

# The Gospel according to Mark



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**Julie M. Smith**

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# About the Brigham Young University New Testament Commentary Series

Welcome to the BYU New Testament Commentary, a project by a group of Latter-day Saint specialists offering to readers a careful, new look at the biblical records that witness the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and the first generation of his church. The commentary series seeks to make the New Testament more accessible to Latter-day Saint general readers and scholars by employing much of current biblical scholarship while reflecting important LDS insights. At the same time, this effort may also be helpful to interested readers of other faiths who want to learn how a group of Latter-day Saint scholars understands the Bible. A fundamental article of faith for Latter-day Saints (Mormons) affirms the Bible “to be the word of God” while adding, understandably, that it needs to be “translated correctly” in order for it to be accurately comprehensible to modern language speakers.

These objectives have helped shape the purposes and parameters of this commentary series. Serious LDS readers of the Bible search the scriptures, looking for depth and breadth in passages whose meanings and mandates may ultimately be plain but not shallow. Such readers and interpreters are served by treatments that unite faith and research, reason and revelation, in prayerfully confronting profound and difficult issues that arise in the texts and affect one’s path of progression. The New Testament has served as an influential guide to western civilization for centuries. As such, its records have long been studied by lay people and scholars alike, resulting in a rich reservoir of information that illuminates the New Testament era culturally, historically, and linguistically. Selectively, the BYUNTC builds upon this vast body of knowledge, resting on the Greek texts of the New Testament and connecting helpful elements of linguistic, literary, historical, and cultural research and traditional scholarship together with LDS scriptures and doctrinal perspectives. The combination of all these features distinguishes the BYUNTC from other commentaries, which are readily

available elsewhere and which readers may also want to consult for more encyclopedic or specialized discussions.

The tone of the BYUNTC aims to be informative rather than hortatory, and suggestive rather than definitive in its interpretation. The opinions expressed in this series are the views of its contributors and should not necessarily be attributed to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Brigham Young University, where many of those involved here are headquartered; or anyone else, though these works have benefitted from input and guidance from a number of colleagues, advisors, editors, and peer reviewers.

Each volume in this series sets in two parallel columns the King James Version (KJV) and a new working translation of the New Testament. Calling this a new “rendition” clarifies that it does not seek to replace the authorized KJV adopted by the LDS Church as its official English text. Rather, it aims to enhance readers’ understanding conceptually and spiritually by rendering the Greek texts into modern English with LDS sensitivities in mind. Comparing and explaining the New Rendition in light of the KJV then serves as one important purpose for each volume’s notes, comments, analyses, and summaries. This effort responds in modest ways to the desire President J. Reuben Clark Jr. expressed in his diary in 1956 that someday “qualified scholars [would provide] . . . a translation of the New Testament that will give us an accurate translation that shall be pregnant with the great principles of the Restored Gospel.”

Depending on their personal skills and interests, the authors of these volumes approach their scholarly sources and LDS materials differently but always with careful exposition and engaging perspectives. In several ways, they employ various interpretive tools, including semantic considerations of Greek vocabulary; cultural, historical, critical, literary, and structural analyses; and intertextual comparisons with other biblical passages, the Book of Mormon, and other scriptural works including the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. Observations are also proffered about the doctrinal and spiritual reception of New Testament teachings and practices in the broad LDS religious tradition.

The format also varies moderately from volume to volume regarding introductory materials and the style of commentary. Throughout, Greek and Hebrew terms appear in transliterated form in conformity with standards adopted by the Society of Biblical Literature. In some cases, a volume reproduces the Greek New Testament text based on the Greek text published by the Society of Biblical Literature (2010) or draws upon the twenty-eighth edition of the Nestle-Aland text in *Novum Testamentum Graece* (2012).

