

Christology for a New World: A Re-Reading of Mark 2:1-3:6 from an Indian Perspective

Sam Peedikayil Mathew*

Introduction

It is well attested in the four gospels that Jesus had many conflicts with the religious-political authorities of his day. However, it is surprising that these conflicts are not given serious consideration in the studies on Christology of the gospels in general and of Mark's gospel, which devotes much space to Jesus' conflict both in Galilee (2:1-3:6) and Jerusalem (chapters 11-12), in particular. The problem of investigation in this short study is whether Christology in Mark is integrally related to Jesus' conflict with the religious-political authorities of his time. This is done by a re-examination of the conflict stories in Mark 2:1-3:6 with a view to bring out some Christological insights that have a special appeal to the Indian context.

Previous studies on Christology in Mark's gospel mainly focus on the titles of Jesus. V. Taylor's statement is typical of many commentators: "The character of Mark's Christology can be best seen in his use of the names and titles of Jesus."¹ Taylor understands the work of Christ on the basis of the person of Christ, as it is understood from the titles used for Christ. This is based on the presupposition that "what Christ does arises out of, and can only be understood in terms of, what he is."² In spite of meticulous background study of some titles of Jesus used in the gospels, it did not throw much light on the actual usage of the title by Jesus in the respective contexts. For instance, the background study of the title, 'Son of Man', failed to illuminate on the Markan use of the earthly suffering and dying Son of Man and special usage in Mark 2:10 and 2:28. We are persuaded that a more productive exercise is to understand the person of Christ based on the various activities of Jesus, as presented in the gospels. As M. D. Hooker observes, "a great deal of Mark's Christology is implicit, conveyed by the way in which he presents the material."³ We will attempt to bring out this implicit Christology underlying the narratives in the Gospel of Mark.

Overemphasis on the historical critical method which dug up the history of the titles played a significant role in assessing the meaning of the Christological titles and arriving at Christologies of the gospels. The conflict stories in Mk. 2:1-3:6 were interpreted in the light of the primitive church's conflict with Judaism. Undue importance given to the history of the conflict stories led to focus on the question of historicity of these conflicts. They were increasingly seen as a reflection of the early Christian controversy with Judaism,

* Dr. Sam Peedikayil Mathew is Professor and Head of the New Testament Department at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, Chennai, South India <sampm@vsnl.net or mathew.samp@gmail.com>.

¹ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (New York: St. Martin's, 1963), 116.

² *Ibid.*, 124.

³ Morna D. Hooker, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark*, Black's NT Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1991), 83.

neglecting their value in understanding the person and work of Christ.⁴ Therefore, we will focus on the conflict stories in Mark 2:1-3:6 and try to delineate insights for a relevant and contextual understanding of the person of Christ, without relying on the historical critical method which distinguished between tradition and redaction.

I. Method and Perspective of the Study

1. Method

Since the sources used by Mark cannot be determined with certainty, it is extremely difficult to make a clear distinction between tradition and redaction in Mark. It has long been recognized that redaction critical study of the same text in Mark's gospel has produced different and even contradictory conclusions.⁵ Even at the peak of redaction critical study, instead of a strict separation of tradition and redaction, the need was felt to treat the Gospel of Mark as a literary whole. As Perrin says, "But now I have reached the methodological point of recognizing that so far as the interpretation of Mark is concerned questions of tradition are comparatively unimportant. What matters is the function of the text concerned in the Gospel as whole."⁶

In this study we will employ insights from literary analysis,⁷ which focuses on the narrative character, of both the structure and story of Mark. We will take seriously the integrity of the conflict stories and look into the narrative patterns and literary techniques, taking into account the elements of the narrative such as the plot line, character development, verbal motives and suspense.⁸ The social meaning of the text will be determined by examining the correlations between the socio-political inferences within the narrative world and the socio-political situation of Mark's Gospel.⁹

2. Perspective¹⁰

⁴ For instance, G. Theissen quotes approvingly Stegemann who says that "the tradition of conflicts between Jesus' early adherents and their Jewish opponents was raised to the level of enmity" in the process of separation between Judaism and Christianity after 70 C.E. (E. Stegemann, "Von Kritik zur Feindschaft: Eine Auslegung von Markus 2,1-3,6", in *Der Gott der Kleinen Leute*, Vol. .2 Neues Testament (Munich & Gelnhausen, 1979), 5. G. Thessen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, transl. L. M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 117, n.132.

⁵ See for example, Donald H. Juel, *Messiah and Temple: The Trial of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark* (SBLDS 31; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 215 for the conflicting results arrived at by scholars who attempted to explain the Trial of Jesus in Mark by relating to tradition.

⁶ Norman Perrin, "The High Priest's Question and Jesus' Answer," in *The Passion in Mark* ed. Werner Kelber (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 90.

⁷ For example, see David Rhoads & Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); also N. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

⁸ Rhoads & Michie, *Mark as Story*, 4-5.

⁹ See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political and Social Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 31ff. for details of this method.

Diversity of languages and cultures, plurality of religions and startling contrasts are the hallmarks of the Indian context. In India there are a thousand six hundred and fifty (1,650) different languages and dialects, fifteen of which are recognized 'official' languages by the Indian constitution.¹¹ All the great religions of the world flourish in India, along with a large number of aboriginal tribal religions and a profusion of new cults. This exuberant religiosity co-exists with poverty of the majority and affluence of the minority. Massive poverty of the majority, pluriform religiosity and its oppressive, all-pervasive caste system constitute the social reality in India. Eighty per cent (80%) of its rural population and about fifty per cent (50%) of its total population live below the 'poverty line.'¹² Poverty in India is not simply an economic category; it is a religious value as well. Caste discrimination along with untouchability is legitimised by Hindu scriptures and generally tolerated by others, including the Christian churches. The struggles of Indian women, Dalits and Adivasis for survival and liberation from violence, discrimination and exploitation, and the ecological problems due to deforestation and the perils of globalisation are the other important dimensions of the Indian context.

In the midst of cultural diversity in India, there is an "underlying fundamental unity" among Indians, a certain 'attitude to life', a certain way of experiencing reality, which is distinctively Indian."¹³ Drawing on A. K. Ramanujan, professor of literature, poet, and translator of Tamil religious verse, Soares-Prabhu observes that Indian thinking differs from Western thinking in that it is context-sensitive rather than context-free. "Indian thinking always sees things as part of a whole. Everything is bounded by a context without which it cannot be properly understood."¹⁴ "It perceives reality as an interconnected, interrelated and therefore an interdependent whole. A human being is perceived not in isolation, but always as situated in the social context of his or her family and caste; humankind does not stand alone, but must always be understood as part of the totality of the cosmos."¹⁵

Our re-reading from an Indian perspective takes into serious consideration this inner and outer reality of the Indian context. The situation of abject poverty of the majority calls the Indian hermeneut for a radical commitment to the poor, which is the first step in any genuine Third World Theology.¹⁶ As Soares-Prabhu maintains, "Only a reading which takes off from the concerns of the interpreter can set going a proper hermeneutical circle,

¹⁰ For this section we have drawn heavily from Sam P. Mathew, "Indian Biblical Hermeneutics: Methods and Principles", *Neotestamentica: Journal of the New Testament Society of South Africa* 38 (1, 2004), 110-113.

