Jesus. The far longer Gospel according to Matthew – which draws heavily on Mark – is generally dated during the 80s of the first century and was almost certainly composed outside of Palestine. It is often suggested that the author of Matthew may have been a Jewish-Christian. This suggestion is grounded in the author's extensive concern with and knowledge of

Jewish traditions and attitudes. Matthew has historically been the most popular of the Gospels, the most widely used in Christian liturgy, and thus the most influential. Scholars have dated the Gospel according to Luke to about the same time as Matthew. The author of the Gospel according to Luke in fact composed a two-volume opus, with the second volume devoted to the decades immediately following the Crucifixion.[2]

The Synoptic Gospel narratives are in most respects simple, telling a fairly direct tale. There are, to be sure, internal discrepancies within each of the three Synoptic Gospels and among them as well. Although these discrepancies are interesting and will be noted, they do not create serious issues for our purposes; rather, the Synoptic Gospels create an overall portrait of Judaism, Jews, and Jewish history that is relatively straightforward and relatively consistent in its negativity toward the leaders of Palestinian Jewry, although mitigation of this negativity is important and will be duly indicated.

The Synoptic Gospels are tightly constricted in space and time. They take place almost exclusively in the Galilee and Judea, with a special focus on Jerusalem. One of the results of this tight spatial focus is that Jews play a dominant role in the Gospels. Gentiles make almost no significant appearance in them. When gentiles are portrayed, as in the Crucifixion accounts, they appear essentially as dupes of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. What is true spatially and ethnographically is true chronologically as well. There is only minimal rumination on the Jewish past and future, which is dwarfed by the Gospels' focus on the immediate and intense opposition manifested by Jesus' Galilean and Judean Jewish contemporaries and especially their role in his crucifixion.

The close focus on limited space and time results in a rather minimal interest in the overall trajectory of Jewish history. Although reflections of the Jewish past and Jewish future are by no means totally absent, for these Gospel authors Jewish history is encapsulated in the thinking and behaviors of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, especially in the opposition and enmity of the leaders of the Jewish community of first-century Palestine to Jesus and his message. That opposition and enmity more or less define Jewishness for these Gospel authors, although again the complications they introduce are important for our purposes.

Scholarly consensus places the time of composition of the Gospel according to Mark toward the end of the 60s or the beginning of the 70s of the first century and the place of composition somewhere in the eastern half of the Roman Empire, and not in Palestine itself. Mark is the shortest of

the Gospels and is effectively spare in its narrative style. It opens with a brief account of John the Baptist, who appears as a prophetic precursor of the far greater Jesus. Very quickly, the mature Jesus occupies center stage, which he does not relinquish thereafter. The narrative stresses the obvious greatness of Jesus, expressed in multiple ways, and the recalcitrance of his Jewish contemporaries in understanding and acceding to his message. Mark is in many ways a tale of failure, which was ultimately of course a stunning success. In this respect, it is much like the earlier Pentateuchal narrative of Moses, who brought God's message and was subjected to incessant questioning and rejection by the Israelite people to whom and on behalf of whom he had been sent.

The sources of opposition to Jesus described in Mark were multiple. The least of these sources of opposition was his band of immediate followers. Although portrayed as understanding overall his nature and mission, Jesus' immediate followers recurrently disappointed him. This is especially prominent toward the end of Mark, at the point of arrest, condemnation, and execution of their leader, but there are earlier incidents of such disappointment as well. Similarly minor opposition is mounted by the shadowy forces of Satan, which regularly recognize, attempt to seduce, or challenge Jesus and his powers. Unquestionably, however, the dominant oppositional force in Mark – and the other Gospels as well – is Palestinian Jewry, precisely the community that Jesus was sent to lead. From the beginning through the end of Mark, it is the Jews who mount the most intense objections to Jesus and do the greatest damage to him and his cause. This tendency reaches its climax at the dramatic close of Mark, as the Jews use their power to have Jesus condemned, deflect Roman efforts to save him, and revile and mock him on the Cross.

Thus, once again – as in the Hebrew Bible – internal enemies are by far the most significant factors on the historical scene. Since history is presumed by the Hebrew Bible and subsequently by the New Testament authors to revolve around fulfillment or nonfulfillment of the divine–human covenant, the covenantal community itself is the most potent factor in historical causation. The Jews to whom Jesus had been dispatched were his most consistent, vociferous, and aggressive opponents. Because of the Jewish sense of the nature of historical process, fully shared by Jesus and his followers, with fulfillment or neglect of divine command the operative force in history, the Jews were Jesus' most important adversaries, on both the spiritual and terrestrial levels.

