

Understanding the Unforgivable Sin: A Study of Mark 3:20-35

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A Thesis in
The Department of Theological Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Theological Studies) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

January 2013

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

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Matthew Plunkett

The unforgivable sin—blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—is the subject of debate, curiosity, and even fear for many. Many scholars and theologians have tackled the subject, yet there is no definite interpretation shared by a majority. This thesis focuses on Mark 3:20-35 in an attempt to gain the best possible understanding of the ambiguous sin in question. While several methodologies are used to varying degrees, this thesis focuses on the biblical passage from a narrative-critical perspective. With all aspects of the story being taken into consideration, a few important conclusions are drawn. First and foremost, the unforgivable sin can be defined as intentionally sabotaging the work of God by calling it Satanic. Secondly, while Jesus mentions such a sin because of the scribes from Jerusalem, one cannot conclude that they are guilty of the sin; Jesus' words may have been a warning. Thirdly, Jesus' family is clearly depicted as an opponent of Jesus. Finally, if indeed the scribes are in danger of committing an unpardonable sin, so are Jesus' mother, brothers, and sisters, since their actions are similar to those of the scribes. The importance of such conclusions is significant in both academic and religious circles.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Dr. André Gagné for his supervision and help throughout this entire process. Your encouragement, input, and assistance has been invaluable and much appreciated. I must also thank the Department of Theological Studies at Concordia University. To all professors and faculty who have been involved in my journey of completing both my undergraduate and graduate studies, I am very grateful. Finally, I would like to thank my family for all the support and love that I have received thus far. I owe much of my success to you.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Pamela Bright.

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INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF THE QUESTION

When performing biblical exegesis, there is no shortage of valid topics. A great deal has yet to be explored while a significant amount of treaded territory is worth re-examination. Although I was certain I wanted to do exegetical work for my thesis, choosing a part (or parts) of the Bible was not as clear to me. As I set out to select a question to answer in my thesis, I wanted to work with a passage that was of personal interest to me while being provocative in both academic and religious circles.

“The unforgivable sin” has been a fascinating and frightening topic for many people over the centuries. It has been the cause of numerous debates and has captured the attention of theologians, religious individuals, and even philosophers. In this thesis, I will explore what is said about this subject and attempt to make sense of the verses related to the topic. Perhaps more importantly, I will examine the story that contains the mentioning of this sin, and find deeper significance through my exploration of its surrounding passages. In short, this thesis will attempt to answer the question: “What is the unforgivable sin?” This is of particular interest to many (both in academic circles and in personal Christian life) because the message of the Christian Bible is that all sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ. The notion that there exists a sin that cannot be forgiven is both contradictory and troublesome, as some might fear they have committed such an offense.

The passage specifically relating to the unforgivable sin can be found in all synoptic Gospels, but I will pay most attention to the *Gospel According to Mark*. The reason for this is twofold. The first is simply because the authors of Matthew and Luke most likely used Mark as a source when they wrote their accounts. The second reason is that the story leading up to the featured passage is different in Mark (the original source). This story seems to relate to the sin in question and understanding the author's reasoning involving the narrative and structure will undoubtedly shed light on the meaning of the especially controversial verses.

One of the first steps involved in performing proper exegetical work in the New Testament is translation. Mark, like the rest of the New Testament, was originally written in Koine Greek and therefore, one might lose or skew a text's meaning when reading a translated version. The passage in question for my exegetical work is Mark 3:20-35. Therefore, translating the text is one of the first steps involved in properly interpreting it. This will be explored further when we consider methodology.

One may notice that the verses directly related to the unforgivable sin are few (28-30). However, the story that contains this saying of Jesus spans from verses 22-30. Verses 22-27 (verse 22 especially) provide context for the statement in question. Yet upon further study, one discovers that verses 20-21 and 31-35 may also be crucial to the understanding of the unforgivable sin and the story in which its mention is contained. Consequently, it is important to delve into the meaning of these verses as well.

In this thesis, I will show how verses 20-21 and 31-35 are relevant to the story of "the unforgivable sin". In Matthew 12:22-24, a clearer context is given to the accusation made by the scribes. A deaf and mute demoniac is brought before Jesus and the latter

heals this man. The accusation that Jesus himself is possessed is a logical continuation in the narrative. In Mark, however, this accusation is absent from the narrative; it seems spontaneous and out of place. At least, this appears to be the case on the surface. Since the story is found within another story about Jesus' family, it is important to ask why this is the case and consider the possibility that this was in fact done intentionally.

The first question to ask is “why would the author insert a story devoid of (immediate) context within another (seemingly unrelated) story?” The author of Mark uses this technique on a few other occasions throughout his Gospel. It can also be seen in Mark 5:21-42, 6:7-32 and 11:12-25. While Jesus' family is traveling to see him, he is confronted by the scribes. At the end of the story, his family arrives, indicating they completed their journey and reached their destination some time later. However, one can read this passage within the context of the enveloping story as more than just filler or a literary technique to show the passing of time. Indeed, a fair amount of scholarship has been dedicated to the structure of Mark.¹

When considering Mark 3:20-35 as a complete story written with a specific narrative purpose, the individual stories within the given text become far more relevant. The account begins with Jesus and his disciples going “home”, most likely to a house belonging to one of the disciples.² A large crowd gathers to listen to Jesus and he does not have time to eat. This upsets his family so much that they set out to “restrain” him. They do this because people were saying “He has gone out of his mind.” However, some translations indicate that it is his very family that claims he is mentally unstable. At this

¹ For more information, see Section 2.4 (Structure).

² Frank E. Gaebelien, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1981), 644.

point in the narrative, the focus moves from the members of Jesus' family, who have set out to restrain their kin, to Jesus and the scribes.

The scribes accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of the “ruler of the demons” and claim that he is possessed by the greatest of demons—Satan. Jesus then responds to this charge. Interestingly enough, verse 23 states that Jesus summoned the scribes, which suggests that they never directly accused Jesus, but were spreading their ideas to the crowd behind his back. Once Jesus catches wind of what is going on, he seeks to directly confront his accusers. He goes on to prove his innocence in the matter by using parables that illustrate the unlikelihood that Satan would work against his own cause. Verse 24 contains the source of a popular quote: A kingdom/nation divided cannot stand.

Jesus then goes on to talk about overpowering “the strong man” in his own home and the need to tie him down before the plundering of the house. This seems like a strange analogy when arguing against the claim that he is possessed. There is no evident correlation between the parable of a divided kingdom and that of the strong man. Yet it is clear that Jesus mentions the overtaking and binding of the strong man purposefully. It is very possible that the author is suggesting that Jesus has overpowered Satan and is now in control. When considering that Jesus cast a demon out of a man, it is also likely that the “strong man’s possessions” refers to people in Satan’s bondage, and that the plundering of the “strong man’s belongings” is a metaphor for the liberation of those that are in spiritual captivity.³

What Jesus says next is the most controversial and debated part in the story. Verses 28-30 are what drew me (and undoubtedly many others) to the study of this story.

³ Gaebelein, 645.

Jesus says that any and all sins will be forgiven with the exception of one: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. To commit this offense is to be guilty of an eternal sin that will never be forgiven. Evidently, the most pertinent and popular question that stems from this statement is the inquiry as to what exactly constitutes the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. In order to adequately answer this question, several aspects must be considered.

One of the most important points to take into account is the concept of the “Holy Spirit” (τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον). What exactly is the Holy Spirit? The term is referenced on numerous occasions throughout the New Testament. I will look at other mentions of the Holy Spirit; first I will thoroughly examine the other mentions of this and similar terms in Mark and I will then briefly compare these to other findings in the New Testament. It will also be essential to determine what Greek words are used for “Holy Spirit” and compare these to other expressions that may be employed, with the objective of obtaining a clearer meaning of what specific role the Holy Spirit plays in one’s committing of the unforgivable sin.

Another important word to consider is “blaspheme” (βλασφημία). The original Greek word may provide a great deal of help in deciphering what exactly Jesus is talking about when he mentions blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. A complete understanding of “blasphemy” is necessary in order to gain a thorough comprehension of what kind of act one could commit that would warrant such harsh repercussions. Again, a comparison to other instances of “blasphemy” in Mark will undoubtedly help me gain a clearer understanding of the passage in question. One might ask whether blasphemy is simply to speak against the Holy Spirit, or if the term holds a deeper meaning in this particular context.

Moreover, one should also pay close attention to verse 30, as it provides important clues in understanding the unforgivable sin. In this verse, the reader is informed that Jesus' threat of committing a sin that cannot be forgiven is a direct response to the accusation made by the scribes. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the scribes were committing—or at the very least, in danger of committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Clearly, the scribes' charge troubled Jesus; to the point that he warned them by implying they might never be forgiven. This is an area that requires a great deal of exploration.

After Jesus responds to the scribes, verse 31 continues with the story of Jesus' family. They arrive at the house where Jesus is and they wait outside for him, summoning him, and asking others to bring him out. Once again, it is interesting to note that the family, like the scribes, does not directly confront Jesus. They convey their message through others. However, in this case, Jesus does not bring them before him. His response, while somewhat directed towards them, is specifically addressed to his followers. He calls those sitting around him—his followers—his true family. In Jesus' eyes, his family members are not his blood relatives, but those who seek to do God's will.

This is a fascinating statement, because it implies that Jesus' family is hindering him from performing his heavenly duty. While the scribes were intentionally thwarting Jesus' ministry by accusing him of being possessed, his family was doing the same by making him out to be insane.⁴ Although the degree of severity may differ and his family most likely has better intentions than those of the scribes, a parallel between these two groups is quite apparent.

⁴ Larry W. Hurtado, *New International Biblical Commentary: Mark* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1989), 68.

Therefore, in my thesis, I will argue that the unforgivable sin—blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—is “knowingly opposing the work of the Holy Spirit. It is deliberately shutting one’s eyes to the light and consequently calling good evil”.⁵ One of the purposes of my research will also be to comprehend how the idea of “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” was received by Christians in the past, and even how modern Christian groups understand it today. We will see that for many contemporary Christians, this sin is not limited to the historical Jesus and it is more than simply an ill-spoken word. Many still believe that those opposing the person of Jesus, like the scribes, Jesus’ family, including his mother Mary, are capable of this kind of blasphemy, placing them in danger of committing the unforgivable sin.

STATUS QUAESTIONIS

There is no lack of scholarship in relation to Mark or the passage in question. However, very little academic work focuses on these verses in significant detail. Most of the contributions relating to Mark 3:20-35 are exegetical works that make up a commentary. Despite the lack of work making these verses the primary focus, it is worth noting how many writers pay special attention to the passage in question, recognizing its significance.

When it comes to the topic of “the unforgivable sin”, a great deal has been written by church-based groups, conservative and fundamentalist Christians, and Christian philosophers. There is literature written by preachers and various Christian groups that addresses the issue of an eternal sin. The general message behind these interpretations

⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 93.

does not vary much from text to text. Examples of these include a published sermon by James Ayers entitled “Mark 3:20-35” and John Newton Strain’s book, *The Unpardonable Sin*. They explain the unforgivable sin to be the refusal to accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God. While these are interesting to read to a certain degree, they provide little insight into the Biblical text and they have virtually no scholarly validity. They were written with the purpose of implanting worry and fear into the reader (or listener). Such texts, even though sometimes peer reviewed, like the work of James Ayers, are of little interest to me for the purpose of my thesis.

However, other traditionalist writings on the subject are more concerned with method and the study of the text. Although most of these use a similar methodological approach and are often more concerned with message and meaning, one gains a great deal by including such material in his research. This is especially relevant for me since I am most interested in meaning. It is also important to gain various perspectives in order to have a more complete understanding of the passage in question. Many, such as David Steinmetz, state that just as it is necessary to consult scholastically published works, one should also investigate the commentaries of the Christian community.⁶ Consequently, I intend to present both approaches as valid and noteworthy in their own right.

I, like many other scholars, believe there are advantages and disadvantages to both traditionalist and modern approaches.⁷ In my thesis, I hope to unify the two and find a way for these perspectives that were once seen as opposites, to complement one another. In the narrative critical portion of my thesis, I will break down the chapter into

⁶ David C. Steinmetz, “Uncovering a Second Narrative: Detective Fiction and the Construction of Historical Method.” In *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, 54-65 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 65.

⁷ Najeeb G. Awad, “How the Church Fathers Read the Gospel of Mark as a Reliable Theological Text: A Comparison Between Early and Modern Scholarship.” *Theological Review* 29 (2008): 84.

four main sections: plot, conflict, characters, and structure. Each section will shed more light into the understanding of the passage as a whole. The plot and conflict have already been addressed and we will therefore survey some interesting points about the characters and structure of the story.

Jesus's Followers

Disciples and followers of Jesus play an important role in Mark 3:20-35. In fact, some consider their presence and involvement in this passage to be one of the central themes of the Gospel.⁸ In his doctoral thesis, Steven Scott explores chiasmic structures in Mark and presents the Beelzebul controversy as the “hinge” of the greatest chiasm of Mark 1:12-6:46. Here, two themes are clearly present. The first is the source of Jesus’ power, which is the Holy Spirit. This therefore becomes a statement of his identity. The second is that of discipleship, which is made more important than family ties. This story emphasizes the importance of following Jesus and doing “the will of God”.

Similarly, Robert Guelich identifies three main themes in Mark 3:20-35: eschatology, Christology, and discipleship.⁹ While many read the given passage and focus primarily on the conflict with the scribes and the issue of the unforgivable sin, the importance of discipleship is also obvious. Therefore, one might conclude that a follower of Jesus is incapable of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. One whom Jesus would refer to as his “true mother or brother” is seemingly not in danger of committing a sin that cannot be forgiven.

⁸ Steven Richard Scott, “Raising the Dead: Finding History in the Gospel Accounts of Jesus’ Resurrection Miracles.” (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2010), 69.

⁹ Robert A. Guelich, *Word Biblical Commentary*. Vol. 34A “Mark 1-8:26” (Nashville, Ten.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 172-184.

Therefore, the emphasis that is placed on discipleship provides an attentive reader with a more complete understanding of the theological implications of the story in question. It is quite clear that blood ties and heritage are not of significant importance when living a life that is pleasing to God. A relationship with Jesus that involves following him becomes a person's highest calling. W. R. Telford takes this concept even further as he affirms that Jesus' rejection of the scribes and of his own family is in fact a rejection of Judaism.¹⁰ Such a conclusion is a bit imprudent since most scholars believe the author of Mark to be a Jew. The Gospel is not as anti-Semitic in nature as John, for example.

The Representation of Jesus' Family and Mary

In many translations of the Bible, the specific mentioning of Mary is omitted. While it is worth looking at various manuscripts to see if there are instances where she is not mentioned, the reason for this omission in some translations (and possibly some manuscripts) is obvious. In this story, Mary is portrayed in a negative light. She sets out alongside her children to restrain Jesus and bring him home. The reasoning behind her actions is that Jesus has apparently lost his mind.¹¹ Ultimately, she intends to prevent Jesus from performing his ministry and therefore serves as an antagonist of sorts in this story.¹² Through the rest of the Bible and throughout history, Mary has been portrayed as a saint; sometimes even to the point of a demigod. Evidently, many Christians, both in

¹⁰ W. R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 238.

¹¹ G. R. Osborne, *Redaction Criticism* (ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery; New Testament Criticism and Interpretation; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 206.

¹² M. C. Parsons, *Canonical Criticism* (ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery; New Testament Criticism and Interpretation; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 282-283.

Late Antiquity and today, would seek to avoid the image of Mary from being tarnished. Consequently, she does not appear in many translations of this story.

Along these lines, many translations of **παρ’ αὐτοῦ** (the ones near him) avoid implicating Jesus’ family by rendering the term “his friends”.¹³ Others, such as R. T. France, who do recognize family as a correct interpretation, suggest that rather than **παρ’ αὐτοῦ** being his immediate family, it is most likely extended family, such as cousins.¹⁴ Some interpreters and scholars go so far as to suggest “the ones near him” are his disciples.¹⁵ This seems very unlikely because of the aforementioned emphasis placed on discipleship within the story. Furthermore, Jesus seems to be with his disciples when his family arrives. Most scholars agree that “the ones close to him” from verse 21 and “his mother and brothers” that appear in verse 31 are indeed the same characters.

When Mary arrives at the house where Jesus is speaking, she is rejected by her son. He calls his disciples his true family and dismisses his own blood.¹⁶ This is uncharacteristic of the Jesus portrayed in the rest of the New Testament, as he is depicted as a loving son; one who is obedient and respectful of his mother. However, it is not particularly uncharacteristic of the *Gospel according to Mark*. Unlike the other two synoptic Gospels, there is no birth story and Mary is never depicted in a positive fashion. Whenever his family is mentioned in this Gospel, it is in a negative context.¹⁷ The concept of Jesus rejecting his own mother and even denying her importance is a

¹³ The Holy Bible, *King James Version* (New York, NY: Penguin Publishing Group, 1981), Mark 3:21.

¹⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 167.

¹⁵ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament in Which the Sense of the Sacred Text is Taken: Doctrinal and Practical Truths are Set in a Plain and Easy Light; Difficult Passages Explained; Seeming Contradictions Reconciled; and Whatever is Material in the Various Readings and Several Oriental Versions is Observed*. Vol. 5. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1954), 322.

¹⁶ Telford, 126.

¹⁷ Mark 3:31-35, Mark 6:4.

theological shock for many. For this reason, many Christians will either leave Mary out of the story or they will portray Jesus' question, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" (Mark 3:33) as less confrontation and more rhetorical and parabolic.

Finally, for Jesus to bracket Mary in the same category as the scribes (those who do not do the will of God) is a blasphemy in itself in the eyes of many.¹⁸ The religious leaders are portrayed as villainous, ignorant and evil throughout all four Gospels. One might ask how it is possible for Jesus to infer such a callous thing about his own mother. Some scholars will answer this question by explaining that Mary merely set out to see Jesus as a by-product of genuine concern.¹⁹ Her intention was to care for him and allow him to rest. As a result, Jesus merely considered her a hindrance from the work that he was meant to perform. On the opposite end of the spectrum, others will say that Jesus' family, including Mary, truly considered him to be mentally unstable and their mission was to put an end to his ministry. Whether or not his family had ill intentions, Jesus could not allow them to obstruct his ministry. Anyone who got in the way of God's will was an adversary and Jesus responded accordingly.²⁰

Structure

A lot can be said regarding the structure of Mark 3. As already mentioned, the literary technique of placing a story within another story (sometimes called a "sandwich") is common in the *Gospel according to Mark*. Some scholars believe this is simply used to

¹⁸ Telford, 132.

¹⁹ Gaebelein, 644.

²⁰ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 125.

indicate a lapse in time.²¹ Others argue that the two stories relate to each other and that one is meant to find deeper meaning through their juxtaposition.²² I tend to agree with the latter group. The abrupt and seemingly incoherent start of the story involving Jesus and the scribes—a story within another story—should call attention to the encompassing account.

The combining of the story of Jesus' family with that of the scribes' accusation that Jesus is possessed seems like a blatant clue that there is a theological parallel. Indeed, Jesus' relatives and the religious leaders make ministry-ending accusations about Jesus. If he were indeed insane, he would lose all credibility and he would not be heard by anyone. Such an accusation is especially grave because it is coming from those (supposedly) closest to him: his own family.²³

Similarly, the scribes accusing Jesus of working with the help and power of Satan were religious leaders. They were the authority in spiritual matters and their words were seriously considered.²⁴ Clearly, their words did not fall on deaf ears, for Jesus heard their accusation through word of mouth. Had the scribes been more convincing (or Jesus' defense been less convincing), Jesus may not have ever recovered from the blow. The accusation that Jesus was working with Satan was potentially devastating, especially coming from the mouths of religious authority figures. Therefore, one sees that both parties play the role of posing a serious threat to Jesus and his ministry.

²¹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1973), 135; William I. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (F. F. Bruce, ed; The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 137.

²² Edwards, 124; Hurtado, 65; Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 153.

²³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 164.

²⁴ Edwards, 119.