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## JESUS HEALS ON THE SABBATH (3:1–6)

### Greek Text

1 Καὶ εἰσῆλθεν πάλιν εἰς συναγωγὴν, καὶ ἦν ἐκεῖ ἄνθρωπος ἐξηραμμένην ἔχων τὴν χεῖρα. 2 καὶ παρετήρουν αὐτὸν εἰ τοῖς σάββασιν θεραπεύσει αὐτόν, ἵνα κατηγορήσωσιν αὐτοῦ. 3 καὶ λέγει τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ τῷ τὴν χεῖρα ἔχοντι ξηράν· Ἔγειρε εἰς τὸ μέσον. 4 καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· Ἔξεστιν τοῖς σάββασιν ἀγαθοποιῆσαι ἢ κακοποιῆσαι, ψυχὴν σῶσαι ἢ ἀποκτεῖναι; οἱ δὲ ἐσιώπων. 5 καὶ περιβλεψάμενος αὐτοὺς μετ' ὀργῆς, συλλυπούμενος ἐπὶ τῇ πωρῶσει τῆς καρδίας αὐτῶν, λέγει τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ· Ἔκτεινον τὴν χεῖρα· καὶ ἐξέτεινεν, καὶ ἀπεκατεστάθη ἡ χεὶρ αὐτοῦ. 6 καὶ ἐξελθόντες οἱ Φαρισαῖοι εὐθὺς μετὰ τῶν Ἑρῳδιανῶν συμβούλιον ἐδίδουν κατ' αὐτοῦ ὅπως αὐτὸν ἀπολέσωσιν. [SBLGNT]

### King James Version

1 And he entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a withered hand. 2 And they watched him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him. 3 And he saith unto the man which had the withered hand, Stand forth. 4 And he saith unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace. 5 And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other. 6 And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him.

### New Rendition

1 And again he entered into the synagogue. And there was a man with a deformed hand. 2 And they were watching him closely, whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so they could accuse him. 3 And he says to the man who had the deformed hand, “Stand in the middle.” 4 And he says to them, “Is it legal on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil? To save life or to kill?” But they were silent. 5 And having looked around at them with anger, being grieved at the hardness of their hearts, he says to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6 And having gone out, the Pharisees immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how they could destroy him.

### Notes

**3:1** *And he entered again into the synagogue:* This seems to be the same synagogue as in 2:1 (hence the “again”), although this is not explicitly stated.

The wording “and he entered again” is very similar to “and again he entered” in 2:1, so Mark is drawing attention to the chiasmic structure of the five controversy stories by locating the first and last stories in the synagogue and introducing them with similar wording.

**and there was a man there which had a withered hand:** “Withered” is a figurative expression (literally: “dried up”); it is not clear from the Greek text what precisely was wrong with his hand, but the point is that he cannot use it.

“A man” echoes the previous story, which stated that the Sabbath was made for “man” and not man for the Sabbath. The question here is: How does one observe the Sabbath in the presence of this man?

**3:2 And they watched him:** The precise identity of the “they” is not explained here, but see 3:6.

“Watched” has the connotation of “to lie in wait”; it is not disinterested observation but watching with negative intent and anticipating a specific outcome. This is the same verb used elsewhere in the NT for close observance of the law (Gal. 4:10); Mark is ironically showing the Pharisees directing the attention that they should be devoting to following the law to Jesus instead. (Which is ironic on multiple levels: first, because the Pharisees would claim that they were focused on watching the law and not Jesus and, secondly, because Mark would approve of a focus on Jesus instead of the law.)

**whether he would heal him on the sabbath day:** They are not doubting his ability to heal—just the propriety of doing so on the Sabbath—so this is an indirect testimony of his ability to heal.

Observance of the Sabbath was a key marker for Jewish identity; it was not just one rule among many but rather the rule that marked them as a distinct people. The previous story announced that Jesus was Lord of the Sabbath; this story will show how the Lord of the Sabbath acts on the Sabbath.

**that they might accuse him:** “Accuse” is a technical term for bringing legal charges against someone.<sup>63</sup>

As mentioned above, Sabbath violations merited a death penalty, but the law was interpreted to require a warning first. It appears that the encounter over plucking grain on the Sabbath was Jesus’ warning, and now they are watching him closely for a second Sabbath violation so they can pursue a death penalty, presumably before a local court. The story portrays their single-minded focus on watching for a violation; they are not paying attention to the specifics of the situation—in this case, that Jesus intends to heal and therefore do good.

