Chapter 3
Your Sins Are Forgiven

Introduction

The extended apophthegm of Mark 2:1-12 introduces the shocking idea that Jesus did more than simply heal people. Jesus also forgave them. The story of the man whose friends dug up the roof over Jesus’ head and lowered a paralytic through the hole down before Jesus, thus bypassing the crowd, is important for its placement as well as for its content. Instead of simply stretching out his hand to heal the man, Jesus surprised everyone with his statement, “Child, your sins are forgiven. (Mark 2:5)” The man hadn’t asked for forgiveness. Indeed, he had asked for nothing. His porters, however, appear to have brought him for healing, not forgiveness. The scribes in attendance ask, “Who can forgive sins except the one God?” Who indeed? The passive expression αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι (“your sins are forgiven”) is taken by Sherman Johnson and R. T. France, as a “divine passive” in the sense that the biblical languages often use the passive to refer to God’s action. The meaning of that expression would be something like, “God forgives your sins.” The scribes, however, do not react as though Jesus had said “God forgives your sins.” They do not ask how Jesus knows this or, perhaps, what Jesus might have done to obtain that forgiveness. Instead, they respond as though Jesus had said to the paralytic, “I forgive your sins,” and they ask themselves as a consequence, “Who can forgive sins except the one God?”

If it was bold to portray Jesus as having knowledge of the demons and the healing arts, it was doubly so to portray him as forgiving sin. In this chapter we are going to deal with this idea as Mark handles it and pose the question whether we can actually believe in the forgiveness we find so boldly sketched out in Mark.

Sins? What Sins?

Christians often misuse the concept of “sin” to cover everything from mass murder to naughty thoughts. When reading this story, then, there is the tendency on the part of some Christians to lump all wrongdoing together under the heading of “sin” and assume that

1 Johnson, Mark, 56. France, Mark, 125-126.
2 This is similar to what the prophet Nathan said to King David in 2 Samuel 12:13: מִמֶּֽעְּנָה הַשָּׁמַֽיִם מִמֶּֽעְּנָֽה הַשָּׁמַֽיִם “Indeed the LORD has caused your sin to pass away.” See Hooker, Mark, 86. Notice, however, that the phrase is not passive. Further, the prophet is reporting something the LORD directly told him.

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one may apply to God for pardon for our “sin.” That leads to some strange and magical thinking.

Consider, for instance, the convicted murderer who said on nationwide television that he knew that God had forgiven him for killing his victim. What did he mean by this? Should we now release him because he is no longer guilty of his crime? Can he demand that the relatives of his victim forgive him because, after all, God has forgiven him already? The one person whose forgiveness might have been most meaningful, the victim, sadly enough, is dead and unavailable to provide forgiveness or blame. What would the implications be of God forgiving the murderer in the absence of any reconciliation with the victim and those who loved the victim?

Biblical religion and Jewish tradition have always been very careful in this matter. When the psalmist wants God’s forgiveness in Psalm 51:6 (English 51:4):

Against you alone I have sinned
and I have done what is bad in your estimation.
Therefore, you are righteous in your sentence
and innocent in your judgment.

The psalmist clearly would not want to incur additional guilt by trying to entice God to forgive him a sin against someone other than God.

Can you sin against someone other than God? Yes. In the story of David, cited above, David had certainly sinned against God, but he had also sinned against Uriah, Bathsheba, and, one might argue, every soldier encamped on the field before Rabbah. When, therefore, Nathan comes to declare judgment on David, the king must endure the almost unendurable punishment of the death of his new son. As to the sin against God, however, God could put that sin away. George Foot Moore described God in Jewish thought as “guardian and vindicator of all good custom” so that offenses against the neighbor had also the character of offenses against God. All sins against God’s law are offenses against God, but not all offenses, are sins against God only. These sins against one’s neighbor require appropriate compensation for injury.