Continuing to explore structure, one can delve even deeper. As previously mentioned, Steven Scott gives an elaborate explanation for chiasms in Mark. It is apparent that the synoptic Gospels are a bi-product of oral tradition.²⁵ The written text was not a significant form of communication and oral tradition was the most popular and valued way of spreading and passing down information.²⁶ Therefore, Scott argues that Mark was written in such a way that one could tell the story from memory. In order to make everything easier to remember, the stories were divided into different groups and themes. As the storyteller would recite each part, he would know what theme came next and would therefore be able to associate the story that corresponded to that theme.²⁷ While this idea speaks more about the structuring of Mark as whole, the concept that Mark 3:22-35 is considered central to Mark 1:12-6:46 speaks a great deal about the importance and meaning of this passage.

The Unforgivable Sin

Jesus tells those in his presence that all sins will be forgiven with one exception: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This statement has led to countless questions, many of which will be addressed in this thesis. The most significant question is to ask what blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is exactly. In order to answer this question as best as possible, one must seek to do two things. The first is to fully understand the text and all the words and nuances found in the verses. Secondly, one should look for clues within the text and find a deeper meaning through context and similar passages.

²⁵ John C. Meagher, *Clumsy Construction in Mark's Gospel: A Critique of Form—and Redaktionsgeschichte*. (Toronto, Ont.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), 27.

²⁶ Scott, 42.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

There are many interesting words that are worthy of examination in Mark 3:28-30. The first of these is the very first word of the passage: Truly (Ἀμῆν). This word is significant for several reasons. The first is that it allows the reader, such as Hurtado, to view it as a statement of Jesus' divinity.²⁸ Jesus is the only person to use this word before his own statement. It is usually used to affirm the word of someone else; often God's. Furthermore, by beginning his sentence with "truly", Jesus is indicating that he is about to speak an irrefutable truth that is to be taken very seriously. The Greek word for "truly" meant that whatever was said was fact and that it was to be taken as a solemn truth.²⁹

Another important word in this passage—perhaps the most important—is “blasphemes” (βλασφημία) or “blasphemy” (βλασφημία). According to scholars, this word has more than one meaning.³⁰ It is commonly interpreted as the act of speaking against someone. In the case of God, it can refer to taking His name in vain.³¹ However, in this particular case, the word likely carries deeper meaning. Some argue that in this passage, “blasphemy” refers to a defiant act of rebellion and rejection.³² Therefore, when one commits blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, he willfully opposes the work of God's Spirit and calls it evil.³³ Interestingly enough, the same word is used when Jesus is condemned to death. Jesus is accused of the very sin that he warned the religious leaders about.³⁴ A deeper investigation into the literary intentions of the author might prove to be very interesting.

²⁸ Hurtado, 69.

²⁹ Hendriksen, 137.

³⁰ Edwards, 123.

³¹ France 75.

³² Hendriksen, 138.

³³ Witherington, 159.

³⁴ Hurtado, 69.

Finally, one should definitely look into the meaning of the term “Holy Spirit” (τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον). This term is used throughout the New Testament, yet it does not seem to always carry the same meaning. Since our understanding of the term “Holy Spirit” is limited and its mention in Mark 3:29 is vague, it is difficult to fully grasp what is meant by “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”. Some conclude that “Holy Spirit” refers to God and his power.³⁵ This would mean that to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is to refer to the work of God as that of Satan. Others interpret the term as the literal Holy Spirit.³⁶ In this case, to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is to criticize any work performed through this being.³⁷ One might therefore ask if the criticism of any individual’s work that is done through God is an act of blasphemy.

Another interesting theory in relation to the eternal sin is presented by James R. Edwards. He references John the Baptizer and his message about the one who will come after the latter. “He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’” (Mark 1:7-8) Clearly, John is talking about Jesus. He says Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit. This is the same Greek word as that of Mark 3:29.³⁸ Therefore, Edwards suggests that to call the power by which Jesus performed miracles demonic, one was essentially calling the Holy Spirit, Satan.³⁹

In the end, there are dozens of different interpretations of what constitutes blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Some go as far as to look beyond the story itself, like

³⁵ Lane, 145.

³⁶ Gaebelein, 646.

³⁷ France, 175.

³⁸ Edwards, 123.

³⁹ Edwards, 123.

J. C. O’Neil, who suggests this blasphemy is the refusal to forgive.⁴⁰ Along these same lines, John Newton Strain argues that it is to “reject the conviction to repent of one’s sin”.⁴¹ All these and other interpretations will be explored in greater detail as a central aspect of my thesis.

METHODOLOGY

When considering methodology for this topic, it is important to be selective. All methodological approaches are valuable and serve an important purpose in better understanding the given passage. However, it is necessary to identify which methods will be most useful to me for the work that I have set out to do. Some methodological approaches, interesting as they may be, will do little to further my thesis. For example, manuscript collation can prove very useful for gaining a better hypothesis of what was originally written. Yet such a task would provide little help for the purpose of my thesis: understanding the unforgivable sin. While I do use multiple methods on one level or another, two or three of these will be employed in a much more thorough manner.

Epistemology

Since I am most concerned with the meaning of the text, I will take a synchronic approach. Although some aspects of a diachronic approach interest me, this perspective seeks to understand the history encompassing the passage in question. Therefore, it is

⁴⁰ J. C. O’Neill, “The Unforgivable Sin” (*Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 19, 1983), 41.

⁴¹ John Newton Strain, *The Unpardonable Sin* (Toronto, Ont.: Copp Clark, 1916), 46.

ultimately of little use to me in my quest to understand the text's meaning. However, I do employ some diachronic-based methods to an extent. The historical-critical method requires outside sources in order to better understand the meaning of the text. This method is of interest to me, but it will not be the main focus my thesis.

On the other hand, the synchronic approach reflects the methods that are most useful to my objective: understanding the unforgivable sin and how it is relevant to the story found in Mark 3. When one takes a synchronic approach, he is more concerned with meaning than with historical issues and the veracity of the text in question. Therefore, the majority of my thesis is written from a synchronic perspective. There are three methods that will especially be used to support my ideas: philology, source/redaction criticism, and narrative criticism, the latter being the most important for the purposes of this thesis.

Textual Criticism, Translation, and Philology

I will provide a philological analysis of certain expressions in my efforts to interpret the given passage. This method is the comparison of words and their interpretation based on context. A philological analysis is of particular interest to me as I seek to explore words such as “blasphemy” and “Holy Spirit”. Finding other instances of “blasphemy” in the New Testament, for example, might prove to be very useful when attempting to gain a full understanding of what Jesus' quote about blasphemy implies.

I will also engage in some textual criticism in order to ensure I interpret the text as accurately as possible. Variations among manuscripts are of great interest to me and I plan on studying these variations and examine which ones are the most reliable and archaic. Using textual criticism will be of particular interest to me in my effort to

understand blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as well as the story of Jesus' family. In relation to the former, a word such as "blasphemy" deserves a great deal of attention. In the case of Jesus' family, some translations claim that his family, including his mother Mary, accused him of insanity. I look forward to studying these specific variations within Greek manuscripts and arriving at a more definite conclusion.

An important part of my thesis is providing my own translation of the text in question. When translating a biblical text, there are several approaches at one's disposal. The formal equivalent approach consists of a translation that is as exact in wording and syntax as possible. However, this method does not allow for fluidity in the narrative and often causes greater confusion to the reader.⁴² At the opposite end of the spectrum is paraphrasing. The process involved is precisely what is suggested by its name—the translator interprets the text in his own words.⁴³ While this may, in many ways, be the most interesting type of translation to read, it has little merit in terms of accuracy. Since my objective is to better understand the text, a paraphrased translation would hinder my comprehension.

There is, however, a middle ground when translating a text: the dynamic equivalent approach. This method is less scientific yet clearer than the formal equivalent approach while being less liberal and more accurate than paraphrasing.⁴⁴ For the purposes of my thesis, the dynamic equivalent approach was the best option. I tried to take the positive aspects of each style and produce a translation that is accurate, clear, and hopefully provides a better understanding of the passage in question.

⁴² Kenney, 7.

⁴³ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 7.

Source and Redaction Criticism

As was previously mentioned, the appearance of an “unforgivable sin” is found in all three synoptic Gospels. However, each account is in some way different. Source and redaction criticism is the study of how and why such variations occur. It is concerned with the sources an author used to write his text and how he modified his sources in view of his own theological concerns. I will address the role of Jesus’ family and how it evolved from the story told in Mark 3 to various portrayals found in the other Synoptic Gospels. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus’ family, Mary in particular, is depicted in a more positive light. Moreover, I will set out to explain why Mark’s account of the scribes’ accusation differs from Matthew’s and Luke’s in terms of context and the story preceding it. In order to do this, I will use redaction criticism.

Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism will play the most important role in my treatment of the passage in question. This approach focuses on the text on its own. It does not consider peripheral aspects nor is it concerned with history. When one performs narrative criticism, he studies the passage just as one would analyze a novel. David Rhoads identifies eleven basic areas of literary investigation into narrative: plot, conflict, character, setting, narrator, point of view, standards of judgment, the implied author, ideal reader, style, and rhetorical techniques.⁴⁵ While I do plan on examining the characters, events, setting, etc, my primary focus is to understand the text’s literary meaning. There are differing views regarding the historical accuracy of the events and sayings of Mark

⁴⁵ David M. Rhoads, “Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 3 (1982): 412.

3:20-35, but all conclusions remain speculative. However, when one seeks to find meaning by examining the text as literature, the veracity of the recorded events becomes irrelevant.

I will also explore the impact this passage is meant to have on the reader. What effect might this passage have had on the 1st-century reader? What effect does it have on the 21st-century reader? Asking such questions may prove to be very helpful in understanding the text's meaning, both from a historical and modern perspective. For this reason, I have consulted the works of Early Church Fathers. The impact on the reader (both ancient and modern) produced by a text is always important to consider, and this will make up the final chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER ONE

Deciphering the Text

In this chapter, the focus will be the biblical text itself. I will be breaking down Mark 3:20-35 and examining it in detail. The first step is to reconstruct the original text as closely as possible. There are countless manuscripts containing this passage and they differ in many ways. From here, the text can be translated into English. Finally, I will proceed with philology, which will provide the foundation for the narrative criticism that I will undertake in Chapter Two.

1.1 The Greek Text (Textual Criticism)

²⁰ Καὶ ἔρχεται εἰς οἶκον· καὶ συνέρχεται πάλιν [ὁ] ὄχλος ὥστε μὴ δύνασθαι αὐτοὺς μηδὲ ἄρτον φαγεῖν. ²¹ καὶ ἀκούοντες οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ ἐξῆλθον κρατῆσαι αὐτόν, ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη. ²² Καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς οἱ ἀπὸ Ἱεροσολύμων καταβάντες ἔλεγον ὅτι Βεελζεβούλ ἔχει, καὶ ὅτι ἐν τῷ ἄρχοντι τῶν δαιμονίων ἐκβάλλει τὰ δαιμόνια. ²³ Καὶ προσκαλάμενος αὐτοὺς ἐν παραβολαῖς ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς· πῶς δύναται σατανᾶς σατανᾶν ἐκβάλλειν; ²⁴ καὶ ἐὰν βασιλεία ἐφ' ἑαυτὴν μερισθῆ, οὐ δύναται σταθῆναι ἢ βασιλεία ἐκείνη. ²⁵ καὶ ἐὰν οἰκία ἐφ' ἑαυτὴν μερισθῆ, οὐ δυνήσεται ἢ οἰκία ἐκείνη σταθῆναι. ²⁶ καὶ εἰ ὁ σατανᾶς ἀνέστη ἐφ' ἑαυτόν καὶ ἐμερίσθη, οὐ δύναται στήναι ἀλλὰ τέλος ἔχει. ²⁷ ἀλλ' οὐ δύναται οὐδεὶς εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν τοῦ ἰσχυροῦ εἰσελθὼν τὰ σκευὴ αὐτοῦ διαρπάσαι, ἐὰν μὴ πρῶτον τὸν ἰσχυρὸν δῆσῃ, καὶ τότε τὴν οἰκίαν αὐτοῦ διαρπάσει. ²⁸ Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πάντα ἀφεθήσεται τοῖς υἱοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὰ ἀμαρτήματα καὶ αἱ βλασφημίαι ὅσα ἐὰν βλασφημήσωσιν· ²⁹ ὃς δ' ἂν βλασφημήσῃ εἰς τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, οὐκ ἔχει ἄφεσιν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ἀλλὰ ἔνοχος ἐστὶν αἰωνίου ἀμαρτήματος. ³⁰ ὅτι ἔλεγον· Πνεῦμα ἀκάθαρτον ἔχει. ³¹ Καὶ ἔρχεται ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔξω στήκοντες ἀπέστειλαν πρὸς αὐτόν καλοῦντες αὐτόν. ³² καὶ ἐκάθητο περὶ αὐτόν ὄχλος, καὶ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· ἰδοὺ ἡ μήτηρ σου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί σου καὶ αἱ ἀδελφαί σου ἔχου ζητοῦσίν σε. ³³ καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς αὐτοῖς λέγει· τίς ἐστὶν ἡ μήτηρ μου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί μου; ³⁴ καὶ περιβλεψάμενος τοὺς περὶ αὐτόν κύκλω καθημένους λέγει· ἴδε ἡ μήτηρ μου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί μου. ³⁵ ὃς γὰρ ἂν ποιήσῃ τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, οὗτος ἀδελφός μου καὶ ἀδελφὴ καὶ μήτηρ ἐστίν.

The Greek text that I am using is from the 27th edition Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece. While there are some variants within the text, I have opted to use the suggested text provided by this edition. I will explain my choices for the dismissal of these variants to a certain extent. It is worth noting, however, that this thesis is not an exercise in textual criticism. An entire thesis could be dedicated to the variants found in the text and the exploration of the history, dependability, and tradition of the many manuscripts that feature this text. My conclusions are based on what scholars accept as the critical edition of the New Testament, and on the basic rules of textual criticism.⁴⁶

Many of the variants are slight grammatical changes, such as verb conjugations. While such differences could play a role in the significance of what one reads, these particular variants do not affect the meaning or interpretation of the text in any way. Other differences do not affect the text in a major way, but they are worth mentioning nevertheless. In verse 20, the verb ἔρχεται is shown as ἔρχονται in a great deal of manuscripts (Ⲙ, A, C, L, 33).⁴⁷ This changes the action “he went” to a plural “they went”. It is therefore suggested in these manuscripts that Jesus’ disciples went into the house with him. Another textual variant can be found in verse 26. On the subject of Satan’s downfall, one reads οὐ δύναται στῆναι, which translates as “he cannot stand”. Some manuscripts, however, read σταθῆναι ἢ βασιλεία αὐτοῦ (D, W), meaning “his kingdom cannot stand”. Finally, in verse 35, the conjunction γάρ (for) is absent in a significant number of manuscripts (Ⲙ, A, C, D, L, Θ). It seems quite likely that the original text did

⁴⁶ James W Voelz, “Textual Criticism of the Gospel of Mark: Trying to Make Progress,” *Concordia Journal* 31 1 (2005): 10-11. In this article, the author performs textual-critical exercises with several passages in Mark. He explains his choices and some of the process involved in performing such work. Furthermore, at the end of his article, Voelz lays out certain guidelines for textual criticism, such as manuscript tendencies and the author’s style.

⁴⁷ Another variation of this plural form also exists as εἴσερχονται.

not contain this conjunction and it was added to better the flow of the text. This word, however, plays no role in the interpretation of this passage for the purpose of my thesis.

Conversely, other variants potentially change the text's meaning if in fact they were deemed more accurate. In any case, these are important differences that must be addressed. One of the most significant variants can be found in verse 21, where Jesus' "close ones" set out to seize him. Grouped with those near him are the scribes (γραμματεῖς). This means that those close to Jesus⁴⁸ are in league with the scribes and are directly implicated in the sin the scribes are in danger of committing or have already committed. Such a significant statement is a potentially radical change in the perception of Jesus' family. This variant, however, is only present in a couple manuscripts of the 6th century, and might not be therefore the most reliable sources for recreating the most primitive form of the Markan text.

On the subject of Jesus' family, there are some differences worth examining. In many manuscripts, ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτοῦ, Jesus' mother and brothers are not mentioned in verse 31 (κ, B, C, D, L, Δ, 33, 892). They are named in the next verse; this provides sufficient context to conclude that "they" are indeed his family. Furthermore, in verse 32, ἀδελφαί, Jesus' sisters, are omitted in these same manuscripts. This leads to several questions. It is possible that with so many manuscripts agreeing on these omissions that the more primitive text did not contain these details either. One might conclude that the naming of mother and brothers in verse 31 was an addition that made the text more clear. Additionally, the inclusion of sisters in verse 32 would also be an addition in an effort to be more inclusive of the female sex. If the exclusion of one is

⁴⁸ Verse 31 makes the identity of Jesus' close ones quite obvious. His immediate family is those close to him.

closer to the earliest form of the text, it is almost certain the other is as well. But it seems, however, as though the author did include female parties in his writings. In Mark 6:3, there is another mention of Jesus' sisters. In this instance, there is no disagreement amongst manuscripts. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that the family is specifically indicated and the inclusion of sisters is not an addition.

Another significant variant can be found in the scribes' accusation in Mark 3:22. The Greek word Βεελζεβοὺλ, translated Beelzebul, is not common in the Bible. The slightly altered Βεεζεβοὺβ (Beelzebub)⁴⁹, however, is a familiar biblical name, most often referencing Satan.⁵⁰ It is likely that this change was made by scribes either accidentally, or in an effort to clarify the text. Consequently, even though this variant is found in a significant amount of manuscripts,⁵¹ it is safe to dismiss it as a deviation from the most primitive form of the text.

Finally, there are two noteworthy variants found in verse 29. These are particularly interesting because they directly relate to the unforgivable sin. First, the prepositional phrase εἰς τὸν αἰῶμα⁵² is absent (D, W, Θ, 28, 565, 700, 2542). This removes the eternal aspect of the privation of forgiveness for committing the sin. One could therefore argue that forgiveness might somehow be possible. This phrase makes the withholding of forgiveness very final, and its removal certainly affects the interpretation of this already highly convoluted verse. However, the omission of the phrase only exists in a few manuscripts. The earliest of these dates to the 6th century while others date as late as the 11th century.

⁴⁹ Translates as "lord of the flies". Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), Βεεζεβοὺβ.

⁵⁰ This will be explained in further detail in 2.4.

⁵¹ ⳨, A, C, D, L W, Θ, 33, 2427.

⁵² Translated as "for (the) eternity". Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, αἰῶμα.

Secondly, the last word in verse 29, ἁμαρτήματος, sin, is replaced with the word κρίσεως, judgment. This can also bring slight change to the interpretation of the verse because an eternal sin does not inescapably amount to an eternal judgment. One could forever suffer the consequences of an action without necessarily being denied salvation. This is particularly significant for the modern reader who may seek out the meaning and implication of committing this sin for personal reasons. Nevertheless, only a few manuscripts contain this variant, and the word describing the act as a sin seems a more reliable presentation of the earliest text.

1.2 Translation

The following is my translation of the Koine Greek text as seen at the beginning of section 1.1.

²⁰ Then he went into the house; and a large crowd assembled again so that they were not even able to eat bread. ²¹ Now having heard this, the ones near him set out to seize him, because they were saying that he had lost his mind.

²² Then the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying: “He is possessed by Beelzebul!” and “By the lord of demons, he casts out demons!” ²³ So he summoned them and told them in parables: “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen against himself and is divided, he cannot stand; but he has reached his end. ²⁷ No one can enter the strong man’s house and plunder all he owns if he does not first bind the strong man. Then he can plunder his house.”

²⁸ “Truly I tell you: all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, even the blasphemies they injuriously speak. ²⁹ But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit does not ever have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” ³⁰(Because they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”)

³¹ Then his mother and brothers came. And standing outside, they sent for him, calling him. ³² And a large crowd was sitting around him and they said to him: “Behold! Your mother and brothers and sisters are outside seeking you.” ³³ And answering them, he said: “Who are my mother and brothers?” ³⁴ And

looking around at the ones sitting around him, he said: “Behold! My mother and my brothers! ³⁵ For whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother.”