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63. Bratcher and Nida, *Translator’s Handbook*, 104.

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**Relationship to Psalm 37:12.** The verb used here for “watch” is the same verb found in LXX Psalm 36:12 (KJV Psalm 37:12, “plotteth”) where sinners are watching and planning to slay a good person; the irony of the allusion is that it casts the Pharisees in the role of the sinners. Further, while they think they are getting ready to entrap Jesus, Jesus ends up entrapping them by asking a question that points to the contradictions of their position (since they will seek to kill on the Sabbath) and shows how they are the ones who are truly violating the Sabbath. The echo of Psalm 37:12 points the careful listener to the ways in which this text in Mark is the opposite of what it might initially seem to be.

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**3:3 *And he saith unto the man which had the withered hand, Stand forth:***

The synagogue likely had benches around the perimeter and mats on the floor. The Greek text reads literally “arise in the middle,” so Jesus is inviting the man from the periphery to the center of the room, where all could see him. There are two possible (and not mutually exclusive) reasons for this:

1. Jesus hopes to kindle some compassion for the man from the crowd once they see him close up.
2. Because they are watching Jesus closely (as if they expect Jesus to hide his actions), Jesus goes out of his way to perform the miracle in the most public way possible. This would be another example of the inversion of expectations and irony in this story.

**3:4 *And he saith unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil?:*** No one has said anything; Jesus has either read their thoughts or is aware that they have been watching him for a second Sabbath violation.

Normally, Sabbath observance was framed in terms of doing something versus not doing something, so Jesus is changing the classification scheme from “do” or “don’t do” to “do good” or “do evil.” The implication is that, in some cases, refraining from action can itself be evil. It is debated whether “evil” refers to moral evil or to harm here. The Pharisees’ rules privilege inaction, but Jesus teaches that inaction is a choice with consequences.<sup>64</sup>

***to save life, or to kill?:*** Jewish tradition permitted breaking the Sabbath in order to save a life,<sup>65</sup> so the Pharisees would have readily agreed that one can save a life on the Sabbath no matter what rules have to be broken to do

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64. One potential weakness of this interpretation is that it appears to do away with the idea of the Sabbath as a special time if one can do anything that is “good.” (In other words, if that were the case, what would be left to distinguish the Sabbath from any other day?)

65. Babylonian Talmud, Seder Mo’ed III, Yoma 83b–84a.

so. But the man's hand is unlikely to cause his death that day, which raises questions about how this saying would apply here and leads to several different interpretations of Jesus' statement:

1. Jesus is alluding to Deuteronomy 30:14–19 (where the Lord sets out two paths, one of life and the other of death), which implies that this situation has two paths: one where the man's full life, including temple worship, is possible, and one with a wooden examination for Sabbath violations, ending with the goal of killing Jesus. Because the Deuteronomy text mentions cursings, Jesus is suggesting that the Pharisees have chosen to curse themselves by choosing (Jesus') death over (the man's) life. Jesus' allusion makes clear that the Pharisees are on the side of the wicked—a truly remarkable accusation. LXX Deuteronomy 30:14 mentions the mouth, heart, hands, and doing, all four of which are also mentioned in this story in Mark.<sup>66</sup> In the HB text, references to the hand are prominent in the context of the violation of covenants as a result of failing to act; if this is paralleled to Mark's text, it implies that the man with the withered hand is literally suffering the consequences of the curses of inaction, from which Jesus rescues him by his own action.
2. The passage implies that withholding healing is a form of killing: "Jesus makes withholding the cure of the man's paralyzed hand, even for a few hours, tantamount to killing him, and performing the cure immediately tantamount to saving his life. For Mark's Jesus, the [last days] war is already raging, and on that battlefield every human action either strikes a blow for life or wields one for death; the cautious middle ground, upon which one might wait a few minutes before doing good, has disappeared."<sup>67</sup>
3. Jewish tradition held that if there is any doubt concerning whether life is in danger, it is acceptable to heal on the Sabbath, even for an illness as minor as a sore throat. Since there is at least a hypothetical chance that the withered hand could cause the man's death before the Sabbath is over and it would show callous disregard for the man's life to take the risk, healing him constitutes saving a life. And the objectors' actions are all the more venal since Jesus' healing was permitted under the law.
4. "Life" is to be understood as "quality of life." The man's withered hand would have prevented him from participating in temple worship (Lev. 21:16–23). So Jesus is not merely restoring a hand but also restoring his ability to engage in temple worship. This reading links this story to 2:1–12, since restoring the man's hand makes worshiping possible, just as the forgiveness in 2:1–12 restores the man's spiritual wholeness.

