

# Jesus' disregard for rules of space

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## Introduction

It is with less confidence that I would say that what I write is not autobiography but biography, not theology but history, not doing Christian apologetics but busying myself with academic scholarship. No, you might look upon my history, and see only theology, upon my academic scholarship and see Christian apologetics<sup>1</sup>. Was it not for my own interest in the development of Web 2.0 technology and, to use this word prematurely, Web 2.0 “space”, and my own involvement with social networking sites, and especially the fact that I was already positive about social networking sites, I probably would not have asked these question. Had I not already had a developing interest in the historical Jesus<sup>2</sup>, this would probably not have been where I would have turned when looking for an approach to the question. Had I not asked the question of how Jesus approached possible limits of space, I would probably not have turned the text to attempt at clearly seeing it from the side which I have chosen.

Is the implication thus that what follows do not go back to Jesus? I hope not. In spite of my doubts concerning Crossan's success at writing a historical biography (Crossan 1994:xiv)<sup>3</sup>, I do express the same hope he does: that our method would help us to not falsify the message of Jesus to simply suit our own needs (Crossan 1994:xiv).

## Problems with prioritizing worlds – approaching Jesus and the scriptures

I will not spend time pointing out the commonly accepted aspects of the development of the gospels from Jesus, through the oral tradition, into four distinct gospels (and those only the canonical gospels) each with an own theological agenda (Crossan 1994:ix-xi). The question I do want to address is: What now? To which part of this process should I

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<sup>1</sup> See Crossan (1994) xi

<sup>2</sup> I use this term not to point to an objective biography which we can retrieve of the person Jesus, but simply to admit that a distinction can be made between the acts and words of the person Jesus, and how these are being communicated.

<sup>3</sup> See also Van Aarde & Van Eck 2007:55, 69

focus my attention? Which part has priority over the other? Does the scriptures have final authority, regardless of what I can learn through historical research? Does (my picture of) the historical Jesus<sup>4</sup> have priority over scripture? Do the two compliment each other? Can either be used?

In what follows I will not choose the one above the other, but rather attempt to see how Mark interpreted the Jesus tradition, in order to then draw the trajectory from Jesus through Mark into our own context. It becomes a play between

- the context of Jesus, some of which is also Mark's referential context,
- the textual world of Mark, and his contextual world, the world in which he find himself at the time of writing, which I will approach as two sides of a coin, which also provide a lens onto the historical Jesus
- and the contextual world in which we find ourselves, which are constantly fueling the questions which bring us to certain conclusions

### **Mark's textual and contextual world**

Although the modern history of dating Mark, as well as other gospels, considered the early church traditions suspect, arguments against taking this serious is not common. France (2002:38-39) choose for a dating in the 60's, as do Gundry (1993:1042) and Witherington (2001:31). Rome is usually taken as a place of origin (France 2002:38; Du Toit 1980:120), within a Gentile Christian community (Witherington 2001:35).

Important in Mark's gospel is that Jesus is the one who creates a community where everybody is welcome, a non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical community. Jesus also declares the temple open before his death (Van Aarde & Van Eck 2007:6).

### **In the house with toll collectors and sinners**

I will not concern myself with the question of who Levi was, and what the relation between Levi in the gospel of Mark, and Matthew in the gospel of Matthew, is

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<sup>4</sup> At no point in this paper do I use this term to point to an objective biography which we can retrieve or reconstruct of the person Jesus, but simply to admit that a distinction can be made between the acts and words of the person Jesus, and how these are being communicated. The technical term "historical Jesus" seem to imply this, since adding the descriptive "historical" to "Jesus" imply that their might be a Jesus which is not historical. At the same time the Jesus pictured in the theology of the early church I believe should be considered as of the utmost importance, not least because this is the only lens we have to look through.

(Witherington 2001:119), since, although interesting, the answer will not influence the question being addressed. Similarly the question whether Jesus historically went into<sup>5</sup> this house, of this specific toll collector, for now, at least, need not be answered, although historicity would be addressed later on.

## **Sinners – the wicked**

The focus of what is being written is Jesus, but much of what I write is sketching a profile of the other characters in the story, and when we start to see Jesus' relationship to these characters, we might be able to put flesh onto the Jesus character.