As is the case with all translation, some of it is straightforward while some requires a certain amount of subjectivity. While I will not justify every decision I have made, I will explain some of the more relevant choices.

The first important translation decision that can be found throughout the text is the interpretation of καί. While the standard translation is “and”, this conjunction serves many purposes. Considering my dynamic equivalent approach, I have chosen to use various (appropriate) conjunctions that better the flow of the narrative, rather than use “and” on every occasion. The first example of this is the very first word of the text, which I translated as “then”.

In verse 20, ὄχλος is usually translated “crowd”. I chose to add the adjective “large” because the Greek word implies great numbers. Other translations include “multitude” and “throng”, meaning the use of such a word suggests more than several people are present. Furthermore, it is more likely that a large crowd would hinder Jesus from being able to eat than the company of merely a few people. Finally, at the end of the narrative, Jesus’ family arrives at the house and they stand outside and call for him. This implies there is such a large crowd inside that they are not able to simply enter, but rather, must wait outdoors and pass a message along.

On the subject of Jesus’ family, there is considerable debate surrounding the interpretation of the term παρ’ αὐτοῦ.⁵³ Literally, the term translates as “his close ones” or “the ones near him”. The question at hand becomes who are these “close ones”? Some

⁵³ Since there is no definite or specific meaning for this term, it is open to interpretation. Various scholars understand “Jesus’ close ones” to mean different things.

argue that these are his disciples.⁵⁴ This is unlikely because they seem to be with Jesus when he enters the house and they are with him when his family arrives. Furthermore, due to the emphasis placed on discipleship within the story, it is doubtful that his followers are the subject of this colloquial expression. Similarly, a significant amount of interpreters translate (or understand) *παρ' αὐτοῦ* as “his friends”.⁵⁵ R. T. France believes that the unspecified group is his family, but rather than being his immediate family, it is most likely his extended family, such as cousins.⁵⁶ Most scholars agree, however, that “the ones close to him” from verse 21 and “his mother and brothers” that appear in verse 31 are indeed the same characters.⁵⁷ I am in accordance with those who argue the latter because first, it is the most logical and consistent option when considering the narrative as a whole. Secondly, the expression *παρ' αὐτοῦ* was a common expression at the time that was often used to describe one’s close family.⁵⁸

Upon deciding on the proper interpretation of *παρ' αὐτοῦ*, I was presented with a new dilemma: whether or not I should translate the term according to my interpretation. Inserting “his family” into verse 21 would definitely make the text clearer for the reader. I even considered taking it a step further and defining them as “his immediate family”. Unfortunately, such a translation would stray too far from the original Greek and I want to be as accurate as possible while trying to remain clear. In a non-scholarly endeavor, I

⁵⁴ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament in Which the Sense of the Sacred Text is Taken: Doctrinal and Practical Truths are Set in a Plain and Easy Light; Difficult Passages Explained; Seeming Contradictions Reconciled; and Whatever is Material in the Various Readings and Several Oriental Versions is Observed*. Vol. 5. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1954), 322.

⁵⁵ The Holy Bible, *King James Version* (New York, NY: Penguin Publishing Group, 1981), Mark 3:21; Hendriksen, 136.

⁵⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 167.

⁵⁷ Ayers, 179., Edwards, 118., Guelich, 172-173., Hare, 50., Hurtado, 64., Lane, 137., Neufeld, 153., Thompson, 123., Witherington, 153.

⁵⁸ Robert A. Guelich, *Word Biblical Commentary*. Vol. 34A “Mark 1-8:26” (Nashville, Ten.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 172.

would most likely elect to name the family in verse 21. But after some consideration, I favored the more objective translation of “the ones near him”.

The word ἐξέστη in verse 21 is important because it explains the motivating factor that drives Jesus’ family to set out and seize him. This verb appears (in various forms) on many occasions throughout the New Testament.⁵⁹ It can mean two very different things. In most instances, it signifies a state of astonishment or amazement. But its use in this particular context is far more negative. Here, those talking about Jesus are literally saying he is “beside himself”, or in more comprehensible terms, has lost his mind. This is a particularly severe accusation because during that time period in antiquity, madness was commonly linked to demonic possession.⁶⁰ Although I chose not to editorialize this in my translation, it is a key point in my thesis that I will be exploring in further detail.

There are, however, instances where I did opt for a more subjective and less literal translation. In verse 22, the scribes accuse Jesus of being possessed. Literally, the phrase Βεελζεβοὺλ ἔχει is translated “he has Beelzebul”. This wording may cause unnecessary confusion with readers. When saying “he has Beelzebul”, the scribes are saying that this demon is inside Jesus, and he is consequently possessed by Beelzebul. In my translation, I chose to clearly convey the meaning of the phrase rather than present a more accurate wording that would be vaguer.

I was also obliged to make creative choices in my translation due to the limitations and differences of English grammar in comparison to the Greek. The last word of verse

⁵⁹ Can also be found in Matthew 12:23, Mark 2:12, 5:42, 6:51, Luke 2:47, 8:56, 24:22, Acts 2:7, 2:12, 8:9, 8:11, 8:13, 9:21, 10:45, 12:16. In all these cases, the English translation becomes “amazed” or “astounded”. Its appearance in 2 Cor 5:13 is similar to that of Mark 3:21, meaning to be out of one’s mind.

⁶⁰ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 155.

28 is βλασφημῆσωσιν, which translates as blaspheme⁶¹ (the act of blaspheming). Literally, the verse should read, “all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, even the blasphemies they blaspheme.” Since this would not be grammatically correct in the English language, it is necessary to alter the final verb while straying from the meaning as little as possible. Adding the adverb “injuriously”, although not in the Greek text, reflects the nature of blasphemous speech.

1.3 Source and Redaction Criticism

The unforgivable sin is mentioned in all three synoptic Gospels. The accounts of Matthew and Luke are similar in nature, but vary in content. I have included a chart that compares and contrasts the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. As one may notice, the versions of Matthew and Luke (particularly the latter) are longer and generally less sequential. I included all verses that are relevant to the Markan account. It is quite clear that Mark contains less detail and as a result, it is important not to automatically associate these details with what is not found in Mark. Considering the other two Gospels, however, is interesting and can provide clues in both understanding Mark’s rendering and deciphering the meaning of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. I have provided my own translation for these three texts and a side-by-side comparison proves to be quite interesting.

⁶¹ Aorist active subjunctive, 3rd person plural.

	Mark 3:20-35	Matt 12:22-37, 46-50	Luke 11:14-28, 12:8-12
Markan introduction	²⁰ Then he went into the house; and a large crowd assembled again so that they were not even able to eat bread. ²¹ Now having heard this, the ones near him set out to seize him, because they were saying that he had lost his mind.		
Introductions of Matthew and Luke		²² Then they brought to him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute; and he healed him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see. ²³ And all the crowds were amazed and said, ‘Is this the Son of David?’	¹⁴ Now he was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed.
Accusation against Jesus	²² Then the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying: “He is possessed by Beelzebul!” and “By the lord of demons, he casts out demons!”	²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, ‘He does not cast out demons but by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.’	¹⁵ But some of them said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.’
Accusation continued			¹⁶ And others, to test him, were demanding from him a sign from heaven.
Jesus’ response	²³ So he summoned them and told them in parables: “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen against himself and is divided, he cannot stand; but he has reached his end.	²⁵ But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to them, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is laid to waste, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶ And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?’	¹⁷ But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is laid to waste, and house falls on house. ¹⁸ If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Because you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul.
Jesus’ response continued		²⁷ And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore	¹⁹ Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore

<p>Strong man's house parable</p>	<p>²⁷No one can enter the strong man's house and plunder all he owns if he does not first bind the strong man. Then he can plunder his house."</p>	<p>they will be your judges. ²⁸But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.</p> <p>²⁹Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his property, if he does not first bind the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered.</p>	<p>they will be your judges. ²⁰But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has already come to you.</p> <p>²¹When a strong man, fully armed, guards his palace, his possessions are safe. ²²But when one stronger attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away the armor he was depending on and divides his plunder.</p>
<p>Allegiance with good or evil</p>		<p>³⁰Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.</p>	<p>²³Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.</p>
<p>Teaching about demons and exorcism</p>			<p>²⁴When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, it wanders through waterless regions looking for rest; but not finding any, it says, "I will return to my house from which I came." ²⁵And when it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. ²⁶Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they come and live there; and the last state of the man is worse than the first.'</p>
<p>Light rejection of Jesus' mother and emphasis on discipleship</p>			<p>²⁷ While he was saying these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!' ²⁸But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.'</p>
<p>Christological statement</p>			<p>⁸ 'And I tell you, everyone who</p>

<p>The unforgivable sin</p>	<p>²⁸“Truly I tell you: all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, even the blasphemies they injuriously speak. ²⁹But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit does not ever have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” ³⁰(Because they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”)</p>	<p>³¹Because of this, I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³²Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, neither in this age, nor in the age to come.</p>	<p>acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; ⁹but whoever denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.</p> <p>¹⁰And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.</p>
<p>Further words about the Holy Spirit</p>			<p>¹¹When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to make your defense or what you are to say; ¹²for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.’</p>
<p>Continued refutation of the scribes’ accusation</p>		<p>³³ ‘Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴Offspring of poisonous snakes! How can you speak good things when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵The good person brings good things out of a good treasury, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasury. ³⁶I tell you: on the day of judgment man will</p>	

<p>Strong rejection of Jesus' mother (and family) and emphasis on discipleship</p>	<p>³¹Then his mother and brothers came. And standing outside, they sent for him, calling him. ³²And a large crowd was sitting around him and they said to him: "Behold! Your mother and brothers and sisters are outside seeking you." ³³And answering them, he said: "Who are my mother and brothers?" ³⁴And looking around at the ones sitting around him, he said: "Behold! My mother and my brothers! ³⁵For whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother."</p>	<p>have to give an account for every careless word he utters; ³⁷for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.'</p> <p>⁴⁶ While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷Someone told him, 'Behold! Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' ⁴⁸But to the one who had said this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' ⁴⁹And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Behold! My mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'</p>	
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The most relevant difference between Mark and the two other accounts is the context of the scribes' accusation. In Mark, there does not seem to be any context at all. The charge against Jesus is preceded by the inability of Jesus to eat because of the crowd that follows him, and his family saying he has lost his mind and setting out to seize him. Some have tried to explain the accusation of verse 22 in the immediate context of verses 20 and 21. In his article entitled "Eating, Ecstasy, and Exorcism (Mark 3:21)", Dietmar Neufeld supports the claim made by Morton Smith that Jesus was a magician.⁶² One's

⁶² Dietmar Neufeld, "Eating, Ecstasy, and Exorcism (Mark 3:21)," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 26 (1996): 154.

modern day perception of a magician does not reflect that of the time of Jesus.⁶³ Being a magician had a very negative connotation. It was commonly associated with madness. Self-starvation in order to enter into a state of trance or to be more connected to higher spiritual powers was common practice.⁶⁴

Some scholars, including Neufeld, suggest that Jesus' family would have been aware that Jesus was a magician and that rumors of his madness would directly reflect upon the family's honor.⁶⁵ This would provoke them to find him, put an end to his "self-imposed" starvation, and keep him from acts of madness. The scribes, on the other hand, would have also recognized Jesus as a mad magician, which at the time, was equivalent to being demonically possessed.⁶⁶ With such a theory, the hostile actions of both the family and scribes are explained. The family fights for its honor, while the scribes are legitimately concerned by the nature of Jesus' actions and his exorcisms.

I would argue, however, that in order to understand the actions of Jesus' family, it is sufficient to read within the context of verse 20. This will be further examined as the text is explored using narrative criticism. As for the accusation made by the scribes, the soundest explanation can be found outside of Mark. In Matthew and Luke, a direct context is provided. Jesus casts out a powerful demon that caused physical impairment.⁶⁷ With the exorcism of the demon, the man is also healed. This is why the scribes speak against the power by which Jesus performs miracles. Such context directly relates to the accusation: "By the lord of demons, he casts out demons!"

⁶³ In today's western culture, a magician is generally seen as an entertainer. His or her so-called "magic" is the result of trickery or illusions. Very few modern-day magicians claim to use supernatural powers. Those who do are referred to by other names such as mediums, clairvoyants, diviners, mystics, seers, etc.

⁶⁴ Neufeld., 154.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 155.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 155.

⁶⁷ In Matthew, the demon causes the man to be blind and mute, while in Luke there is no mention of blindness.

While it is strongly recommended to avoid the use of sources outside a specific text to interpret a given passage, I propose that this is the best method of interpretation in this particular situation for two reasons. First, a general rule when performing biblical exegesis is that the simplest explanation is most often the best explanation. Analyzing the Markan text as completely separate from the other two synoptic Gospels and trying to decipher the meaning of verse 22 based solely on verses 20 and 21 is far more difficult than taking Matthew and Luke into consideration. Secondly, I have concluded that the author of the *Gospel According to Mark* purposely linked Jesus' family to the Beelzebul controversy by not writing about an exorcism between verses 21 and 22. The author had a specific theological agenda and took liberties with his retelling as a narrative technique. As narrative criticism becomes the focus of this thesis, I will explore the significance of Mark's structuring and the role Jesus' family plays in this story. As a result, greater clues will be provided when attempting to explain the unforgivable sin.

Another important element that separates Mark from Matthew and Luke is found in the wording of a phrase that directly relates to the unforgivable sin. In Mark 3:28, one reads that "all sins will be forgiven the sons of men". In Matthew 12:32, however, it says that "[w]hoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven", while Luke 12:10 states that "everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven[.]" The wording of Matthew and Luke is nearly identical. What one reads in Mark, however, is drastically different.

The dissimilarity between the "sons of men" of Mark and the "Son of Man" of Matthew and Luke introduces contrasting interpretations of the meaning of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. If in fact, one interprets based on the Markan text, it is possible to

argue that the sin in question could only be committed against the historical Jesus. If indeed the more accurate reading (for lack of a better term) is “all sins will be forgiven the sons of men”, a sin committed against Jesus may not be accepted. The one forbidden sin could be something done or said against the historical Jesus. But if one considers the saying “whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven”, a sin against the historical Jesus cannot be considered unforgivable since the religious leaders were speaking out against Jesus.

As we have seen, an understanding developed from the reading of Matthew and Luke excludes the possibility that the sin is limited to the historical Jesus. When one reads that all sins committed against the Son of Man are forgiven, one understands the Son of Man to be Jesus and therefore, any sin committed against the person of Jesus could be forgiven. Although Mark’s text does not directly state that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is a sin against the historical Jesus, it does, unlike the texts of Matthew and Luke, allow one to interpret the text in such a way.

Due to the major implications involved in this slight textual variation, it is important to attempt to determine which text is most reliable. There have been many efforts in redaction criticism and tradition history made by scholars, particularly in the last three decades, to determine the original rendition and to explain the reasons for the existence of such a variation. In his article, J. C. O’Neill proposes that the “sons of men” saying is most accurate, explaining that the dissimilarity exists “because scribes wanted to see a reference to Jesus Son of Man wherever they could.”⁶⁸ M. Eugene Boring makes an interesting point by saying that if indeed the “Son of Man” saying were authentic, one

⁶⁸ J. C. O’Neill, “The Unforgivable Sin,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 19 (1983): 38.

“cannot accept Mark's comment in which speaking against Jesus is considered the point,” and therefore would omit Mark 3:30 (as is the case in Matthew and Luke).⁶⁹

Boring also postulates that *Q* was in fact Mark's source.⁷⁰ It is doubtful that one source was dependent on the other. The text of Mark does not have enough similarities with Matthew/Luke to warrant the conclusion that one was the source of the other. The dating of Mark, however, is not the focus of this thesis. Although it is an interesting topic, I have no intention to determine whether or not Mark uses a hypothetical, fabricated text (such as *Q*) as its source.⁷¹

Finally, O'Neill proposes that the term “Holy Spirit” is an inaccurate representation of the most primitive form of the text and that the unforgivable sin is in fact “blasphemy against this spirit”.⁷² He argues that his “conjectured form” is a more authentic, original text, and that this text does not include the Holy Spirit.⁷³ He explains that the form was altered because the early scribes “were determined to take every reference to spirit as a reference to the Holy Spirit”.⁷⁴ As a result, the adjective ἅγιον (holy) was added. The demonstrative τούτου (this) was removed due to what would have been interpreted as an error because of the repetition found in the word, and therefore, turned from a demonstrative into a definite article.⁷⁵ From here, adding the adjective “holy” to “the spirit” was a logical and natural choice for the scribes.

I disagree, however, with everything O'Neill proposes on this matter. His

⁶⁹ M. Eugene Boring, “The Unforgivable Sin Logion Mark III 28-29/Matt XII 31-32/Luke XII 10: Formal Analysis and History of the Tradition,” *Novum Testamentum XVIII* 4 (1976): 261.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁷¹ It is nevertheless important to state that I do favor Markan priority to the other Gospels (also meaning Mark was a source of Matthew and Luke), which is why this thesis is based on Mark's account rather than that of either of the other two gospels.

⁷² O'Neill, 38.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

arguments hold little ground when carefully examined. His entire claim is primarily based outside of Mark. His theory of the demonstrative “this” preceding “spirit” is based on a single manuscript of Matthew 12:32,⁷⁶ where τούτου is found. Not only does this hold little weight in a study centered on Mark, but in the Markan text, τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον is in the accusative, while τούτου is in the genitive, and its accusative form, τοῦτον, is not similar to the article τὸ. Finally, O’Neill identifies manuscripts where “holy” is not found.⁷⁷ In spite of this, it is of little importance, as all these instances occur in Matthew and Luke. The only variation found in (very few) Markan manuscripts is the placing of the adjective “holy”, which sometimes precedes the noun.⁷⁸ Although his research is interesting and may be worthy of further exploration, the evidence he presents to support his claim is not convincing enough, especially when considering the fact that the focus of this thesis is Mark. So, the unforgivable sin remains blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

There are many other differences between the three synoptic texts that are quite interesting. An example is the contrast of the strong rejection of Jesus’ family in Matthew and Mark, and the weak rejection found in Luke. There are also many verses (particularly in Luke) that could help one understand blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Since the focus of this thesis is narrative criticism, I have chosen to limit the time and space dedicated to redaction criticism. Although the texts of Matthew and Luke are also interesting, the focus remains on Mark 3:20-35.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ibid., 40. The Manuscript in question is 489.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 41. For Matthew 12:32, ms. D; for Luke 12:10, mss. X, 213, 565, 1313.

⁷⁸ O’Neill does not specify which manuscripts contain this inversion of the order of wording. Since the Nestle-Aland does not list these variations, I conclude that very few mss. actually contain the inverted wording.

⁷⁹ As previously mentioned, the reason for the focus on Mark’s text is simply that it is the earliest dated Gospel and most likely the source for the other two synoptic Gospels. While this is not a certainty, it is the most accepted theory amongst scholars.

1.4 Philology

In order to provide a more complete analysis of Mark 3:20-35 using narrative criticism, it is important to have a proper understanding of the words within it. A brief philological study of some of the relevant words will prove to be helpful when exploring and interpreting the text. There are five terms that are of particular significance: κρατῆσαι (seize), ἐξέστη (he had lost his mind), Βεελζεβούλ (Beelzebul), βλασφημία (blasphemes), and τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον (the Holy Spirit). These are interesting because of their relevance to the story itself and/or the debate and disagreement involved with their interpretation. Many of these words possess more than one meaning, and it is therefore necessary to decipher them.