¹¹ According to the Census in 2001, *India Today*, July 22-28, 2003, 38.

¹² E. Franco, "The Structural Nature of Poverty in India", in J. Murickan (ed.), *Poverty in India: Challenges and Responses* (Bangalore: The Xavier Board Publication, 1988), 42.

¹³ See V. Smith, *The Oxford History of India* (Oxford, 1919), x.; R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (London, 1962), 1.

¹⁴ George M. Soares-Prabhu, "Interpreting the Bible in India", in *Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu*, S.J., edited & Introduced by Francis X. D'sa, Vol. 4, *Theology of Liberation: An Indian Biblical Perspective*, Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth Theology Series Vol. V (Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 2001), 9. See A.K. Ramanujan, "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23 (1989), 41-58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

which will relate text to life."¹⁷ Therefore, the needs of the poor and the oppressed Dalits, women and Adivasis are placed at the head of the criteria of our biblical interpretation. Their experience and questions form the starting point for our re-reading of the Bible in the Indian context. Our understanding of Christology will be informed by the person and work of Christ from the narratives in Mk. 2:1-3:6, focussing more on what Jesus does in order to understand the person of Christ¹⁸, taking into serious consideration the narrative context as well as the socio-historical context.

II. A Re-reading of Mark 2:1-3:6 from an Indian Perspective

1. Mark 2:1-12

The immediate context of Mark 2:1-3:6 is the healing and cleansing of a person suffering from leprosy (Mark 2:1-12), where Jesus challenges the social power of the priests not only by healing him but also declaring him clean. The conclusion of Mark 1:40-45 is linked to Mk. 2:1-12 by several "hook words", a Markan technique by which he chains episodes. The healed person proclaims "the word" (*ton logon*) just as Jesus does in Mark 2:2. The phrase "so that no longer" (*haste meketi*) is used in both the verses.¹⁹ Both the leper and the paralytic suffered exclusion from society. In both cases Jesus deals with the root of the complaint.²⁰ In both episodes Mark shows us that Jesus' authority is superior to the priests who alone could pronounce the leper clean or forgive only when a person is healed and proper sacrifices are made.²¹ In Mark 2:1-12, as we shall see below, Jesus challenges the social power of the scribes who supported the Temple and the priesthood in various ways. Thus, Jesus' conflict with the religious-political authorities, which was hinted at Mark 1:21ff. and indirectly began in Mark 1:40-45, is continued and intensified in Mark 2:1-3:6.

i) Solidarity with the Poor

The narrative setting of Mark 2:1-12 contains several details that point to the social level of the community with whom Jesus interacts. The episode is located in a "house" (Mk. 2:1), which is dug through to let the paralytic in. This shows that it was an earthen roof and most probably a single room house of a poor person. The paralytic was brought by four men in a *krabbatos* (cf. *kline* used by both Matthew and Luke), which specifically refers to a type of sleeping mat used by the poor.²² The mention of the crowd (*ochlos*), a term analogous to 'am ha 'aretz (people of the land), who in the first century C.E. referred

¹⁶ Cf. A. Fierro, *The Militant Gospel: A Critical Introduction to Political Theologies* (New York: Orbis, 1977), 190-93.

¹⁷ George M. Soares-Prabhu, "Two Mission Commands: An Interpretation of Matthew 28:16-20 in the Light of a Buddhist Text", in *Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu, S.J.*, Vol.4, 55.

¹⁸ In our approach we will give equal importance to the words and deeds of Jesus in the narratives of Mark.

¹⁹ Joanna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure and Theology in Mark 2:1-3:6* (SBLDS 48; Missoula, Chico: Scholars Press, 1980), 117f.

²⁰ Hooker, *St. Mark*, 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

to the lower class, poor, uneducated, ignorant of the law²³, clearly indicate that the people who thronged to Jesus were predominantly poor. In the internal structure of this episode a ring composition has already been noted:²⁴

- Mark 2:1-5 - introduction (crowd and paralytic)
- 2:6-10a - controversy (scribes and Jesus)
- 2:10a-12b - healing and conclusion (crowd and paralytic)

"This form articulates Jesus' solidarity with the poor from whom the scribes are insulated."²⁵ Thus the reference to the house, mat, crowd and the internal structure of composition of the episode are intended by Mark to show Jesus' identification with the poor and the underprivileged in society.

ii) Liberation from Sin and Oppression

Jesus' words to the paralytic, "your sins are forgiven" must be interpreted in the light of the Old Testament (OT) understanding of forgiveness of sins. The standard view in the OT is that sins are forgiven by God and not by humans.²⁶ Although sacrifices are required for the granting of forgiveness of sins, they did not effect the forgiveness of sins. As we see in Numbers 5:7 repentance and confession of sins were an essential part of sacrifice and repentance would be demonstrated by a sacrifice.²⁷ According to Lev. 5:16, the priest "makes atonement" and the person is "forgiven." Sanders points out that there is no evidence that the priests pronounced forgiveness, although they had the prerogative to do so.²⁸ In Psalms, the Prophets and Intertestamental literature, the idea that forgiveness of sins is the result of repentance could be seen.²⁹ In the first century C.E, the idea common to all Jews is that it is God who forgives sin on the basis of repentance through the daily and private sacrifices especially through the rites of the Day of Atonement.³⁰

²² B. J. Malina & R. L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 187.

²³ Ahn Byung-Mu, "Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark," in *Minjung Theology: People as Subjects of History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), 139.

²⁴ Dewey, *Markan Public Debate*, 154.

²⁵ Myers, *Binding the Strongman*, 154.

²⁶ I. Broer, "Jesus und das Gesetz—Anmerkungen zur Geschichte des Problems und zur Frage der Suendervergebung durch den historischen Jesus," in *Jesus und das juedische Gesetz*, ed. I. Broer (Stuttgart/Berlin/Koeln: Kohlhammer, 82-82. Also Sam P. Mathew, *Temple-Criticism in Mark's Gospel: The Economic Role of the Jerusalem Temple in the First Century CE* (Delhi: ISCK, 1999), 202.

²⁷ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), 206; Idem, *Jewish Laws from Jesus to Mishnah: Five Studies* (London: SCM, Philadelphia: Trinity International Press, 1990), 62; K. Koch, "Suendervergebung um die Wende von der exilischen zur nach-exilischen Zeit," *Evangelische Theologie* 26 (1966), 231.