The first of these characters is the sinners, the ἁμαρτωλός. Understanding the sinners, or maybe just addressing a common misconception, can be achieved by pointing out the difference with the group called “the people of the land”, the common people. These were the non-pharisaic people of the post-war Jewish religion, and associating the sinners with this group has led to the sinners being painted as a ritual impure group, which is not the case (Wright 1996:264; Sanders 1985:183, 186-187, 198-199). Purity laws in the time of Jesus did not affect table-fellowship, but principally access to the temple (Sanders 1985:186).

If not the ritually impure, who was the sinners? Behind the Greek the ἁμαρτωλός we would find the Hebrew רשע, or Aramaic equivalent, which is best translated as the wicked, they were those that renounced the commandments of the Lord (Sanders 1985:177), not the impure. The impure was not sinners, impurity sometimes being a necessity and even required (for example impurity from caring from the dead). Also contact with the impure was not a sin, but rather avoided to keep impurity from spreading (Sanders 1985:182-183).

The sinners in Mark 2:15-17 should be seen as those who renounced the laws. Jesus' association with this group puts into question not his ritual purity, but his moral standing (France 2002:d). It is his association with the wicked which is such a prominent part of his ministry.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 5:29 says that Jesus went into Levi's house. Mark does not necessarily say this explicitly, since 2:15, although following on the calling of Levi, starts a new narrative, and αὐτοῦ could also refer to Jesus' house. But since Mark nowhere else refer to the house in Capernaum, and the house was in fact probably Simon's, it is most likely that Jesus is sitting in Levi's house (France 2002:d).

## **The wicked toll collectors**

The system of tax collecting in first century Rome depended on entrepreneurs who contracted with the Roman authorities to collect taxes. The highest bidder would then get the contract, and have to pay the tax in advance, and collect it afterwards. We must therefore make distinction between the chief tax collector, and his employees, it is this employees we find in Mark 2:15. The bidding process however resulted in a system which inevitably attempted to squeeze as much as possible from people, and probably more than would be considered fair (see Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:189-190 and Rousseau & Arav 1995:275-277).

In the Galilee of Jesus' time Herod was king, and taxes would thus be collected for him. Although a Jew, he was hardly a popular monarch, and his Jewish orthodoxy was highly suspect, and furthermore he was kept in power by Rome (Wright 1996:266), we shouldn't suspect that those who collected taxes under his government was at all popular. Those in the tax collecting system considered sinners<sup>6</sup>, part of the wicked. The reason could be dishonesty (Guelich 1989:101) or their association with the Romans, and thus they were traitors (Sanders 1985:178).

Thus we have Jesus going into the house of a toll collector; associating with the group we get to know as the sinners and toll collectors, a group which would have been considered to be wicked, because they renounced the law.

## **Jesus and a ministry of table communion**

### **The blurry line between Jesus and Mark**

The task of this paper is not a reconstruction of the historical Jesus, but rather that of exegesis and hermeneutics. The attempt that is being made, and whoever shall read this must evaluate the success of this attempt, is to exegete not only, or maybe even not primarily, the final written form of the text, but also the dynamic text as it stand in relation to the Jesus-tradition. The attempt to understand the elements of the Jesus-tradition which Mark built upon in his gospel do not have as goal the downplay of the

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<sup>6</sup> Mark's change between toll collectors and sinners, to sinners and toll collectors, and back to toll collectors and sinners seem also to point to the fact that he considered these groups to be on the same level.

gospel text, but rather to continue the process of looking at the Jesus-tradition in order to find meaning and theology for later contexts.

Granted, however, that I highly doubt the human capacity to look beyond the written texts and see a historical Jesus not known to these texts (see also Van Aarde & Van Eck 2007:69-70). Our exegesis stands in the creative tension between written text, underlying Jesus-tradition and our own context, which provide questions which inevitably influence the answers which will be found.

The process thus far was an attempt to describe sinners and toll collectors, but to do so not from a Pharisaic post 70 AD perspective, but from a 30 AD perspective. Here the tension starts to show: Although the Markan narrative provide the Pharisees as the eyes which evaluate the sinners and toll collectors, above we have looked at Jesus not through the eyes of Mark or the Markan readers, but through that of a reconstructed historical situation a number of decades before Mark.