The root of κρατῆσαι (Mark 3:21), κρατέω, is an example of a verb that can be interpreted several ways. It seems to be used quite broadly throughout the New Testament, including the synoptic Gospels. One could divide these meanings into two categories: positive and negative connotation. The first “positive” definition is “to take”, i.e., taking someone’s hand.⁸⁰ This can be found in Mark 1:31, 5:41, and 9:27. The second “positive” definition is “to hold on to”, such as holding on to traditions.⁸¹ There are four such occurrences in Mark (7:3, 7:4, 7:8, 9:10). The first “negative” definition, “to arrest”, is the most common in Mark, found in 6:17, 12:12, 14:1, 14:44, 14:46, and 14:49. The second “negative” definition, “to violently seize”, is only found on one occasion in Mark.⁸² It is the description of a young man who is seized and flees naked in Mark 14:51. In Matthew, nine out of twelve instances are “negative” (14:3, 18:28, 21:46,

⁸⁰ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, κρατέω.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Other than Mark 3:21.

22:6, 26:4, 26:48, 26:50, 26:55, 26:57), while only three are “positive” (9:25, 12:11, 28:9). In Luke, both appearances of the word are “positive” (8:54, 24:16).

The second of the “negative” definitions is the most likely interpretation of κρατῆσαι in Mark 3:21. It is possible to eliminate the option of a “positive” definition based on two important factors. The first is the context of the word’s use. While one could entertain the possibility Jesus’ family members are setting out in kindness to bring him under their protection, the second part of verse 21, “they were saying that he had lost his mind”, brings such a theory into serious doubt. The second reason is that whenever the word κρατέω is used in direct relation to a person, it is negative.⁸³ It is also worth noting that this interpretation of κρατέω is often coupled with violence.

The word ἐξίστημι, root verb of ἐξέστη (Mark 3:21), can be defined in two very different ways. The first interpretation is amazement, shock, being astounded, or taken aback. Such a term is most often employed to describe one’s reaction to a miracle. There are three instances of this word holding such a meaning in Mark (2:12, 5:42, 6:51). Similarly, there are verses in Matthew (12:23) and Luke (2:47, 8:56, 24:22) where ἐξίστημι is present with a meaning matching this first definition.

The second definition, insanity or a loss of one’s mind or senses, seems like the more likely interpretation for Mark 3:21. There is no other place in Mark, or any of the synoptic Gospels, where the appearance of ἐξίστημι carries this meaning. In fact, the only other instance with this word carrying the definition in question can be found in 2 Corinthians 5:13. One should naturally assume that ἐξίστημι is defined the same way in Mark 3:21 as it is in the rest of the Gospel. One could interpret verse 21 as Jesus being

⁸³ When the object of this verb is a person, it signifies an act of aggression. When the object of the verb is an object, idea, or a part of a person (hands, clothing), the verb’s meaning broadens.

overwhelmed and in shock by the size and persistence of the crowd that his family set out to perform a rescue of sorts. I would argue against this because of the negative portrayal of Jesus' family throughout the entirety of Mark.⁸⁴ There are many other reasons for the dismissal of such a theory that will be explored in detail as I analyze the text through narrative criticism.

The word Βεελζεβοὺλ (Beelzebul, Mark 3:22) is peculiar because it only appears in the synoptic Gospels and with one exception, is exclusive to the unforgivable sin story.⁸⁵ Therefore, its exact meaning is somewhat ambiguous. A similar word, Baalzebub, appears in the Hebrew Bible, and is a reference to a pagan god, meaning “Lord of the Flies”.⁸⁶ A far more similar form of the word, Baalzebul meant “Lord of the High Place” (not heaven, but a high altar).⁸⁷ It is largely accepted that the New Testament variation translates as “Lord of Dung” or “Lord of the Dung Heap”.⁸⁸ The word is most likely a direct reference to Satan, but the connection it bears to Baalzebub, the pagan god of the Hebrew Bible, is unclear.

When considering βλασφημέω (blaspheme), the root word of βλασφημῆση (Mark 3:29), there is room for a great deal of interpretation. In many ways, a proper understanding of this word is the key to interpreting the meaning of the unforgivable sin. There is no shortage of occurrences of this word (or some variation of it) in the New Testament, as it appears 54 times. It can be found on four occasions in Mark outside of the passage in question (Mark 2:7, 7:22, 14:64, 15:29). The word βλασφημέω, however,

⁸⁴ W. R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 132.

⁸⁵ Also found in Matthew 10:25, 12:24, 12:27 and Luke 11:15, 18, 19.

⁸⁶ Larry W. Hurtado, *New International Biblical Commentary: Mark* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1989), 68.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸⁸ Guelich, 174.

translates into the English language several ways. Its uses in Mark and throughout the New Testament vary according to context.

While “blasphemy” is considered a much harsher word today, in the context of its use by Jesus, the word was broader—taking the Lord’s name in vain, bad language, defamation, slander, etc. Therefore, one may ask: when Jesus mentions blasphemy against Holy Spirit, is the term just as broad?⁸⁹ It seems as though one must consider the context surrounding the word in order to properly understand it. In Mark, the uses of βλασφημέω vary. In Mark 2:7 and 14:64 its use is directly related to “blasphemy” as we know it today. In Mark 7:22, however, it translates better as slander, while in Mark 15:29, the English words defame, revile, or insult are more appropriate.

Another interesting meaning of this word is to discredit. This becomes particularly significant in light of Romans 14:16, which reads, “μὴ βλασφημείσθω οὖν ὑμῶν τὸ ἀγαθόν.” The NRSV translates this as “So do not let your good be spoken of as evil.”⁹⁰ Larry Hurtado defines blasphemy in this particular case as “disregarding [Jesus’] message by calling it Satanic.”⁹¹ The idea of directly calling something good evil is perhaps the most important clue in defining the sin in question, and many scholars postulate theories based on such an understanding. This will be addressed in further detail throughout this thesis, as it is key to understanding blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

The final words of interest are τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29). While πνεῦμα (spirit; wind) is found on countless occasions in the New Testament, the combination of these words is what makes it noteworthy. In fact, of the twenty-three instances of πνεῦμα (or some variation) in Mark, there are only two outside the passage

⁸⁹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1973), 138.

⁹⁰ New Revised Standard Version Bible, Romans 14:16.

⁹¹ Hurtado, 66.

in question that combine it with ἅγιος (Mark 12:36, 13:11).⁹² It is for this reason that some (such as O'Neill) question the authenticity of ἅγιος in Mark 3:29.⁹³ Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit that plays such an important role in Acts and Paul's letters is the same Holy Spirit that is the (potential) victim of blasphemy in Mark 3. Hurtado also notes that it is the same "Spirit" as that of Mark 1:10, which empowers Jesus for his ministry, and is therefore the definite source of Jesus' miracles.⁹⁴

Now, a basic foundation has been laid for the task at hand: narrative criticism. In this next chapter, the literary elements of the text will be examined. Doing this will bring meaning to the text and will serve as the basis for my interpretation of the unforgivable sin and all that surrounds it.

⁹² The meaning of "spirit" in Mark 1:10 seems to be the same as that of the verses combining "spirit" with "holy".

⁹³ O'Neill, 38.

⁹⁴ Hurtado, 66.

CHAPTER TWO

Narrative Criticism

There is a great deal that one must examine when performing narrative criticism of a biblical text. When engaging in such a practice and applying the rules involved, there is some danger when it comes to literary criticism of a text such as the *Gospel According to Mark*. Pheme Perkins discusses the art of literary criticism in the context of New Testament studies. She explains that standard literary criticism the way we use it today cannot be used when studying the Bible. The writing style of the Gospels is far different from what one reads in other criticized works such as novels and even plays.⁹⁵

One of the reasons for the Bible's disconnect from other works is the use of characters. Character study plays a large role in literary criticism. Often, characters in more modern literature change throughout the story.⁹⁶ Development of characters is one of the most important keys to a proper and full understanding of a story. In ancient literature, however, characters served more as a representation of a theme (i.e.: Judas personifying evil and betrayal).⁹⁷ Characters remain stagnant and internal development is absent. Perkins argues that the Gospels were written in such a way.

In spite of this, character study is one of the most important aspects of narrative criticism; particularly with regards to Mark 3:20-35. In fact, David Rhoads explores the use of narrative criticism in relation to the *Gospel According to Mark*. He, like many others, considers the danger of using a method primarily intended for more modern works

⁹⁵ Pheme Perkins, "Crisis in Jerusalem? Narrative Criticism in New Testament Studies," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 303.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 303.

when examining ancient texts. Nevertheless, there is great value in examining various literary aspects of Mark. Rhoads lists these as being plot, conflict, setting, narrator, point of view, standards of judgment, the implied author, ideal reader, style, and rhetorical techniques, in addition to character.⁹⁸ I will explore all of these; some in far greater detail than others. In addition to the eleven themes addressed by Rhoads, I believe that examining the text's structure is of great importance. Therefore, this chapter will be based primarily on four key points: plot, conflict, characters, and structure.

2.1 Plot

A story's plot is not as easy to properly discuss as it may initially seem. There is so much that must be addressed in order to cover all the important aspects. The one advantage presented in this particular analysis is the length of the text in question; a mere sixteen verses. However, some, such as Richard Baukham would argue that a plot analysis of the entire *Gospel According to Mark* is necessary.⁹⁹ While I do not argue against such a position, the analysis I will be presenting is almost exclusive to Mark 3:20-35 as a stand-alone text. I will sometimes consider other parts of Mark, and even other verses in the Bible, but I believe the text on its own to be self-sustaining. Therefore, the story begins with Mark 3:20.

Everything opens with Jesus entering a house; but the definite article suggests it is a specific house, even though it is not identified in any explicit way. As a result, the first words of the story leave considerable room for interpretation, and consequently a call to

⁹⁸ David M. Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 3 (1982): 412.

⁹⁹ Richard Baukham, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story" In *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 39.

examination. Some, such as Edwards, believe the unspecified house to be the home of Simon (or Peter) and Andrew because of the use of the definite article “the” before house, implying it is the same house that was mentioned in Mark 1:29.¹⁰⁰ Since it is the only house that is identified before Mark 3:20, there is validity to such a conclusion. However, many believe Jesus went into his own house. In fact, a great deal of translations read, “Then he went home [.]”.¹⁰¹ Due to this and other similar translations, many who comment on this verse do so under this pretense. Yet there is very little evidence to suggest the house of verse 20 belongs to Jesus. Consequently, it is almost certainly a misinterpretation of the biblical text.

There is, however, another fascinating theory about the meaning of “the house”. Witherington proposes that the use of the definite article is to relate the house Jesus enters in verse 20 with the strong man’s house in verse 27.¹⁰² It would not be uncharacteristic of the Markan author to bring special attention to something and tie it in with another theme at a later time. This technique will be made quite obvious as I explore the structure of the text. While there is no hard evidence for a link between the house of verse 20 and that of verse 27, the author’s style does allow for such a conclusion.

This link is particularly interesting because it brings about a great deal of layers to Jesus’ parable and allows for a much deeper interpretation of what he says. As Mark 3:27 is examined more closely, the significance of the link between the strong man’s house in Jesus’ parable and the house that opens the story of Mark 3:20-35 will be made clearer. This house is of importance because it provides the reader with the setting for the entire

¹⁰⁰ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 118.

¹⁰¹ New Revised Standard Version Bible, Mark 3:20.

¹⁰² Witherington, 155.

story. Therefore, this setting likely serves as macrocosm to the microcosm of the fictitious, intangible house from Jesus' parable.

Next, a crowd is said to have gathered at the house. The reason for their presence is not addressed, but the word "again" indicates that crowds were always following Jesus. In my translation, I added the adjective "large" to "crowd", because the Greek word ὄχλος is often translated as "multitude" or even a "throng". Yet there are some, such as Jean Delorme, who believe the crowd to be small. The description of the grouping of people sitting around Jesus in Mark 3:32, causes Delorme to conclude that a picture is painted of a modest grouping of people.¹⁰³ However, the description of people sitting around Jesus in verse 32 does not necessarily mean the crowd is small. In fact, when reading Mark 3:31-32, Jesus' family members present themselves at the house, yet they stand outside and call for him. This suggests the house was so packed with people that his family is unable to even enter the house and have access to him.

The presence of the large crowd that assembles at the house becomes a hindrance to Jesus. When reading the end of verse 20, one sees that "they were not even able to eat bread." The word "they" almost certainly refers to Jesus and his disciples. Although he dismisses it, France explains that according to the Greek, it could be "the crowd" that does not have time to eat.¹⁰⁴ However, the motif of Jesus feeding a hungry crowd found in Mark 6:35-36 and Mark 8:2 does not fit as well as the motif of Jesus and his disciples being pressed by crowds to the extent that they do not have time for food, as found in Mark 6:30.¹⁰⁵ The precision of eating bread in Mark 3:20 implies that even such a simple

¹⁰³ Jean Delorme, *L'heureuse annonce selon Marc: Lecture intégrale du deuxième évangile* (Montréal, QC: Médiaspaul, 2007), 233.

¹⁰⁴ France, 165.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

and quick meal was not a possibility for Jesus due to the crowd. This sets the scene for verse 21 and 31-35.

The next verse (21) opens with “Now having heard this”. Clearly, “this” refers to something found in verse 20: Jesus’ failure to eat. The result is that his immediate family concludes that he has gone mad and they set out to take him by force. This is significant for several reasons, but before exploring this, it is important to try to understand why Jesus’ family is so upset, particularly by something that seems as trivial as not eating food. First and foremost, it has already been mentioned that madness was correlated to demonic possession.¹⁰⁶ If his family believed he had lost his mind (or that he was possessed), a quest to take hold of him and correct the problem is understandable. However, one would still ask why Jesus not eating would result in his family saying he is no longer sane.

John Peter Lange, along with many other scholars, tries to portray Jesus’s family in the most positive light possible, claiming that their suspicions of his madness and consequent actions are a result of genuine concern.¹⁰⁷ If indeed his mother and brothers set out because they were worried about him and thought the crowd following him to be hostile or detrimental to his well-being, their actions are justified. Such a theory, however, is uncommon in modern academia. A concern for Jesus’ safety does not reflect the overall theme of the story, nor does it explain his rejection of his family found at the end of Mark 3.

The question therefore remains: Why would Jesus’ failure to eat result in such an angry reaction on his family’s part. Neufeld proposes a bold, yet perceptive explanation.

¹⁰⁶ Witherington, 155.

¹⁰⁷ John Peter Lange, *Lange’s Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*. Vol. 8. The Gospel According to Mark (Translated by William G.T. Shedd. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 38.

As previously alluded to, in the first century, self-starvation was common practice for magicians.¹⁰⁸ Magicians were considered to be demonized individuals who often fasted in order to enter trances and communicate with spiritual beings (demons). If rumors were indeed spreading about Jesus being a magician, the fact that he was also not eating would certainly prompt a negative reaction among his family members.¹⁰⁹ Even though Neufeld argues that he actually was a magician, a point I would strongly contest, it is likely that the mother and brothers of Jesus would have believed the latter was practicing occult magic, avoiding food and removing himself from his mind and body. Many translations of verse 21 read, “[...] they were saying, ‘he is beside himself!’” These are the words of one who would believe Jesus to be in a demonic trance, triggered by a refusal to eat food. This seems to be the most logical and complete explanation as to why Jesus’ inability to eat caused such a strong reaction on his family’s behalf.¹¹⁰

The story of Jesus and his family abruptly ends and switches to a more familiar opponent in verse 22: the scribes. The sudden change of plot without any transition will be explored in more detail when we focus on structure. The aforementioned scribes accuse Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebul, and that he casts out demons with the help of the lord of demons.¹¹¹ The reason for such an accusation is never stated. The accounts found in both Matthew and Luke describe an exorcism performed by Jesus and the

¹⁰⁸ Neufeld, 154.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 155.

¹¹⁰ There are many other theories as to why Jesus’ family was inspired to set out and seize him. Neufeld’s (or part of it) is the only one that addresses the combination of no food with the claim that Jesus has lost his mind.

¹¹¹ The “lord of demons” is undoubtedly Satan, as Jesus responds to the scribes using the name “Satan”. The etymology “Beelzebul” has already been explored, but the reason for using such a word is uncertain. It is likely that their saying Jesus was possessed by the “lord of the dung heap” was an added insult to Jesus, accompanying the accusation they were making.

scribes' accusation follows. The lack of any action taking place before the accusation should cause the reader to ask a few important questions.

The first question one might ask is whether or not the lack of any background information is intentional. If so, which I would postulate that it is, the following question becomes "Why?" Clearly, the actual exorcism that Jesus performs is not relevant to the plot in the eyes of the Markan author. At this point in Mark (which is very early on), there have already been several accounts of miracles performed by Jesus, including the telling of an exorcism. It is clear that Jesus is powerful and is capable of great things. Rather than be redundant and describe yet another exorcism, the author of Mark, a very straightforward writer, chooses to leave out details that do not add to the overall message of his writing.¹¹²

The accusation made by the scribes, when considered from a literary perspective, would be known as the plot's conflict. However, what makes this story different from others is that a primary conflict was seemingly already established with Jesus' family setting out to seize him. The introduction of "the scribes who came down from Jerusalem" not only diverts the reader's attention from Jesus' family to a new opponent, it makes this new opponent a far more obvious antagonist. The words of the scribes come across as much more confrontational and direct. Conversely, Jesus' response to the scribes is anything but direct.

When studying the unforgivable sin in Mark, Jesus' parables do not usually come to the forefront of what is considered. Nevertheless, nearly one third of the story of Mark

¹¹² As structure is explored in detail, the author's intended message will be made clearer. However, it is important to note that to say that the Markan author left out an exorcism story does not mean he was using another text. The fact that an exorcism took place seems quite evident, but the absence of such an account is intentional.

3:20-35 consists of Jesus responding to the accusation in parables.¹¹³ Not only are these parables found in Mark, they are present in Matthew and Luke as well. In fact, these two other synoptic accounts contain many more sayings of Jesus, including other parables. Therefore, it is clear that they play an important role in the story, and perhaps even in helping interpreting the verses that follow.

Before addressing the parables, it is worth noting that verse 23 begins by saying that Jesus summons his accusers. This is particularly significant because it implies that the scribes did not directly accuse Jesus, but rather, they were spreading their defamatory ideas within the crowd. The other possibility is that they were so loud in their accusation, causing such a commotion, that Jesus had no choice but to respond to them. In either case, the accusation was not a direct confrontation and was far from discreet. On the other hand, Jesus did not defend himself before those around him. He summoned his opponents in order to confront them directly.

Jesus begins his response with a rhetorical question: “How can Satan cast out Satan?” Immediately, he uses logic to call into question the validity of the accusation. Also, he substitutes “Beelzebul” with “Satan”, which first helps the reader clarify the meaning of this and “lord of demons”, while giving the perspective that he is in fact, in direct confrontation with Satan.¹¹⁴ The nature of the question is essentially an introduction to the rest of Jesus’ argument, which begins in complete simplicity. The images of kingdoms and houses standing against each other are used to illustrate the absurdity of Satan using one under his control to free others under his control. This leads to the more layered and complex parable of the strong man’s house.

¹¹³ Five of the sixteen verses are Jesus’ parables.

¹¹⁴ William I. Lane, “*The Gospel According to Mark.*” In *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Toronto, Ont.: University Press of America Inc., 2007), 142.

The very quick parable of Mark 3:27 is far more than an argument for Jesus' liberty from any demonic influence. It is a statement about who Jesus is and his mission on earth. At first glance, Mark represents Jesus using a low Christology. However, Mark 3:20-35 seems to indicate the complete opposite. This will be explored throughout this chapter, as it strongly relates to the plot, the character of Jesus, conflict, and the structure. Without a doubt, the content of verse 27 is indispensable in understanding not only the unforgivable sin, but in fully grasping the person, mission, and role of Jesus.

There are four important aspects to this parable: the strong man, his house, his possessions, and the one who enters the house. First, we will explore the house (so to speak). As has already been mentioned, the connection has been made between the strong man's house and the house that Jesus is in when he is speaking. Yet some scholars, Ben Witherington III and James R. Edwards in particular, make further connections. Both describe a link between the house and Beelzebul, the one the scribes claimed was in control of Jesus. They explain that when talking about "the strong man's house", Jesus used a play on words to reference the house of Baal, which would therefore make Baal (Beelzebul) the strong man.¹¹⁵ As a result, Satan is unquestionably made out to be an enemy of Jesus.