²⁸ Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 62.

²⁹ G. Montifiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teaching* (New York: Scribners, 1970), 392 finds direct connection between repentance and forgiveness of sins in Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Malachi. Also H. Thyen, *Studien zur Suendervergebung im NT und seinen alttestamentlichen and juedischen Voraussetzungen* (FRLNT 96; Goettingen: Vandenhoeck, 1970), 29; Borer, "Jesus und das Gesetz", 85.

"Your sins are forgiven" (Mk. 2:5b) has been interpreted by some as Jesus taking God's prerogative to forgive sins.³¹ This interpretation overlooks two things. First, there are no known texts in which the messianic figure or Son of Man forgives sins by virtue of his power.³² Second, Jesus speaks in the passive voice, which means that the man is forgiven not by Jesus but by God. The sense of the passive voice indicates that the issue here is the right to declare sins forgiven, outside the cult, without repentance and sacrifice as laid down in the Law and enacted by the priest.³³ V. Taylor considers Jesus' word as prophetic, "the utterance of the one who can speak with complete certainty as commissioned to declare a stupendous spiritual fact."³⁴ The scribe's question is not on the offer of forgiveness in response to the disease, but rather on who declares forgiveness. Through his declaration of forgiveness of sins, Jesus does here what only a priest can do, thereby challenging the mediation of forgiveness of sins through temple cult and priesthood.³⁵

Popular belief regarded sickness or misfortune as the result of sin (cf. Jn. 9:1-5; I Cor. 11:30). This is well attested in the Talmud: "No one gets up from his sickbed until all his sins are forgiven" (b. Ned. 41a). The idea that suffering is a punishment for sins pervades in the Book of Deuteronomy and is seen in the Prophets (e.g., Isa. 40:2).³⁶ If the paralytic shared this popular opinion, that would have prevented him from effecting physical healing. Jesus overturns the popular belief that sickness and poverty are always due to sin or curse from God (cf. Lk. 16:19-31). Since Jesus sees that forgiveness is indispensable to the cure, he mediates forgiveness to the paralytic, without implying that sin is the universal cause of sickness.³⁷ Against popular belief, apart from the Law and the cult, forgiveness, like the cleansing act in Mk. 1:40-44 was made available without any condition or penalty out of sheer grace and made the sick person whole.

Jesus heals the sickness of the person as well as his sense of sin in which sickness was believed to be rooted. Crossan points to a circle of victimisation in the conjunction of

³⁰ L. Gaston, *No Stone on Another: Studies in the Significance of the Fall of Jerusalem in the Synoptic Gospels* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 77.

³¹ E.g., G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, ET (London: Macmillan, 1960), 81; N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 139; Gaston, *No Stone*, 77; D. J. Antwi, "Did Jesus Consider His Death to be an Atoning Sacrifice?", *Interpretation* 45 (1, 1991), 23; J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and Law* (London: SCM, 1986), 27, argues that here we see Jesus' ability and authority to forgive sins.

³² See H. L. Strack & P. Bellerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*, 4 Vols. (Muenchen, 1922-28), Vol. I, 495; G. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 4 Vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1927-30), Vol. I, 535-36.

³³ J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology I. Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1971), 114; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 206-27; Idem, *Jewish Law*, 61, 63

³⁴ Taylor, *Mark*, 201.

³⁵ Mathew, *Temple-Criticism*, 203-04.; E. J. Broadhead, "Christology as Polemic and Apologetic: The Priestly Portrait of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (47 (1992), 27 points out that in the worship of Israel, God's offer of forgiveness belongs to the priesthood (Lev. 16:32-34; 4:26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 18; 6:7).

³⁶ Hooker, *St. Mark*, 85.

³⁷ Taylor, *Mark*, 201.

sins and sickness. Oppressive taxation could leave the poor physically malnourished or hysterically disabled. But the religious leaders blamed people themselves and taught that their sicknesses are caused by their sins. People were required to make offerings in the Temple to get their sins forgiven, in a circle of victimisation.³⁸ By making forgiveness of sins freely and directly available to the sick person, Jesus was exposing the religious means by which social restrictions were imposed on the people.³⁹ By challenging the mediation of forgiveness of sins through the priests and the temple, Jesus was in effect liberating the paralytic from the temple cult that became oppressive to the poor, sick and the marginalized.⁴⁰ When the people were required to make offerings in the temple through the priests, Jesus' declaration of forgiveness of sins without the priests and sacrifices was a challenge to the monopoly of the priests and the exploitation of the poor through the temple and priesthood.⁴¹

The scribes were the legal experts and judges, conversant with the maxims and wisdom of the ancients (Ecclus. 37:33; 39:1).⁴² Saldarini points out that though the scribes were dependent on Temple revenues and subordinate to the priests who controlled the temple, they were part of the political leadership during the Hasmonian period.⁴³ In the gospels the scribes were found to be connected to the government in Jerusalem as associates of the priests in judicial proceedings, enforcement of Jewish custom and ongoing business of the Sanhedrin.⁴⁴ They developed primarily the precepts relating to sacrifice, festivals and dues to the temple and priesthood, often favouring the rich and the powerful.⁴⁵ Since Judea was governed by the temple, headed by the high priest and the Torah, the role of the scribes as interpreters of the Torah was especially important. Jesus' declaration of "forgiveness of sins" outside the temple and priesthood undermined the theological basis of the sacrificial system centred at the temple, which gave legitimacy to the economic benefit the temple and its supporters received through the sacrifices. Therefore, being closely associated with and dependent on the temple, the protest of the scribes can easily be understood. Jesus' action and words questioned the social power of the scribes.

iii) Liberation and Conflict Lead to Passion of Jesus

³⁸ J. D. Crossan, *Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 324.

³⁹ R. A. Horsely, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 184. A. C. Wire, "The Structure of Gospel Miracle Stories and Their Tellers," *Semeia* 11 (1975), 92-96 shows how the healing stories reveal the restrictions imposed by religious authorities.

⁴⁰ See Mathew, *Temple-Criticism*, 130-217 for a detailed discussion of Jesus' reaction to the oppression and exploitation of the poor and the marginalized through the Jerusalem Temple, its leaders and institutions.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴² E. Schuerer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B. C. - A. D. 135)*, 3 Vols. Ed. & Rev. G. Vermes, F. Millar & M. Goodman (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), Vol. II, 323.

⁴³ A. J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestine: A Sociological Approach* (Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988), 250, 252.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 262-64.

⁴⁵ Schuerer, *History of the Jewish People*, Vol. II, 345, 366.