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66. Kurt Queller, "'Stretch Out Your Hand!': Echo and Metalepsis in Mark's Sabbath Healing Controversy," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 4 (2010): 744. The parallel to "doing" is found in the man's action of stretching out his hand.

67. Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 252.

5. “Save” can have a theological meaning in Mark (5:34; 10:26; 13:13). This would imply that Jesus’ miracle will increase the man’s faith and therefore “save” his soul—an action most appropriate to the Sabbath. This reading creates a nice link to this controversy story’s chiasmic partner (2:1–12), where the issue is forgiveness of sins.
6. This statement is an example of exaggeration to make a point.

Regardless of which interpretation is correct, Jesus’ reference to taking a life applies to the plot against his own life (see 3:6). Obviously it is a violation to kill someone on any day of the week, and yet the Pharisees are closely watching Jesus so they can level an accusation that will result in his death. In this sense, the contrast between his actions and theirs is clear: to any extent that Jesus is guilty of violating the Sabbath, they are guilty of much, much worse.

One implication of Jesus’ statement is that the categories that they have adopted (“do” and “don’t do”) create horrifying outcomes, since the man can be left disabled on the Sabbath, but it is permissible to plan a murder.

***But they held their peace:*** Because the obvious retort—that the man’s withered hand did not endanger his life—is not voiced, it appears that they understood that Jesus was referring to their plot to kill him. There might also be an allusion here to how Jesus silences demons.

Any number of theories could be offered for their silence, but the next verse states that Jesus attributed it to their hardness of heart.

**3:5 *And when he had looked round about on them with anger:*** “Looking around” seems to be in anticipation of an answer to his question; when none is forthcoming, Jesus’ anger changes to grief.

***being grieved for the hardness of their hearts:*** Having hard hearts implied being set in their ways and unwilling to learn something new or to think differently. Because Israel often responded to the prophets with hard-heartedness (Deut. 29:18; Jer. 7:24; 9:13; 13:10), Mark is portraying Jesus as the rejected prophet and the Pharisees as unrepentant Israel. Additionally, several key texts show Pharaoh to be hard-hearted (Ex. 7:3, 13), thus linking the Pharisees to Pharaoh, a link enhanced by the fact that in Greek both words are quite similar. Since Pharaoh was the archetypal enemy of God’s people, this is quite a stinging indictment of the Pharisees.

There are two references to Jesus’ emotional state here: he is angry and grieved. There are several possible reasons for Mark to mention this:

1. The focus on Jesus’ emotions delays the narration of the healing and thus increases the tension and drama in the story.
2. There was an expectation in the Roman world that healers would show some sort of emotionally heightened state before performing a healing; perhaps Jesus was conforming to this cultural convention.

3. The references show that Jesus was not only concerned with the man but also with his opponents, for whom he grieves.

***he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand:*** Despite the emotions directed at the Pharisees, Jesus does not speak to them; his words are addressed to the man.

Unlike many of his other healing miracles, Jesus does not touch the man. This raises the question of whether Jesus could be accused of performing work on the Sabbath:

1. Because speaking was not defined as work,<sup>68</sup> Jesus had not violated the Sabbath laws. This makes the plot to kill him (see 3:6) all the more insidious, since he has not broken any law.
2. There is evidence from ancient Jewish tradition indicating that it was not an act per se but rather the intent for which it was performed that determined whether the Sabbath was violated: “it is the intention of healing and the performance of any activity for the purpose of healing that are forbidden on the Sabbath. The issue does not seem to be whether what one does is otherwise defined as work or not, since the same activity is permitted if it is not done with the intention of healing. In other words, anything done with the intention of healing is defined as work, even if the same activity done without the intention of healing would not be classified as work.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, Jesus did in fact work on the Sabbath and violated (the Pharisees’ interpretation of) the law.