Modern scholarship has concluded that Jesus appeared as a Palestinian Jew, addressed his fellow Palestinian Jews, and projected himself as their

divinely mandated leader. There is powerful support for this conclusion in the terminology employed in Mark. The locution "Jew" or "Jews" is not employed in the first-person statements attributed to Jesus or in the third-person narration of events by the author. Indeed, the only times the term appears are in Chapter 15, which is the Crucifixion chapter, and the only ones to use the terminology are Romans. Pilate asks Jesus: "Are you the king of the Jews?"[3] In addressing the assembled crowd, the Roman procurator again uses the same term twice.[4] In mocking Jesus, Roman soldiers "dressed him in purple and, plaiting a crown of thorns on his head, placed it on his head. Then they began to salute him: 'Hail to the king of the Jews!' "[5] The titulus on the Cross invoked the same designation one last time.[6] For Romans to use this term of course makes perfect sense. They were outsiders, speaking to and of Jews as a separate and alternative group.

The fact that Jesus' first-person statements and the narrator's third-person account do not invoke the locution "Jew" or "Jews" is highly significant. Reportage of American election campaigning would not note that the audience addressed was American, since all such campaigning involves American audiences. So too the author of Mark does not desisgnate Jesus' audience as composed of Jews, since such was so obviously the case. Rather, reportage of American election campaigning focuses on subgroups in American society. Audiences are depicted as midwestern, southern, middle class, Latino, old, or young. So too does Mark identify subsets of Palestinian Jews – scribes, priests, Herod's men, Pharisees, Sadducees, or the crowd. The audiences were all Jewish; only the subgroups of Palestinian Jewry were important to note and specify.

The key points conveyed by this specification of Jewish subgroups are two. In the first place, the leaders of the diverse sectors of the tense and fragmented Jewish community of Palestine were united in their opposition to Jesus, the divinely appointed messenger. Despite the deep disagreements among these leadership groups on a wide range of political and religious issues, they came together in their rejection of Jesus. The second impression created is that the opposition to Jesus was by and large the responsibility of these leadership groups. The Jewish people on their own were responsive to Jesus' message, but were regularly led astray by their misguided and self-interested leaders. To be sure, we shall see that the author of the Gospel of Mark occasionally undercuts these broad impressions.

The grounds for the opposition of the various leadership groups in Palestinian Jewry were numerous and diverse; they ranged from

understandable uncertainty through what Mark perceives to be excessive legalism and ultimately to reprehensible self-interest. Some of the questions posed by Jewish leaders opposed to Jesus seem to have been motivated by a relatively straightforward desire for clarification. Of course, the author of Mark sees even such straightforward questioning as problematic. Jewish observers should have been convinced by the power of Jesus' miracles, the brilliance of his teaching, or his fulfillment of well-known prophetic predictions. Nonetheless, these straightforward questions are the least offensive of the lines of opposition. Chapter 2 of Mark begins with the incident of the paralyzed man who was lowered through the ceiling into Jesus' presence. "When he saw their faith, Jesus said to the man: 'My son, your sins are forgiven.' " This touched off anxiety among some of the scribes in attendance. They thought to themselves: "How can the fellow talk like that? It is blasphemy! Who but God can forgive sins?"[7] Again, from the perspective of the author of Mark, this anxiety was unfounded, but the response of the scribes was not in and of itself obnoxious.

The most regularly recurring motif in the opposition of the Jewish leadership revolves around the legal demands of Jewish tradition. Recurrently, the Jewish leaders, especially the scribes and Pharisees, are distressed with what seemed to them Jesus' flaunting of Jewish law. Thus, in the same chapter of Mark, shortly after the incident involving the paralyzed man, Jesus was having a meal in his own house, in the company of many of his disciples, who included in their ranks a considerable number of tax collectors and sinners. This reality agitated some of the scribes present. "Some scribes who were Pharisees, observing the company in which he was eating, said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' "[8] Instances of questioning based on considerations of Jewish law abound throughout Mark.[9]

In some cases, like the one just now cited, the questioning arose in the normal course of events; in other cases, the questioning based on legal considerations was contrived, constituting a premeditated effort to embarrass and expose Jesus. Thus, the question about taxes found in Chapter 12 is introduced in the following way: "A number of Pharisees and men of Herod's party were sent to trap him with a question. They came and said, 'Teacher, we know you are a sincere man and court no one's favor, whoever he may be; you teach in all sincerity the way of life that God requires. Are we or are we not permitted to pay taxes to the Roman emperor?' "[10] Although the question was a legitimate one, in this instance it was intended as a trap. This intention makes the flattering

introductory observations about Jesus' sincerity all the more irksome in their obvious insincerity.