The scribes mentally charge Jesus with blasphemy (Mk. 2:7). Since forgiveness of sins is the prerogative of God, according to the Old Testament (cf. Ex. 34:6f.; Isa. 43:25 and 44:22), to usurp this right is to blaspheme God. Penalty for blasphemy is stoning (cf. I Kings 21:13; Lev. 24:15f.; Jn. 10:33; Acts 7:58). The scribes understood Jesus as acting and speaking for God. It must be noted that the charge is tentative and not actually made. However, the rhetorical questions in the mind of the scribes in conjunction with the assertion of blasphemy (Mk. 2:7) point to Jesus' conviction and consequent death. In Mk. 2:7 the scribes ask in their minds, "Why does this man talk like this? He blasphemes! Who is able to pardon sins except God?" In Mk. 14:64 the assertion in the middle of the verse emphasizes the charge of blasphemy, leading to Jesus' conviction which led to his suffering and death.⁴⁶ Therefore, Mark shows that the conflict caused by Jesus' act of liberating people from sin and sickness will ultimately result in Jesus' passion and death.

iv) The Self-designation of Jesus: Son of Man

Mark 2:10 is the first occasion in Mark in which Jesus offered an explanation for his authoritative action. A proper interpretation of Mk. 2:10 gives a clue to understanding Jesus' authority.⁴⁷ As Hooker points out, the conflict stories are a demonstration of Jesus' authority. Therefore we will interpret Mk. 2:10 in the light of the conflict stories, taking into account the use of the phrase in other passages in Mark.

Of the fourteen usages of the phrase, "Son of Man," in Mark, eight deal with the present suffering (Mk. 8:31; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 14:21, 41) and three refer to the future vindication (8:38; 13:26; 14:62); in Mk. 2:10 it refers to the "authority on earth to forgive sins" and in Mk. 2:28 the Son of Man is "Lord of the Sabbath." The origin of the phrase "Son of Man" could be traced to Dan. 7:13 and the Book of Enoch. In Dan. 7:13, "one like unto a son of man" comes "with the clouds of heaven" to the "Ancient of Days", representing the Jewish people, "the saints of the Most High." In the Book of Enoch, the Son of Man is a superhuman figure of great dignity and power (cf. I Enoch 46:1, 3; 48:2f.; 51:3; 62:2, 6f.; 69:27-29). In Ez. 2:1 and Ps. 8:4 the term is a synonym for 'man.'

It has been argued that Jesus used the phrase to make a messianic claim.⁴⁸ While some contend that Jesus identified himself with the eschatological Son of Man,⁴⁹ others hold that after the resurrection the early church identified Jesus with the Son of Man.⁵⁰ Some others argue that Jesus understood his vocation in terms of the Isaianic suffering servant.⁵¹ For E. Schweizer, Jesus used the phrase "Son of Man" to express his prophetic calling, which he linked to the innocent suffering of the righteous in Isa. 53 and Wisdom 2-5.⁵² Based on the study of the Aramaic phrase, *bar nasha*, which was used for "Son of Man", Vermes

⁴⁶ Rhoads & Michie, *Mark as Story*, 50-51.

⁴⁷ Even after Jesus' powerful temple action in Mk.11:15-19, when he was questioned about his authority, Jesus gave only an indirect answer (see *Temple-Criticism*, 182-83).

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Mark*, 199; D. E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark*, The Pelican New Testament Commentaries (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), 94.

⁴⁹ E.g., Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 257-58.

⁵⁰ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols (New York: Scribners, 1951), Vol. I, 28-32; F. Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology*, ET (London: SCM, 1969), 15-53 among many others.

⁵¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1970), 110-15.

⁵² E. Schweizer, *Good News According to Mark*, ET (London: St. Martin's, 1971), 166-71.

suggested that the phrase was used in the first century C.E. meaning not only 'man', but as a circumlocution of 'I'.⁵³ Taking into serious consideration the use of the phrase, 'Son of Man,' in Dan. 7:13 and the Book of Ezekiel, Hooker concludes that Jesus used the phrase not in a messianic sense but to refer to himself since it "conjured up all kinds of associations: prophetic calling, the mission of God's obedient people, the possibility of suffering for those who were faithful to his will, and the promise of vindication."⁵⁴

It is significant that Mark introduces the phrase "Son of Man" in the context of conflict over forgiveness of sins. The authority of the Son of Man challenges the mediation of forgiveness of sins through the temple, priesthood and the scribes who support it. That is why it is asserted that the "Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." The heavenly Son of Man in Daniel is reinterpreted as having authority "on earth" over the priests and the scribes who exercise their authority on earth by exploiting God's forgiveness of sins for social power and economic gain. It is noteworthy that the power of the Son of Man in Daniel goes hand in hand with the power of the imperishable reign of God, in contrast to the monstrous beast, the empire. This implies that the authority or power (*exousia*) of Son of Man—hence, the power of Jesus—is the opposite of the oppressive power.⁵⁵ All these lead us to the conclusion that Mk. 2:10 presents an important activity of Jesus as the Son of Man, i.e., challenging the oppressive power of the religious-political authorities.

2. Mark 2:13-17

Jesus called Levi, a customs official, to be his disciple (Mk. 2:13-14). Tax-collectors were not regarded by Jewish religious authorities as fit company for anyone who took seriously the will and demands of God. In the second narrative (2:15-17), Jesus sat at table with the "tax-collectors" and sinners. The tax-collectors were mostly employees of the chief tax-collector who entered into a contract with the Romans to collect taxes for bringing goods across the border. It is generally held that they were dishonest and rapacious. They were shunned by the Jews not only due to their dishonesty but also for working as representatives of the Roman colonial power and the ritual impurity associated with them.⁵⁶ However, recent scholarship suggests that most of the tax-collectors were poor and rootless people who were unable to find work and their extortion or cheating most likely benefited the rich chief tax-collectors for whom they worked.⁵⁷ Although the rabbinic moralists, traders, and rich people despised them as thieves, robbers, and ritually unclean, the poor and the day labourers had little or nothing on which such duties should be levied and they did not despise the tax-collectors.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the Jewish religious leaders held that for a devout Jew, tax-collectors were on a level with gamblers, usurers, shepherds, and the violent.⁵⁹

⁵³ G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 160-91.

⁵⁴ Hooker, *St. Mark*, 93. Ezekiel, the prophet, and Daniel are addressed as 'Son of Man' (see Dan. 8:127).

⁵⁵ Jose C. Pallares, *The Poor Man Called Jesus: Reflections on the Gospel of Mark*, trans. R. R. Barr (Indore: Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra, 1986), 10.

⁵⁶ See J. R. Donahue, "Tax-collectors and Sinners: An Attempt at Identification," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33 (1971), 33ff.

⁵⁷ Malina & Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary*, 190.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*; see also A. J. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), 111. See b.