The strong man is never given any kind of identity. One may initially sympathize with this man, since an assailant binds him and his house is plundered. But in the context of the parable, it is quite clear that the strong man in fact represents Satan. Consequently, the one entering the strong man's house is Jesus, who cannot thwart Satan's plans without first incapacitating him. Finally, the strong man's possessions would therefore

¹¹⁵ Edwards, 121; Witherington, 157.

represent people in Satan's bondage.¹¹⁶ Jesus is making a statement about his mission: coming into a world under Satan's control, overpowering him and freeing those that were captive to the "evil strong man".

One could also conclude that the house of verse 20 belonged to a possessed man. Jesus would have entered the house, exorcised the demon(s), therefore binding the strong man (demonic forces) and taking his possessions (the house owner). On the other hand, there is an interesting connection that can be made between the strong man parable of verse 27 and verse 20. When considering the plot as a whole, the house of the parable is linked to the house Jesus goes into at the very beginning of the story. In Jesus' parable, one forcefully enters a house and overtakes a strong man; a very close parallel to Jesus' family setting out to go into the house he is in to take him by force. No matter how one chooses to interpret verse 27 and how it relates to the rest of the passage, it is obvious the Markan author places great importance of this parable and makes blatant connections with the rest of the story.

Edwards makes a fascinating connection between Mark 3:27 and Isaiah 49:24-25.¹¹⁷ Here, one reads, "Can plunder be taken from warriors, or captives rescued from the fierce? But this is what the LORD says: 'Yes, captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save.'"¹¹⁸ The similarities are quite obvious, which opens the door to further interpretation. While the Markan author does not seem to reference the Hebrew Bible or Judaic culture as much as the author of Matthew, it seems quite possible that verse 27 is a direct reference to the passage in Isaiah. When considering the possibility

¹¹⁶ Gaebelien, 645.

¹¹⁷ Edwards, 121.

¹¹⁸ *Holy Bible* New International Version (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), Isaiah 49:24-25.

that Jesus actually spoke this parable, which Schweizer argues that Jesus did,¹¹⁹ one must conclude Jesus was deliberately speaking this parable in reference to Isaiah.¹²⁰ He would have been aware that learned scribes from Jerusalem would be knowledgeable in relation to the Hebrew Bible and its text and that the connection would be obvious for them.

On a final note in relation to Jesus' response, Austin Busch makes an interesting claim. He postulates that one may consider the parables as a sound argument against the scribes' accusation but in reality, "Mark's discourse [...] makes a number of rhetorical gestures hinting that these parables might not straightforwardly oppose Jesus's understanding of his exorcisms to that of the scribes after all."¹²¹ Busch basically claims that not only is Jesus' argument basically flawed, but that this is due (at least in large part) to the narrative laid out by the Markan author. He uses a basic mathematical equation to explain the logic of Jesus' argument. If indeed Jesus is working by Satan's authority (**a**), then Satan is attacking himself (**b**). But if Satan attacks himself (**b**), then he is divided and he falls (**c**). If **a=b**, and **b=c**, then **a=c**, and **c** is not possible; therefore **a** is also not possible.¹²²

However, Busch claims that not only is it possible for Satan's kingdom to be divided and fall, but that throughout Mark, it is clearly stated that it already has. He states, "There is simply no denying that Mark's Gospel requires us to understand Satan's

¹¹⁹ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* Translated by Donald H. Madvig (Atlanta, Ga: John Knox Press, 1970), 86-87.

¹²⁰ The argument Schweizer uses to defend his statement that Mark 3:27 is an authentic saying of Jesus is that the it is a summons to faith. This means that the meaning of what he says is not obvious. One must make an effort to understand what he is saying. Those who would have taken the time to understand (namely those who have a positive relationship with him) will grasp the full meaning of Jesus' parable; a parable that makes little sense if it is not actually spoken by Jesus.

¹²¹ Austin Busch, "Questioning and Conviction: Double-Voiced Discourse in Mark 3:22-30," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 3 (2006): 479.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 483.

kingdom to have fallen”.¹²³ He cites Mark 1:12-13, 1:14-15, 1:21-28, 1:34 and 1:39 as evidence that the narrative has already described Satan’s kingdom as “fallen”.¹²⁴ The problem with Busch’s argument is that the verses he uses to back up his point never mention anything about Satan’s reign being over. In Mark 1:12-13, one reads of Jesus being tempted by Satan. In 1:14-15, an announcement is made about the arrival of the Kingdom of God (not the fall of a kingdom of evil). The other verses are accounts of Jesus’ power and authority as he heals people and casts out demons. None of these verses remotely mention Satan’s reign being at an end. Yet one could interpret them to mean Jesus is at battle with Satan, which in fact, supports Jesus’ argument against the scribes’ accusation.

By the beginning of Mark 3:29, Jesus has proved he is not working under the power of Satan. Now, the existence of an unforgivable sin is made known. Without any context, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit could be interpreted numerous ways. This is why using narrative criticism and the context surrounding Mark 3:28-29 is in many ways, more significant than studying the actual verses in question. As we have already seen in the section on philology, the word “blasphemy” is broad in its meaning. The verses leading up to Mark 3:28 provide the best clues for a sound interpretation. Since this saying of Jesus is a continuation to his response to the scribes, the first thing to look at when considering what blaspheming against the Holy Spirit consists of, is the scribes’ accusation.

It seems likely that saying Jesus was possessed and casting out demons with the help of demons is what caused Jesus to bring up the existence of an unforgivable sin.

¹²³ Ibid., 484.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 484.

However, one must ask if more than the accusation itself inspired Jesus' response. One would also explore the possibility that the accusation means more than simply ill words spoken against Jesus. Throughout the entirety of Mark, the religious authorities are depicted as testing or speaking out against Jesus.¹²⁵ Jesus always responds to them, usually without any kind of warning. Oftentimes, the relationship between religious authorities and Jesus appears in many ways to be a power struggle. Jesus sometimes even insults the scribes (or Pharisees), calling them hypocrites and fools,¹²⁶ but only in Mark 3 are their words and actions (potentially)¹²⁷ eternally condemnable. Why is this particular instance different?

Following the mention of the unpardonable sin in Mark 3:28-29, the author adds an explanatory note: "Because they were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" (Mark 3:30) The accusation made against Jesus was clearly a severe one, but to fully understand it, one should seek to understand the motive of the scribes. Throughout Mark, the scribes and other religious authorities are depicted as Jesus' opponents. Most often, they object to his teachings or lifestyle. In this particular instance, however, Jesus performed a miracle. There are two possibilities for the scribes' motivation in attacking Jesus' miracle. Either they genuinely believed Jesus was possessed or in league with Satan (the magician theory being a possible explanation), or they were fully aware of Jesus' source of power and in desperation, attempted to discredit him and sow doubt in the crowd.

¹²⁵ Mark 2:16, 2:18, 2:24, 3:2, 3:6 (here, they are plotting Jesus' assassination), 7:5, 8:11, 10:2, 11:18 (here again, they are depicted plotting his death), 11:27-28, 12:13, 12:18, 14:53-65, 15:3 (in Mark 15, they petition for Jesus' death and are ultimately successful), 15:31.

¹²⁶ Mark 7:6, 7:18.

¹²⁷ The uncertainty of the scribes' guilt will be explored in greater detail throughout this, and the next chapter.

No matter the reason, according to the narrative Jesus has proven the source of his power to be godly in verses 23-27. Therefore, to continue to claim Jesus was possessed would be unforgivable. Interestingly enough, Jesus is never again accused of being in league with Satan or any other kind of evil. During the account of Jesus' trial before the religious leaders in Mark 14, several accusations are made against him, but never possession. However, as Hurtado notes, it is quite interesting that blasphemy, the very sin Jesus warns the scribes about in Mark 3:29, is the very crime that Jesus is charged with in Mark 14:63.¹²⁸ This notwithstanding, it is never clear whether or not Jesus' pronouncement in Mark 3:28-29 is a warning to the scribes, or a sentencing.

Knowing that Jesus is in fact doing the work of God, performing miracles through the power of the Holy Spirit, one calling the source of Jesus' power Satanic would surely be blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. However, one could still (rightfully) ask whether or not this is limited to the scribes' accusation and/or to the historical Jesus.¹²⁹ In the narrative, the scribes are not the only antagonists. In fact, not only does Jesus' family also play the role of antagonist, but those close to him consider him to have lost his mind, which as we have already seen, is associated with demonic possession. Essentially, if the scribes did indeed commit the unforgivable sin, his family is at the very least, in danger of doing so as well.

The narrative ends the same way it began: with Jesus' family. They arrive from wherever they set out and call for Jesus. However, Jesus does not heed his family's request. Just as he dismissed the scribes, so he also dismisses his family. It is clear that not only are his mother and brothers in opposition to Jesus and his mission, but they are

¹²⁸ Hurtado, 69.

¹²⁹ These questions will be explored in greater detail throughout this chapter and Chapter 3. A more comprehensive answer can only be given upon a complete literary analysis of the text.

arguably vilified to the point of being at the same level as the scribes. Indeed, both groups are unhappy and seek to put an end to Jesus' ministry, whether it is a temporary interruption or a permanent halt.

Edwards, who makes interesting connections between Mark and Hebrew Bible texts, likens the family's actions in verse 21 to Zechariah 13:3,¹³⁰ which reads, "And if anyone still prophesies, his father and mother, to whom he was born, will say to him, 'You must die, because you have told lies in the LORD's name.' When he prophesies, his own parents will stab him."¹³¹ This link seems like a bit of a stretch, particularly when one considers the context of the Hebrew Bible passage. The prophet in Zechariah is a false prophet, while in Mark, Jesus is undoubtedly depicted as doing God's work. Nevertheless, when such a connection is made, it is clear that Jesus' family does not play a positive role in the story. Jesus' response to their beckoning, "Who are my mother and brothers?", is a blatant dismissal of his family. He essentially claims his ministry takes precedence and his family is a hindrance to it.

On the other hand, Jesus places great value on his followers and "whoever does the will of God". Those sitting around him become more important to Jesus than his family; so much so that he calls them his true family. It is interesting that before calling those around him his family, it is explicitly written that he looks at them. This is an indication of approval, as Jesus affirms what he is saying with his body. In relation to this Austin Busch writes, "In the immediate context of the passage, Mark goes to great lengths to suggest that precisely those who are expected to be intimate insiders with respect to Jesus (i.e., his family) find themselves on the outside, and that those expected

¹³⁰ Edwards, 119.

¹³¹ *Holy Bible* New International Version (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), Zechariah 13:3.

to be outsiders (i.e., the crowd hanging around Jesus) actually have an intimate relationship with and understanding of him.”¹³² Clearly the main message of Mark 3:31-35 is that status and relation are insignificant to Jesus. Rather, it is *relationship* that plays the biggest role. The “outsiders” are at odds with Jesus and are in danger of committing the unforgivable sin (if they haven’t done so already). In contrast, the “insiders” are safe from any form of condemnation.

2.2 Conflict

One of the most important aspects of plot is conflict. Now that the plot has been explored in detail, it is worth examining the conflict(s) of Mark 3:20-35. David Rhoads writes, “When conflicts are central to a story, it is important to understand their origin, the causes of their escalation or diffusion, their climax, the resolution or lack of resolution.”¹³³ It is clear at this point that there are two major conflicts in the passage. Jesus’ confrontation with the scribes is the most obvious one and the unforgivable sin saying pertains directly to them. Some would not consider the story of Jesus’ family¹³⁴ to be seen as conflict,¹³⁵ but with the evidence that has been presented thus far, it is safe to identify the events of verse 21 as a conflict of sorts (whether it be direct or indirect).

Rhoads makes several interesting points regarding conflict in Mark. He notes that Jesus is in conflict with three realms: the spiritual (demons, and more), the natural

¹³² Busch, 502.

¹³³ Rhoads, 415.

¹³⁴ Although the story begins and ends with Jesus’ family, it would be considered the subplot of Mark 3:20-35, the focal point remains the account of Jesus and the scribes.

¹³⁵ Several scholars, such as R. T. France, John Gill, and John Peter Lange take a more conservative approach in relation of Jesus’ family, and do not view his mother and brothers as antagonists. France, 167; Gill, 322; Lange, 38.

(storms, his own body), and humanity (religious authorities, and more).¹³⁶ While all these are significant in some way, “Jesus has no authority from God to subdue people”, making them more complex.¹³⁷ “So Jesus’ conflicts with people, being more evenly matched than those with nature or the supernatural, are the central and suspenseful conflicts in the story.”¹³⁸ Indeed, both conflicts of Mark 3:20-35 are with people. The backstory of the scribes’ accusation is an exorcism—a conflict with a spiritual force—but this is not even mentioned in the text, which is a clear indication of its relevance to the author and thus affirms the opinion presented by Rhoads.

Clearly, Jesus’ confrontation with the scribes is the primary focus of the passage in question. This conflict is particularly difficult for Jesus because he cannot simply command the scribes to stop. Rhoads writes, “Jesus is in conflict with the authorities. Here Jesus is vulnerable because he has no authority to lord over people. Yet he is superior to the authorities because of his courage and cleverness in debate. Time and again he conveys his message while at the same time eluding their efforts to indict or destroy him.”¹³⁹ Indeed, Jesus does not use supernatural strength to foil the scribes, nor does he ever resort to violence. His words and intellect are at the heart of Jesus’ victories against the religious authorities.

A great deal has already been said about the conflict between Jesus and the scribes, but there has not been any attempt to explain why the scribes confront Jesus in the first place. When reading Mark from the beginning, there have already been five other

¹³⁶ Rhoads, 415.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 415.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 415.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 415.

confrontations with the religious leaders.¹⁴⁰ On all these occasions, they do not directly attack Jesus' person, but rather, object to his practices and his lifestyle. Their discontent with Jesus and his controversial actions (in their eyes) is the precursor to the accusation of Mark 3:22. On all previous occasions, Jesus provides a defense that cannot logically be undermined. As a result, the nature of the latest confrontational is no longer a theological issue, but a defamation of Jesus' character.

In their latest effort to discredit Jesus, the scribes' accusation is not only an attack on Jesus as a person, but also on his miracles, and consequently, on the power by which the miracles are performed. No previous passage in Mark indicates that the scribes (or any other religious authorities) believed Jesus to be motivated by evil. The authenticity of the miracles is never questioned, and there is no way for the scribes to question the results. Therefore, when considering the accusation of Mark 3:22 from a narrative critical perspective, it becomes evident that the scribes themselves do not believe Jesus to be possessed. They do not actually question the source of his power, but publicly do so in order to discredit Jesus.

For this reason, Jesus' response is not a defense directed towards the scribes, but is meant for the crowd that hears the accusation. The scribes sowed a seed of doubt into the crowd in order to turn Jesus' followers against him. When the scribes accused Jesus of casting out demons "by the lord of demons", it was a direct attack on his ministry. Jesus was doing "the will of God",¹⁴¹ and as a result, an effort to thwart Jesus' ministry was an effort to put a stop to God's work and will. Therefore, Jesus' defense, where he "proves" his innocence, is not meant to change the minds of the scribes, because they

¹⁴⁰ Referred to the "experts of the law" or "Pharisees". Mark 2:6, 2:16, 2:18, 2:24, 3:2. All these are separate instances.

¹⁴¹ Mark 3:35.

already know the truth. Their intentional lying then becomes the real problem in Jesus' eyes, which I would argue is the reason Jesus considers their words blasphemy. It is not the words spoken against Jesus himself that are so dangerous, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit: to knowingly compromise what is of God.¹⁴²

The next difficult issue is to determine whether or not Jesus was condemning the scribes. It is possible the scribes did not yet commit an offense that could never be forgiven. I believe the key to solving this mystery is found in Mark 3:30 and the remainder of the Gospel. Mark 3:30 is an interesting verse because it is clearly separate from the rest of the story. The rest of the passage is a chronological account of what took place. In verse 30 however, the author adds an explanative note about what Jesus has just said. Not only does this note help one understand what the unforgivable sin might be,¹⁴³ but upon a close grammatical examination, one can bring further interpretation to the story. William Lane notes that the verb ἔλεγον (from the root λέγω, meaning "to say") is in the imperfect tense, implying a continuous action involving "repetition and a fixed attitude".¹⁴⁴ This may suggest that the scribes did blaspheme against the Holy Spirit because they did more than simply speak out once.

However, the importance of the imperfect tense could also mean that a one-time act does not result in immediate and irreversible damnation. It is possible that to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit involves a continuous and unrepentant action. If this is indeed the case, I would argue that the scribes did not necessarily commit the

¹⁴² As this thesis continues (particularly in Chapter 3), we will see that several thinkers share this interpretation of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Strangely enough, none of them consider the original intent of the scribes in the conflict. Nevertheless, I believe this is the strongest argument for claiming the unforgivable sin to be an intentional attack against God.

¹⁴³ The unforgivable sin is clearly tied to what the scribes said about Jesus having an unclean spirit. While there is still much room for interpretation, there is no doubt it relates to this accusation.

¹⁴⁴ Lane, 146.

unpardonable sin. There is never any other instance in Mark where the religious authorities accuse Jesus of being possessed or empowered by Satan. It is possible that Jesus was warning them not to cross the line and do something that could not be undone. Had the scribes continued their accusation, one could safely assume they were beyond any hope of forgiveness. If indeed they did commit the greatest of sins,¹⁴⁵ it was not because of what they said in verse 22, but what they would have *continued* to say.

With this in mind, it is now important to consider the conflict with Jesus' family and determine whether or not they also committed such a sin. Clearly, his family is a distraction and a hindrance to his ministry. Setting out to seize him and saying he is out of his mind would also sow doubt into the crowd and possibly discredit Jesus. If indeed saying Jesus had lost his mind was equivalent to saying he was possessed, it might certainly seem that Jesus' own mother and brothers are as guilty as the scribes. However, there are two factors that separate the family from the scribes: motivation and the distinctiveness of the scribes' accusation.

Motivation is of great importance when considering the unforgivable sin. In the case of the scribes, we have already explored their motivation. Their accusation was a desperate attempt to discredit Jesus, knowing full well the source of his power was not demonic. This charge was introduced after many others that had already failed. In the case of Jesus' family members, the reason for their claim against Jesus does not seem to be motivated by ill intentions. Their words are most likely the result of a lack of understanding and discernment. Their actions (setting out to seize Jesus) were most likely done in order to avoid soiling the family's reputation; most likely Jesus' reputation too.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Greater than other sins because it cannot be forgiven.

¹⁴⁶ France, 167.

While this may not be considered appropriate, it seems that the intention is not as conniving or malicious as that of the scribes.

Furthermore, when Jesus' family sets out to seize him, claiming he has lost his mind, it seems as though it is something being discussed amongst each other. When they finally arrive at Jesus' location, they do not speak ill of Jesus in front of the crowd. Their concern comes across as more legitimate than that of the scribes who, contrary to the family, are very vocal in their accusation. Jesus' mother and brothers do not have any intention of discrediting Jesus before the crowd. Rather, they act in an effort to avoid any negativity. Therefore, I postulate that if it is possible the scribes did not commit the unforgivable sin and were simply being warned,¹⁴⁷ Jesus' family is certainly not guilty of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

2.3 Characters

Exploring conflict in Mark 3:20-35 was helpful in developing a deeper understanding of the unforgivable sin and its relevance to the story. However, looking at other literary aspects in more detail will bring even more clarification. A careful examination of the important characters and their relationships with one another is one of the most important aspects of narrative criticism. There are four main characters (or groups of characters) in the sixteen verses of the passage: Jesus, his followers (this includes the disciples and the crowd), his mother and siblings (family),¹⁴⁸ and the scribes.

¹⁴⁷ While I would consider the words of Jesus a warning, this does not affect the gravity of the sin of the scribes. As previously mentioned, persistence in such actions (or words) would undoubtedly result in committing an eternal sin.

¹⁴⁸ The mention of "brothers" collectively includes Jesus' sisters as well.

While I will perform a traditional character study, it is important to explore characters beyond the modern method of this practice. Perkins explains that in ancient literature, characters were used differently from how they are in modernity. They were often introduced to represent a theme more than internal examination of the actual people.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, each group of characters encompasses an important theme (sometimes more than one). Combining this concept with other modern ideas, I will provide a more complete character study of the four mentioned groups or individuals.