It is likely that a withered hand could not be stretched out, so Jesus is commanding him to do something that requires him to have been healed in order to do it. (Compare 2:1–12, where Jesus’ command to the man to take up his bed and walk requires that he be healed in order to do so.)

***And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other:*** “Whole as the other” does not appear in the best ancient manuscripts,<sup>70</sup> but even without this phrase, the text presumes that his hand was restored to the same state as his other hand.

“Restored” (Greek: *apokathistēmi*) is the same word used in 9:12, in the context that Elijah will “restore” all things. This suggests a metaphorical aspect to the restoration, particularly if the man’s withered hand was regarded as evidence of sin.

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68. Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 136.

69. Collins, *Mark*, 207.

70. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary*, 103.

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**Relationship to Exodus 14.** The following points of contact between this story and Exodus 14 have been identified:<sup>71</sup>

1. “Stretch out your hand” is the same phrase as in LXX Exodus 14:16. This parallel puts the man with the withered hand in the role of Moses and Jesus in the role of the God of the HB. In Exodus, the stretched hand introduces plagues, but in Mark’s story, it ends one; this inversion speaks to Jesus’ power to right wrongs and perhaps even subtly alludes to the Atonement. Much as the plagues were a witness to Pharaoh, the ending of the man’s plague should be a witness to the Pharisees of Jesus’ power. (One of the most remarkable—and yet rarely remarked upon—aspects of Mark’s story is that the scribes seem completely unaffected by witnessing a miracle.) Just as Moses and Aaron stretch forth their hands to enact plagues that condemn Pharaoh, the man’s stretching out of his hand seems like it will condemn Jesus (to the death plot) but, ironically, ends up condemning the Pharisees.
2. The word for “restored” (Greek: *apokathistēmi*) is the same word used in LXX Exodus 14:27, where the waters are “restored.” There are two possible ways to understand this parallel:
  - a. Much as the restoring of the water resulted in the death of the Egyptian army, the restoring of the man’s hand results in Jesus’ death (as a result of the Pharisees’ plot). Unlike Pharaoh’s army, however, Jesus is innocent of wrongdoing, a fact which encourages the audience to draw some conclusions here about the Atonement, mainly that Jesus’ suffering is unjustified.
  - b. The restoring of the waters is what made it possible for the children of Israel to be free. Similarly, the restoring of the man’s hand frees him to fully participate in life and worship. (And in a typical example of Mark’s irony, it has precisely the opposite effect on Jesus since it will ultimately lead to his death.)
3. “In the midst of the sea” (LXX Ex. 14:16, 22, and 23) might explain the odd phrasing in 3:3 inviting the man to appear in the middle. Much as the focus in Exodus 14 is on the miraculous action that affects the sea, the focus in Mark’s story should not be on the watching Pharisees or the death plot but on the miracle that happens to the man.
4. The reference to hardness of heart parallels Pharaoh’s hardness of heart (despite the fact that the LXX uses different language to describe it).
5. The “withered” (dried out) hand might allude to the Red Sea, which also becomes “dried out,” although the same word is not used. In both cases, the “restoration” points to miraculous powers and divine care.

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71. Queller, “Stretch Out Your Hand!” 739–41.

6. Just as Pharaoh's plot to enslave the Hebrews failed because of divine intervention, the Pharisees' plot to kill Jesus will ultimately fail because of the Resurrection.