The term ‘sinners’ was generally understood to refer to the *‘am ha ‘aretz*, “the people of the land”, which gradually came to mean all those who neglected to observe the law according to the Pharisaic ideal of purity.⁶⁰ Jeremias notes four possible meanings for the term ‘sinners’: i) those who practised seven despised trades, such as gambling, usury, games of chance, dealing in trades of Sabbatical year, shepherds, tax collectors, and revenue farmers (see Sanh. 25b); ii) those guilty of flagrant immorality, e.g., adulterers, prostitutes, extortionists, murderers, idolaters, etc.; iii) those who did not observe the Torah according to the Pharisaic understanding of it; iv) the Gentiles. One thing common in all the four groups is that they neglected tithing and ritual purity.⁶¹ Some scholars think that the term ‘sinners’ referred to all those who deliberately violated the law and were thus treated as religious and social outcasts.⁶² The sinners who cannot and will not observe the Torah were treated as Gentiles and fellowship with them was forbidden on the grounds that one might be tempted to accept their manner of life.⁶³

The Pharisees considered tithing and ritual purity as their primary concern.⁶⁴ Since the concern for tithing and purity found expression in the table fellowship, one could not be a guest of one who did not pay tithes or failed to observe dietary laws or one who is ritually unclean.⁶⁵ The scribes’ disapproval of Jesus’ eating in the company of “sinners and tax-collectors” would be due in part to the possibility that food provided would not have been tithed in accordance with the law (e.g., Deut.14:22), or not prepared in a proper way, or it was possible that he might come into contact with unclean garments or dishes.⁶⁶ The rabbis taught that the Jews should neither share meals nor travel together with the *‘am ha ‘aretz*, the people of the land. Yet Mark presents Jesus as openly doing both in the call of Levi, the tax-collector, and eating with the outcasts. Jesus subverts the purity system that discriminated and marginalized vast sections of the people by making himself an outcast, showing his solidarity with them. Jesus was in fact breaking down the barriers that excluded many sections of the people from society.

Jesus’ table fellowship with “sinners and tax-collectors” was a public demonstration of acceptance and forgiveness extended to marginalized sections of society. Jeremias observes, “For the oriental every table fellowship is a guarantee of peace, trust, or brotherhood... The oriental... would immediately understand the acceptance of the outcasts into table fellowship with Jesus as an offer of salvation to guilty sinners and as the assurance of salvation.”⁶⁷ If Jesus granted forgiveness of sins by his words in Mk. 2:5-10, he does the

Sanh.25b; m. Tohar 7.6; Ned. 3.4; b.Qam10:2; b.Sebu. 39a.

⁵⁹ J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. H. & C. H. Cave (London: SCM, 1969), 322.

⁶⁰ R. P. Booth, *Jesus and Laws of Purity: Tradition History and Legal History in Mark 7*, JSNTS 13 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 110; Taylor, *Mark*, 205.

⁶¹ Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 302-312.

⁶² Hooker, *St. Mark*, 95; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 174-221.

⁶³ Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries*, 111.

⁶⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York/Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), 80; J. D. M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1970), 282.

⁶⁵ Borg, *Jesus: Conflict*, 81; M.Dem.2.2-3

⁶⁶ Hooker, *St. Mark*, 96.

same here by his deeds. Jesus' eating with the cultically impure makes the temple and the sacrifice superfluous. As Gaston comments, "The whole distinction between clean and unclean as well as cultic means of removing uncleanness, are here abolished."⁶⁸ No wonder the scribes of the Pharisees objected to it, since such public breaking of the purity laws and offer of forgiveness without the Temple and priesthood was a threat to their social power and influence.

Jesus replies that "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Mk. 2:17). He points out that the physician needs to keep company with the sick in order to bring health to them. He makes it clear that he came to 'invite' the sinners to the banquet, a common metaphor for the Kingdom of God. He couldn't do this unless he consorted with them and identified with them. Jesus' exceptional conduct rests upon this unique mission of Jesus. The error of the scribes is their failure to understand this unique task. Thus, Jesus is presented in this passage as a physician who heals the sickness of impurity caused by the reinforcement of the boundary of purity. The cultically impure come to Jesus and they are made pure by his "offensive purity" which spreads purity and turns impurity into purity.⁶⁹ He breaks these barriers that exclude people and invite the discriminated to an alternative inclusive community by eating with them, and thereby brings about healing and reconciliation in the community.

3. Mark 2:18-22

Although according to the Law the only fast required was on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29), additional fasts were observed by the Pharisees, twice in the week, on Mondays and Thursdays. Traditional fasts on commemoration of historical events (e.g., the great fast on the 9th of Ab (August)) were also observed.⁷⁰ The Pharisees considered fasting superior to almsgiving and prayer since it was done with one's body. The Jerusalem Talmud states that one who prays and is not heard should fast.⁷¹ Thus, the question raised by the Pharisees regarding Jesus' disciples' non-observance of fasts was pertaining to the Law and tradition of the Jews.

Jesus' reply takes the form of a parable or allegory about bridegroom and wedding feasts, implying a comparison between Jesus and the bridegroom. The image of the bridegroom is used of God in the OT (Isa. 54:4-8; 62:5; Ez. 16:7ff.). Jeremias has argued that in v.20 bridegroom stands allegorically for Jesus himself.⁷² The rabbis sometimes used the metaphor of wedding in connection with the coming of the Messiah, and early Christians used the marriage relationship to describe the relationship between Christ and the church (cf. Eph. 5:22-23; Rev. 19:7ff.; 21:9; 2 Cor. 11:2).⁷³

The saying in v.20 points to the significance of Jesus: his presence is the occasion for such rejoicing that ordinary duties cease (cf. v.19). His presence overrules even religious

⁶⁸ Gaston, *No Stone*, 78.

⁶⁹ K. Berger, "Jesus als Pharisaer und fruehe Christen als Pharisaer", *NovTest* 30 (1988), 247.

⁷⁰ Taylor, *Mark*, 209.

⁷¹ Behm, "nh/stij", *TDNT IV*, 924 -36.

⁷² Taylor, *Names of Jesus*, 87ff.

⁷³ Nineham, *Mark*, 102. Nineham thinks that there is a covert allusion in this verse to Jesus as Messiah (*Ibid.*,103).

customs like fasting.⁷⁴ The parabolic sayings in vv.21-22 also reiterate the radical nature of what is taking place: "The old forms of Judaism—symbolized by the practice of fasting—cannot contain the new factors introduced into the situation by the coming of Jesus and his proclamation of the Kingdom of God."⁷⁵ The emphasis seems to be on the situation of gladness and celebration due to the radical social practice brought about by Jesus accompanied by the break with the laws and traditions.