Perhaps the most negative questioning is grounded in blatant self-interest. Although many of the questions may be reasonably inferred as emerging out of self-interest on the part of Jewish leaders who would be displaced by the divinely mandated authority of Jesus, in a number of instances the author of Mark asserts this self-interest overtly. A major example of this blatant self-interest is contained in the famous passage in which Jesus entered the temple and drove out the merchants buying and selling there and the moneychangers. His actions are described by the author of Mark as deeply upsetting to the chief priests and scribes. "The chief priests and the scribes heard of this and looked for a way to bring about his death; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching."[11] This episode shows the forces of opposition planning the most drastic of measures. Moreover, there is here no sense of opposition grounded in principle. Rather, it is the fear of popular acceptance of Jesus and rejection of their own leadership that is portrayed as moving the chief priests and the scribes to their extreme plans.

In contrast, there are recurrent references to public support on the part of Jesus' audiences, which were – as we have noted – composed totally of Jews. Mark reports repeatedly enthusiastic responses from crowds of Jews to Jesus – his appearance, his miracles, and his teachings. The report on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a particularly impressive depiction of such popular enthusiasm. "Many people carpeted the road with their cloaks, while others spread greenery which they had cut from the fields. Those in front and those behind shouted, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David which is coming! Hosanna in the heavens!' "[12] This is an especially rich description of adulation on the part of the general Jewish population.

The broad paradigm of opposition to Jesus on the part of the vested leadership of Palestinian Jewry and acceptance of his message by the common folk in and of itself portrays Jesus' Jewish contemporaries in a balanced way. Jewish opposition to Jesus is by no means depicted as total. Indeed, the implication is that the majority of Palestinian Jews acknowledged him and his teachings. Occasionally, however, Mark undercuts this simple paradigm, complicating the picture of first-century Palestinian Jewry considerably.

On the one hand, leadership figures on the individual level are portrayed as recognizing the divine mission of Jesus and accepting it. The

rambling incident involving a synagogue president, depicted in Mark 5, offers one such instance. In this case, the distraught man pleaded with Jesus for help with his grievously ill daughter. While on their way to the daughter, word arrived of the little girl's death. Jesus continued to the home, where he was successful in raising the girl to life. The confidence reposed in Jesus by the distraught father indicates that not all Jewish leaders were in opposition.[13]

The same point is made by the post-Crucifixion activities of Joseph of Arimathaea. Joseph is described by the author of Mark as "a respected member of the Council, a man who looked forward to the kingdom of God."[14] Thus, Joseph is depicted as a member of the leadership of Palestinian Jewry who was responsive to the message of Jesus or was at the very least in agreement on the nearness of the kingdom of God. Joseph seemingly used his position to make his way to Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus. This request was granted, and Joseph respectfully wrapped the body and buried it. Again, not all leaders of Palestinian Jewry ranged themselves in opposition to Jesus.

Conversely, not all members of the broad Jewish community accepted Jesus. There are interesting instances of rejection by Jewish onlookers, even without the intrusion of leadership figures. A relatively benign example of such rejection comes in Jesus' own hometown. On the Sabbath, he preached in the synagogue and elicited the following reaction: "'Where does he get it from? What is this wisdom he has been given? How does he perform such miracles? Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us?' So they turned against him."[15] While this rejection is attributed by Jesus to the special issue of acceptance of a prophet in his own original environment, it shows popular rejection, without the intrusion of Jewish leadership figures.

A far more significant instance of crowd rejection is associated with the scenes of condemnation and execution of Jesus. When Pilate offered the crowd the opportunity to have Jesus released, the assemblage chose instead to ask for the release of Barabbas, thereby in effect condemning Jesus to the cross. In this instance, Mark attributes the crowd response to the incitement of the chief priests.[16] However, during the crucifixion itself, Mark reports crowd derision of Jesus, with no reference to incitement on the part of leadership figures. "The passers-by wagged their heads and jeered at him: 'Bravo!' they cried, 'So you are the man who was to pull down the temple and rebuild it in three days! Save yourself and come down from the cross.'"[17] Here, the Jewish crowd seems ranged in

self-generated opposition, indeed derision. While Mark presents a broad portrait of Jewish leadership opposed to Jesus contrasted with Jewish masses that accepted him, from time to time the author of Mark upsets this simplistic portrait, suggesting that the Jewish reactions to Jesus were – like all important human reactions – exceedingly complex.

