

MK 3.1-6 AS A “SIGN STORY” SOLVING THE PERICOPE’S INTERPRETATIVE DIFFICULTIES

Jeffrey B. Gibson

Exegetes have long noted that Mark’s story of the healing on the Sabbath of a man with a “withered” hand (Mk 3.1-6) raises several interpretative questions. There is, first of all, the literary critical question of how the story is to be classified form critically. Then there are the traditions-history questions of whether the pericope is unitary or composite, and if the latter, of what its original core was, as well as when and by whom its sub-units, how ever they might be delineated, were joined together. And finally there is the (to my mind more interesting) story level question of how the various actions of Jesus that are depicted within the pericope are to be interpreted. What, according to Mark, was Jesus “up to”?

It is my belief that answers to the second and third of these questions will be found if we answer the first of them – that is to say, the traditions history question and the question of what the Markan Jesus thinks he is doing in the story told in Mk. 3:1-6 can be resolved by determining the story’s form. So the initial task at hand is to answer the question: what form does Mk 3:1-6 actually have? How is it to be classified form critically?

I. FORM OF THE STORY

At first glance Mark’s story of the healing of the man with a withered hand seems to be a *Streitgespräch* or “Conflict Story” in which Jesus is portrayed as attempting to justify casuistically, by means of a question on the legitimacy of “doing good and saving life on the Sabbath” (vs. 4), his

performing a healing which under the rubric of Mosaic Law and its prohibitions against Sabbath “work” would ordinarily have been forbidden him.¹ But a closer inspection of the story reveals that this is not the case. For, first of all, the structure of the story does not cohere well with the form typical of the Conflict Story. Conflict stories – and notably, the conflict stories in GMark—usually follow the pattern of (1) action (introductory narrative), (2) objection to the action (opponents’ question or attack), and (3) pronouncement (dominical saying) which justifies the disputed action (cf. Mk 2.15-17; 23-28).² In other words, the utterance or pronouncement around which the conflict story centers, and by which the action causing the conflict is justified, generally occurs at the *end* of the story, *after* a description of the action which occasions the conflict and a notice of the objection the action raises. But in Mk 3.1-6, not only is there *no* notice of an objection to Jesus performing the healing recounted there (Mk 3.6 notwithstanding); the story’s pronouncement actually occurs *before* both the (purportedly) troublesome action and something that, to use Joanna Dewey’s words is “not characteristic of the controversy apothegem form”, namely, a notice about Jesus (v. 5a) that is

¹ This is the judgment of the majority of scholars who have dealt with the question of how Mk 3.1-6 is to be classified form critically. See, e.g., R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), p. 12; M. Albertz, *Die synoptischen Streitgespräche: ein Beitrag zur Formengeschichte des Urchristentums* (Berlin: Trowitzsch & Sohns, 1921), pp. 12-13; A. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries: The Form and Function of the Synoptic Conflict Stories in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), pp. 82-83; and to some extent V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1955) 220.

On the purpose behind the pericope, see Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries*, 82-83. As Hultgren and many other commentators have pointed out, ‘healing’, except to save a life, seems to have been considered ‘work’, and was, therefore, an activity prohibited on the Sabbath. (For the evidence, see *Str-Bill*, 1, pp. 623-29 and I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharasaism and the Gospels* (Cambridge: CUP, 1924), 1, pp. 129-135).

² On this, see Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries*, 52-59.

explicitly biographical in nature.³ And in the second place, if Mk 3.1-6 is dealing with a question of Law and the legitimation of the particular healing Jesus there undertakes, then, as R.A. Banks has noted, “it is strange” that the pronouncement Jesus utters to defend his action “has no relevance to the man around whom the story centers, for his life is not saved if his hand is healed, nor is his life lost if it is not”⁴ Should we not expect, if within Mk 3.1-6 Mark wished to portray Jesus as intent to justify the healing that he there engages in, that the saying Jesus uses to do so would be more apt?⁵

Is Mk 3.1-6 then, as some have suggested,⁶ a healing miracle story? If so, then why the admixture to the notices of healing (3.1, 3, 5b) the notices of controversy (3.2, 4) and the story’s biographical (3.5a, 6) elements⁷ - notices and elements which not only are *not proper* to the typical miracle story form of (1) description of circumstance; (2) narration of the action of the healer; (3)

3 Joanna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate : Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1-3:6* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980) 103.

4 R.A. Banks *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: CUP, 19xx), p. 124.

5 Of course, one might argue in defense of the *Streitgespräch* categorization that Mk 3.1-6 was indeed shaped and intended by Mark to be seen as a ‘conflict story’, the purpose of which was to provide a defense for engaging on the Sabbath in the types of healings which the Law did not seem to permit, *and that Mark has simply failed here to be the master of his material*. But to my mind this type of defense smacks too much of special pleading to be taken seriously.