Mark's narrative device of arranging episodes in concentric pattern in Mk. 2:1-3:6 illuminates further the meaning of Mk. 2:18-22. The four conflict stories (Mk. 2:1-12 (A), Mk. 2:13-17 (B), Mk. 2:23-28 (B'), Mk. 3:1-6 (A')) form concentric patterns around Mk. 2:18-22 (C) with B and B' having common theme of eating and A and A' dealing with healing of the body.⁷⁶ The central episode (Mk. 2:18-22) concentrates on Jesus' response rather than on conflicts and actions and Jesus' response illuminates all the five episodes that make up the concentric pattern. The reference to the bridegroom being "taken away" (v.20) points to the possible consequences of opposition by the authorities in Mk. 2:1-12 (A) and Mk. 3:1-6 (A'), death penalty for blaspheming or for breaking the Sabbath.⁷⁷ The parables of the wine and the cloth show how the authorities use old categories of law and tradition to judge newness that Jesus represents. There is a thematic contrast of Jesus' authority with that of the Jewish leaders. Jesus is special like a bridegroom or something new (C). That explains his authority to pardon sins (A), consort with sinners (B), have authority over Sabbath (B'), and to heal on the Sabbath (A'). In contrast to Jesus, the Jewish leaders have authority only to accuse, and they fail to get Jesus indicted.⁷⁸

4. Mark 2:23-28

As the disciples of Jesus travel through the fields they pluck ears of corn and this action was questioned by the Pharisees. The verb translated, "make their way" (*hodon poiein*), means literally "to make or build a road" (e.g., M. Sanhedrin 2.4). Mark understands the action of the disciples as making a way by tramping down the standing corn.⁷⁹ Comparison made with David later in the episode and the Markan use of *hodos* in 1:2f. (preparing a way for Jesus) and in 10:32, 52 (road to Jerusalem and path of discipleship) seem to indicate that Mark deliberately chose a language which suggests that the disciples made a path for Jesus through the field, since Jesus was seen as a kingly figure.⁸⁰ According to Deut. 23:25, it is permitted for a hungry traveller to gather ears of grain from a field. Since reaping was one of the 39 activities prohibited on the Sabbath (cf. 34:21; M. Shabbath 7.2) the Pharisees protested. Although Deut. 23:25 distinguishes between plucking a few ears by hand and cutting the corn with a sickle, which was truly work, as per the strict scribal interpretation, the disciples' action of plucking a few ears of corn meant work that

⁷⁴ Hooker, *St. Mark*, 100.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ See Rhoads & Michie, *Mark as Story*, 52 for more details about these inner and outer rings.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷⁹ J. D. M. Derrett, *Studies in the New Testament*, Vol. I (Leiden:E. J. Brill, 1977), 85ff.

⁸⁰ Hooker, *St. Mark*, 102.

contravened the Torah.⁸¹

The sanctity of the Sabbath is derived from its relationship with the God of the covenant and from its status as part of that covenant. It is tithe of time—one day in a week consecrated to Yahweh—and it is referred to in the various formulations of the covenant.⁸² In the post-exilic times prescriptions concerning the Sabbath became so strict that the Book of Jubilees forbids marriage, the kindling of fire and preparation of food on the Sabbath. Celebration of the Sabbath became one of the principal characteristics of being a Jew (cf. 2 Macc. 6:6). Sabbath became more weighty than all the commandments in the law (Cf. J. T. Berakhot 1). The Sabbath was perhaps the most obvious of those observances that unified the Jews and distinguished them from other nations. To disregard Sabbath was tantamount to threatening the Jewish identity and the fabric of their society. Therefore the one who works on the Sabbath merits death (Jub. 2:19).⁸³ According to the Pharisees, who are separated and devoted their whole life for the Law, this incident deals with the most important aspect of Jewish religion, namely Sabbath observance.

Jesus' first answer to the accusation of violation of the Sabbath law is appeal to David's action in I Sam. 21:1-6. David was generally regarded in the Jewish tradition as a model of piety. Jesus argues that David, like the disciples, did something which is forbidden by eating the 'shewbread', the 12 loaves which were set out each Sabbath in the presence of the Lord (Lev. 24:8) and to be eaten only by the priests on the following day. It is significant that Mark has added to his free rendition of the David episode that David and his men were hungry. It could be easily assumed that Jesus and his disciples were also hungry since they were poor and had neither anyone to prepare their Sabbath meal nor the facility to preserve if it were prepared.⁸⁴ Both in the case of David and Jesus human need takes precedence over Sabbath observance, which is one of the Ten Commandments (cf. Ex. 20:8). As Schottroff and Stegemann comment: "The hunger of the poor is explained in a symbolic way as setting Israel its central religious task, one taking precedence even over the duty of observing Sabbath."⁸⁵

The second answer to the accusation of the Pharisees is given in Mk. 2:27-28, where Jesus speaks about the real purpose of the Sabbath: The Sabbath is made for human beings and not human beings for the Sabbath and the Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath. There is a parallel saying in the Midrash attributed to Rabbi Simeon b. Menasya in Mekilta 109b on Ex. 31:14: "The Sabbath is delivered unto you, and you are not delivered to the Sabbath."⁸⁶ Though the Rabbi mentioned lived much later than Jesus, the saying probably reflects earlier rabbinic interpretation that understands Sabbath to be God's gift to Israel, instituted for the sake of Israel. Jesus' saying here includes the whole humanity since he

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸² Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (New York: Mc Graw-Hill, 1967), 378.

⁸³ E. Lohse, "sabbaton", *TDNT*, VII, 1-34.

⁸⁴ It is interesting to note that Matthew interprets this by adding "they were hungry" (Mt. 12:1) and understands this episode in terms of mercy, using quotation from Hos. 6:6 (see Mt. 12:7).

⁸⁵ L. Schottroff & W. Stegemann, "The Sabbath was Made for Man: The Interpretation of Mk.2:23-28," in *God of the Lowly* (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis, 1984), 125.

⁸⁶ Taylor, *Mark*, 219.

points to the original purpose of Sabbath when God instituted it for the whole creation to take rest and enjoy. By referring to the creation standards, it is stressed that Sabbath is at the service of the poor and the needy. Jesus seems to be drawing attention to the deterioration and manipulation of the early commandments given by God originally for the welfare of humans.