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**Relationship to Isaiah 56:1–8.** Isaiah 56:1–8 has several resonances with 3:1–5, including references to the Sabbath, the hand, and being dried up. If Mark wrote with that story in mind, it suggests the following:

1. In the Isaiah passage, the main concern is the exclusion of a physically imperfect man (a eunuch) from being counted among the people of the Lord. In Mark's passage, the man with the withered hand would have been excluded from temple worship. So the topic at hand is not so much working on the Sabbath but the inclusion or exclusion of people from the house of God. Mark's story makes the point that restoring this man to the blessings of full participation in the house of Israel was a most appropriate act for the Sabbath. Isaiah 56:3 emphasizes that the Lord's ministry will not and must not exclude anyone, so by analogy, Mark's story implies that Jesus will not allow this man to be excluded from the blessings of full participation.
2. The Isaiah text is focused on the will and actions of the Lord, who is the one who restores the eunuch. Thus, Mark's text focuses attention on Jesus as the Lord who reveals righteousness (see Isa. 56:1).
3. Immediately after issuing the command to promote justice (Isa. 56:1), the Lord commands the people to keep the Sabbath. This parallel ensures that Mark's story is not interpreted as encouraging lawlessness but rather as promoting honoring the Sabbath by saving a life.

The Isaiah passage ends with a reference to the Lord gathering all people who will follow him. In the Markan context, the withered man is one of those people (at least literarily if not literally). The position of the Pharisees is that it is acceptable to exclude this man; Jesus' position is that including this man supersedes the need to follow the Sabbath rules. Because the prevailing interpretation of Sabbath rules permitted violations when life was at stake, Jesus' point here is that exclusion from the temple rituals constitutes a sort of living death.

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**3:6 *And the Pharisees went forth:*** In 3:2, Jesus' opponents were mentioned but not by name (they were called "they"); here, they are called Pharisees. It is odd that Mark would identify them here but not at the beginning of the story; this verse may suggest that their identity is, in a sense, revealed by their actions.

The verb "went forth" (Greek: *exerchomai*) is not required to advance the narrative, so it may be here to emphasize the Pharisees' act of leaving

the synagogue. The story began with Jesus entering the synagogue, so Jesus is aligned with the place of worship, but the Pharisees abandon that place.

**and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him:** “Immediately” (KJV: “straightway”) makes clear that the healing leads directly to the plot against Jesus. It is amazing that their reaction to a miracle is not awe but rather vengeance. The “immediately” also makes clear that they are plotting Jesus’ death on the Sabbath. Mark exposes them as the rankest hypocrites for accusing Jesus of breaking the Sabbath by healing, while they are willing to violate the Sabbath by planning to kill Jesus. Jesus’ comment about killing on the Sabbath (3:4) indicates that he anticipated their actions.

There is some debate as to who exactly the Herodians were; possible meanings include:

1. a group that thought Herod was the Messiah
2. a (religious) group favoring (or favored by) Herod
3. the Essenes
4. the Sadducees
5. a political group
6. people from Herod’s household
7. Jews who disliked Roman rule
8. a Roman group
9. Jews who lived in certain geographic areas
10. tax collectors
11. the scribes
12. a local government council<sup>72</sup>
13. some combination of the above groups that had formed an alliance
14. there was no group called “Herodians”; it is Mark’s creation, meant to link Jesus’ fate to John’s since Herod had John killed.<sup>73</sup>

Regardless of who the Herodians actually were, it is not clear which “Herod” is referenced since “Herod” was the name of a dynasty.<sup>74</sup> Because

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72. Collins, *Mark*, 210.

73. List adapted from John P. Meier, “The Historical Jesus and the Historical Herodians,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 4 (2000): 741.

74. Meier, “Historical Jesus and the Historical Herodians,” 742.

there are very few references to this group in the NT,<sup>75</sup> little is known about them. But there is evidence that Herod disagreed with the Pharisees, so the idea of the Pharisees and the Herodians working together is puzzling. Perhaps the Pharisees and Herodians put aside their antipathy in order to silence Jesus. Since the Pharisees would have needed cooperation from local Roman rulers in order to put Jesus to death, this would have encouraged the Pharisees to work with them despite disagreeing on other matters.

**how they might destroy him:** “Destroy” is the same verb used in 1:24, where the demons asked if Jesus had come to destroy them. So by attempting to destroy Jesus, the Pharisees have aligned themselves with the demons.

While death was the penalty for Sabbath violations, it was not normally enforced, so seeking it here as a reaction to a healing is a most disproportionate response.