6 Eg. H. van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965) 436-440.

7 On this, see Herman Hendrickx, *The Miracle Stories of the Synoptic Gospels* (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1987) 155; R. Guelich, *Mark 1:1-8:26*, 131.

description of the favourable impression the healing makes upon its witnesses⁸ - but which here have the unusual effect of making the healing subordinate in interest to the religious question at issue, i.e., whether “Is it seemly on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?”⁹

Could it be, as J. Roloff has argued,¹⁰ that the pericope is an historical, biographical “story about Jesus”, that is, a narrative whose substance and form is shaped to a great extent by the memory of an actual encounter between Jesus and his opponents? While by no means impossible, this thesis seems countered by evidence which points to the fact that the story is largely a Markan

8 On this, see V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1949) 121; R. Bultmann, *Form Criticism: A New Method of New Testament Research* (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1934) 36-39.

9 So Taylor, *Mark*, 220. So, too, R.G. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles* (London: SCM Press, 1963, p. 52; Hultgren, *Jesus and his Adversaries*, p. 82.

10 *Das Kerygma und der irdische Jesus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), p. 64.

construction,¹¹ or at least has been heavily redacted by Mark.¹² But even more importantly, this thesis, based as it is on Roloff's observations of how the story fails to fit into any of the regular form critical categories,¹³ is *unnecessary*. For there is one form critical category the story *does* fit, a category generally overlooked or heretofore unrecognized by scholars, namely, that of the "sign" story.

The "sign" story and its form

11 So Dewey (Markan Public Debate, 100-105), based on her observations of how well crafted the story in terms of concentric patterns, a feature characteristic of Markan construction.

12 On this, see Hendrickx, *The Miracle Stories*, 152-159.

13 An observation also noted by Guelich (*Mark 1:1-8:26*, p. 131) and shared by Hendrickx (*Miracle Stories*, 153).

A “sign” story is one whose theme is how a claimant to divine authority, facing hostility or disbelief, finds it necessary to produce or work a *shmeiḇn*, a “proof” or “token of trustworthiness” either to certify the truth of a prophecy he has uttered, or to establish the validity of his claim that a certain course of action he has undertaken is “of God”.¹⁴

Typical examples in Biblical or biblically related literature of the type “sign story” may be found at 1 Sam 2.30-34 (the prediction of the death of Phineas’ sons); 1 Sam 14.6-15 (the call to Jonathan and his armor bearer to defeat the Philistines); 2 Kgs 20.1-10 (the cure of Hezekiah’s illness, cf. 2 Chron 32.24); Is. 7.1-8 (the “sign” of Immanuel); Lk. 2.8- 20; Jn 2.13-19; B.T. *Sanhedrin* 98a; B.T. *Baba Meziah* 59b; and Mk 8.11-13. As these examples show, this type of story contains notices or allusions to three facts

(1) that the claimant to divine authority or insight into the mind of God has engaged in an activity, or has uttered a prophecy or doctrinal statement, that in his eyes bears God’s approval;

(2) that that action or utterance is viewed by observers as either (a) so strange and surprising, or (b) so contrary to common sense, conventional wisdom or practical

14 A “sign” (*shmeiḇn*) itself is a public event. Its occurrence is meant to be seen or perceived, as well as publicly acknowledged as having happened, and its ability stand as proof of the truthfulness of a distrusted utterance or the legitimacy of a claim that a person and his actions are “of God” is grounded in the public experience of a coincidence between a prior prophecy (what is designated as the “sign”) and a subsequent event (the “sign’s” actual manifestation). Accordingly, a “sign” does its work when it is effectuated in exact conformity with its predicted or previously stipulated “shape”. And though often a miracle or a prodigy, a “sign” does not need to have a spectacular content in order to stand as a token of trustworthiness. The important thing about a “proof sign’s” “shape” is not whether it is in itself miraculous or ordinary, but whether, once manifested, it then appears in complete correspondence with its own terms, whatever they have been stated to be. On this, as well as for a further discussion of the characteristics of a “sign”, see O. Linton, “The Demand for a Sign from Heaven (Mk 8:11-12 and parallels)”, *Studia Theologica* 19 (1965), pp.112-29.

considerations, or, worse, (c) such a direct contravention of Mosaic Law that its truth and divine origin is initially rejected by them; and

(3) that the claimant, wishing to secure acceptance of what he has said or done, (a) chooses (or has chosen for him) a “sign”, (b) proposes to bring it about, and -- working within the understanding that should he be able to effectuate it immediately according to stipulation, the skepticism surrounding his disputed action or utterance will no longer be valid -- (c) attempts to bring the “sign” to pass.