It is noteworthy that in the three episodes where the Pharisees appear, Mark has focused on some aspects of food consumption. Jesus defended his eating with the outcasts (Mk. 2:13-17), his disciples' freedom to ignore the fasting or non-eating tradition (Mk. 2:18-22) and his disciples' breaking of the Sabbath law by plucking ears of the corn (Mk. 2:23-28). Ched Myers comments that Mark is doing more than simply deflating the holiness code of the Pharisees: "He is simply raising a political issue of criticism by identifying with the issues of land and table."⁸⁷ There is evidence in the halachic tradition of tensions between the Pharisees and the Galilean peasants over the issues of sowing and marketing produce. The Pharisees prohibited sowing crop in the Sabbath year and they determined what was and was not suitable for consumption according to strict purity regulations.⁸⁸ Therefore, the disciples' plucking of grain could be seen as a protest over the politics of food in Palestine, challenging the ideological control and manipulation of the economy by a minority elite group.⁸⁹ All this shows that for Mark, solidarity with the poor would also involve taking on the structures that oppress the poor. The justification of the disciples' action is based on the status of Jesus as the Son of Man who has the authority to overturn the purity codes and re-interpret the meaning of Sabbath. The original purpose of Sabbath set out in v.27 is fulfilled through Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath (Mk. 2:28).⁹⁰

5. Mark 3:1-6

This episode is the climax of the five conflict stories which began in Mk. 2:1-12. Tensions and conflicts between Jesus and the religious-political authorities escalate gradually and come to a climax in this passage. While Mk. 2:24 gives a legal warning necessary before actual prosecution on a charge, Mk. 2:28 asserts Jesus' authority over the Sabbath. In Mk. 3:2 the opponents of Jesus watch him to accuse him legally if he violated the Sabbath. If he acts illegally he is liable to arrest. Thus the claim of Jesus in Mk. 2:28 lead to a higher level of hostility.⁹¹ Opposition against Jesus widens and the groups opposing Jesus expands: first it was the scribes, then the scribes of the Pharisees, then the Pharisees, and then the Pharisees with the Herodians (Mk. 3:6).⁹²

The issue is on what is permitted on the Sabbath or how Sabbath must be observed. Since healing was considered as work, it was not normally permissible to heal on the Sabbath. But if life was in danger, then emergency treatment was allowed (M. Yoma 8.6). Jesus

⁸⁷ Myers, *Binding the Strongman*, 160.

⁸⁸ S. Safrai & M. Stern, *The Jewish People in the First Century*, 2 Vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), Vol. II, 830.

⁸⁹ Myers, *Binding the Strongman*, 161.

⁹⁰ Most scholars, following historical-critical method, consider v.28 as a Christian comment added to v.27 (See, for example, Taylor, *Mark*, 220; Nineham, *Mark*, 106 among many.) But it seems to us that v.28 follows logically from v. 27.

⁹¹ Dewey, *Markan Public Debate*, 100.

⁹² Rhoads & Michie, *Mark as Story*, 86.

appeals to this principle and extends it. He drew up a sharp distinction between doing good and doing evil, and between attitudes which either save life or kill. For Jesus, there is no distinction between offer of full life and saving life. To delay healing for a day is to deny giving full life, which characterizes his whole ministry.⁹³ This interpretation is supported by a reference in the apocryphal *Gospel of the Nazareans*, where the man is mentioned as a stonemason who is deprived of his livelihood. The man said to Jesus, "I was a mason seeking a livelihood with my hands: I pray thee, Jesu, to restore me mine health, that I may not beg meanly for my food."⁹⁴ Thus, Jesus' healing the man was meant to give full life to him by restoring his health and by saving him from abject poverty. Jesus' compassion for the less privileged and his concern for justice are seen together in this episode. But the purity concerns of the Pharisees are devoid of compassion and justice.

Jesus expresses his anger (Mk. 3:5 uses *orge*) by rebuking the attitude of indifference shown by his opponents to the situation of suffering and poverty. Mark has already portrayed Jesus' anger in Mk. 1:41, 43 where the purity system and their controllers oppress a leper.⁹⁵ This anger is later on expressed more powerfully when Jesus arrives in the temple, looks around (11:11), drove out those who sold and bought in the temple premises, made a blockade in the temple and unleashed strong verbal attack on the custodians of the temple (Mk. 11:15-19), which directly led to his arrest and death.

There are direct and indirect indications in Mk. 3:1-6 about the death of Jesus. In the question, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or do evil, to save life or to kill? (Mk. 3:4), a sharp contrast is drawn between Jesus' intentions to save and those of his opponents to kill. The infinitive used here meaning "to kill" (*apokteinaí*) is always used by Mark in reference to political execution (see Mk. 6:19; 8:31; 12:5; 14:1).⁹⁶ The healing on the Sabbath could carry death penalty, like blasphemy (Mk. 2:7). In spite of that Jesus heals the man with a withered hand.⁹⁷ Therefore it is significant that the Pharisees and the Herodians "took counsel" (*sumboullion*) how to destroy him. The Herodians referred to here are most probably the friends and supporters of Herod Antipas, who assassinated John the Baptist (Mk. 6:17-29) and looked for an opportunity to kill Jesus (cf. Lk. 13:31-33).⁹⁸ In Mk. 15:1 the same word *sumboullion* is used in the sense of decision or consultation to crucify Jesus. The verb "destroy" in the subjunctive (*apolesosin*) is again used in Mk. 11:18 where it is

⁹³ Hooker, *St. Mark*, 107.

⁹⁴ See Frag.10 in W. Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. I Gospels and Related Writings*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 160.

⁹⁵ The reading *orgistheis* (moved with anger) may be more original in Mk. 1:41 and the strong emotions in v.43 support this. See Mathew, *Temple-Criticism*, 183-89, for more details.

⁹⁶ Myers, *Binding the Strongman*, 162.

⁹⁷ Jewish scholars argue that since Jesus heals the man by word alone, it was not contrary to Torah. See Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 25. But, if Jesus was not seen as violating the Sabbath law by the Pharisees, it is difficult to explain the mention of their immediate and hostile attempt to destroy Jesus (Mk. 3:6).

⁹⁸ W. J. Bennett, "The Herodians in Mark's Gospel", *NovTest* 17 (1, 1975), 914 argues that 'Herodians' is a Markan construct meant to represent Galilean aristocracy, with its interest in maintaining order.

⁹⁹ See S. S. Smith, "The Role of Jesus' Opponents in the Markan Drama," *New Testament Studies* 35

the chief priests and Scribes in Jerusalem who plot to destroy him.⁹⁹ Thus, the climax of the series of five conflict stories end with the note that Jesus has been judged and found guilty and the shadow of the cross is already visible in the early stages of Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

III. Christological Insights from a Re-reading of Mark 2:1-3:6

Our re-reading of the conflict stories in Mark 2:1-3:6 from an Indian perspective, using insights of literary analysis, enables us to bring to focus the implicit Christology in Mark's gospel. The following Christological insights that are drawn from our interpretation of Mark 2:1-3:6 have relevance in the Indian context for formulating a contextual Christology.

1. Jesus in Solidarity with the Poor, the Suffering and the Outcasts

Jesus in the early conflict stories of Mark allows the poor to come to him or he goes out to them. He meets them to heal or help them in their time of need and suffering. The crowd that is seen with Jesus is predominantly found to be the poor and the underprivileged. Jesus eats with the marginalized sections of society, such as the "tax-collectors and sinners" who are despised and excluded from society, contravening the existing laws and traditions. Jesus' solidarity with the poor is also expressed in going all out to help them even at the risk of earning death penalty, as is seen in the case of healing the paralytic and the man with a withered hand. Jesus is seen in the company of the poor and the outcast both indoors and outdoors. Thus, Jesus is presented as publicly identifying with the plight of the poor and sharing the concerns of the poor. An understanding of Jesus who identifies with the poor and the outcasts has great appeal to the Indian context which is characterized by poverty and suffering of the majority and the widespread dehumanising caste discrimination that excludes vast sections of people from the society.