To begin, I will look at each character separately and identify the theme(s) that they represent. Afterwards, I will look at things such as character development and the interaction between characters. Jesus is the story's protagonist and the main character.¹⁵⁰ However, he represents more than just "good", unlike the role of the protagonist in many other stories, folk tales, etc. Although Christology has not been discussed thus far in this thesis, there is a significant amount of Christological content in Mark 3:20-35. Some, such as Peter Head argue that Mark's representation of Jesus has a low Christology.¹⁵¹ I propose that the passage in question has a very high Christology.

Typically, Christology is defined as the study primarily concerned with the nature and person of Jesus.¹⁵² When Jesus is portrayed as a mere human, the representation can be said to have a low Christology. When Jesus is depicted as more divine, it is considered a high Christology. Suzanne Henderson explains that many scholars studying Mark have "focused so narrowly on the gospel's depiction of Jesus as suffering messiah" (low

¹⁴⁹ Perkins, 303.

¹⁵⁰ Jesus is not only the main character of the story in question, but of the entire Gospel of Mark.

¹⁵¹ Peter M. Head, *Christology and the Synoptic Problem* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 8-9.

¹⁵² Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.

Christology).¹⁵³ However, she argues that a much higher Christology can be found, and that allusions to Jesus' divinity are present throughout Mark. Indeed, I would support Henderson's claim and argue that Mark 3:20-35 reflects a high Christology. Therefore, to begin my character analysis of Jesus, I will explore the divine representation of Jesus in the passage.

The first indication of Jesus being portrayed as divine is in his response to the scribes. As it has already been mentioned, when Jesus talks about the strong man's house being plundered, Jesus is most likely referring to himself as the one entering the house. The taking of the strong man's possessions is a metaphor for his role as liberator of those captive to Satan. When he warns the scribes about the unforgivable sin in verse 28, he prefaces it by stating that all sins will be forgiven. The fact that he makes such a statement is indicative of his divine nature. Until Jesus, no other person promised the forgiveness of sins. The performing of miracles is not uncharacteristic of other characters in the Bible, but pronouncements about the fate of a man's soul are uncommon.¹⁵⁴

Scott views this passage in a similar way. He writes, "The Beelzebul story not only puts the emphasis on Jesus's powers being from God, but also on the nature of Jesus himself. During his response to the accusation Jesus gives a parable where he says that in order to break in to a strong man's house, that is, Satan's house, one must first bind the strong man (3:27). The implication is that Jesus is the one who can bind Satan. However, the only person who can bind Satan, the representative of Evil, is God, specifically, God

¹⁵³ Suzanne Watts Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9.

¹⁵⁴ There are certainly instances in the Hebrew Bible where statements are made about one's fate (i.e.: Isaiah, Daniel, Jonah), but these are all considered messages from God. In this case, Jesus speaks with an authority implying he is God. He does not make his claim in the name of God, but takes full responsibility for his pronouncement.

in his YHWH manifestation.”¹⁵⁵ There is a clear message that Jesus is more than a man. He embodies a divine strength that cannot be matched.

Secondly, the entire story of Jesus in verses 31-35 almost spells out a high Christology. Jesus dismisses his family when they call for him. This rejection is not due to a lack of respect or love for his family. Rather, it is a statement about his true mission on earth. He calls his followers his true family because they do the will of God. In earthly terms, those calling for him are his family, but his true identity is not tied to them, but to God. W. R. Telford makes an interesting point that throughout Mark, Jesus is depicted as elevated above all others. In Mark 3:31-35, he is superior to his family and they are linked to the scribes.¹⁵⁶ In Mark 9, it is the disciples that are coupled with the religious authorities, and again, Jesus is above them.¹⁵⁷ Telford suggests that this rejection of the scribes, the disciples and his own family symbolizes a rejection of Judaism.¹⁵⁸ While this remains an interesting theory, I believe it is a technique used to elevate Jesus higher than all people—even those of great importance.

When discussing the story’s protagonist in terms of Jesus as a man, a great deal can also be said. The very first verse provides a significant piece of information about Jesus. A large crowd follows Jesus to the house that he enters. The word “again” implies that this was quite common. Therefore, one can conclude that Jesus is depicted as charismatic, inspiring many people to follow him. His refusal to eat any food suggests that he places more importance on the crowd than on his physical needs. Thus, a literary

¹⁵⁵ Scott, 77.

¹⁵⁶ W. R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 132.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

critic could call Jesus compassionate, dedicated, and caring. Other positive qualities can also be identified when reading about the conflict with the scribes.

While this is not always the case in Mark, Jesus is shown as very slow to anger in relation to the scribes. James Ayers proposes that when Jesus summons the scribes, it is more of a friendly invitation.¹⁵⁹ While the camaraderie suggested by Ayers may be over-interpretive, it is important to recognize that Jesus never insults the scribes nor does he appear to be angry. Taking this into consideration, one could say that the issue with the scribes is not a conflict, but more of a dialogue.¹⁶⁰ From here, it is appropriate to make the claim that a greater conflict is described between Jesus and his family. However, in light of what has already been said in relation to conflict, the calm nature of Jesus is not enough to dismiss the controversy altogether.

Finally, one of the most importance aspects about Jesus when reading the text is his power and authority. As it has already been mentioned, the authenticity of Jesus' miracles is never questioned. He is able to cast out demons; an act that causes the scribes to seek to discredit him. In his pronouncement about the unpardonable sin, Jesus prefaces his statement with the word "Truly" (Ἀμῆν). Many scholars have commented on this word. Hendriksen explains that using this word meant that what followed was not only fact, but very solemn.¹⁶¹ This reflects the severity of the warning (or possibly the damnation) spoken by Jesus. Hurtado notes that saying "truly" before one's own statement is unique to Jesus.¹⁶² Other authors such as Delorme and Guelich explain that to preface a statement with this word brings great authority to what is being said as well

¹⁵⁹ James Ayers, "Mark 3:20-35," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 51 2 (1997): 179.

¹⁶⁰ I would not go so far as to say that Mark 3:22-30 does not describe a conflict, simply because of the malicious intent on the part of the scribes.

¹⁶¹ Hendriksen, 137.

¹⁶² Hurtado, 69.

as to the one speaking.¹⁶³ Not only does the speaker (Jesus) take complete responsibility for his statement, but he is also speaking for God himself.¹⁶⁴

Now that there is a clearer understanding of the protagonist, we will explore the other characters and how they relate to Jesus. The first group of characters mentioned in the text is Jesus' followers (this includes the crowd). Interestingly enough, they are also the last ones to be mentioned in the text. They are the only ones to be with Jesus from the beginning to the end. This means the reader should understand that a strong emphasis is placed on discipleship. Nevertheless, they play a very passive role in the story. They do not do very much; their only actions are following Jesus and sitting around him. The only thing they actually say is to inform Jesus that his family is outside. Yet it is clear that they are the people most important to Jesus in the story.

Jesus embraces his followers to the extent of naming them his true family. It is also apparent that the author recognizes their importance too. Their passive role may in fact be the element that becomes significant to Jesus. Their attentiveness and devotion is not only admirable, but is considered the "will of God".¹⁶⁵ It seems as if being active translates into something negative, while being in communion with Jesus is considered admirable and meaningful. They have little to no active interaction with Jesus, yet this translates as a positive relationship. This is essentially the opposite of the relationship depicted between Jesus and the other two groups.

The "ones near Jesus" (his family) are not portrayed in a positive light. This is especially significant in the case of his mother, Mary. While the other two synoptic

¹⁶³ Delorme, 242., Guelich, 177.

¹⁶⁴ Guelich equates this to the Hebrew Bible authoritative declaration: "Thus says the Lord", 177.

¹⁶⁵ In Mark 3:34, Jesus looks at those around him and calls them his mother and brothers. In the very next verse, Jesus calls those who do God's will his mother and brothers. Therefore, those seated around him are doing the will of God, simply by being with Jesus without any selfish agenda.

Gospels, Matthew and Luke, hold Mary in high estimation, Mark does not only refrain from glorifying her, but she is belittled. As it has already been mentioned, Mark is the only synoptic Gospel not to mention Jesus' mother by name. In relation to Jesus' family in general, it is always portrayed negatively in Mark. The family's actions and motivations have already been explored¹⁶⁶ but a few more points are worth mentioning.

First, one must note that in the context of narrative criticism, the family plays the same role as that of the scribes. An antagonist is defined as "the character [...] who stands directly opposed to the protagonist (the chief character in a story); a rival or opponent of the protagonist".¹⁶⁷ Indeed, Jesus' family opposes him and tries to bring his ministry to a halt, acting as an obstacle to the protagonist's mission. However, they do not appear to pose a serious threat to Jesus. He simply dismisses them and the story is over. Once Jesus has openly rejected them, they do not insist or persist in stopping him. There appears to be closure in the story when Jesus calls those around him his true family.

The fact that his mother and brothers stand outside the house and call for him implies a few noteworthy details about them as literary characters. It was already mentioned that they are most likely outside because the crowd is so large, they are unable to enter the house. However, one family member could surely have made his or her way to Jesus, especially since those surrounding Jesus recognized them as his family. As a result, the failure of (at least one member of) the family to enter the house implies a weak relationship with Jesus. Furthermore, they all stand outside and call for him, which would undoubtedly be a distraction and cause a commotion. This is a lack of respect for Jesus'

¹⁶⁶ This was primarily discussed in the section about conflict.

¹⁶⁷ William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, *A Handbook to Literature* (New York, NY: The Odyssey Press Inc., 1960), 25.

dignity and his ministry. Jesus may not have responded the same way if his mother or his brother had approached him in discretion, especially if the intention was noble. It seems evident that the author is making a clear distinction between earthly and spiritual matters and that his family is merely another part of what belongs to the earthly realm.

A considerable amount has already been said about the scribes. They are clearly the main antagonists of the text. While Jesus' family may not be motivated by admirable intentions, those of the scribes are blatantly malicious. Whenever they appear in Mark, there is a confrontation with Jesus. Their goal is to bring an end to Jesus' ministry and ultimately, to his life. Guelich notes that the small detail of their place of origin, Jerusalem, is significant. It is "the center of Jewish legal authority [and] clearly represents in Mark a place of hostility for Jesus, the place of his death and itself destined for destruction."¹⁶⁸ Even though a tension has already been described with "the ones near Jesus", the arrival of "the scribes from Jerusalem" is a clear and ominous sign that a greater conflict will take place.

The reader should interpret the scribes as educated, intelligent and cunning. Their plan to discredit Jesus is discreet and indirect. In spite of this, they do not appear to have any measure of success in their endeavor. When Jesus responds to the scribes, he is portrayed as more intelligent and logical than they are. It is difficult to determine whether or not there is a change in the thinking and actions of the scribes (at least with regards to their accusation of verse 22). After Jesus responds to them, they do not persist. Coincidentally, there is no indication that there was any change amongst the scribes either.

An important point must be made regarding the lack of any mention of change with the scribes. There is no character development as one would see in more

¹⁶⁸ Guelich, 174.

contemporary literary works. Character development is one of the most central aspects of modern literary criticism, but in Mark 3:20-35, there does not appear to be any whatsoever. The characters remain flat and represent a certain theme or theological role. Jesus, the obvious protagonist, possesses many positive qualities and no negative traits. He does not change throughout the text and all other characters are portrayed in relation to him and his relationship with them. The crowd, which is synonymous with his followers, is always with him and shares his beliefs and goals. The mother and brothers of Jesus are obstacles for him. They represent the earthly things that do not concern Jesus and his mission. The scribes are the primary antagonists. They represent the willful opposition of the kingdom of God.

In many ways, the static representation of the text's characters helps define the message more clearly. Thus far, one should have a pretty well defined understanding of the text and the meaning of the unforgivable sin. The survey of plot, conflict, and characters serves as a good basis for the interpretation of the text. Another key element remains to be examined in this narrative-critical study: structure. Structure is important in all literary works, but in Mark 3:20-35, it is particularly significant. We will explore the significance and intricacy of the structure of the narrative in these verses in order to gain a complete understanding of the story and its message.

2.4 Structure

Nearly every scholar who has commented on Mark 3:20-35 has in the very least mentioned the text's structure. When considering structure, it is important to first discuss

the sixteen verses in question. While I, like the majority of writers,¹⁶⁹ would argue that the story surrounding the unforgivable sin begins with verse 20 (of Mark 3) and ends with verse 35, some break the verses down in different ways. The most common variation is the removal of the family-related accounts. Austin Busch examines the story beginning with verse 22 and ending with verse 30.¹⁷⁰

One may interpret this as being the idea of a conservative writer, trying to leave Jesus' family out of any sort of controversy. But most traditionalist authors group verses 20-35 as a complete story and Busch most certainly writes from a more contemporary perspective. The interpretation of the text's relevant verses does not seem to correlate with one's theological point of view. Steven Scott breaks down the passage in yet another way. He recognizes the possibility of grouping verses 20-35 together, but elects to leave out the last five verses, classifying the "Beelzebul controversy" as beginning with verse 20 and ending with verse 30.¹⁷¹ This includes the first part of the account relating to Jesus' family, but leaves out the conclusion.

He defends this idea by writing, "While this also takes place in the same location and at the same time as the Beelzebul controversy, and also continues the story of Jesus's family, the topic of these verses has nothing to do with the Beelzebul controversy. Consequently, it was decided to treat this as separate unit."¹⁷² I would argue against this logic because first and foremost, verse 20 clearly ties in with verses 31-35. To separate them is to deny the connection made between these two (sets of) verses. Secondly, while Scott claims verses 31-35 do not relate to Beelzebul controversy, one could definitely

¹⁶⁹ Ayers, 178., Delorme, 232., Edwards, 118., France, 164., Guelich, 166., Hurtado, 64., Lane, 137., Lange, 38., Schweizer, 82., Witherington, 153.

¹⁷⁰ Busch, 477.

¹⁷¹ Scott, 17.

¹⁷² Ibid., 17.

argue that they are very much a part of the same story. Through the narrative criticism performed thus far, I believe the connection to be apparent. Jesus' family, like the scribes, are opponents to Jesus and his mission. In Mark 3:33-35, Jesus has already rejected the scribes and now does so with his family, claiming his followers are doing the work of God. Two groups (Jesus' followers and family member) are featured both at the beginning and at the end of the story. It becomes quite clear that this response by Jesus ties in with the Beelzebul controversy.

In addition to the varying opinions in relation to the text in itself, a great deal more can be said about the nature of the text's structure. A clearer understanding of the structure in Mark 3:20-35, will provide even more information about the text and its interpretation. The most obvious feature of the text's structure is the "sandwich technique" employed by the author—the placement of a story within another story. Most authors that have written any sort of exegesis on this passage in Mark have commented on this.¹⁷³ From a literary perspective, there are a few reasons for employing such a technique. Witherington explains that the first objective of the "sandwich technique" is that the "related stories allow for mutual interpretation".¹⁷⁴ Indeed, throughout this exegetical exercise in narrative criticism, the two stories have been merged and analyzed as one.¹⁷⁵ The second reason for inserting a story in the middle of another is to indicate a lapse in time between the two parts of the story.¹⁷⁶ This is a common occurrence in Mark. Hurtado cites Mark 5:21-42, 6:7-32, and 11:12-25 as other examples.¹⁷⁷ In all these cases,

¹⁷³ Gaebelien, 645., Hurtado, 64., Witherington, 153.

¹⁷⁴ Witherington, 153.

¹⁷⁵ Story #1 being Mark 3:20-21, 31-35, while Story #2 is Mark 3:22-30.

¹⁷⁶ Witherington, 153.

¹⁷⁷ Hurtado, 64.

not only is there an indefinite time interval between the two parts of the story, but one could certainly draw parallels between the outside story and the one it envelops.

There are however, those who do not recognize such a well thought-out order in Mark's structure. In John C. Meagher's *Clumsy Construction in Mark's Gospel: A Critique of Form—and Redaktionsgeschichte*, the author in question argues that Mark is in fact, very disordered and clumsy (as the title states). In his opinion, certain methodologies (redaction criticism in particular) give Mark's author too much credit in terms of the thought process involved in the Gospel's structure and narrative.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, his opinion remains that of the minority, and I would firmly claim that the structuring of Mark 3:20-35 is intentional.

The structure of this passage causes scholars to make interesting connections between the two stories. Witherington notes that one may draw a parallel between the "house divided against itself" in verse 25 and Jesus' family that is opposed to one of their own.¹⁷⁹ From a literary point of view, this statement made by Jesus would be a clear declaration that his family is against him, which furthers the family's connection to the scribes. In spite of this, one must remember the danger of narrative criticism: over-interpreting. Not only is there a risk of misusing methodologies intended for modern works when examining ancient texts, but also when performing narrative criticism on any work, there remains the possibility of reading too far into a text.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ John C. Meagher, *Clumsy Construction in Mark's Gospel: A Critique of Form—and Redaktionsgeschichte* (Toronto, Ont.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), 25.

¹⁷⁹ Witherington, 25.

¹⁸⁰ Rhoads, 412.

This is the primary criticism of those who identify chiasms within the Bible.¹⁸¹ However, I believe these to be worth exploring. A chiasm is a literary device “in which the second part [of a text is] balanced against the first but with the parts reversed”.¹⁸² Basically, they are patterns within a text, where certain words, themes, or concepts are repeated. These are used to construct patterns, which emphasizes a certain theme or creates parallels. In the course of studying the structure of Mark 3:20-35, I have come across scholars who identify important chiastic roles in the given text. Busch considers Mark 3:13-35 to be a self-contained chiasm.

The Beelzebul controversy occupies the center of a chiasmus beginning with Mark 3:13 and ending with 3:35, which, as I construe it, sandwiches narratives of ignorant "insiders" whom Jesus rebukes and excludes (B and B ') between stories of "outsiders" whom Jesus brings into his fold (A and A ')

- A) Jesus chooses twelve from his followers whom he authorizes to preach and to cast out demons (3:13-19).
- B) Jesus's family tries to seize him because they believe him insane (3:20- 21).
- C) Conflict dialogue between Jesus and the scribes (3:22-30).
- B ') Jesus's family calls Jesus to come to them (3:31-32).
- A') Jesus refuses, claiming that those who follow him constitute his true family (3:33-35).¹⁸³

Here, Busch identifies a theme that contrasts outsiders and insiders. The concept of Jesus’ followers being insiders is repeated and also highlights the importance of being an insider, as the chiasm in question begins and ends with “insider” accounts of Jesus’ true close ones.

I would also postulate that there is a simple chiasm within the text of Mark 3:20-35. Like the one portrayed by Busch, there are three main themes with the middle one (the central and most important) serving as a “hinge”.

- A1)** Jesus’ family (3:21; his family sets out to seize him)
- B1)** The scribes (3:22; the antagonists are introduced)
- C)** The unforgivable sin (3:28-29; most gripping part of the story)

¹⁸¹ In this particular case, the chiasms that are identified are in Mark.

¹⁸² Thrall and Hibbard, 82.

¹⁸³ Busch, 480.

- B2)** The scribes (3:30; the attention returns to them and their accusation)
- A2)** Jesus' family (3:31-35; they arrive to "seize" Jesus but are rejected)

This is a very simple chiasm, yet the themes are quite evident and it shows an opposition to Jesus, not only on the part of the scribes, but from his family as well. It becomes obvious that such a technique was deliberately used to convey this message.

One of the most interesting and thorough works about chiasms in Mark is the doctoral thesis of Steven Scott. He spends a significant amount of time proving the intentional existence of chiasms using mathematics. He then identifies dozens of chiastic structures in Mark. The most significant of these is Mark 1:12-6:44, which he considers to be one big chiasm.