A “sign” story has the form:

1. introductory narrative framework
2. objectionable utterance or action
3. objection to, or expression of doubt over, the validity of the utterance or action (this sometimes takes the form of a notice of hostility toward the claimant to divine authority)
4. proposal of means by which the validity of the action or utterance may be certified (stipulation of the “sign”)
5. carrying out of the proposal (effectuating the “sign”)
6. reaction of observers

To illustrate this, let us consider five of the examples noted above, 2 Kings 20.1-11; B.T. *Sanhedrin* 98a; Lk. 2.8-ff; J.T. *M.K.* III, 1. 81cd; and Jn. 2:13-19.

JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL STUDIES

1. Introductory narrative framework

⁴And before Isaiah had gone out of 2 Kings 20.1-11

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, "Thus says the LORD, "Set your house in order; for you shall die, you shall not recover."'" ²Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to the LORD, saying, ³"Remember now, O LORD, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in thy sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

B.T. *Sanhedrin* 98a

Then the disciples of R. Jose ben Kisma asked him (R. Joshua ben Levi), "When will the Messiah come?" He answered, "I fear lest you demand of a sign of me". They assured him, "We will demand no sign of you".

Lk. 2.8-20

⁸And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.

JT *M.K.* III.1. 81cd

1) They wanted to tell R. Eliezer of the ban pronounced against him.
2) They said, "Who will go and tell him?" R. Akiba said, "I will go and tell him."

John 2.13-

¹³The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business.

2. objectionable utterance or action

⁴And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: ⁵"Turn back, and say to Hezekiah the prince of my people, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you; on the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD. ⁶And I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David's sake." ⁷And Isaiah said, "Bring a cake of figs. And let them take and lay it on the boil, that he may recover."

So he answered them, "When this gate falls down, is rebuilt, falls again, and is again rebuilt, and then falls a third time, before it can be rebuilt the son of David will come".

¹⁰And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; ¹¹for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

5) [Could R. Eliezer merit] all that praise without the Halacha's being according him? R. Haniniah said "Once it (the Torah) was given, the majority principle (Ex. 23.2) must be applied.

6) But did not R. Eliezer know that this principle had to be applied? He became insistent only because they burnt that which he declared to be clean (an oven) in his presence.

7) We learnt elsewhere [M. Kelim V.10], "If he cut it into separate tiles, placing sand between each tile: R. Eliezer declared it clean but the Sages declared it unclean." And this was the oven of *Hakinai*.]

¹⁵And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade." ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me."

3. objection to, or expression of doubt over, the validity of the utterance or action

<p>⁸And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "What shall be the sign that the LORD will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the LORD on the third day?"</p>	<p>They said to him, "Master, give us a sign". He protested, "Did you not assure me that you would not demand a sign?" They replied, "Even so".</p>	<p>(none noted, but suspicion of the truthfulness of the claim is presupposed)</p>	<p>3) He went to tell him and said, "Teacher, your fellows excommunicate you."</p>	<p>¹⁸The Jews then said to him, "What sign have you to show us for doing this?"</p>
--	---	--	--	--

4. proposal to offer and/or stipulation of the "sign"

<p>⁹And Isaiah said, "This is the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that he has promised: shall the shadow go forward ten steps, or go back ten steps?" ¹⁰And Hezekiah answered, "It is an easy thing for the shadow to lengthen ten steps; rather let the shadow go back ten steps."</p>	<p>He said to them, "If so, let the waters of the grotto of Paneas turn into blood:"</p>	<p>¹²And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"</p>	<p>4) He [R. Eliezer] took him outside and said, "Carob tree, carob tree, if the halakaha is as they say, be uprooted." And it was not uprooted. [Then] he said, "If the halakah is as I say, be uprooted."</p>	<p>¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." (²⁰The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹But he spoke of the temple of his body.)</p>
--	--	--	---	--

5. carrying out of the proposal (effectuating the "sign")

<p>¹¹And Isaiah the prophet cried to the LORD; and he brought the shadow back ten steps, by which the sun had declined on the dial of Ahaz.</p>	<p>and they turned into blood.</p>	<p>¹⁵When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.</p>	<p>And it was uprooted. ([He said,] "If the halakah is as they say, may the tree return unto the ground." It did not return. [Then he said,] "If the halakah be as I say, may it return." And it returned.)</p>	<p>²²When therefore he was raised from the dead,</p>
--	------------------------------------	--	--	---

6. reaction of observers

<p>None noted (but cf. 2 Kngs 20.11-12)</p>	<p>None noted</p>	<p>¹⁷And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorify- ing and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.</p>	<p>none noted</p>	<p>his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.</p>
---	-------------------	---	-------------------	---

As we can see from these illustrations, the form is so typical of a “sign” story that even in the examples of the type which lack one or another of the form’s basic elements, that element is nevertheless always presupposed there. Moreover, the form is both ancient and regular, appearing in literature spanning centuries, yet, from its earliest to its latest exemplar, never changing in any of its essentials.¹⁵

15 If any change is noticeable, it is to extend the story by repeating elements 3, 4, and 5 of the form. For example, consider the ‘sign’ story found in B.T. *Baba Meziah* 58b-59a, a later parallel to J.T *M.K.* III, 1.81cd

I. We learnt elsewhere [M. Kelim V.10], ‘If he cut it into separate tiles, placing sand between each tile: R. Eliezer declared it clean but the Sages declared it unclean.’ And this was the oven of Aknai.

