

Violence in the gospel of Mark

By Craig Thompson

The concept "violence" lends itself to application to a broad range of human experiences, ranging from physical assault to non-physical but nevertheless quite destructive political, economic and psychological conflicts. This paper draws on the gospel of Mark as a source for reflection on the meaning of "violence," with a particular view to delineating between the senses of "violence". [Constraints of time have cut the analysis a bit short, but hopefully it will serve as a place to start!!]

Violence and Conflict

Explicit, "literal" violence - the physical assault of one upon another - is quite limited in Mark's gospel. In addition to the crucifixion itself, we may note the assaults on Jesus after the trial and the mockery and mistreatment of him before he is crucified. The assault with a sword on the slave of the high priest in Gethsemane passes without comment, other than serving as an occasion for Jesus drawing attention to the irony that "with swords and clubs" the authorities come to catch him in the night as a robber despite his having been out in the public spaces all the time. In this connection, we might also note the implied violence in the authorities' fear of the crowd when they considered arresting Jesus in just such a public place (11.18, 14.2). Another controversial and ambiguously violent event in the gospel is the clearing of the temple.

While physical violence is relatively lacking from the gospel, another "violence" of conflict permeates the whole of the narrative. Consider the conflicts and challenges to sensibilities which are present in the following sequence of events from chapters 1-3 alone:

- the call/challenge to Simon and Andrew, James and John to leave their boats
- the conflict between Jesus and the demon in Capernaum, and the contrast drawn between Jesus and the scribes
- the cleansing of the leper, and the concomitant conflict with the purity laws and the role of the priests
- the conflict over the forgiveness and healing of the paralytic
- the conflict over the eating with tax collectors and sinners
- the conflict over the non-fasting of Jesus' disciples
- the conflict over the plucking of heads of wheat on the Sabbath
- the conflict over the healing on the Sabbath
- the plot to destroy Jesus
- the Satan/Beelzebul controversy
- "who are my mother and my brothers?"
- and, in several places through this sequence of events, recurring references to the casting out of demons

Each of these is interpretable as a "violence" in the terms of the conflict between the actions of Jesus and the expectations of those who witness them. Jesus may be said to constitute an assault on the expectations and sensibilities of those he encounters, which they may experience as a "violence".

The Continuities of Conflict and Violence

While it is obvious that a distinction must be drawn between this kind of conflict and the physical violence which is visited upon Jesus following his arrest, a continuity

between the two is established in the mockery of the crucified Jesus, "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe". Here the politico-religious conflict of "ideas" between Jesus and his opponents is joined to physical assault. The truth of Jesus' claims, and these claims in their "violence" to the claims of his opponents, is put to the test in physical violence, with the implication being that overcoming the physical violence will establish the rightness of his own assault on their religious sensibilities. For Jesus' opponents the conflict of expectations and physical conflict are points on a continuum, such that the former may lead to the latter – as it clearly did – or the latter might resolve the former, which it also did in the minds of Jesus' persecutors. (It is this type of continuity which sees "violence" being used to describe "mere" conflict and difference; "mere" conflict can lead to persecution, deprivation, etc.)

However, this continuity of conflict and violence does not apply to Jesus' bearing of himself towards his opponents. While he is clearly the instigator of the conflicts which arise, this conflictual violence *does not* extend to physical violence to another person from his side, even in the one case where Jesus might be said to be acting violently – the clearing of the temple. While God's work in Christ can be considered an assault on the expectations and sensibilities of his opponents (*and* his friends),¹ "a bruised reed he did not break".

Power, Authority, and Violence

Attention to the relationships between power, authority and violence in Mark's gospel will further illuminate what is at stake in the conflicts and violence in the story of Jesus.

The capacity to be violent – whether in the physical or confrontational senses, implies the possibility of exercising a power over others. The violence of the cross reflects the power of the Jews to effect from the Romans what they desire, and is an exercise of that power. The conflictual violence between Jesus and his opponents implies at the very least Jesus' capacity to have an effect through argument and miraculous demonstration.

Yet power itself is clearly not persuasive. The healing of the man with the withered hand (3.1ff) is the occasion for setting in motion the plot against Jesus, and not for a concession to the rightness of his cause; similar conclusions could be drawn from the cases of the healing of the paralytic and the Gerasene demoniac (cc. 2, 5). From the other perspective, the crucifixion – as a work of power – also apparently serves in the first instance as establishing the rightness of the Jewish-Roman cause, hence the mockery on the cross.