Mark 2:24 can be read as Jesus’ warning for a Sabbath violation and 3:2 as the Pharisees watching him for a second violation. Mark 3:6 reflects their conclusion that Jesus has violated the Sabbath twice, and so they feel justified in seeking the death penalty for him. While many controversy stories show Jesus silencing his opponents through his words and deeds, in this case, they are not persuaded by him. Perhaps this explains why he grieves.

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**Relationship to Deuteronomy 15.** In this passage, the Lord teaches that the law requires them to lend money to benefit the poor. The passage denounces those who refuse to lend because the year of release (when debts would be canceled) is approaching. So righteousness requires acting, even with the expectation that the loan won’t be repaid. Jesus makes a similar argument in Mark when he categorizes Sabbath rules not according to the prevailing norm of “do” or “don’t do” but rather according to whether the action “saves a life” or “kills.” If Jesus’ words echo Deuteronomy 15, it might explain the somewhat puzzling line about “saving a life,” since not lending money to a poor person could result in starvation or enslavement and death; thus the allusion teaches that sometimes inactivity can be tantamount to causing a death. Deuteronomy 15 has several references to stretched out hands, hearts, and secret plans that further align it with this story in Mark.<sup>76</sup> Jesus’ Sabbath healing is like releasing the man from debt, which is precisely what

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75. When Matthew tells this story, he drops the reference to the Herodians (Matt. 12:14). The only other reference in Mark is 12:13 (interestingly, Matthew maintains that reference; Matt. 22:16).

76. Queller, ““Stretch Out Your Hand!”” 749.

the law required Jesus to do; the Pharisees are compared to those who refuse to lend money because the Sabbath year is approaching.

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**Relationship to Deuteronomy 29:18–20.** The passage in Deuteronomy warns those who imagine that they can keep their evil plans secret that they will be met with the Lord’s anger. The parallel to the Mark story (where Jesus is aware—even beforehand—of the secret plot to kill him) provides a context for Jesus’ anger here and aligns him with the God of the HB. It also shows that the Pharisees—not Jesus—are the ones who are truly violating the law.

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**Relationship to 1 Kings 13:1–6.** In 1 Kings 13:1–6, Jeroboam’s hand withers after he attempts to arrest a prophet. He pleads with the prophet to heal his hand, which he does. If this story is part of the background to 3:1–6, it identifies Jesus as a prophet.

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**Relationship to 2:1–12.** Mark 3:1–6 has many similarities to 2:1–12, which is to be expected since these texts bookend the group of five controversy stories. The similarities include:

1. Both stories feature healing miracles (unlike the other three controversies). This distinction helps clarify that these controversies bracket this section of the text.
  2. The issue of Jesus’ authority is raised—in the first story overtly and in this one more subtly. And since forgiving sins and defining the Sabbath were seen as God’s prerogatives, both identify Jesus with the God of the HB.
  3. The first story starts and finishes with references to a pleased crowd; this one begins and ends with references to the opposition that Jesus faced. Thus the framing indicates progression from general acceptance to general condemnation.
  4. Both stories are set in the synagogue.
  5. In neither story is the challenge to Jesus verbalized. This points to what today might be called the passive-aggressive nature of his opponents as well as to Jesus’ own miraculous powers to discern thoughts.
  6. The issue of what is in Jesus’ opponents’ hearts is raised. (In the first story, Jesus knows what is in their hearts, and in this story, Jesus knows that they are hard-hearted.) In both cases, Jesus’ knowledge emphasizes his power and authority.
  7. Jesus tells the person being healed to rise (Greek: *egeirō*, 2:9 and 3:3).
  8. Both charges—blasphemy and a (second) Sabbath violation—carried a penalty of death.
  9. Jesus responds to an unspoken objection with a question in both stories.
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## Analysis

This healing story not only showcases Jesus' miraculous powers but also emphasizes the increasing hostility to his ministry, culminating in a plot to kill him.