2. Why/the oven of/Aknai? – Said Rab Judah in Sammuell’s name: ‘Because the encompassed it with arguments as a snake (*Akna*) and declared it unclean.’

3a. It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them.

3b. Said he to them: ‘If the halacha agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!’ Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place -- others affirm four hundred cubits. ‘No proof can be brought from a carob-tree’, they retorted.

3c. Again he said to them, ‘If the halacha agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!’ Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards -- No proof can be brought from a stream of water’, they rejoined.

3d. Again he urged: ‘If the halacha agrees with me, let the walls of the school-house prove it’, whereupon the walls of the schoolhouse inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them saying, ‘When scholars are engaged in a halacha dispute, what have you to interfere?’ Hence they did not fall, in honour of R. Joshua, not did they resume the upright, in honour of R. Eliezer: and they are still standing, thus inclined.

3e. Again he said to them: ‘If the halacha agrees with me. let it be proved from Heaven!’ Whereupon a Heavenly Voice (Bath-Qol) cried out: ‘Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters

II. MK 3.1-6 AS A “SIGN” STORY

Is, then, Mk 3.1-6 a “sign” story? The answer is yes, for three reasons. First, the theme of Mk 3.1-6 – how Jesus, facing hostility (cf. Mk 3.2, 6), moves to prove that a certain course of action is “of God” – is, as we have seen, the theme of the “sign story”. Second, the way Jesus here goes about proving his claim is, as in all “sign” stories, not through discussion or argument or quotation of scripture, but *by making something happen*. And third, when we view Mk 3.1-6 against the structure of the “sign” story, we find an almost exact coherence in form.

1. Introductory Narrative Framework, vv. 1-2

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him.

2. objectionable utterance or action, vs. 4a, b

⁴And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?"

3. objection to, or expression of doubt over, the validity of the utterance or action, vv. 4c, 5a

But they were silent. ⁵And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart,

4. proposal of the means by which the validity of the action/utterance may be certified (stipulation of the “sign”), vs. 3

And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come here (into the middle)".

5. carrying out of the proposal (effectuating the “sign”), vs. 5b

and [he] said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

the halacha agrees with him?'

3f. But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: 'It is not in heaven!'

4. What did he mean by this. Said R. Jeremiah: 'That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai: we pay no attention to a heavenly voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, 'After the majority must one incline.' (Ex. 23.2)

Here we find the pattern objection, stipulation, effectuation repeated three times.

6. reaction of observers, vs. 6

The Pharisees went out, and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

The only noticeable difference between the form of Mk 3.1-6 and that typical of “sign” stories is that the notice of the recognition of the need for a “sign” and the stipulation of the means by which the validity of the disputed action or utterance may be certified (element 3) occurs *before* the action or utterance (here a pronouncement) that the “sign” is intended to verify. But anticipation on the part of the one whose actions or utterances are resisted of the need for a “sign”, not to mention having already in hand the “proof” that this one will offer, is not unprecedented in “sign” stories.¹⁶ And in any case, it makes sense for Mark to have Jesus do this since, on the one hand, as the notice in Mk 3.2 of the hostile intent with which Jesus was being watched as he comes to the Synagogue reveals, the antipathy displayed to Jesus by his opponents at the beginning of (or for that matter through out) Mk 3.1-6 is hardly something newly spawned, something that only begins with this confrontation,¹⁷ nor, on the other hand, is this antipathy something of which, prior to this occasion, Jesus was unaware. In fact, as Mk 3.4-5 shows, it is there taken by Jesus as a given. Moreover, as a straight-forward reading of Mk. 3.1, 3 indicates, to demonstrate publicly before his opponents that “it is right to do good, even on the Sabbath, and to save life” as he has been doing, *is*

16 Cf. 2 Kgs 20.1-10; Is. 7.1-8; Lk. 2.8-13, where, in anticipation of disbelief, the agent of God already has in mind a ‘sign’ that, once given, should serve as proof of the truth of the action or utterance that will need validation.

17 Apart from the technical meaning that *kathgorew* may have here (i.e., bring charges of ‘Law breaker’ against) and the actions with respect to the Mosaic Law that are probably assumed at Mk 3.2 to have happened (law breaking, prior warning) in order for the opponents to ‘accuse’ Jesus (on this, see Dewey, *Markan Public Debate*, 100; R. Gundry, *Mark*), no one waits to accuse anyone of anything unless there is already some antipathy between accuser and accused.

the very reason that Jesus goes into the synagogue. For there is, one may note, an air of extreme purposiveness not only in the way Jesus enters “again” into a place where his opponents are gathered, and are known to be plotting against him, but also in his calling to the infirm man to “come” and stand before them all.¹⁸ So having a “sign” already “in hand” in anticipation of a need to counter hostility (or show it openly for what it is) is here quite apropos.