The exercise of power of itself is ambiguous. This suggests that it is not at base a conflict of powers which is at stake in Jesus' exchanges with those who oppose him, but a question of authority. The chief priests, scribes and elders put as one to Jesus the question, "By what authority do you do these things?" (11.28). This question comes after the purification of the Temple, which is the last public thing Jesus "does". The first public action after his baptism was also the occasion on which the question of authority was first raised (1.21ff "he taught them as one having authority, and not as

¹ NOTE: the term "opponents" here denotes particularly the religious authorities, as well as those elements of the Herodian and Roman authorities who stood over against Jesus. However, the conflict of expectations extended also to those who could not simply be classified as opponents – the amazed and astounded crowds, and the thick-witted and fearful disciples. The notion of "conflict" fits most easily with the formal authorities, but the ideas can be extended to these other groups.

the scribes...). In the teachings which follow 11.28, the question of authority is not explicitly raised, but is implicit in the conflictual tone of the challenges put to (and by) Jesus.

“Authority” and “power” appear in the following texts in Mark (NRSV). In each case “authority” translates *exousia*, and “power” *dunamis*. [The list is cut directly from a Bible search engine, hence the fragmentary nature of the citations].

- Mk 1:22** he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23
- Mk 1:27** is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the uncl
- Mk 2:10** know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he
- Mk 3:15** the message, 15 and to have authority to cast out demons. 16 So h
- Mk 5:30* 30 Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesu
- Mk 6:2* n given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!
- Mk 6:5* 5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid hi
- Mk 6:7** out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.
- Mk 6.14* [to Herod] for this reason these powers are at work in him
- Mk 9:1* ngdom of God has come with power.”
- Mk 9:39* for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon
- Mk 11:28** o him 28 and said, “By what authority are you doing these things? W
- Mk 11:28** ese things? Who gave you this authority to do them?” 29 Jesus said
- Mk 11:29** , and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. 30 Did t
- Mk 11:33** ither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”
- Mk 12:24* either the scriptures nor the power of God? 25 For when they ri
- Mk 13.25* and the powers in the heavens will be shaken
- Mk 13:26* coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. 27 Then he will
- Mk 13.34** [the absent master] puts his slaves in charge [“gives authority”?]
- Mk 14:62* ated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds

The theme of authority appears when a conflict between Jesus and his opponents is acknowledged (the incidents of the Capernaum demoniac and paralytic, and after the Temple incident) and when Jesus equips the disciples to cast out demons (3.15, 6.7). “Power” designates a capacity to effect change. The real conflict in Mark’s gospel is that of authority. An answer to the question about authority (11.28) is refused because the Jewish leaders demonstrate themselves unwilling (*unable?*) to identify the true source of the Baptist’s authority.

One *believes* in authority, as distinct from simply exercising (or being subject to) power. One “chooses” an authority to underwrite an exercise of power – Moses (7.10, 10.3, 12.19), David (2.25, 12.36), etc. This choice is the “believing” dimension of our actions. Our exercise of power is justified by the authority to which we appeal, and is

intended to persuade the other of the authority claimed (“... But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...”, 2.10). The question is not “why is power being exercised” – for a work of power is of itself equivocal – but “by what authority?” is the power exercised. The question is not “does it do the job?” but “is it the job which ought to have been done?” Outcomes are not the final measure. The religious leaders and the Romans *can* crucify Jesus but if the deed does not have the appropriate authority, it redounds to the perpetrators’ discredit.

Authority concerns the *exercise* of power, rather than the power itself. The gospels do not say that Jesus had the raw power to cast out demons, although this could conceivably have been asserted. Jesus’ power over the demons is clearly greater than their power over their victims or over him, yet it is Jesus’ identity as one with authority to deal with them which is the source of the demons’ fearful response to him (“...I know who you are, the Holy One of God”, 1.24). It might further be noted in this connection that Jesus’ identity, and so authority, is the subject of the messianic secret (note the silencing of the demon in this episode [c.1]), and not the power he is plainly able to exercise. The exercise of power draws attention to Jesus, after which the question of authority is raised.