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5 I am uncomfortable with Moore, Judaism 1:117, seeing restitution as part of the activity of repentance. Justice or equity is the goal of all of the law codes in the Bible, including the earliest one, the Covenant Code (Exodus 21-23), but repentance as a specific idea (תְּשׁוּבָה) is not particularly important to any of them. The goal of the court in ancient Israel was principally to restore equity, שלום shalom. Moore, ibid., is correct, however, to claim that repentance ultimately became the substitute for all of the cultic means of atonement.
A person who has suffered injury as a result of wrongdoing might well expect compensation, but there is at least one other means available for lifting the obligation of sin. One may forgive the sins done against one’s person. If you lie about me and ruin my reputation, I can sue you or forgive you. Either way, the wrong between us is resolved. Churches find themselves in the position of having to forgive parishioners’ obligation to pay their pledges when they cannot pay. This forgiveness discharges the obligation.

Now if you lie about me, your lawyer and mine may be able to come to an agreement about how much you should pay me in compensation for the loss of my reputation. If not, perhaps a civil court will do so. The alternative is that I could simply refuse to collect what you owe me. I could forgive the debt. That would also wipe out the wrongdoing. Forgiveness is not about relieving resentment or anger—though forgiveness often leads to such results—it is about my refusal to collect what the wrongdoer owes me for the wrongdoing. Forgiveness cancels the debt. Equity, shalom, is restored.

When one asks what it would take to satisfy God, however, we enter a vast unknown. What is the weight, the cost, of sin to God? What would be fair compensation for my wrongs against God, including, of course, those of which I am unaware. In the final analysis, if God doesn’t forgive me my sin, relieve me of my obligations; I have no other way to pay them.

Jewish teaching, however, has always been very clear about the fact that there is a way to ask God effectively for forgiveness for the many sins against God of which human beings are conscious: teshuvah, repentance. Repentance was one of seven things God created before the creation of the world, alongside of the holy Torah. Someone who repents is a ba’al teshuvah, Repentance is not a feeling of regret or remorse but a change of mind and behavior.

Closely related to the concept of teshuvah is the Hebrew Bible’s usage of the word nicham, also often translated as “repent.” The passive and reflexive of this verb means “be sorry” or “regret,” as well as “find consolation.” The focus of is on the experience of regret as well as the change of mind that regret may bring, and it is mind-change that leads to the Greek verb metanoeō “repent” in the LXX and the New Testament. Regret, a change in attitude, and a change in behavior—these are the elements of repentance.

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6 Since this course is not about Matthew or Luke, we shall not have an opportunity to get into the text of the Lord’s Prayer except to say that Matthew’s petition in Matthew 6:5 “And relieve us of our debts just as we have relieved those indebted to us,” takes up this ancient understanding of forgiveness.

7 The word also means “answer.” The root is השוב, “turn.”


10 HAL 688b lists 48 occurrences of the nifal of the verb. The hitpael can also mean “regret” or “change one’s mind,” HAL 689a. Later Hebrew also shows about the same range of meanings for these two conjugations. See Jastrow, Dictionary, 895b.

11 See Moore, Judaism 1:507-534.
There is a second way to gain forgiveness from God: the temple and its sacrificial cultus. George Foot Moore reminds us that “sin” in Judaism and its sacrificial expiation most often relate to religious prohibitions and not to moral stipulations.\textsuperscript{12} This leads him to explain, as do others, that the cultic system existed mainly for the forgiveness of unintentional trespasses, most often ritual defilements of one sort or another. At best, however, these writers are risking an oversimplification. It is not at all clear that there was a clear line of distinction between sins that involved matters of ritual and purity and those that involved moral failing. Further, it should not be terribly surprising for us to find that after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE the Rabbis turned to a non-cultic means of atonement, repentance, as the single way in which God acted to forgive sins. Not surprisingly, then, the fourth-century Raba believed that sacrifice without \textit{teshuvah} is an abomination, whereas a sacrifice offered with \textit{teshuvah} turns the sacrifice into a mere gift or votive offering.\textsuperscript{13} Yet in the Mishnah, in a discussion we could not place more than a century and a half before Raba, we find the following summary:

\begin{quote}
And for the rest of the transgressions that are against the Torah, whether light or weighty, conscious or unconscious, known or unknown … for all these the one sent away\textsuperscript{14} brings atonement to Israelites, priests, and the anointed high priest.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Clearly, this text does not distinguish between morally culpable and ritually culpable, and it does not simply apply to those of which the sinner is ignorant. Likewise, the Hebrew Bible also does not make these distinctions. Although it is without question that repentance became for Jewish thought the single way toward reconciliation with God, it is not at all clear that in the first-century of our era there was any consensus in the matter. This does not mean, of course, that \textit{teshuvah} was unimportant for Jews of the first century, but it does mean that as long as the temple cultus continued and its strong memory remained shortly after its destruction, there was ample room for Jews to believe that the sacrificial system could accomplish its goal of reconciliation.

When, therefore, the scribes suppose (correctly) that Jesus is forgiving sins and ask (correctly) who can forgive sins other than the one God, the real offense of Jesus’ forgiving ministry becomes clear. Jesus is acting as though he were God. Jesus is not simply assuring the paralytic that God has forgiven his sins, he—Jesus—has just forgiven the paralytic his sins. He needed neither repentance nor sacrifice to accomplish this work.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Authority to Forgive (Mark 2:1-12)}
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How could Jesus arrogate to himself the authority to forgive in God’s place? Nothing in Mark 2:1-12 answers that question. Unlike the discussion in Mark 11:27-33, the issue

\begin{footnotes}
\item[13] \textit{T. b. Zevachim} 7b. The Talmud here actually uses the Greek word \textit{δώρον} (\textit{dorón}), and the usual translation for the compound term \textit{דָּוָרּוֹן עֹלָה} is “votive offering.”
\item[14] The scapegoat in the Day of Atonement ritual.
\end{footnotes}
in Mark 2:1-12 is not by what authority Jesus forgives but, rather, whether Jesus has the authority to forgive. In Mark 11 Jesus refused to tell his interrogators by what authority he acted, but in Mark 2:9-12 Jesus demonstrates that he possesses the authority necessary to forgive sins by healing the paralytic of his infirmity. In the miracle stories, the authority of Jesus is to heal and to cast out demons, but here by virtue of the question in 2:9 the miracle demonstrates an authority that is even greater than the authority to heal.

Nowhere else in Mark does Jesus forgive sins. In Mark 11:25 Jesus tells his students that they should forgive others before coming to prayer, and in Mark 3:29 he introduces the idea of an “eternal sin.” In neither passage does he forgive anyone. Mark even lacks the generous words of forgiveness from the cross that Luke 23:34 reports. Indeed, in Mark 4:12 Jesus rephrases Isaiah 6:10 as

...that seeing, they may see and not know,
and hearing, they may hear and not understand
lest they turn and be forgiven.”

By any standard this is a harsh saying, and there have been many attempts to undo its offense. Matthew Black, however, is correct in his adamant assertion: “Nothing is more certain that Mark wrote and intended ἵνα ... μὴ ποτὲ,” (hina, “that” … mē potē, “lest”). On this model, Jesus’ ministry as a whole does not lead to forgiveness for those who witness his works and hear his teaching. Perhaps for this very reason the author of Mark had to preface this harsh truth with the scene of the man whose sins Jesus forgave. Without this story, one might argue, the good news of the Gospel of Mark would be missing or seriously diminished.

Since this is the only passage in Mark where Jesus actually pronounces forgiveness, it is important to note how he does it. If, as we have held above, sins against God are forgiven through repentance, it is striking that Jesus does not make repentance a condition of the paralytic’s forgiveness of sins. If the scribes are correct—and they are—to question whether any but God has the authority to forgive sins against God, then their

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16 As to how the healing proves Jesus’ authority is another matter. R. T. France, *Mark*, 127, is correct to recognize this as a חמר קל qal va-xomer argument, i.e. an argument from the “light” case to the “weighty” case, an argument *a fortiori*. This works only if the scribes will agree that the word of forgiveness is weightier than the word of healing, and this formulation of the question lets us know that Mark, at least, considers this to be the case.