III. AN OBJECTION

Despite the evident formal and thematic similarities between Mk 3.1-6 and “sign” stories, one might object that this reading of the text is, nevertheless, not plausible because, as many scholars have noted, the Markan Jesus is one who is adamantly opposed to producing “signs” when the truth of his message or the divine authority behind his actions is disputed or rejected. This, it is argued, is apparent in Mark’s version of the story of the demand for a “sign” (Mk. 8.11-13). Not only does Jesus refuse such a demand, but the horror which, according to Mark, the demand arouses in Jesus (cf. Mk 8.12a), his flat refusal to countenance it (Mk 8.12c; cp. Matt. 12.39//Matt. 16.4//Lk. 11.29), and the vehemence with which he denounces and castigates as faithless and evil (Mk 8.12b) those who make the demand of him, indicate not only how fervently Jesus feels his ministry is self-authenticating, needing, for those with eyes to see, no external or additional proof of its validity; but that to offer such proof would be a concession to unbelief, making unlikely, if not impossible,

18 On this, see not only Dewey, *Markan Public Debate*, who notes that Jesus’ actions are viewed by Mark as a “virtual taunt” (p.), but also the discussion of A. Trocme in his *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1964), pp. 143-145, who argues that the episode represents carefully staged political theater in which Jesus chooses to force the issue of the validity of his interpretation of God’s will with respect to the boundaries drawn by the Law on clean and unclean, righteous and sinner, and the purpose of the Sabbath.

the response of radical faith which Jesus seeks from all who are confronted by what he says and does.¹⁹

Now this objection would be telling if what it alleges is indeed what Mk 8.11-13 really indicates about Jesus' attitude toward the demand for, or the giving of, "signs". But, as I have argued elsewhere, this is a misreading of this text.²⁰ For there is strong evidence in Mark's Gospel to show that Jesus had no such opposition to offering "signs", but to the contrary, that he was ordinarily quite ready and willing not only to produce "signs" but to offer to do so when he or, notably, others felt

19 Among the many commentators who hold this view are E.P. Gould (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1896], p. 145); Alan Menzies (*The Earliest Gospel* [London: Macmillan, 1901], p. 163); H.B. Swete (*Mark*, p. 168); A.W.F. Blunt (*The Gospel According to Saint Mark* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929], p. 193); A.E.J. Rawlinson (*The Gospel of Mark* [London: Methuen, 1925], p. 257); B.H. Branscomb (*The Gospel of Mark* [London: Houlder & Stoughton, 1937], p. 138); C.E.B. Cranfield (*The Gospel According to St Mark* [Cambridge: CUP, 1959], pp. 257-58); G. Delling ('Botschaft und Wunder im Wirken Jesus', in *Der historische Jesus und der kerygmatische Christus* ed. H. Rostow and K. Matthiae [Berlin, 1960], pp. 389-402); Taylor (*Mark*, p. 361); K. Rengstorff ('σημε_ον', *TDNT* [19xx], p. 235); D.E. Nineham (*St. Mark* [Baltimore: Pelican, 1963], pp. 210-12); C.F.D. Moule (*The Gospel According to Mark* [Cambridge: CUP, 1965], pp. 60-61); K. Tagawa (*Miracles et evangile. Le pensee personnelle de l'evangeliste Marc* [Paris, 1966], pp. 75-80); E.J. Mally ('The Gospel According to Mark' in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* ed. R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer, R.E. Murphy [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968], p. 39); E. Schweizer (*The Good News according to Mark* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1970], p. 159); P.P. Martin (*Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* [Exeter: Paternoster Press,], pp. 172-74); W.H. Kelber (*The Kingdom in Mark* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974], p. 61); W.L. Lane (*Mark*, pp. 277-78); W. Barclay (*The Gospel of Mark* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], pp. 175-76); Anderson (*Mark*, p. 91); W. Harrington (*Mark* [Dublin: Veritas, 1979], p. 111); L. Williamson, Jr. (*Mark* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1983], p. 143).