2. Jesus as Liberator from Sin and Oppression

Mark presents Jesus as forgiving sins freely without any mediation of the priests and sacrifices. The mission practice of Jesus involved liberating people from sin that is heaped upon them by the custodians of the law. In doing this Jesus freed common people from oppression in the name of religion and God. The unconditional forgiveness that is offered by Jesus was a great relief from the economic burden on the poor and the marginalized. In a situation in which the law and the temple were used by the priests and their supporters to exploit and oppress people, the liberation from sin offered through Jesus was welcomed by the majority who suffered from it. With authority Jesus brought to the masses the freely forgiving God without any mediator. The offer of free forgiveness of sins has tremendous implications in the Indian context where common people are indoctrinated by the *Karma* theory which teaches that one's present suffering and poverty are due to past sins. Jesus' rejection of such a theory of sin offers liberation for the poor and the suffering in India. For them it would be liberation from the oppressive structures and laws of religion that pile up sins on the people in order to exploit and control them.

(2, 1989), 175.

3. Jesus Liberates from Physical and Social Suffering

All the five episodes in Mk. 2:1-3:6 present Jesus as offering physical and social healing. In Mk. 2:1-12 and 3:1-6 we find Jesus healing the bodies of people with a sense of urgency in order to bring wholeness in their lives. This is seen by Jesus as “doing good” or “saving life” which means giving full life. Jesus rejects the idea that all sicknesses are caused by sin. In Mk. 2:13-17 and 2:18-22 Jesus brings healing to society by mending the brokenness caused by the stratification of society through strict purity laws. He does this by openly eating with the outcasts and the despised of society and interpreting it as a situation of joy and celebration brought about by his special presence. Jesus seriously sees the situation of hunger and poverty, and he defends his disciples when they broke the Sabbath law in order to meet urgent human need. As the physician who heals physical and social sickness, Jesus has great appeal in India where at least one fourth of the total population are branded as “outcasts”, subjecting them to social discrimination, and where millions suffer from several diseases including malnutrition due to abject poverty.

4. Jesus Confronts Oppressive Structures

In the first conflict story itself (Mk. 2:1-12) Jesus takes on the oppressive laws that label people as sinners. He opposes the purity laws that discriminate and marginalize people by eating with the outcasts. He calls into question the temple and the priesthood by making forgiveness of sins freely available without any mediation and asserts his authority here and now over against oppressive forces. This radical action has made him a blasphemer before his opponents. He allowed his disciples to break free from the ritual of fasting prescribed by the law and the tradition, in order to let people enjoy and celebrate the presence of the Kingdom of God. Jesus and his disciples violated the Sabbath law for the sake of the hungry and the needy. Jesus defended their action by saying that Sabbath was instituted by God for human beings. He taught that laws that are detrimental to the interests of the poor and the suffering must be rejected or re-interpreted in the light of God’s will and purpose. The religious-political leaders, such as Scribes and Pharisees, are directly criticized and opposed by Jesus in these episodes for upholding the laws that oppress, impoverish, and thereby imprison people in a circle of exploitation. Jesus is presented in Mk. 3:5 as angry and sad at the way the Sabbath laws are manipulated to deny or delay the experience of fullness of life to the sick and the suffering people. Jesus who confronts the oppressive structures is relevant to the Indian context where oppressive structures and laws play a significant role in creating and maintaining poverty and discrimination in society. Markan presentation of Jesus provides the motivation to confront oppressive structures, laws and leaders in society.

5. Alternative Social Practice of Jesus

Whereas the Jewish religion reinforced the barriers within the community using purity laws, leading to the exclusion of many sections of society, Jesus broke free from those purity laws, in order to create an inclusive community, where there is no discrimination. Such a new community is characterized by joy and celebration. In that new world order there will be wholeness and life in its fullness. The identity of the community will not

be defined by the laws of purity, but by goodness and mercy, as is shown in the case of the healing of the man with a withered hand. Thus Jesus not only criticized the existing social order, but also presented an alternative social order, which he called Kingdom of God. In that new community human need will be given priority over the religious laws and traditions. In the contemporary Indian context, such a new social-order inaugurated by Jesus gives hope for a new world order. It encourages every follower of Jesus to work for this new world-order, where there will be wholeness, compassion and justice.

6. Death of Jesus as Political Execution

The conflict stories in Mk. 2:1-3:6 consistently reiterate that the death of Jesus was caused by the religious-political opponents of Jesus. Episode after episode name the Scribes, Pharisees and Herodians as the enemies of Jesus. The priests remain only in the background in these early stages of Jesus' ministry and they will later appear as main opponents in Jerusalem. The reasons they found to kill Jesus, e.g. blasphemy and violation of Sabbath law, clearly deserve death penalty. The reference to the "taking away" of the bridegroom (Mk. 2:20) and the plot to destroy Jesus are clear references to the death of Jesus. It is quite surprising that most scholars, following Pauline interpretation, understood the death of Jesus in Mark in sacrificial terms, based on Mk. 10:45 and 14:24. We are persuaded that Mark interprets the death of Jesus as primarily due to political opposition and of course that was a result of the voluntary sacrifice of Jesus for the cause of the Kingdom of God. The interpretation of the death of Jesus as political assassination provides clear guidelines in the struggle for peace and justice in the midst of this unjust and violent world. Such an understanding reminds every follower of Jesus the way of the cross and the price one has to pay for the cause of Jesus in establishing a new inclusive community.

Conclusion

Our re-interpretation of the conflict stories in Mark 2:1-3:6 from an Indian perspective, using insights from literary analysis has brought out some Christological insights that are relevant to the Indian context. Jesus is presented in these passages as a very authoritative person who frees people from sin and oppression. He is the physician who heals the bodies of the people and works towards wiping out discrimination in society. Jesus in Mark shows solidarity with the poor and the needy not only by showing his compassion to them but also by opposing and criticizing the oppressive laws, traditions, and leaders that are responsible for the plight of the poor and the marginalized. The new social order inaugurated by Jesus is characterized by wholeness of all people, compassion, joy and justice. Jesus who enters into conflict with the powerful structures and religious-political leaders will surely be done to death. Jesus' passionate compassion, sacrificial confrontation, and inclusive community found in the early conflict narratives in Mark's gospel give us hope for a new world in the present context of injustice, oppression and violence. These insights on the person and work of Christ prove that there is an integral relationship between Christology in Mark's gospel and Jesus' conflict with the religious-political