“AN EXEGETICAL STUDY ON *MARK 2:18-22* 
JESUS QUESTIONED ABOUT FASTING” 
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Narrative Art in the Gospels
Introduction

The Gospel of Mark is the first and shortest of the three synoptics. Amidst the parables, controversies, and the passion, the author includes a particular instance where Christ taught about fasting. The author writes:

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. 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?" 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. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins--and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.  

The thesis of this paper is to faithfully exegete Mark 2:18-22 and show how the passage applies to a modern reader.

Authorship of the Gospel is traditionally accredited to John Mark, the companion of Peter and Paul. Church History says Peter passed on reports of what he experienced to Mark who wrote them down as this Gospel. Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis in A.D. 120, affirmed four things about the Gospel and it’s Markan composition: (1) he was the writer for Peter; (2) he wrote down accurately as much as he could remember of Peter's words, which the latter had adapted to the needs of the moment; (3) he was not an eyewitness of Jesus, nor a disciple and (4) it was his desire not to omit or misrepresent anything. Internal evidence also supports Petrine origin.

The date of the composition of this Gospel is a debatable issue amongst scholars. Some Church history endorses the Gospel with an early date. Irenaeus reports that Mark did not reduce

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1 All Bible citations taken from the ESV.

2 (See Acts 12:12,25; 13:5,13; 15:37; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Phm 24; 1 Pet. 5:13)

the Gospel to writing until after the “exodus” of the apostles Peter and Paul in Rome. The use of “exodus” in the work connotes the death of Peter and Paul.\textsuperscript{4} However, other notable figures in Church history such as Origen and Clement of Alexandria report that the Gospel was written while Peter was living. Internal evidence rests on three factors: the suffering motif of the Gospels itself, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, and the “abomination of desolation” mentioned in Mark 13:14. Mark’s emphasis on Jesus as the suffering Son of God, and the concomitant emphasis on suffering discipleship (8:31-9:1; 13:3-13), suggest that the second Gospel was written to Christians undergoing persecution.\textsuperscript{5} The Neroian persecution that was responsible for Peter and Paul’s deaths took place between A.D. 64-67 and would coincide with the Gospel’s composition. The mention of a future destruction of Jerusalem and an “abomination of desolation” in Mark’s eschatological discourse would suggest the events had not occurred yet. In conclusion, a combination of external and internal data appears to point to a composition of the Gospel of Mark in Rome between the great fire in 64 and the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 70, that is, about the year 65.\textsuperscript{6}

The audience to whom the Gospel was written seems to be Gentiles in Rome. Scholars believe this for various reasons: the Gospel contains the fewest OT quotes and allusions, Mark interprets and translates Aramaic words that are found in the Gospel for his readers (3:17; 5:41; 7:11), Mark explains some geographical locations in connection with stories (13:3), Mark


\textsuperscript{5}Edwards, 7.

\textsuperscript{6}Edwards, 9.
clarifies Jewish customs (7:3), and there is not one mention of the Law in the Gospel itself. The purpose of the Gospel’s writing is to get the suffering Son of Man/God to the cross. In short, the Gospel of Mark is about why Jesus died. Other distinctive themes in the Gospel of Mark are the roles of disciples/discipleship, imminent eschatology, and the message about Jesus as Good News. Of the four Gospels, Mark is most overtly a “docudrama,” consisting of noteworthy “clips” as well as typical or representative events; snatches of speeches or dialogues; and commentary by the narrator. The author also makes extensive use of travel language throughout the Gospel to get Christ to the pinnacle and goal of his earthly Incarnation, the cross.

**Preceding Context**

Mark groups together a series of five stories, all of which fall into the category of “pronouncement” stories. They are also called conflict or controversy stories. The scribes and Pharisees are offended by Jesus’ actions. The reaction of the scribes and Pharisees calls forth a crucial pronouncement of Jesus which sheds light on the new situation his coming has introduced. The five here arguably form a chiasm: two that include controversial healings (Mark 2:1-12; 3:1-6); two that involves debates about food- when to harvest it and with whom to

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9 Bloomberg, 120.

10 Crossway, 1890.

11 Bloomberg, 235.

eat it (2:13-17,23-28); and a central climatic pair of metaphors about the joy and newness of the kingdom (2:18-20,21-22).\textsuperscript{13} It is uncertain if these events actually occurred in consecutive order or if Mark decided to group them together for thematic reasons.