17 The text represents a portion of Isaiah 6:9-10 (LXX) except that Mark ends the quotation with καὶ ὁρῶ· αὐτοῖς instead of καὶ ἰδώ ὅταν οἵμαι αὐτοὺς, representing Hebrew לא ראית. The Targum reading לירש הלא הלאו agrees with Mark’s reading, suggesting that the author did not dream up his rendering of Isaiah’s text, but exactly how that rendering came into Mark’s Greek is difficult to decide.

18 For a discussion of many of the possibilities see France, *Mark*, 199-201. Taylor, *Mark*, 257-258, decided that Mark was “misled” to apply the saying to parables and conjectures that Jesus may have noted the similarity between the result of his own ministry and that of Isaiah.

shock and offence may be inferred from the story as Jesus forgives the man’s sins as if Jesus were himself God. There is no way to mitigate the scandal here. Sherman Johnson is one of the few commentators not to be distracted by the issue of the paralytic’s illness as a result of his sin, noting that Jesus announces the man’s forgiveness “independent of the sin-offering or the Day of Atonement, or any evidence of his repentance.”

Johnson’s point drives us back to the other means of forgiveness of sins against God, the cultus. My own teacher, W. D. Davies, always insisted that the expression “upon earth” (ἐπί τῆς γῆς) in Mark 2:10 referred specifically to the temple cultus where human beings and God met and where the sacrifices of the temple cultus brought forgiveness of sins against God. The meaning of verse 10, then, would be that Jesus takes the place of the temple as the locus of forgiveness, a theme that is fulfilled in the rending of the temple veil in Mark 15:38 at the moment of Jesus’ death. Taylor believes that the rending of the temple veil shows us the opening of the way to God through Jesus as well as the end of the sacrificial system’s efficacy. This is an important complement to the story of the paralytic. If Jesus can forgive sins against God, then the temple cult is no longer of any help.

But what about repentance? Repentance is a different story. Jesus came into the Galilee, according to Mark 1:15 with the proclamation: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; change your minds (=”repent”) and believe in the Gospel.” Repentance and faith are the two elements of his message. But in Mark 2:5 only one of those elements, faith, finds mention; and that faith is the faith of those who brought the paralytic to Jesus, not the faith of the paralytic. Yet it is their faith that brings about the assurance of pardon and the healing.

Faith that destroys the roof of a neighbor’s home, faith that risks rejection, faith that is oblivious to social custom or even the common courtesy of waiting one’s turn—that is the faith that Jesus sees in Mark 2:5, and his response to that faith is at least as audacious, at least as daring, even as dangerous as the reckless faith of the paralytic’s friends: Jesus forgives what only God can forgive. The scribes correctly understand the importance of his action, but they lack the faith that would actually understand the act.

As mentioned above, commentators often focus on the connection between sin and illness in Mark 2:5. Nowhere does the text explicitly state that sin caused the paralytic’s illness or that forgiveness of that sin would necessarily result in healing. Samuel Tobias Lachs gives several rabbinic passages to support the fact that Rabbinic Judaism saw a definite link between sin and illness, and the reader might well consult the passages he cites. There is a tendency among some modern interpreters to make this connection a

20 Johnson, Mark 57.
21 Taylor, Mark 596.
matter of psychology. This kind of interpretation continues in the work of Morna Hooker who takes the passage as an opportunity to relate a story by a psychiatrist of a woman’s hysterical paralysis.