Further insight into the relationship between power and authority in Mark, and the character of the *permissible* “violence” which authorised exercise of power might inflict, is gained from attention to the exorcisms. In particular, it is noteworthy that the demons are not destroyed, but “simply” cast out. In some cases it might seem that the demons cannot be destroyed because of the extent to which they are entangled with their victims (note the Gerasene demoniac in particular), but why are they not then destroyed *after* the exorcism? It is conceivable that this could have been done, but Jesus even goes so far as to grant a petition to the demons in the case of the Gerasene demoniac (an act of mercy?). The authority which Jesus exercises here would seem to limit his exercise of power. If the assertions hereabouts about the relation of power and authority are valid, then it is most likely the demons themselves, in their possession of their victims, are simply exercising power without corresponding authority, and so are not themselves destroyed but simply revealed as unauthorised powers. The reference to the shaking of the powers in heaven in 13.25 may be read to suggest that these powers have an appropriate place but have themselves over-stepped their authority. That is, the demons do not cease to be extant powers, but cease to have inappropriate, unauthorised power over those from whom they’ve been cast. The attack on the demons is a disentangling of authorities.

This treatment by Jesus of the demons corresponds directly to his dealings with his opponents. They exercise power in the Jewish community and over against Jesus without proper authorisation. The power the demons have over their victims corresponds to the power Jesus’ opponents have over him and “Israel”; Jesus’ assaults on the expectations and sensibilities of his opponents amount to an attempt at an exorcism of the people of God, yet one which does not destroy the occupying “demons” – the religious and political leaders. Just as Jesus’ attack on the demons is direct and uncompromising, evoking loud, “violent” responses from them, so also does his attack on the traditions of the elders (etc.) evoke a similar response from those who hold to them. The difference is that the “demons” which are Jesus’ human opponents are not cast from their victim; the exorcisms in the gospel are proleptic of the exorcism of Israel’s heart which is yet to come. The point here may be that whereas the demons can be distinguished and cast from their victims, the “demons” who hold the people of God in thrall on account of their inadequate claims to authority are *themselves* part of that people. The “Pharisee” (here in the role as archetypal opponent of Jesus) cannot be cast from the people because he is part of them. A

separation of demon and victim will not solve the problem here in the way that it does for the "literally" demon-possessed. This "demon" does not know itself as demon, because it does not recognise its power as exercised with authorisation.

Some Concluding Remarks

Violence is the exercise of power without a corresponding authority. The violence of Jesus' opponents against him is unauthorized. The "violence" of his conflict with them is implicitly authorised in the resurrection's denial of their exercise of power over him.

The shift of focus to the concept of authority does not of itself identify for us which *our* of actions are appropriately authorized. The character of a violent/conflictual act cannot be determined from the exercise of power itself, *except perhaps* in the contrast between Jesus' dealings with his opponents/the demons and their dealings with him. Jesus leaves his opponents – demonic and human – whole. The *reauthorization* of a scribe or Pharisee would be a reforming of his approach, not a removal of him.

The authority determines the nature of the violence which may be inflicted or, to put it differently, the way in which power may be exercised. If "violence" is a concept which lends itself to being applied to the whole range of human conflictual situations from "mere" denials of the psycho-socio-political sensibilities of the other, right through to enforcing such denial with physical abuse or death, then the authority which Jesus exercises limited him to the violence of "mere" denial and conflict. The authority of Jesus' ministry takes the concrete form of "non-violence". That is, Jesus does not seek to extinguish his opponents, be they the religious leaders or the demons. In his ministry the focus is not one of distinguishing between powers (which powers may be and which may not) but of distinguishing between authorities – a matter of *ordering*. God's mode of engagement with the disordered powers is to subject himself to them. The disorder of the world is radical, in that power and authority are confused. Power – the capacity to effect change – is presumed to imply authority, so the crucifixion is presumed to establish the case against the claims of Jesus. The gospel implies the opposite – authority limits the exercise of power, and so the extent and character of the violence which might be inflicted.

This raises a question for us: Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection can be understood as revelatory – showing forth that that the conflict between Jesus and his opponents was one in which he (and not they) was properly authorized to do and say as he did. In being revelatory, to what extent is it also *exemplary*? Can authority be measured from the kind of conflict or violence which is manifest?