In Mark 2:14-17, Jesus is presented in the Gospel calling Levi or Matthew the apostle and sharing a meal at his house with, as the Pharisees would say, “sinners.” Everything in the story hinges on the one who calls and the decisiveness and finality of the call. That it is inserted here and not combined with the earlier report is due to the fact that here the call is issued to one who as a customs official stood outside the boundaries of Jewish religious respectability and was \textit{persona non grata} with the Jewish religious authorities.\textsuperscript{14} Matthew, as a tax collector, left a lucrative job and financial security to immediately follow Jesus, a traveling Rabbi. The story emphasizes the cost of discipleship and what Christ demands of his followers. Jesus goes to Levi’s house where he and his disciples begin to eat and fellowship with the lowly people of society. The scribes and Pharisees came and were shocked that Jesus was disregarding the social norms of the day to eat with “sinners” and “tax collectors.” Jesus responds to the accusation with a sharp rebuke “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” In his mind, to reach sinners, one must get physically close to them. Mark’s interest in recording this incident lies precisely in the demonstration of forgiveness which it affords.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Immediate Context}

\textsuperscript{13} Bloomberg, 235.


\textsuperscript{15} Lane, 107.
Verses 18-22 begin the bulk and aim of the exegetical thesis of this paper. It is widely held that vv. 21-22 were originally independent from vv. 18-20 because they are very general and do not mention fasting. This may be, but certainty is impossible. Both parts contrast the old way (that of John and the Pharisees) and the new way (that of Jesus).16

**Mark 2:18**

The first question raised by the passage is “Why were John’s disciples and the Pharisees fasting to begin with?” In Jesus’ time, the Pharisees made a show of their frequent fasting twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays (Luke 18:12). James R. Edwards says the following about the Jewish view of fasting in the first century:

> The three main pillars of Judaism were prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. Judaism required but one fast on the Day of the Atonement (Lev. 16:29-30; Num. 29:7-11). But the Mishnah…specifies at least three other types of fasts. One type was fasts that lamented national tragedies, such as the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar (Zech 7:3-4; 8:19); another was fasts in times of crisis, such as war, plague, drought, and famine; and a third type was self-imposed fasts for any number of personal reasons (2 Sam. 12:16; Psa. 35:13).17

Jewish leaders abused the OT mandate of one fast a year to showcase their personal hypocritical piety to the people around them. The exact reasons for John’s disciples fasting is unknown. The disciples of John may have been fasting because of the imprisonment or death of their leader, his ascetic lifestyle, or his emphasis on repentance.18

It is hard to know exactly which groups were present and who explicitly asked the question about fasting. In the parallel accounts in Matthew 9:14-17 and Luke 5:33-39, the person

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17 Edwards, 88-89.

18 Brooks, 64.
asking the question concerning John’s disciples and the Pharisees’ fasting is one of John’s disciples and an unnamed person respectively. Mark 2:18 says “the people” came and said to him. From the flow of the narrative, the questioners would seem to be the disciples of John and the Pharisees, but since they go on to speak of these groups in third person, this seems unlikely; they may be either an undefined group or the scribes who have opposed Jesus in two previous pericopes. Based on all three synoptics, it is hard to pinpoint who actually asked the question. Scholars have also noted that the phrase “the disciples of the Pharisees” (μαθηται των φαρισαίων) is an odd locution, because “disciple” implies adhesion to a particular master such as John the Baptist, Jesus, or Hillel, not membership in a group as the Pharisaic party. The phrase could mean those scribal adherents of the more extremist perushim among the Pharisaic party who would have had a great deal in common with the austere outlook of the disciples of the Baptist. Matthew 9:14 omit’s the whole phrase itself. The question of fasting itself was aimed directly at Jesus’ disciples and indirectly at him. Jesus would be accused later of being a drunkard and a glutton (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34).

**Mark 2:19-20**

Jesus, in true form, answers their question of why his disciples do not fast directly with a question utilizing a wedding metaphor. To understand the context of the answer, one must understand the 1st century Jewish wedding. The wedding feast was a celebration of prolonged

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20 Ibid., 233.

joy, and might last as long as a week (Judg. 14:12). The intention of Jesus’ question is to show that just as glad celebration is the hallmark of a wedding feast, so joy is the hallmark of his disciples. It would be unthinkable to fast during a wedding celebration that is heralded by joyful music and gala processions. Joel Marcus even notes that in Jewish law, wedding guests were freed from certain religious obligations that were deemed to be incompatible with the joy of the celebration.

Jesus’ use of the bridegroom metaphor arguably has Christological significance and implications. The fact that the Messiah is nowhere in the OT presented as a bridegroom, and only rarely outside the OT, has led a number of scholars to doubt the Christological significance of Jesus’ use of the bridegroom imagery in 2:19. Hugh Anderson even says that “Jesus employed the word ‘bridegroom’ initially in a metaphor intended only to underscore the contrast between his own disciples and others, the Church would quickly have fastened on to it and taken it as a allegorical representation of his person.” In the OT, the bridegroom is an image of Yahweh himself (Hos. 2:19; Isa. 54:4; Ezek. 16:2; Jer. 2:2). What is shocking about this passage is that Jesus is attributing the title to himself! The imagery of the bridegroom is carried even further in the NT with messianic implications (John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:32).

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23 Anderson, 107.