The reader may want to consider the possibility that what Jesus or Mark believed about the relationship between sin and illness is beside the point here. Whether you believe in such a connection or do not believe in such a connection, the meaning of the apophthegm is still the same, as contained in verse 10: “In order that you know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth, …” One of the enduring benefits of form criticism is its ability to help us see what is most important in a passage. In the apophthegms our concern is not with the action of the story except as it might illustrate or highlight the words of Jesus. The words of Jesus in this story are only about the authority to forgive sins, and this limitation should drive our interpretation. Authority to forgive sins is the issue, the only issue, not the connection of sin to illness, not even the power of Jesus to heal. Jesus heals many people in the Gospel but he forgives only one, the paralytic.

The Eternal Sin (Mark 3: 28-30)

Is there a sin which God cannot or will not forgive? If it surprises us that Mark only has Jesus forgive one person’s sins in the entire Gospel, it may also surprise us that Mark in the very next chapter introduces the idea of a sin that God cannot or will not forgive:

_Amen, amen, _I say to you that all sins will be forgiven the sons of men and whatever blasphemies they will utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit does not have forgiveness forever but is guilty of an eternal sin._” For they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.” (Mark 3:28-30)

Blasphemy is of some interest in Mark. Jesus is twice accused of blasphemy. The first occasion is in the story of the paralytic we have just reviewed where the scribes ask, ”Why is he speaking this way? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins except the one God?” (Mark 2:7) The second time is in the statement of the high priest at Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, “What evidence do we still need? You heard the blasphemy. How does it seem to you?” (Mark 14:63b-64a) In the first case Jesus had just acted to forgive the paralytic for his sins against God. In the second case Jesus had replied to the high priest’s question, “Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed?” (Mark 14:61) His reply is

I am, and you will see “the Son of Man” seated on the right hand of power and “coming with the clouds of the sky.”

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24 Hooker, _Mark_ 85.

The definition of “blasphemy” in both cases would appear to be claiming a divine role or position. It is important to let Mark define blasphemy for us as it pertains to charges against Jesus. The meaning is limited. It is not a charge that Jesus has sinned by pronouncing the divine name, as Stauffer wrongly believed.

Before looking at the “unforgivable” blasphemy, it may be well to look at the other two instances in Mark where there is mention of blasphemy or blaspheming. In Mark 7 Jesus instructs his students privately as follows:

And when he had come into the house from the crowd, his students asked him [about] the parable. And he says to them, “Are you so dense?” Don’t you know that whatever is outside, when it goes into a person, is not able to defile that person because it does not go into the heart but into the toilet?” (He was making all foods clean.) And he was saying to them, “What comes out of a person: that defiles the person. For from within, from out of the heart of people come bad thoughts, sexual misbehaviors, thefts, murders, adulteries, acts of greed, misbehaviors, cunning, licentiousness, evil eye, blasphemy, arrogance, foolishness. All these bad things come from within and defile a person.” (Mark 7:18-23)

Blasphemy here stands in a traditional list of twelve bad actions all of which derive from a person’s “bad thoughts.” That is to say, these activities, including blasphemy, come from the intention and planning of the heart, the seat of reason and will. None of these wrongs are accidental or impulsive. Evidently, one cannot blaspheme accidentally and more than one might steal murder accidentally.

In Mark 15:29-32, Jesus’ enemies take his execution as one last opportunity to taunt him to his face:

And those walking by spoke badly of him (eblasfēmoun auton), shaking their heads and saying, “Ah, you who would destroy the sanctuary and build it in three days, save yourself by coming down

26 See the very important study of Darnell L. Bock, Blasphemy And Exaltation In Judaism And The Final Examination Of Jesus: A Philological-Historical Study Of The Key Jewish Themes Impacting Mark 14:61-64 (“Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament” 2. Reihe; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998). This work has recently been reissued (2000) by Baker Books.

27 Ethelbert Stauffer, Jesus and His Story, trans. Richard and Clara Wilson (New York: Knopf, 1960), 102. Stauffer, perhaps, did not understand that the limitation in m. Sanhedrin 7:5 that made it impossible to punish one for blasphemy so long as that one did not utter the divine name was not so much a prohibition of a single word as a prohibition of the magical use of the name of God. Thus if one was charged with magical practice and it could be shown that the defendant used God’s name in magical formulae, then and only then could that person suffer the consequences of being a מגדף, a blasphemer.