20 See J.B. Gibson, "Jesus' Refusal to Produce a "Sign"" *JSNT* 38 (1990), pp. 37-66; idem., *The Temptations of Jesus in early Christianity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 159-195.

they were needed. This evidence is to be found in a story which, notably, precedes both the story of the demand for a “sign” and that of the healing of the man with a “withered” hand, namely, the story of the healing of the paralytic (Mk 2.1-12), for here, as a sober reading of the text shows, Mark portrays Jesus as actually producing a “sign” to prove that his proclamation is “of God” when the truth of that proclamation and its divine origin are questioned. This becomes clear when we note several things: First, that within Mk 2.1-12 the type of conflict that prompts Jesus to cure the paralytic is the same as that which, according to the phenomenology of “signs”, would prompt a “sign” worker to produce a “sign”, namely, the rejection of a claim that at a given time, one is speaking or acting on God’s behalf with divine approval. In this case, the claim rejected is both Jesus’ possession of authority to forgive sins and whether or not his proclamation in v. 5 effectuates what it proclaims. Second, that the response that Jesus secures from the those who here reject his claim (the Scribes) by healing the paralytic is identical with that typically won by “sign” workers from their interlocutors when they effectuate the “signs” they have added to their disputed words or deeds. The Scribes accept the truth of the utterance or the implications of the action for which the subsidiary prophecy stands as proof.²¹ Third, that the activity that Jesus immediately resorts to after

21 See M.D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: SPCK, 1967), p. 88. In support of this, it is important to note that Mark has cast Jesus’ offer to make something happen in such a way as to call to mind the similar offer on the part of Isaiah in the ‘sign’ story of the healing of Hezekiah in 2 Kings 20.1-11. According to Mark, Jesus, like Isaiah, points out two courses of action that he is willing to take to meet the skepticism that he has encountered on account of his proclamation (cp. Mk 2.9 with 2 Kngs 20.9). Also, as does Isaiah, Jesus allows the decision as to which course of action he is to take to be made for him. Finally, note the verbal resemblance between Jesus’ question in Mk 2.9, ‘Which is easier...?’ (ti, estin euƀroƀteron, κτλ.) and Hezekiah’s remark in the LXX of 2 Kngs 20.10, ‘It is easy...’ (kai. eiƀen Ezekiaj kouƀon, κτλ.). On the correspondence between Mk 2.1-12 and 2 Kngs. 20.1-11, see T.R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (Waco: Word Incorporated, 1985), p. 293. Curiously, there appears to be no other scholar besides Hobbs who has

the Scribes' initial rejection of his words, and all they imply, is formally the same as that which, as we see from "sign" stories, "sign" workers typically engage in when the truth of their words or deeds is challenged. Jesus responds to the gauntlet thrown down against the validity and the import of his statement, not by initiating a discussion or an argument, *but by offering to make something happen*. Given its context, in function this response is nothing less than offering a "sign".²² Finally, and perhaps most importantly, that Mark has Jesus himself declare that his reason for undertaking the cure of the paralytic is precisely to prove the claim that he has made in Mk 2.5. At Mk 2.10 Jesus proclaims that he performs the healing so that those who have expressed doubt over the truth and the import of this claim may "know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (ἵνα δε εἰδῆτε ὅτι ἐκousian ἐχει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἀφιεναι ἀμαρτίας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς).²³ In other words,

appreciated, let alone noticed, the correspondence between the two texts.

22 We must take seriously the fact that Mark does not exclude the Scribes from those who marvel at what Jesus does in his healing of the paralytic. It is, Mark notes at Mk 2.12, 'all' (πανταῖς) who were present on this occasion who 'were astounded and gave glory to God' (ἠσῆστε ἐκίστασθαι πανταῖς καὶ δοξάζειν τὸν θεόν). To say, as does, for example, T.A. Burkill, that in Mk 2.1-12 'The impression produced [by the healing] on the hostile Scribes finds no mention, for they would hardly be included among those who glorify God in verse 12, and we are perhaps meant to take it for granted that they are temporarily put to silence' (*Mysterious Revelation* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963], p. 127) is to engage in special pleading.

23 J. Duplacy ([1957] 424-26), following a suggestion first made by D.S. Sharp in *ExpT* 38 (1927), pp. 428ff., contends that here ἵνα with the subjunctive εἰδῆτε expresses a command and therefore this verse should be translated 'Know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' ('Marc II, 10, note de syntax', in *Melanges bibliques dédiés en l'honneur de A. Robert* [Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1957], pp. 421-427, esp. pp. 424-26; see also C.J. Cadoux, 'The Imperitival Use of ἵνα in the New Testament', *JTS* 42 [1944], pp. 165-73; H.G. Meecham, 'The imperitival use of ἵνα in the New Testament', *JTS* 43 [1942], pp. 179-80; and the summary of the evidence by C.F.D. Moule in his *An Idiom-Book of New*

though he does not use the specific terminology, *Jesus himself here identifies his cure of the paralytic as a “sign”*.

Now if, as these observations indicate, Mark’s story of the Healing of a Paralytic presents Jesus not only as validating as “of God” his actions or utterances by means of a “sign”, but as having no compunction against either producing “signs” or offering to do so when he or others felt they were needed, then the objection against seeing Jesus as engaged in this activity in Mk 3.1-6, and therefore against seeing Mk. 3.1-6 as a “sign” story, disappears.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE

Testament Greek [Cambridge, CUP, 2nd ed., 1959], pp. 144-45). If this is the case, then the deliberateness of Jesus’ intention to prove his authority is all the more pronounced.