Jewish opposition to Jesus reached its climax in his crucifixion. Mark advances a fairly straightforward sequence of events, in all of which the Jewish leadership plays the dominant role. Although the Roman official Pilate formally decreed the execution of Jesus and although Roman soldiers carried out the decree, Mark makes it abundantly clear that the Romans had no quarrel whatsoever with Jesus and that the execution was a bow to insistent Jewish demands. In fact, the Roman procurator Pilate is portrayed as having attempted to save Jesus by invoking a traditional custom, whereby one prisoner could be released at the request of the crowd assembled to witness executions. According to Mark, this Roman attempt at saving Jesus failed, due to the agitation of the Jewish crowd, stirred up by its leaders. Subsequently, the Jewish mob turned negative on its own, as we have just seen.

Thus, Mark provides an essentially balanced portrait of Jewish responses to Jesus, with general acceptance by the Jewish population at large and rejection by the Jewish leadership. He further balances his portrait by indicating instances of acceptance of Jesus by Jewish leaders and rejection by the masses. Nonetheless, this general balance is dwarfed by the portrait of the monolithic and negative Jewish role in the Crucifixion. The execution and resurrection of Jesus constitute the high point of the Gospel according to Mark, the denouement toward which the drama of Jesus' life had been leading. In this dramatic high point, the Jews – leaders and masses alike – play an unrelievedly destructive role.

To be sure, the portrait of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus was undercut to a significant extent by another major theme in Mark, which was Jesus' forewarning that he was to suffer and die in accordance with prophetic prediction. At about the mid-point of the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus warns his disciples of the reality of Jewish opposition, of his death, and of his resurrection. "He began to teach them that the Son of Man had to endure great suffering, and to be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes; to be put to death; and to rise again three days afterwards. He spoke about it plainly."[18] From this point on, Jesus recurrently reminded his followers of what was to happen to him. Now, the notion that God had planned for Jesus to be put to death and then resurrected complicates considerably the

Marcan portrait of Jewish culpability for the Crucifixion. However, in dramatic terms, the hostile role of the Jews – both leaders and followers – tends to overwhelm the theological niceties. The Crucifixion account is exceedingly powerful, drawing much of its narrative force from the contrast between an innocent victim and gratuitously malevolent enemies, who are the Jews.

The Jewish opposition to Jesus so totally reflected in the Crucifixion narrative must be seen against the backdrop of Palestinian Jewish life during the days of Jesus and likewise against the realities of the slightly later period during which the Gospel according to Mark and the other Gospels were composed. As noted, Palestinian Jewry was beset by major political and spiritual rifts, which set groups of Jews intensely and often violently against one another. This intensity surely influenced the Marcan portrait of virulent Jewish opposition to Jesus at the time of his crucifixion, as the Gospel authors were surely well aware of the polarized Jewish environment within which Jesus appeared.

At the same time, the internal developments in the Jesus movement we have noted certainly played a role as well. As the Pauline version of Jesus' message began to spread among the gentile population of the Roman Empire, the spectacle of Jesus executed at the hands of the Roman authorities raised serious problems. The solution to these problems was to create a portrait that effaced all traces of tension between Jesus and Rome. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to shift culpability for the crucifixion of Jesus from the Romans to the Jews. As a result of these needs, Mark's relatively balanced depiction of Jewish reactions to Jesus prior to the Crucifixion gives way to the wholly negative portrait of the Jews at the time of Jesus' execution. Overall, the drama of the Crucifixion narrative has shaped much of Christian popular thinking about Jews. More thoughtful observers, however, have not overlooked the complexities and nuance of the broader Marcan narrative.

Mark's focus in depicting Jews is almost wholly on the Jewish contemporaries of Jesus. This focus flows from the nature of the narrative, which is concise and limited to the immediacy of Jesus, the Galilee, and Jerusalem. There is only one significant instance in which Mark explicitly extends its purview beyond the immediate and into the Jewish past and future. Interestingly, that introduction of Jewish past and future is achieved in the form of a parable, a favorite mode of teaching on the part of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. This is the well-known parable of the vineyard owner and his rebellious tenants. It was clearly intended by the author of the Gospel according to Mark as a reflection on the past and