This being said, I think it might clear up the process try and lessen the blurriness between Jesus and Mark, not to created tension, but rather to help us in our own hermeneutic process; to see how Mark interpreted Jesus, and attempt to extend this line into our own day.

1. An easy starting point is Jesus' association and eating with sinners and toll collectors, about which there is general consensus (Wright 1996:264; Malina and Rohrbaugh 1992:189)<sup>7</sup>.
2. Possibly Jesus' answer to the Pharisaic challenge goes back to Jesus, but not in this form.
3. Whether Jesus went into this specific house of this specific toll collector is irrelevant for the present study, although this does not mean that Jesus did not go into the houses of toll collectors.
4. Most probably the conversation with the Pharisees is not historical, but is part of a narrative created, which will be discussed below.

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<sup>7</sup> This in spite of the fact that, for example, Sanders (1985:174) stress the discontinuity between Jesus and the early church, and specifically use this discontinuity as an argument in favor of the historicity of this fact, and Wright stress the continuity with the early church (Van Aarde & Van Eck 2007:35), but also Jesus' association with sinners (Wright 1996:264).

Looking at these four points, my hope is that it will be clear that although the narrative might not be true in the forensic sense of the word, the narrative is true theologically, and even historically: that which Mark portrays is Jesus, the historical Jesus, although a narrative might be constructed to do this.

### **Jesus and table-communion**

Meals in antiquity were what anthropologists call “ceremonies”, predictable events where roles and statuses in the community are affirmed. Meals usually included only people of the same social rank, and eating together implied that you shared a common set of ideas and values, and frequently a common social position as well (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:191). The question of the Pharisees in Mark’s narrative under discussion would also ask why Jesus are associating with sinners and toll collectors; is he sharing there ideas, values and social position?

Jesus’ practice of table-communion with those not considered respectable company, thus breaking the rules of society, is another seldom contested part of reconstructions of the historical Jesus. It was also so striking a feature of his style to be commented upon (Wright 1996:149). Let me shortly just point out again that the problem of table communion was not that when it was shared with those who were ritually impure, but sharing with the wicked; the sinners and toll collectors (Sanders 1985:187).

## **“And Jesus answered” said Mark**

### **Pharisees**

When we turn our attention to the Pharisees, the importance of noticing the difference between the context of Jesus and that of Mark becomes clear. In the synoptic gospels the role of the Pharisees is larger than in what it would have been in the time of Jesus. The idea that the Pharisees governed Judaism in the time of Jesus need to be challenged. Rather, the priests governed Judaism, if anyone did. It was the priest that was used by both Herod and the Roman authorities as the go-between with the people of Judea (Sanders 1985:194-195; Meier 2001:331).

The idea that the Pharisees went about Jewish land in the time of Jesus as ritual policemen is highly unrealistic (Sander 1985:178). In Mark 2:1-3:6 the Pharisees and

scribes (probably the scribal leaders of the Pharisaic party) appear directly or indirectly in all five narratives. It is most dubious that this is historical, but rather part of the Markan redaction (Meier 2001:333-334). Jesus did have interaction with the Pharisees, but the strong imprint left in the gospels was rather because of the struggle between Christian Jews and Pharisaic Jews after the time of Jesus (Meier 2001:336).

It was only after the war that the Pharisees became a dominant group, and as the gospels evolve from Mark to Matthew, Luke and John, we also see an evolving picture of the Pharisees (Meier 2001:340). When this is not considered Jesus' association with sinners was too often interpreted in light of post-war rabbinic literature, and then seen as a purity issue.

### **Jesus' answer in the Markan community**

Where should we make the attempt of interpreting Jesus' answer to the Pharisees? Some (Guelich 1989:104) would say that this saying goes back to Jesus, and maybe the core of it does, but "I came" passages are under suspicion of being creations of the later church (Sanders 1985:174). I suggest that we "play it safe" and interpret this from a Markan perspective. The problem is however what the question in concern is? This is hard to say with certainty, but it doesn't necessarily, in the 60's AD in Rome, in a Gentile Christian congregation, need to be the critique of the Pharisees. Lacking another proposal, however, then if this is the case, then the passage becomes one of defining themselves over and against the Judaism of the day. The question is whether the community would have identified with the sinners and toll collectors, or with Jesus, and then seen the people among whom they were living as sinners and toll collectors?<sup>8</sup>