It has, however, frequently been suggested that Mk 2.10a was not meant by Mark to be seen as a statement of Jesus to the Scribes. Rather it is a parenthetical remark addressed by the evangelist to the Christian readers of the Gospel to explain the significance of the closing phase of the healing for them (cf. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* [New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1933], p. 67; G.H. Boobyer, ‘Mark II, 10a’, pp. 115-20; C.P. Ceroke, ‘Is Mk. 2, 10a Saying of Jesus?’, *CBQ* 22 [1960], pp. 369-90; C.E.B. Cranfield, *Mark*, p. 100; J. Murphy-O’Connor, ‘Peche et Communauté dans le Nouveau Testament’, *RB* 74 [1967], pp. 181-85; L.S. Hay, ‘The Son of Man in Mk. 2:10 and 2:28’, *JBL* 89 [1970], pp. 71-73; N. Perrin, ‘The Christology of Mark: A Study in Methodology’ in *A Modern Pilgrimage in New Testament Christology* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974], pp. 112, 116 n. 24; Lane, *Mark*, p. 98; and R.M. Fowler, *Loves and Fishes* [Chico: Scholars Press, 1981], pp. 161-62. I do not find this conjecture convincing in that it is based primarily on a questionable assumption, namely that the title ‘Son of Man’ is here a designation of transcendent dignity which Mark would not have Jesus publicly apply to himself so early in his ministry. For trenchant criticisms of this assumption, see M. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark*, pp. 84-85; C. Tuckett ‘The Present Son of Man’, *JSNT* 14 (1982), pp. 58-81 and J.D. Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), pp. 83-84.

Accepting its validity, what, then, is the significance of this conclusion? To see Mk 3.1-6 as a “sign” story helps to resolve the traditions-history question of whether the pericope is unitary or composite, and if the latter, what its original core looked like, as well as when and by whom its sub-units, how ever they might be delineated, were joined together. Absent the model of the “sign” story, the strongest argument for a composite development of Mk 3.1-6, and, therefore, for setting out on the quest to explain when, why, and how it was put together, has always been that form-critically the story is, as we have seen, a *Mischgattung*. How else to explain the fact that the story did not fit well with regular form-critical categories than to see that either Mark or a tradent before him has joined a controversy with a healing? But once we see that Mk 3.1-6 is indeed a “sign” story, then the grounds for viewing the pericope as composite and having a complex history of development fall apart. The admixture of controversy and Jesus’ making something happen found there is not an indication that the story had a composite developmental history, but, on the contrary, that it is a unitary composition. Such an admixture is exactly what we should expect to find there.

More importantly, to see Mk 3.1-6 as a “sign” story is to see that Mark’s point in telling it is to have Jesus prove the legitimacy *not* of something he *intends* to carry out within the story (i.e., not the healing, which *is* the “sign”, and as such is *not* the center of attention in the story, let alone anything that needs to be justified), *but of something he has said or done prior to the healing and against which his opponents have raised questions or objected.*

Now when we ask just what, in Mark’s eyes, this actually is, what Jesus here uses a “sign” to justify, there is good reason to see that the answer is: All of those things which, according to Mark, Jesus has engaged in since his healing of the paralytic (Mk 2.1-12), i.e., his open association with tax collectors and “sinners” (τελωνῶν καὶ ἀμαρτωλῶν) and his refusal to abide by the Law’s prescriptions on coming in contact with things that defile (Mk 2.15-18), his renunciation of such

common (and presumably “official”) expressions of piety as fasting (Mk 2.19-22), and his abrogation of the commandments against doing “work” and violating the sanctity of the Sabbath (Mk 2.23-28). Several pieces of evidence suggest this.

First, there is the fact that these actions and all that they imply are precisely the sort of things which would need special justification not just to Jews in general, but especially to those who in Mk 3.1-6 are the recipients of the “sign” Jesus is there said to give, namely, Pharisees (cf. v. 6). In Mark, the Pharisees are the guardians of the Law and intense advocates of fasting and of observing distinctions between clean and unclean, Jew and “sinners”. And, as Mark points out in Mk 2.13-28 by specifically identifying as Pharisees those who object to what Jesus does there, they [the Pharisees] are the ones out of all other Jews or groups with whom Jesus has contact who are indeed offended by these actions.²⁴