24 Marcus, 233.

25 Edwards, 90.


associations inherent in the bridegroom imagery are consonant with Mark’s Christology, whose chief Christological category is not Messiah, but Son of God (1:9-11, 25, 2:10). The latter conveys not simply messianic service of God but shared nature and essential union with God.

Jesus did note a time when the disciples would fast. He said “the days” would come when they will fast. The phrase “the days” has been noted to have eschatological significance (Luke 17:22, 21:6). Many OT passages, such as Amos 8:11; Jer. 16:14, 19:6, use a similar phrase that is only slightly different (“days are coming”). Jesus said the bridegroom would be “taken away.” The phrase “taken away” (απαρθη απ) denotes a violent removal that echoes Isa. 53:8 (By oppression and judgment he was taken away). Some have taken the phrase “in that day” found at the end of v. 20 to mean the days between the Good Friday that Christ was crucified upon and Easter Sunday in order to promote the idea that fasting is not illegitimate under the New Covenant. However, the phrase could mean just merely “then” or it may have deeper significance. The phrase appears in apocalyptic contexts in the OT (Mal. 3:19; Zeph. 1:15; Amos 8:9) and the NT, including Mark and other Apostle’s writings (Mark 13:32; 14:25; Matt. 7:22; 2 Thess. 1:10). The word (ἡμέρα) could denote literally the space between dawn and dark or

28 Edwards, 90.
29 Marcus, 234.
30 Barbieri, 69.
32 Marcus, 234.
figuratively a period between ages. Robert Gundry says “the entirety of the Church age constitutes ‘the days’ ‘that will come when the bridegroom is taken away.’”

**Mark 2:21-22**

Jesus follows his bridegroom metaphor with two parables using everyday objects: cloth and wineskins. A summary of the parables is:

The first pictures a new patch of cloth sewn on an old garment. When washed, the new patch will shrink, causing a tear in both the garment and the patch (Job. 13:28). The second depicts used wineskins filled with new wine that ferments and expands bursting the old and brittle skins (Job 32:19). Both wine and wineskins come to ruin.

The interpretation of the parables is that a joyful new age has arrived demanding new ways and not just a patched-up Mosaic covenant. Joel Marcus says:

This basic point about the incompatibility between the new and old orders and the necessity of preserving, undiluted by compromise with the structures of the old age, the eschatological power that has broken into the world in Jesus’ advent, is summed up by the battle cry that ends the passage: “New wine into new wineskins!” Similarly the eschatological newness of Jesus’ mission cannot be contained within the old structures of Judaism.

The kingdom of God cannot be regarded merely as a patch over the regulations of the Mosaic law and extra biblical traditions. Jesus is showing the finality of the OT way of doing things with the beginning of the New Covenant. As seen by the parabolic images, something serviceable is destroyed and of no further use.

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35 Edwards, 92.

36 Marcus, 238.
Seceding Context

Mark continues to list his five controversies Jesus had with the religious leaders of the day. In ch. 2:23-28, Jesus is questioned about what is lawful to do on the Sabbath after his disciples pick some grain. Jesus responds with reminding the leaders about king David and his men eating the sacred showbread (1 Sam. 21:1-6) and an assertion that he was the “Lord over the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28). Jesus was suggesting very far-reaching changes in how his followers were to observe the fourth commandment. 37

Application

A good application from this text is that fasting is a Christian discipline and should be practiced today. Jesus did not do away with fasting when he instituted the New Covenant but gave it a new significance in the lives of believers. John Piper said:

The new wine of Christ's presence demands not no fasting, but new fasting. The new fasting is based on the mystery that the bridegroom has come, not just will come. The new wine of his presence calls for new fasting. It's not only about mourning over sin under the New Covenant. 38

Christ himself said “When you fast...(Matt. 6:16).” Not, “if” you fast. The Church found in Acts frequently fasted (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23) and continued to do so after the apostle’s deaths. The Didache or Teachings of the Apostles says “But do not let your fasts coincide with those of the hypocrites: since they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, you must then fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.” 39 The earliest Christians after the Apostles fasted twice a week! We, as the Church, need to rediscover the privilege, discipline, and joy of fasting. Jon Piper said:

37 Bloomberg, 238.
38 Piper, 40.
Fasting is peculiarly suited to glorify God. It is fundamentally an offering of emptiness to God in hope. It is a sacrifice of need and hunger. It says, by its very nature, “Father, I am empty, but you are full. I am hungry, but you are the Bread of Heaven. I am thirsty, but you are the Fountain of Life. I am weak, but you are strong. I am poor, but you are rich. I am foolish, but you are wise. I am broken, but you are whole. I am dying, but your steadfast love is better than life.” When God sees this confession of need and this expression of trust, he acts, because the glory of his all sufficient grace is at stake. The final answer is that God rewards fasting because fasting expresses the cry of the heart that nothing on the earth can satisfy our souls besides God. God must reward this cry because God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.40

Amen! Let the Church repent of it’s spiritual apathy and lethargy to seek after God in this fashion today!

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40 Piper, 180-181.
Bibliography