Only one other time in Mark is it said that Jesus καλέω (called) someone, and this is the sons of Zebedee in 1:20. The calling of Levi follow the same structure as that of the sons of Zebedee, although καλέω, is not used, and Levi ἀκολουθῶ (followed). The obvious interpretation seems to be that when Jesus call in 1:17, this is also a call to discipleship, since it is said that the sinners and tax collectors followed. This is not considered by France (2002:g), since all those at the table did not become disciples, however, it is

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<sup>8</sup> These question I have not yet answered. Also, more must be made of a study of the place of this statement in the textual context of Mark.

erroneous to say that only the twelve become disciples in Mark's gospel (Witherington 2003:123).<sup>9</sup>

This do not provide me with an answer to what was being addressed in the Markan community through this narrative. It becomes clear, however, that Mark open the door for communion with the wicked/immoral, and also that these could be called as disciples, that they could become part of the Christian community.

## **How Jesus approached immoral space**

The question of ritual space has not been addressed in above, but that of moral/immoral space has. From the life of Jesus, and the way in which Mark used this tradition in his gospel, we cannot but conclude that Jesus did not consider certain places to be immoral spaces that should be avoided because of the people you would find there, but rather that he openly accessed these spaces, and identifies with these people through eating together. I have mentioned the difficulty of finding a context within the Markan community against which this could be read. But it is clear that Mark use this tradition to portray his vision of an open community which Jesus instituted.

## **Modern dualism, space and Web 2.0**

Dualism is the idea that for some specific domain there are two fundamental categories, such as good and evil, mind and body (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). In religion, in a modernistic worldview, this dualism was also between sacred and secular (Gibbs & Bolger 2006:66-67). From personal experience, especially with growing up in a small town, this dualism of space was a definite reality. You had good space and bad space. Good space included the church or school, bad space several parts of secular space which was not considered the place of "good religious people".

Web 2.0 is a designation used for a second generation in internet technologies, which include blogs, wiki's and social networking sites. The key words in Web 2.0 is user-generated-content and networking. These sites is more than information sites, but become

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<sup>9</sup> Another possibility I think we need to consider is that Jesus' answer do not designate that all those he had a meal with were called and became disciples, but rather that his having a meal opened the door, saying that it is from this group that I will call members to be part of my in-group, the disciples, or even that the meal they share make them part of Jesus' in-group, and then it can be said that it is from this group that disciples will be called.

places of community. In contrast to “traditional” forms of websites, which can be describes as an evolvement of printed media, the “book”, Web 2.0 should rather carry the description “space”.

Different approaches can be envisioned to social networking sites like Myspace and Facebook. It would basically revolve around the question whether we take part in this event, whether we may be found joining this space, and if the answer is yes, how do we approach this space?

## **The Hermeneutic Line**

When drawing this line from Jesus through Mark to Myspace, I don't think that Jesus had the answer for Myspace, but within the Christian community the way of Jesus is accepted as providing a way of life to be followed. The line I would draw is that contrary to accepted Jewish practice Jesus broke the rules by associating with the wicked and by joining the wicked in the space provided. Contrary to Pharisaic law, the Markan approach set out was that rules of space is not binding to followers of Jesus, but that an open community is what Jesus created. In Mark's narrative it becomes clear that taking part in “wicked” space also mean that this space should be changed.

## **Conclusion: An obvious implication**

Let me end this pages long attempt at writing one paragraph by doing just that, writing that particular paragraph: Within Web 2.0 technologies, and especially social networking, we find something which much more resemble a place I visit, than a book I read. These emerging spaces can seem threatening to some, and immoral to others. Whatever our perception of these spaces, however, when turning to Jesus and the early church we find an approach that did not make certain spaces inaccessible, but rather opened space up, broke down borders and gave followers of Jesus permission to enter space which was considered closed by Jewish religious leaders and even Jewish culture. But more than permission seem to have been at stake, when entering a space the Markan implication was also that it was to be transformed. Can we enter these emerging spaces? “Yes”, Jesus would have said. What do we do when entering this space? “Jesus would have said: ‘heal it, I can call them into the Christian community’”, Mark would have said.

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