A1 PWSn 1: Temptation (1)

B1 GPS 1: Proclaiming in Galilee (2)

C1 DS 1: Four called (3)

D1 GPS 2: Teaching in Capernaum (4.1)

E1 PWSn 2: A1 PS 1: Capernaum demoniac (4.2-3)

F1 PWSn 2: B1 PS 2: Simon's mother-in-law (5)

G1 PWSn 2: C1: Healing at Simon's (6)

H1 PWSn 2: D: Jesus and the four in desert (7.1)

I1 PWSn 2: C2: Jesus and the four proclaim (7.2)

J1 PWSn 2: B2 3: Leper healed (8)

K1 PWSn 2: A2 PS 4: Paralytic healed (9)

L1 GPS 3: Teaching by sea (10.1)

M1 DS 2: Levi called (10.2)

N1 GPS 4: Many eat with Jesus (11.1)

O1 PWSn 3: A1 CS 1: Sinners controversy (11.2)

P1 PWSn 3: B1 CS 2: Fasting controversy (12)

Q1 PWSn 3: C1: New cloth (12.2)

R1 PWSn 3: D: New wine (12.3)

S1 PWSn 3: C2 CS 3: Plucking grain (13.1)

T1 PWSn 3: B2: Son of Man lord of Sabbath (13.2)

U1 PWSn 3: A2 CS 4: Healing controversy (14)

V1 GPS 5: Healing by boat (15)

W1 DS 3: Twelve appointed (16)

X1 GPS 6: Jesus's family part one (17.1)

Y PWSn 4: Beelzebul controversy (17.2)

X2 GPS 7: Jesus's family part two (18.1)

W2 DS 4: Disciples declared family (18.2)

V2 GPS 8: Teaching from boat (19)

U2 PWSn 5: A1 SP1: Seed on ground (20)

T2 PWSn 5: B1 Why teaching in parables (21)
S2 PWSn 5: C1 SP2: Parable explained (22)
R2 PWSn 5: D Lamp (23)
Q2 PWSn 5: C2 Measure (24)
P2 PWSn 5: B2 SP3 Seed in secret (25)
O2 PWSn 5: A2 SP4 Mustard seed (26)
 N2: GPS 9: Public taught in parables (27.1)
M2 DS 5: Disciples taught everything (27.2)
 L2 GPS 10: Jesus leaves in boat (28.1)
K2 PWSn 6: A1 PS 1: Stilling of the Storm (28)
J2 PWSn 6: B1 PS 2: Gerasene Demoniac (29.1–2)
I2 PWSn 6: C1: Gerasene not accepted (29.3)
H2 PWSn 6: D: Gerasene proclaims (29.4)
G2 PWSn 6: C2: Jairus's request (30)
F2 PWSn 6: B2 PS 3: HW (31)
E2 PWSn 6: A2 PS 4: JD (32)
 D2 GPS 11: Teaching in Nazareth (33) and Teaching in villages (34.1)
C2 DS 6: Twelve instructed (34.2)
 B2 GPS 12: Twelve proclaim (34.3), Herod and John (35.1–2) and twelve return (36.1a)
A2 PWSn 7: Feeding of the 5000 (36.1b–4)¹⁸⁴

As one may notice, the Beelzebul controversy is “the hinge”, or at the centre, of the chiasm. This means it is the most important part of the entire chiasm and its theme is central to the text.¹⁸⁵ Scott concludes, “This would indicate that the two central themes are discipleship [...] and the nature of Jesus’s powers.”¹⁸⁶ Indeed, this is reminiscent of what has already been said regarding the theme of Mark 3:20-35. However, when one considers the work of Scott, the themes of discipleship and the divine empowering of Jesus are not only the themes of the text in question, but also the themes of the entire first third of *The Gospel According to Mark*. Consequently, one can notice the extent to which structure plays an important role, not only in the understanding of the given text, but in all biblical studies.

While I would not necessarily agree that the large chiasm presented by Scott is intentional on the part of the Markan author, I thought it important to show as it reflects the amount of study that has gone into the structure of both Mark and more specifically,

¹⁸⁴ Scott, 122.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

into the passage in question. Furthermore, this work suggests the text of Mark 3:20-35 to be central to the first third of the Gospel and ultimately one of the most important passages in Mark. This is a testament to what is at stake when studying the passage.

Since the focus of this thesis is narrative criticism, a significant amount of ideas have been explored in the second chapter. The chapter was divided into four main sections of narrative criticism: plot, conflict, characters, and structure. In examining the plot, a foundation was laid out for the rest of the study. It also became clear that in addition to the scribes, Jesus' family members are definitely opponents to the protagonist. Through a closer look at the story's conflict, it is was evident that while Jesus' own mother and brothers were in danger of committing the unforgivable sin, their actions are not equivalent to those of the scribes. Unlike the scribes, Jesus' family did not with malicious intent, deliberately try to sabotage Jesus' work.

Studying the characters in the story enhanced the distinction between the scribes and Jesus' mother and brothers. It also revealed Jesus' family members to be opponents of Jesus and ultimately, outsiders. This contrasts the depiction of his followers; insiders who are his true family. Finally, a closer study of Jesus indicated a high Christology. The story emphasizes his authority and divine identity. This becomes a very important issue when examining the story's structure, where Jesus' statement regarding the unforgivable sin is the central component of a chiasmic structure. This structure also serves as a method of grouping the scribes and Jesus' family together.

In the third and final chapter, I will explore the interpretation of the unforgivable sin according to thinkers and scholars over the centuries. Understanding their point of

view in light of what has already been discussed in these first two chapters will help complete my interpretation of Mark 3:28-29.

CHAPTER THREE

Reception and Interpretation

There is definitely something troubling about the thought that there is one sin that will not be forgiven, especially when the sin is so ambiguously defined. For this reason, the unforgivable sin has been a subject of great interest from the time of the early Christian Church until the present. While it would be impossible to fully survey the thoughts and interpretations of all theologians and scholars throughout history, I will still cover many important thinkers and their various understandings of this sin. We will see the writings of the Early Church Fathers, dating back as early as the 3rd century, to the more recent works of the 21st century.

3.1 Defining Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit

While a traditional survey of the literature related to this topic would usually be done in chronological order, I have chosen a different approach. Since there are certain main ideas presented in this survey, I will group the interpretations of various thinkers by theme rather than by date. This will allow one to see the similarities amongst theologians and will make clearer the influence of earlier thinkers on more modern ones. Grouping interpretations by theme is also more organized than the otherwise disordered and perhaps confusing process of explaining each interpretation in chronological order.

It is important to understand that I do not propose to hold a definite answer for the correct interpretation of what blasphemy against the Holy Spirit consists. For this reason, I believe it is important to explore as many interpretations as possible. Gaining a

complete grasp of what has already been said will allow me to form a stronger opinion and support this opinion more firmly. Nevertheless, I do consider some interpretations to be limited or misguided and will therefore use the work that I have already shared to argue against or support the various opinions proposed by theologians and scholars.

3.2 The Rejection of Christ and Salvation

One of the greatest theological thinkers in Christianity's history is Saint Augustine of Hippo. Augustine is debatably the most influential of all the Early Church Fathers. A prolific writer, in addition to his best-known works such as *City of God* (*De civitate dei*) and *Confessions* (*Confessiones*), he wrote hundreds of sermons,¹⁸⁷ one of which, commonly known as *Sermon LXXI*, is entitled *On The Blasphemy Against the Holy Ghost*. Although, like the majority of early scholars, Augustine bases his study on Matthew, completely ignoring Mark, his thoughts on the subject are surprisingly revealing. He does not look at the verse about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit metaphorically, or implicitly. Rather, his understanding is quite literal, saying, "There is then without doubt some certain blasphemy and some word which if it be spoken against the Holy Ghost, shall not be forgiven."¹⁸⁸

However, Augustine's interpretation of the verse becomes figurative. He understands the Holy Spirit to be the saving power that removes sin from man's soul. Therefore, he claims the unforgivable sin is a man reaching death without acknowledging

¹⁸⁷ The exact number of sermons written by Augustine remains unclear, because it is impossible to authenticate each one as having truly been penned by him.

¹⁸⁸ Augustine of Hippo. *Sermon LXXI*. Philip Schaff, ed, Translated by R. G. MacMullen (Dallas, TX: The Electronic Bible Society, 1996), <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PATRISTC/PNI6-7.TXT>.

Christ and the Spirit's saving power, and therefore not obtaining forgiveness.¹⁸⁹ The biggest problem with such an interpretation is that there is little to no methodology involved. Augustine was a very philosophical thinker and his biblical exegesis reflects this. He does not examine the text in an objective manner, but rather uses the verses to support the theological beliefs that have already been established in his mind. Nevertheless, the theory that dying without having obtained forgiveness through Christ and the Holy Spirit remains the foundation for the sin's interpretation for subsequent theologians since.

Although Augustine's views are amongst the most important in all of Christian history, he was not the first to provide such an interpretation of the unforgivable sin. Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage in the 3rd century, only briefly mentions the sin and defines it as living one's life in denial of Christian faith.¹⁹⁰ The sin is therefore complete upon one's death. Perhaps his writings influenced Augustine since the latter spent some years of his education in Carthage.

We will now explore some of the authors whose understanding of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit reflect or resemble that of Augustine. Peter Lombard, a 12th century theologian, and one of the most important Christian thinkers of the middle ages, agrees with Augustine that reaching death without asking forgiveness is the greatest of sins. However, he explains blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to be several possible sins that inhibit one from seeking forgiveness, which therefore makes it unattainable.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Cyprian, *Treatises*, vol. 2, translated by Roy J. Deferrari (New York, N.Y.: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1958), 28.

¹⁹¹ Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, Vol. 42, Translated by Giulio Silano (Toronto, Ont.: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007), 2.

When considering the New Testament as a whole, one would surely see why the concept of a sin that cannot be forgiven is particularly perturbing. The entire message of the New Testament is that all sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ's salvific power. The existence of a sin that will not be forgiven seems contradictory to the Gospel message. Therefore, one may try to reconcile the two concepts by labeling the sin of Mark 3:29 as a refusal to accept Christ's saving power.

This leads to one of the most popular interpretations among churchgoers today. Jean Calvin, an especially influential and prominent name in Church history, one of the Fathers of the Protestant Reformation, rejects Augustine's view that the sin is the refusal to ask for forgiveness, but argues in favor of something similar. Calvin claims the sin is committed by those who "with evil intention, resist God's truth, although by its brightness they are so touched that they cannot claim ignorance. Such resistance alone constitutes this sin."¹⁹² In essence, a knowledge and understanding of "God's truth", coupled with a rejection of it, is unforgivable.

Another Protestant reformer, James Arminius, argues something quite similar to the ideas of Calvin. It becomes clear that salvation and forgiveness are linked closely to belief in Jesus Christ.

The sin against the Holy Ghost is the rejection and refusing of Jesus Christ through determined malice and hatred against Christ, who, through testifying of the Holy Spirit, has been assuredly acknowledged for the Son of God, (or, which is the same thing, the rejection and refusing of the acknowledged universal truth of the gospel,) against conscience and committed for this purpose—that a sinner may fulfill and gratify his desire of the apparent good which is by no means necessary, and may reject Christ.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* The Library of Christian Classics. Vol. 2 Translated by Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 617.

¹⁹³ James Arminius, *Writings*, vol. 2, translated by James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1956), 528–29.

Prior to the start of this thesis, I personally believed that such a concept was theologically viable. Indeed, if the Holy Spirit causes the conviction to repent for one's sins, the refusal to do so would be blasphemy against the source of this conviction.¹⁹⁴ Bruce claims that when reading Luke, a different context provides another point of view on the sin.¹⁹⁵ When considering Luke 12:8-9 especially, the unforgivable sin is the refusal to accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God.¹⁹⁶ However, the Markan account provides the reader with a different understanding; one that will be explored further on in this chapter.

3.3 Forgiving and Being Forgiven

If the unforgivable sin were in fact the refusal to ask for forgiveness, as Strain claims is the case, the theological ideologies of many remains unhampered. Unfortunately, the interpretation is not so simple despite those who, like Strain, propose otherwise, sharing similar beliefs to those of Augustine. Barnard Franklin argues that even though the Holy Spirit may convict one of Christ's saving power, a final rejection of Christ is not the unforgivable sin.¹⁹⁷

Although the refusal to heed the conviction to repent (or ultimately, the refusal to be forgiven) is the greatest sin in the eyes of some, O'Neill interprets things a little differently. Rather than the refusing to be forgiven, he claims it is the refusal to forgive that is unpardonable.¹⁹⁸ To be sure, Mark 11:25-26 seemingly reflects such theology: "[...] if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that you Father in heaven may

¹⁹⁴ John Newton Strain, *The Unpardonable Sin* (Toronto, Ont.: Copp Clark, 1916), 46.

¹⁹⁵ Bruce, 92.

¹⁹⁶ See chart in section 2.3.

¹⁹⁷ Barnard Franklin, "The Blasphemy Against the Holy Ghost: An Inquiry into the Scriptural Teaching Regarding the Unpardonable Sin" (*Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 370, 1936), 230.

¹⁹⁸ O'Neill, 41.

forgive you your sins. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your sins.”¹⁹⁹ It seems that since the importance of forgiving others is mentioned within Mark, Jesus’ warning in Mark 3 may very well relate to this same issue.

In Chapter 1, we saw that O’Neill does not believe “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” to be an accurate saying, but rather, “blasphemy against *this spirit*”.²⁰⁰ He understands this to mean a blasphemy or rejection of the spirit of forgiveness and mercy mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.²⁰¹ I would argue that while this is an interesting interpretation worthy of reflection, it does not accurately represent the text of Mark 3:20-35. First and foremost, as already mentioned in Chapter 1, there is very little evidence to support the accuracy of the wording “this spirit”.²⁰² Secondly, the concept of forgiving others in no way fits the other themes presented within the text.

Perhaps due to the fact that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is described as unforgivable, it seems that several authors conclude the sin somehow relates to forgiveness. Hendriksen postulates that the unpardonable sin was committed by the scribes, not because of anything specific that they did, but because they refused to repent.²⁰³ While this conclusion resembles that of authors like Strain, there remains a distinction between being unrepentant (as Hendriksen states) and denying Jesus’ saving power through the Holy Spirit. In either case, the refusal to repent does not seem to completely encompass the sin’s meaning. Nevertheless, I would argue that, due to the

¹⁹⁹ *Holy Bible* New International Version (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), Mark 11:25.

²⁰⁰ O’Neil, 40-41.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁰² See *Philology* (2.4).

²⁰³ Hendriksen, 139.

work performed in narrative criticism relating to character study and conflict, an unrepentant state of the heart does play an important part in the unforgivable sin.²⁰⁴

The most important cause for dismissal of any of the interpretations offered thus far is the explanative statement of Mark 3:30. The author takes a short break from the narrative to write, “Because they were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’” This verse is a clear statement that what Jesus is saying is a direct result of the scribes’ accusation. Repentance and forgiveness may be important issues in *The Gospel According to Mark*, but they play a minimal role in understanding what blasphemy against the Holy Spirit entails. Franklin differentiates rejection of Christ from calling the source of his power evil. He recognizes the arguments of those who view a rejection of Jesus as an eternal sin as viable, but dismisses its relevance in the context of the text.²⁰⁵ The Markan author’s note is an obvious indication that this sin, in the very least, relates to accusing Jesus of being possessed.

Even while considering the fact that the unforgivable sin is closely tied to the scribes’ accusation against Jesus, there remain many interpretations of what exactly this sin could be. Some of these can easily be dismissed because they do not correlate with the biblical text in question.²⁰⁶ For example, Irenaeus, another important Church Father of the 2nd century, explains the sin to be a denial of the gift of prophecy.²⁰⁷ This was, in fact, a common belief at the time.²⁰⁸ Since the text does not explicitly define blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to say with complete certainty what it is and

²⁰⁴ See *Conflict* (2.2) and *Characters* (2.3).

²⁰⁵ Franklin, 230-231.

²⁰⁶ This is especially true when considering that this thesis is an exercise in narrative criticism,

²⁰⁷ Irenaeus, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons Against the Heresies*, Translated by Dominic J. Unger, and John J. Dillon (New York, N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1992) 3.11.9.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.11.9.

therefore, impossible to completely rule out any interpretation. Nevertheless, some can be written off more easily than others. As we examine some other interpretations, I will explain why I believe they are incomplete in some way, while ultimately understanding that any conclusion is subjective.

3.4 A Sin Against the Historical Jesus and the Implication of His Family

A very popular theory relating to the unpardonable sin is that it could only be committed against the historical Jesus. As Guelich points out, this means it would be impossible to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit after Jesus of Nazareth walked on earth.²⁰⁹ Yet there are still details that differ with each scholar's interpretation. Witherington states that committing the unforgivable sin cannot be accidental. It could only be committed against Jesus while he was on earth. Yet he claims that even scribes had not yet committed this sin but were certainly in danger of doing so and consequently, Jesus warned them.²¹⁰ He argues that the scribes were unaware of what they were doing and the severity of their words and therefore could not be fully held accountable for what they were saying.²¹¹ In his interpretation, it is also possible that Jesus' family was in danger of committing the unforgivable sin as well, because the accusation of Jesus being mad resembles that of the scribes.²¹²

Telford on the other hand, does not believe Jesus' family can be likened to the scribes. The scribes are the only ones that have committed the serious offense mentioned in Mark 3:29. Indeed, contrary to Witherington, Telford claims that the scribes are

²⁰⁹ Guelich, 180.

²¹⁰ Witherington, 159.

²¹¹ Ibid., 159.

²¹² Ibid., 155.

beyond the hope of forgiveness and have committed the unforgivable sin the moment they question the source of Jesus' power.²¹³ However, if indeed the unpardonable sin consists of simply questioning the means by which Jesus performed miracles, there would undoubtedly be far more guilty parties than the scribes alone. Why are the scribes guilty of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit when they question the source of Jesus' power, yet his family, who also call Jesus mad, innocent?²¹⁴ It also leads one to ask, if questioning the source of Jesus' power is a sin that cannot be forgiven, why is it only possible to do this in relation to the historical Jesus? Telford never attempts to answer this question. Similarly, Witherington does not explain why the sin in question could only be committed during the time of Jesus' ministry.

Schweizer makes an interesting statement when he writes, "There is scarcely any other passage where Mark's pen is as evident as it is here."²¹⁵ He recognizes the importance of considering what the author wrote and interpreting the text in accordance with such a consideration. He states that Mark places more importance on the nature of what Jesus says than on the content.²¹⁶ Therefore, approaching the text from an exceedingly literal perspective may ultimately be misleading for the reader.

For this reason, I would argue that the interpretations of scholars such as Guelich, Telford, and Witherington do not completely capture the message and ultimately, the meaning of the Markan text. While they do consider the text in and of itself, they are very literal with their understanding of it. David Steinmetz likens the

²¹³ Telford, 126.

²¹⁴ If one were to call Jesus insane, mad, out of his mind, etc., this would indicate that he also questions the source of Jesus' power. Therefore, it is undeniable that the mother, brothers, and sisters of Jesus doubted the divine origin of his power.

²¹⁵ Schweizer, 83.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

reading of the Bible to reading a detective mystery novel.²¹⁷ Detective stories cannot be understood if one reads just a part. Similarly, a literal reading of Mark 3:28-30 does not paint a complete picture of its meaning and significance. This is why Steinmetz discusses the “Second Narrative”; the concept that one can try to objectively read a biblical text in part—the first narrative, or interpret the passage subjectively—the second narrative.²¹⁸

There are several authors who consider the interpretations of many but do not necessarily endorse a particular claim. Lane, on the one hand, explains blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to be a sin that could only be committed against the historical Jesus—another example of a literal and one-dimensional interpretation.²¹⁹ On the other hand, he also writes, “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit denotes, the conscious and deliberate rejection of the saving power and grace of God released through Jesus’ word and act.”²²⁰ This reflects the very theological interpretations of authors such as Strain (discussed at the beginning of this chapter), who are overly subjective in their exegesis. In his writing, it becomes difficult to decipher what his interpretation really is, but it is clear that he recognizes the existence of more than one possible explanation.