28 Eduard Schweizer, The Good News According to Mark, trans. Donald H. Madvig (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1970), 150, compares this list with similar lists in Romans 1:29-31; Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:5, 8; 1 Timothy 1:9-10; and 2 Timothy 3:2-5. He believes such lists arose in Hellenistic Judaism.
from the cross.” Similarly, the chief priests ridiculed him among themselves together with the scribes, saying, “He saved others; he is not able to save himself. Let the Christ, the king of Israel, come down from the cross so that we may see and believe.

It is perfectly true that the verb *blasfēmeō* can mean simply to speak ill of someone, the term most often has connotations of a curse against someone or a derogatory statement about the gods.29 Although commentators write about the comments of the passersby as “ironic,” the irony is important in that it takes part in the derogation of the divine implied by the word *blasfēmeō*.

The most telling blasphemy is the reiteration of the false charge—clearly identified in Mark 14:58 as false—that Jesus had threatened to destroy the temple and then rebuild it after three days. Mark’s reader, however, knows that the only prophecy Jesus made about a span of three days was the period of time that was to elapse between the death of the Son of Man and his resurrection in Mark 8:31; 9:31; and 10:34. Indeed, the false charge actually points clearly to the meaning of that destruction and resurrection. Jesus as the “new temple” is now being destroyed and after three days will rise.30 The blasphemy points to and contains the truth about Jesus.

So does the blasphemy of the scribes and chief priests. He has “saved” others. In Mark 5:23, 28 the ruler of the synagogue and the woman with the hemorrhage both conclude that the mere contact with Jesus will lead to “salvation.” When, however, the woman receives healing, Jesus tells her that her faith has saved her (Mark 5:34). Similarly, in Mark 10:52 Jesus says the same thing to Bartimaeus. In Mark 6:56 we learn that those who touched Jesus were saved.31 So, the scribes and chief priests are correct, so far as Mark is concerned, to say that Jesus “saved others.”

Are they also correct to say that Jesus cannot save himself? We know that there is precedent in Mark for saying that Jesus is unable to do wonders under certain conditions:

And he was not able to do any miracle there except that when he laid his hands on a few sick people he cured them. (Mark 6:5)

More to the point than this passage, however, are Jesus’ words about the meaning of being his student:


30 See above (3-6).

31 Modern translations sometimes render the verb ἑλθμιν as “heal” or the like. Thus the RSV has the woman with the hemorrhage say “If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well. While the translation is not wrong, it does obscure the fact that the verb “save” unites all these passages.
And when he had called the crowd around him, together with his students, he said to them, “If anyone would follow after me, let that one deny himself and pick up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save (STEMA σαί, σῶσαι) his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and for the Gospel shall save it. (Mark 8:34-35)

The application to Jesus on the cross is unmistakable. He “cannot” save himself for the reason that to save his life would be to lose it, just as he had taught his own students. In losing his life for the Gospel he will “find” it. Those who taunt him have it right for all the wrong reasons. The death of Jesus is the culmination and fulfillment of Jesus’ own reckless faith and the reckless faith to which he calls his students.33

The “blasphemy” of the passersby and of the scribes and chief priests represents a misunderstanding of Jesus’ call to discipleship. In the trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus was convicted through his own words of “blasphemy,” and part of the punishment he bears is the “blasphemy” of those who deride him as he suffers on the cross. There is, however, no doubt that the blasphemy of the onlookers is forgivable. At worst theirs is a blasphemy against the Son of Man: “Amen, amen, I say to you that all sins will be forgiven the sons of men and whatever blasphemies they will utter …” (Mark 3:28) 34 Their misunderstanding of Jesus, however wrongheaded and willful, is not unforgivable. In fact, it is absolutely necessary to the salvation the death of Jesus brings.