This story emphasizes Jesus' blamelessness in several ways: he does not perform work on the Sabbath, he saves a life, he knows his opponent's thoughts, he knows the future, and he is clearly more righteous than his accusers (who seek his death on the Sabbath). And despite this blamelessness, the story ends with Jesus' death being plotted. Clearly, Jesus knows that healing this man will lead to his own death, and yet he chooses to do so anyway. Thus Jesus is pictured as innocent but willing to die in order to save other people.

Jesus could have healed the man on the next day or in private.<sup>77</sup> The fact that Jesus chose to heal the man in public (even inviting him to stand "in the middle" where no one could possibly miss what was happening) and on the Sabbath (when the man does not, at least according to this story, even seek healing), combined with the emphasis on Jesus' innocence, implies that Jesus is doing something very deliberate here: there is a very real sense in which Jesus intentionally trades his own life for the "restoration" of the man in this story.

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**The Controversy Stories (2:1–3:6).** This section of Mark's Gospel appears carefully composed: not only does each story teach something about Jesus, but the order and arrangement of the stories is also instructive:

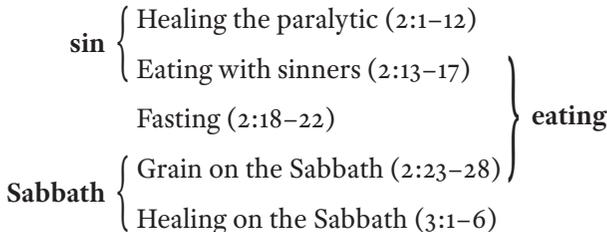
1. The stories show an increasing level of hostility to Jesus: first silent accusation (2:6–7), then questioning his disciples (2:16), then neutral parties asking Jesus a question (2:18), then adversaries asking Jesus a question (2:24), and, finally, plotting to kill him (3:6). The fact that Jesus willingly perseveres in the face of this hostility shows his commitment to his mission.
2. The second and fourth stories have compelling parallels since the story of David procuring food for his men is similar to Jesus permitting food to his disciples, both in situations contrary to the law. Both stories use the same phrase ("have need" in 2:17 and 2:25) for David's need for food and the sick person's need for a physician. And both stories end with a proverb and a saying about Jesus' identity.<sup>78</sup>

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77. In 1:29–31, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law on the Sabbath, but, presumably because of the private setting, there is no outcry.

78. Joanna Dewey, "Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark 2:1–3:6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92, no. 3 (1973): 396.

3. The center point of the entire structure is the subtle reference to Jesus' death (as the bridegroom taken away in 2:20). This suggests that the point of this section is not primarily the opposition to Jesus or the various issues (eating, fasting, the Sabbath) but rather the (literal) centrality of Jesus' death to the gospel message.
4. It is possible to interpret chapter 1 as concerning Jesus' relationship with demons and disease and 2:1–3:6 as concerning Jesus' relationship with other humans. In that light, the escalation of hostilities over the course of these five stories suggests that Jesus' interactions with religious and political leaders are only going to get worse as the story progresses.
5. In some way, each story concerns Jesus' authority. Instead of seeing the controversial elements as primary, it may be preferable to view the issue of Jesus' authority as central. These are not debates over how best to interpret the law; these stories are ultimately about Jesus' authority to act.
6. These five stories are surrounded by framing references: in 1:45 and 3:7–8, people flock to Jesus. Surrounding the controversies with references to Jesus' popularity places them in a different light: the opposition to Jesus comes from religious and political leaders, not from the people in general, and the controversies do not impede Jesus' increasing popularity.
7. Each story comments on Jesus' identity: he has authority to forgive sins, he is the great physician, he is the bridegroom, he is like David, and he acts as the Lord of the Sabbath.
8. The second story enacts the forgiveness of sins that the first story mentioned. The fifth story enacts the rights of the Lord of the Sabbath that the fourth story mentioned.<sup>79</sup>
9. There is the following interwoven pattern in these stories:<sup>80</sup>



The central story, with Jesus' statement that the old and new cannot mix, serves as a key to understanding the entire section, as the audience sees in each story that Jesus' "new" ministry cannot mix with the "old" order.

79. Dewey, "Literary Structure," 396.

80. This chart is adapted from Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 214.