Richard Thomas France also expresses uncertainty in his writings and is hesitant to present a definite conclusion. He understands the severity of the scribes’ accusation, explaining that the casting out of a spirit “is being achieved not simply by a man, but by a man in whom the Spirit of God is working. The exorcisms thus reveal the essentially spiritual dimension of the ministry of Jesus. That is why it is so serious a

²¹⁷ David C. Steinmetz, “Uncovering a Second Narrative: Detective Fiction and the Construction of Historical Method” In *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 61.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

²¹⁹ Lane, 145.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

matter to pervert their meaning into a satanic conspiracy.”²²¹ As a result, it seems likely that the scribes were in fact guilty of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. He notes that although Jesus’ words do not explicitly link the scribes to the unforgivable sin, the author does in verse 30.²²² However, he notes that it is difficult to tell whether such a sin exists outside of the particular scenario in question.

As previously mentioned, the unforgivable sin has troubled readers of the Bible for centuries. The Church Fathers considered it an important issue, as did the important thinkers who followed centuries later.

3.5 Aquinas’ Survey of Various Interpretations

Perhaps the most important Christian theologian of the 13th century is Thomas Aquinas. Like Augustine, his theology is still studied and valued today. His greatest work, the *Summa theologiae*,²²³ remains one of the cornerstones of Catholic doctrine. The text is unique due to its format, wherein questions are asked and arguments are made in favor of or against the several responses provided. In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas specifically addresses the question of “Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost”.

The first task he undertakes is to define blasphemy within the given context. He calls blasphemy the “greatest sin”²²⁴ and claims it pertains to “unbelief”.²²⁵ While Aquinas usually takes a stance on a particular subject and makes arguments to defend his beliefs, this is not the case for his chapter (or section) pertaining to the unforgivable sin.

²²¹ France, 174.

²²² Ibid., 177.

²²³ Better known as *Summa Theologica*.

²²⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. Vol. 2. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York, NY: Benziger Brothers Inc., 1947), Part 2.2, Question 13, Article 3.

²²⁵ Ibid., Part 2.2, Question 13, Article 1.

Rather, he considers the opinions of the Church Fathers and does not favor any opinion. He considers all proposed definitions for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as valid and explains how in each case, the sin could be considered unforgivable.

One theory explored by Aquinas is that of Augustine of Hippo. Although this explanation has ultimately been dismissed in this thesis, Aquinas recognizes it to potentially be an accurate definition, stating that if one dies without obtaining forgiveness for his sins, all his sins are therefore unforgivable.²²⁶ Clearly, Augustine's writings were a great influence on thinkers nearly a millennium later. Aquinas offers another interpretation that is similar to others that have already been discussed.

In his exploration of the unforgivable sin, Aquinas presents a definition given by Church Fathers preceding Augustine. Saint Ambrose, an important theologian of the 4th century, explains blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to mean ascribing evil to the power by which Jesus performed works.²²⁷ This definition, much like Augustine's definition, has influenced many thinkers and is offered by theologians presently (as we have already seen). This interpretation suggests that the sin in question could only be committed against the historical Jesus. I would argue that it does not define the nature of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, but rather, defines the act of the scribes.

A similar interpretation to that of Ambrose was popular among many Early Church Fathers such as Basil of Caesarea and Cyril of Jerusalem. Rather than relating the unforgivable sin to Jesus, they consider blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to be against the one mentioned: the Holy Spirit.²²⁸ One commits the sin if he says anything negative

²²⁶ Ibid., Part 2.2, Question 14, Article 1.

²²⁷ Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, *El Espíritu Santo*, translated by Carmelo Granado (Madrid: Ciudad Nueva, 1998), 1.3. 54.

²²⁸ Basil, *Letter* (New York, N.Y.: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1951), 188; Cyril of Jerusalem,

about this important facet of God. This seems to be too broad of a definition to bear any validity in terms of biblical interpretation. Furthermore, the scribes never themselves mentioned the Holy Spirit. Their accusation was directed towards Jesus.

Aquinas discusses yet another explanation for “the sin against the Holy Ghost”: sinning deliberately with malicious intent.²²⁹ While this may be a partial definition, I would be hesitant to accept it as completely accurate. In the context of Mark 3:20-35, Jesus specifically mentions blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as a response to the scribes’ accusation.²³⁰ If deliberately sinning with ill intent did indeed equate to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, there would undoubtedly be other instances when such a sin would be committed and countless people would never be forgiven. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, the concept of the unforgivable sin being a deliberate action intended for evil does seem to be a significant aspect to a more complete explanation.

Despite his refusal to favor a particular definition, Aquinas does express some of his opinions regarding blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Although the scribes were speaking out against Jesus, Aquinas states that such a sin is not necessarily spoken. It can be committed through thoughts or deeds.²³¹ This suggests that Aquinas does not limit the sin to the particular instance involving the scribes. He does not give much more information and argues in favor of all the opinions that he surveys. The evading of precisely defining the sin is not exclusive to Aquinas. Origen, one of the earliest Church Fathers, never defines the nature of the sin. He does, however, claim it can only be

“Catecheses”, *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, translated by Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1970), 76.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, Part 2.2, Question 14, Article 1.

²³⁰ Such as is specified in Mark 3:30.

²³¹ Aquinas, Part 2.2, Question 14, Article 1.

committed after baptism.²³² This means only a God-fearing individual is capable of the sin, which also means the sin cannot be unintentional. Similarly, although Aquinas fails to provide an opinion of his own, he makes certain to state that no matter how the unforgivable sin is defined, it is not a sin of ignorance.²³³ As a result, it is a deliberate act, and those concerned with committing such an offense are in no danger of doing so.²³⁴

3.6 A Deliberate Act of Rebellion

The intentionality of the act involved in committing the unforgivable sin may be the key to gaining a complete understanding of such an offense. Many scholars recognize this and propose definitions accordingly, which I favor over the explanations that have been surveyed thus far. James Edwards writes that anyone who is unable to distinguish good from evil and light from darkness “is beyond the pale of repentance.”²³⁵ In the context of the Markan text, this is an accurate description of the state of mind and consequent actions of the scribes. They saw Jesus performing miracles (by the power of the Holy Spirit) and called what was good, evil. This lack of discernment is undoubtedly intentional, if not in verse 22, certainly by verse 27, when Jesus successfully defends himself from the accusation.

Frank E. Gaebelien, editor of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, shares the latter point of view, quoting other authors. He mentions the work of Mitton, writing that the sin is “To call what is good evil when you know well that it is good”.²³⁶ Referencing Taylor, he writes that it is “a perversion of spirit which, in defiance of moral values elects

²³² Origen, *Commentaire sur Saint Jean*, translated by Cécile Blanc (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1964), 2:6.

²³³ Aquinas, Part 2.2, Question 14, Article 4.

²³⁴ This concept will be explored in greater detail at the end of this chapter.

²³⁵ Edwards, 123.

²³⁶ Gaebelien, 645.

to call light darkness.”²³⁷ This definition is quite similar to that offered by Edwards. It seems the key to understanding the sin is identifying the act in conjunction with perceiving it as something very deliberate.

F. F. Bruce also views blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as an intentional sin. While he defines the sin differently in the context of Luke,²³⁸ the message of Mark is simple. He explains that “the sin against the Holy Spirit involves deliberately shutting one’s eyes to the light and consequently calling good evil”.²³⁹ Similarly to Edwards, the gravity of the offense is the attribution of evil and demonic qualities to what is good and divine. Bruce makes it clear that an important factor is the intention behind the sin. His use of the word “deliberately” reflects the idea that if “one’s eyes are shut,” this does not prevent him from being forgiven. However, if he deliberately shuts his eyes, his fallacious act of labeling what is from God as evil, it is a direct act of rebellion and ultimately, hatred towards God.²⁴⁰

Much like Bruce, Eduard Schweizer states that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is “to declare war on God”.²⁴¹ Although this definition is short and does not directly relate to the Markan text, it is one of the most interesting definitions provided. It is concise and it captures the nature of the unforgivable sin: a deliberate act against God, wherein one not only rejects God, but attempts to sabotage his work. Such a definition is appropriate in the context of Mark 3, as the scribes knew full well that Jesus was performing miracles through the Holy Spirit, but chose to oppose him anyway (subsequently opposing the Holy Spirit) and attempted to bring doubt into the hearts of

²³⁷ Ibid., 645.

²³⁸ This was addressed earlier in the chapter.

²³⁹ Bruce, 93.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 93.

²⁴¹ Schweizer, 87.

others (the crowd that was present). Therefore, one can conclude that the scribes were not only opposing Jesus, but declaring war on God.

Taking this into account, I would argue that the definitions provided by Bruce and Schweizer most accurately combine interpretation with a consideration for the text in question. They do not simply read about the scribes' accusation and equate it to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It is important to understand *why* Jesus responded in such a way. On the other hand, they do not become overly philosophical or theological with their interpretations. All the conclusions they draw are founded on what is read in the text of Mark 3:20-35. The middle ground used by these theologians provides for what I propose to be the most complete definitions.

Throughout this thesis, there have been a few references to the writings of John Gill—an 18th century conservative Calvinist. His traditionalist views are certainly reflected in some of his interpretation of Mark 3:20-35, particularly with regards to Jesus' family. However, his explanation of the unforgivable sin resembles the more comprehensive definitions of Bruce and Schweizer. He writes, “[the scribes] charged Christ with having a devil, and his miracles with being wrought by the help of the devil; when, at the same time, they knew in their own consciences they were works which were wrought by the finger and Spirit of God, and so were guilty of the sin against the Holy Ghost”.²⁴² This explanation is similar to the conclusions I brought forth in Chapter 2.²⁴³ Gill therefore offers good insight into an age-old question despite his limited understanding and conservative views in other aspects of the biblical passage.

Gill, however, is not the earliest thinker to propose such a view. Although his

²⁴² Gill, 322.

²⁴³ See sections entitled “Conflict”, and “Characters” (more specifically, the scribes).

writings are brief, Jerome, who wrote at the same time as Augustine, proposed a more agreeable interpretation than the latter. He writes, “It is obvious then, that this sin involves blasphemy, calling one Beelzebub for his actions, whose virtues prove him to be God.”²⁴⁴ This is, in essence, what has been repeated centuries later by scholars such as Bruce and Schweizer.

3.7 Present Impact and Relevance of the Biblical Text

Another important issue concerning blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is whether or not such a sin truly is unforgivable. Some scholars, such as France and Guelich propose that to call the sin “unforgivable” may be too harsh. Upon examining the Greek text, they suggest that a more accurate translation of ἔνοχός ἐστιν αἰωνίου ἁμαρτήματος²⁴⁵ is in fact “is guilty of a sin with eternal consequences.”²⁴⁶ Therefore, one who commits the sin is not necessarily doomed, but may suffer a lasting penalty for doing so, or the offense may have an eternal effect.²⁴⁷ While this is an interesting interpretation and the translation is worthy of consideration, it does not ultimately change the nature of the sin, nor does it allow for the possibility that the sin can be forgiven. No matter how one translates the end of verse 29, the phrase preceding it, οὐκ ἔχει ἄφεσιν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα (does not ever have forgiveness), clearly indicates that the sin is in fact unforgivable. Such an idea may be very frightening to some.

²⁴⁴ Saint Jerome, “Letters”, from *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Ware, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 56.

²⁴⁵ Translated as “is guilty of an eternal sin”.

²⁴⁶ France, 176; Guelich, 180.

²⁴⁷ France, 176.

Modern readers of the Bible may ask what Mark 3:20-35 (verses 28-29 in particular) means in their personal lives and in our world today. Many people worry about this passage, lest they commit (or already have committed) the unforgivable sin. A personal and devotional application of the passage varies according to one's understanding. However, no matter the interpretation, almost all scholars, ministers, and other writers agree that there is little cause for concern with regards to the unpardonable sin. If one is of the same opinion as Busch, Guelich, Telford, or Witherington, believing the sin could only be committed against the historical Jesus, obviously nobody today is in danger.²⁴⁸

When considering the other interpretations for the offense in question, it does not seem possible to be guilty of this blasphemy while also being worried about not doing so. Witherington writes that it is impossible to commit the unforgivable sin accidentally.²⁴⁹ Similarly, Hurtado states that “all such anxiety is misdirected.”²⁵⁰

As the context makes plain, Jesus' warning is against disregarding his message by calling it Satanic, a quite specific deed. A person doing such a thing would have no concern about Christ's forgiveness for it. So, the very anxiety lest one may have done something that cuts one off from Christ's forgiveness is, ironically, evidence that one believes Christ to be sent from God, and thus proof that one cannot have committed the sin warned against here.²⁵¹

A majority of authors are in accordance with this idea, writing similar things about the relevance of the unforgivable sin and its relation to modern readers.²⁵² No matter how one interprets “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”, there is no cause for

²⁴⁸ There does remain a theological question of whether or not speaking against the historical Jesus in the present day could be considered blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Even though Jesus is not present on earth, one could still speak against him.

²⁴⁹ Witherington, 159.

²⁵⁰ Hurtado, 66.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 66.

²⁵² Aquinas, Part 2.2, Question 14, Article 4; Ayers, 182; Edwards, 124; Franklin, 231-233; Gaebelein, 645; Hare, 51-52; Hendriksen, 138-139; Lane, 146; Schweizer, 87; Strain, 44-46.

concern for today's reader. Any and all who would worry about committing the unforgivable sin have not done so, nor will they do so.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I began by introducing the concept of the unforgivable sin, as it appears in Mark, and followed it with brief survey of literature that addresses the issue. It was clear that many interpretations existed and that different views are provided, not only in understanding blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, but with other aspects of the passage in question as well. Next, it was important to deconstruct the text itself (Mark 3:20-35), beginning with the Koine Greek. After providing a short textual critical commentary of the Greek text in an attempt to recreate the most authentic version possible, I was able to present a more accurate translation of the passage. I then compared the text of Mark with my translations of parallel passages in Matthew and Luke using redaction criticism. For the final part of my first chapter, a philological analysis of some of the more interesting terms was also helpful in developing a better understanding of the text.

The second chapter was an exercise in interpreting the text through narrative criticism, which was the focus of the thesis. There were four important facets of the passage that required special attention: plot, conflict, characters, and structure. Exploring each of these helped shed light on the text that allowed for a more complete interpretation of the Markan text. It became quite clear that the scribes are not Jesus' only opponents, but his very own family is an adversary as well. More than this, if in fact one interprets the text in such a way that scribes blasphemed against the Holy Spirit, Jesus' family is in danger of committing the sin too. An analysis of the story's conflict does help show that Jesus' mother and siblings did not actually blaspheme against the Holy Spirit because while their words resemble those of the scribes, an important aspect of the sin is the

motivation and intent behind it. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable link between the scribes and Jesus' own family.

In exploring the text's structure and performing a character analysis of Jesus and his followers, two themes become prevalent. The first is the divine nature and anointing of Jesus. The challenge issued by the scribes and Jesus' consequent response clearly express that he is empowered by the Holy Spirit and that he is doing God's work. The parables of Mark 3:23-27 are statements about Jesus' mission on earth: to set Satan's captives free from their bondage, destroying the latter's kingdom and establishing the kingdom of God. Secondly, there is great emphasis on the importance of discipleship. Jesus essentially rejects his family and calls his followers his true family. For Jesus, the most important people are those who live their lives according to God's will. These two themes are central to *The Gospel According to Mark*.

In the third and final chapter, I explored several different interpretations of the meaning of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" as offered by various theologians and scholars. Some were philosophical and liberal with their interpretation while others were very literal. In the end, the most comprehensive definition is one that finds a middle ground between the two approaches.²⁵³ Although more current studies often provide more thorough explanations, it is interesting to see the conclusions drawn from early thinkers and the similarities to the interpretations provided to this day. The final part of the chapter addressed the reception and meaning of the passage for readers today. This is especially important because of the debate and concern that still exists in relation to the unforgivable sin.

²⁵³ This does not mean the most accurate interpretation is a mixture of ideas. Rather, it can be found when one achieves a balance between a literal and metaphorical approach.

As I have already stated, there is no way of being certain any one interpretation of Mark 3:20-35 (specifically verse 29) is more accurate or correct than others. One can simply offer what he believes to be the best explanation based on the information he is given. Through my research and the work I have done, particularly with narrative criticism, I believe the best definition for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is given by F. F. Bruce, who states that “the sin against the Holy Spirit involves deliberately shutting one’s eyes to the light and consequently calling good evil”.²⁵⁴ This interpretation resembles that of other scholars such as Edwards, Gaebelein, Gill, and Schweizer.²⁵⁵ Taking all these definitions into account, I am able to provide my own—one that reflects the work of these writers. The unforgivable sin is to intentionally sabotage the work of God by calling it Satanic.

There are those who would disagree with my definition because the biblical passage is so divisive and debated. I cannot claim that my definition is the best, nor could any other scholar rightfully do this. Understanding the biblical text requires interpretation despite the hints it provides. As a result of the research and narrative criticism I performed, I favor the definition that I provided (or others that resemble it) because it best reflects the nature of the story itself. This focus on the narrative aspect of the text therefore explains the implications of my thesis.

Many have commented on the unforgivable sin and offered their explanation of what it is, exactly. Defining this sin is in no way a new endeavor. While some have presented innovative and fresh definitions, most (including myself) repeat or reword old ideas. The aspect that separates my work from that of others is the focus on narrative

²⁵⁴ Bruce, 93.

²⁵⁵ Edwards, 123; Gaebelein, 645; Gill, 322; Schweizer, 87.

criticism. It seems obvious that the key to understanding Mark 3:28-29 is found in the story containing these verses. Clearly, I am not the first one to consider the story of Mark 3:20-35. Many scholars²⁵⁶ have examined the story, but kept it self contained; meaning the sinful act and the story's entire message does not transcend beyond the events of the story itself. However, like most of the Bible, it is not the events themselves that are the primary focus, but the message and meaning behind what is written. Although my work does not shed light on any historical aspects of the text, my narrative-critical approach to the biblical text does help with understanding it.

Some may disagree with the conclusions that I draw as a result of my work, since, it seems as though time has not had much effect on the perception of the unforgivable sin. When considering the Early Church, some, such as Athanasius and Saint Ambrose, interpret the text in a similar way as I do, while others, like Augustine, understand the passage to be more metaphorical. These two interpretations are common still today and it is likely that dissimilar opinions will continue to exist for as long as the biblical passage is studied.

When I first selected this topic to focus on in a thesis, my motivation in choosing it was simply personal curiosity. The idea that the Bible mentions a sin that cannot be forgiven is both intriguing and frightening. When I asked people for their interpretation, I received several answers, which inspired me to develop my own understanding—one that was more academic than devotional. I would often hear people explain that if one is truly concerned about committing the unforgivable sin (in the past

²⁵⁶ Guelich, 180; Lane, 145; Telford, 126; Witherington, 159.

or future), that person essentially does not need to worry at all.²⁵⁷ This seemed like a safe and borderline patronizing answer used to reassure those who might ask if they have ever committed such a great offense. However, upon doing research and studying the subject on my own, it seems like the anxiety that stems from the biblical passage is unnecessary and unjustified. As we have already seen, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is a sin committed with a rebellious attitude where one intentionally “declare[s] war on God”.²⁵⁸

Therefore, the intention of this thesis was not to present something completely new, or set out to prove something. I simply intended to discover an interpretation for the unforgivable sin that I believed to be the most comprehensive in its relation to the text of Mark 3:20-35. Certainly the narrative critical approach separates this work from prior interpreters. Furthermore, the entire focus of the thesis is the defining of a single term and is therefore quite thorough and extensive.

Naturally, critics of the narrative critical approach may not recognize the validity of such a study. I do not propose that the biblical text and my consequent work reflect historical accuracy. My narrative study of the text is not concerned with historical accuracy and therefore does not question anything outside the text itself. In this thesis I set out to define “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” as it is mentioned in Mark 3:20-35, explaining the passage and why I defined the sin the way I did using narrative criticism. While I am sure I have not brought an end to the debates relating to the topic, I hope my work will help bring satisfactory answers to some.

²⁵⁷ This idea was explored at the end of Chapter 3 and it seems like this concept is generally accepted because there is no way to commit the sin without intentionally wanting to do so.

²⁵⁸ Schweizer, 87.

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