There are two important and shocking acts of abject betrayal in Mark that we might mention in passing: the threefold denial of Peter and the betrayal by Judas, both described in Mark 14. We mention them only to say that neither man is accused in Mark of committing the unforgivable sin. To be sure, it would have been better for Judas not to have been born than to betray the Son of Man (Mark 14:21). Hooker sees interplay between freedom and prophecy here: The betrayal of Jesus accomplishes God’s purpose for Jesus as prophesied in Scripture, but Judas must still bear the burden of his wrongdoing.35 Perhaps his burden is on the same order as Peter’s regret in Mark 14:72 upon realizing that he has fulfilled the Master’s prediction that he would deny him three times before the second cockcrow. In any event, Mark never mentions the betrayer.

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32 The fact that P45 D 28 700 it (STEMA σαί) omit τούτούς and leads France, Mark 332, to believe that these words are an addition to an originally Marcan εἰκότως τούτον γεγένησθάντα. Only Mark has the words “and for the Gospel.” The parallels in Matthew 16:25 and Luke 9:24 do not have these words, but they do agree in using the subjunctive instead of Mark’s future indicative. With Taylor, Mark 382, I would take τούτον γεγένησθάντα as Mark’s addition to the tradition, an addition that has important implications for the way in which we understand the death of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel.

33 See Chapter 4.

34 Hooker, Mark 373, also sees this connection.

35 Ibid., 337.
One may argue that Judas was not forgiven, for indeed that is true in Mark’s Gospel, but the text does not accuse him of the sin discussed in Mark 3:28-30. Peter’s betrayal leads only to personal regret, and he continues to play his important role right up to the end of the Gospel (Mark 16:7). There is no overt act of forgiveness in either case, and in neither case is one requested.

If, then, personal betrayal and even blasphemy against the dying Jesus cannot be the “eternal sin” of Mark 3:29, we must look elsewhere for the answer. Our search, however, needs to go no farther than the next verse: “For they were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’” (Mark 3:30) Here at last we seem to have some candidates for the eternal sin. The identity of the candidates, however, is not completely transparent. In Mark 3:21 those who attempt to grab Jesus because they think he is demented are described only as οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ (hoi par’ autou, “those with him”).37 The NRSV takes them to be Jesus’ family, while the AV and the RSV takes the expression to refer to his “friends.” Leaving aside the question as to how friendly it is to try to seize someone for lunacy, the Greek text leaves the question as to the identity of the culprits completely open for us. We can imagine family, friends, students, or casual listeners. As mentioned before about the apophthegms, the story serves the saying, not the other way around. For purposes of the tradition the identity of hoi par’ autou, is beside the point. They do not accuse Jesus of being possessed by a demon or of casting out demons by the power of the Prince of Demons.

The same cannot be said of the scribes who make no attempt to seize Jesus but who do render their opinion about how it is that he is able to cast out demons by the power of Beelzebul,38 the Prince of Demons (Mark 3:22). Unlike the previous charge, this is an accusation of possession, not only by a demon but by the chief demon. Whether we are to take this as Satan or another figure is debatable. Although the demons act for Satan in Mark,39 they are not themselves underworld creatures. The Prince of Demons may, indeed, simply be the worst of the lot. That would mean that the scribes are the ones who specifically said, “He has an unclean spirit.” (Mark 3:30) One might assume that the Prince of Demons would be the most unclean spirit of all.40

36 Mark lacks the story found in Matthew 27:3-10 that relates the story of Judas’ suicide and the use of the thirty pieces of silver to buy the potter’s field. Once Judas completes his mission he is of no further interest to the plot.

37 France, Mark 166, has an excellent discussion of the possibilities.

38 The reader may recognize the name of the Canaanite god Baal in this name. The second part of the name means “rule” or “be ruler of,” and the combination reflects the usage of the word zbl in the Ugaritic literature in reference to Baal and to other Canaanite deities. See Cyrus Gordon, Ugaritic Handbook (“Analecta Orientalia” 38; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), 393a. The variant form “Beelzebub” reflects the joke name given to the god of Ekron in 2 Kings 1:2-6 (“Lord of the Flies”).