24 I am aware of the fact that nowhere in Mk 2.18-20, the question about the disciples failure to fast, are the interlocutors of Jesus identified as Pharisees. Indeed, strictly speaking, on a purely literal reading of the passage, those who question Jesus about what he permits his disciples to avoid seem to have no particular identity at all, for Mk 2.18 reads only *kai. ercontai kai. legousin autw̄ dia. ti, κτλ.* But that in Mark's eyes Jesus' opponents here are *not* Pharisees seems unlikely. These are the opponents that Jesus faces prior to and immediately following Mk 2.18-20 (cp. Mk 2.15-17; 23-28; 3.1-6). Moreover, both up to and for some time after this point in the Gospel, Pharisees, while certainly not only the only ones who question Jesus, are the *only ones who question him in the manner in which he is approached in Mk 2.18*. In light of this, the subject of *ercontai kai. legousin* can be regarded as unspecified (cf. C.H. Turner 'Markan Usage: Notes Critical and Exegetical on the Second Gospel', *JTS* 24 [O.S. 1924], p. 379) *only* (a) when these similarities between the actions of this subject and those of the Pharisees are ignored and (b) when Mk 2.18-20 is read in isolation from its larger context. It should also be noted in this regard (a) that Mark employs this same phenomenon, namely, contextual identification as Pharisees (and Herodians) of initially unspecified opponents of Jesus at Mk 3.1-6 (cp. v. 1 with v. 6), and (b) that Luke reads Mk 2.18 as though it were referring to Pharisees (cf Lk. 5.33). Cp. also Mt. 9.14 where Matthew does this even more clearly.

Second there is the fact that with his statement in Mk 3.2 that *as* Jesus arrives in the Synagogue the Pharisees are filled with malice toward him, Mark notes that the Pharisees have *already* found Jesus and his activities objectionable. This indicates that it is not anything that Jesus says or does *within* the healing story that causes the conflict at the heart of Mk 3.1-6 and is the bone of contention with which Jesus finds himself there having to deal. Rather, according to Mark, it is something that Jesus has said and done, and to which the Pharisees took offense, *prior* to their present encounter with him. And, as we have seen, this is all the activities Jesus is said to have engaged in, in Mk 2.13-28.

Then there is the evidence of Jesus' question in Mk 3.4 which, as is shown by Mark's notices of the Pharisees' refusal to answer it (οἱ δὲ ἐσιώπων, v. 4b) and Jesus' anger at their refusal (καὶ περιβέβηται αὐτοῦ μετὰ ὀργῆς) (σὺ ἰουδαίου ἐπιθῆναι πρὸς τὴν καρδίαν αὐτῶν, v. 5a), functions as an encapsulation of the issue over which Jesus and the Pharisees are divided. As Swete, Rawlinson, Taylor and others have argued, in the phrase (ἐξ ἐστίν... ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἐπιθῆναι ἡμῶν) the question contains an allusion to the unavowed intentions of the Pharisees to accuse Jesus as a Law breaker and bring about his destruction (cf. Mk 3.2). It therefore has the meaning "Who is the real upholder of God's will, he who ignores the law to perform works of mercy, thereby doing good, or those who, angered by this, seek to do an injury, and are in fact plotting murder as you are doing?". Given this, the question identifies the actions Jesus has engaged in prior to Mk 3.1-6 as what Jesus must justify, for its reference to what the Pharisees are angered over points backwards to the confrontations Jesus and the Pharisees have had in 2.13-28.

Finally, as Joanna Dewey has shown, there is the fact that the story of the healing of the man with a withered hand not only caps, but is the literary and rhetorical culmination of, Mk 2.13-28 in

that Mk 3.1-6 is the end piece of an *inclusio*, the other end of which is Mk 2.1-12.²⁵ This means that what occurs in Mk 3.1-6 is the result of, and the response to, what occurs in the material which Mk 2.1-12 and Mk 3.1-6 encircles.

But why— and this is the really important question — why should all that Jesus does between Mk. 2:1-12 and Mk. 3:1-6 be in need of the special validation that a “sign” had the potential to give? Is not so much that all that Jesus does there goes against the Law of Moses and rides roughshod over the particular institutions and patterns of piety whose maintenance the opponents of Jesus regard as essential to their cultic and national identity, though this is certainly true. Rather, *it is that in Mark’s presentation of things, Jesus claims that the God of Israel has authorized him specifically to do so.*²⁶ The Pharisees are in need of a “sign” because they refuse to believe that an agent of Yahweh would act as Jesus acts and are in need of confirmation that what Jesus does is indeed “of God”.

And so when we ask what it is, according to Mark, that Jesus is “up to” in Mk. 3:1-6, it is not justifying a healing that he wished to undertake in violation of Sabbath law. Rather, it is his claim, implicit in all he has said and done before he undertakes this healing, that God is now dispensing with Sabbath observance, “pharisaic” distinctions of clean and unclean, and other “boundary marking” Jewish practices as badges for determining who does and who does not belong to the people of God.

25 On this, see Dewey, *Markan Public Debate* 100-101; See also D. Mitchie, D. Rhoads, J Dewey, *Mark as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999) 52-54.