39 That is clear from what Jesus says in Mark 3:23-27 about Satan casting out Satan. That is not quite the same thing as identifying Satan with Beelzebul pace France, Mark 170.

40 Taylor, Mark 238, also claims that Beelzebul is an “evil spirit” allied to but not the same as Satan.
Sherman Johnson gives clear voice to the usual explanation of verse 30:

In this context (cf. verse 30) it means ascribing to Satan what is perhaps the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit, that of rescuing those who are in Satan’s power. One who takes such an attitude overturns all moral values and says, ‘Evil, be thou my good’. So long as a man is in this position he has no forgiveness, for he has shut God out from his life.\(^{41}\)

This explanation has much to recommend it but has its drawbacks as well. The main drawback is that it simply does not reflect the words of Jesus. Is confusion about who and what is at work in Jesus the eternal sin? Hooker thinks so.\(^{42}\) Schweizer, however, is correct to observe that Jesus does not here accuse the scribes of such a sin.\(^{43}\)

There is an unforgivable sin in the Hebrew Bible as well:

Now as for the soul that acts with a high hand, whether native or alien—that one reviles the LORD and that soul will be cut off from the midst of her people.\(^{44}\) (Numbers 15:30)

Indeed, this verse has given us the basic terminology in Hebrew for blasphemy\(^{45}\) and provides us as well with a class of behaviors that require extirpation, actions beyad ramah. In context, sin beyad ramah stands in contrast to the instructions in verses 27-29 about the offering for unwitting sin:

If a soul should sin unwittingly\(^{46}\) then she shall bring a one-year-old goat for a sin offering, and the priest shall make atonement before the LORD with a sin offering for the soul who erred to make atonement for him that he might be pardoned. The native among the children of Israel, and for the alien in your midst—you shall have one law for the one who acts unwittingly.

Clearly, the distinction is between those who sin through error and those who sin intentionally. This, indeed, is the only unforgivable sin known in Judaism,\(^{47}\) and there is

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\(^{42}\) Hooker, *Mark* 117-118.

\(^{43}\) Schweizer, *Mark* 87. See also Taylor, *Mark* 244, where he considers that the scribes are warned of their peril but not actually accused of the sin.

\(^{44}\) The gender problem in translation (he … her) stems from the fact that נפש nefesh, “soul,” in Hebrew is feminine so the text reads: “shall be cut off from her (i. e. the soul’s) people.”

\(^{45}\) In Hebrew הגורר megaddef. The word מגדף became the general term for a blasphemer in Jewish law. See above, note 27.

\(^{46}\) In verse 28 we meet the participle: “the soul that errs (=acts unwittingly),” נפש תַּעַנְגּוֹלָה.

no record of anyone ever being accused of committing it. The category of unthinkable, intentional sin, sin beyad ramah, in fact, defines a wide category of “unwitting sin.” One could, in fact, be left with the impression that all other sin would fall into that “unwitting” category, at least in the sense that the sinner did not act with the intent of flaunting the law of God.

In Mark the religious authorities act unwittingly to accomplish God’s purpose. As we have seen above, their blasphemy against Jesus in the form of false charges and taunts serve to complete the mission of the Son of Man. Their understanding is distorted though the ministry of parables\textsuperscript{48} in such a way as to accomplish the will of God.

Neither the scribes nor Jesus’ associates have committed an unforgivable sin, and the text does not accuse them of doing so or, for that matter, Mark’s text does not even warn them that they are treading on thin ice.\textsuperscript{49} The warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit stands in contrast to the utter stupidity of the claim that Jesus casts out demons by the power of Satan, as Jesus successfully argues to his students in Mark 3:23-27. Stupidity may be culpable but it is hardly unforgivable.

\textsuperscript{48} Mark 4:12.

\textsuperscript{49} Pace Taylor, Mark 244.