

The Gospel according to Mark

Mark 2.1-3.6 Five episodes of Conflict

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Abbreviations:

DSA^{ubs4} = Discourse Segmentation Apparatus of UBS4¹⁹⁹⁴
 UBS4¹⁹⁹⁴ = Greek Text of the United Bible Societies, 4th Edition 1994
 NA²⁸ = Novum Testamentum Graece, Nestle-Aland, 28th edition

Mark 2.1-12 The Healing of the paralytic [Matt 9.1-8; Luke 5.17-26] *[Jesus' authority to forgive sins unique prerogative of the Son of Man]*

The five narratives in 2.1-3.6 are controversial. Jesus and his disciples are covertly [2.6-7;3.2] or openly [2.16,18,24] challenged by the Pharisees and the scribes, who interpret the tradition. They raise the powerful issues of the Messiah's mission:

- [1] how sin and sinners are dealt with by the forgiveness of God [2.1-17]
- [2] fasting and the observances of the Sabbath [2.18-3.6]

This challenge brings forth a crucial announcement from Jesus which tells us something of the new light that his coming has brought. Mark moves very quickly, it is as if he wants to re-tell the events simply to make the words of Jesus intelligible - words that silenced his adversaries and informed the Church.

These five narratives at the beginning of the Galilean ministry are balanced by five controversies at the tail end of the Gospel [11.27-12.37]. Taken together they indicate that the radically new situation which Jesus' person introduced meant that He must be put to death.

2.5
 faith

It is clear that the determination of the four men to bring their paralysed friend to Jesus showed their implicit faith that He could do something about it. Certainly it seems that Jesus takes it that way. Faith in Mark relates closely to miraculous power. It carries the expectation that God [11.22-24], or more often Jesus, will exercise supernatural power to solve the practical problem – illness or physical danger - which presents. Indeed, Jesus heals in response to faith [5.34,36; 9.23-24; 10.52].

Son, your sins are forgiven

The customary way for a Jewish person to make a pronouncement about God's action, without using the divine Name, was to put it into the passive. Jesus word to the paralytic would have been understood to be saying 'God forgives you'. The announcement is strange to our ears, for it seems inappropriate or even irrelevant to the situation.

However, against the background of the OT, sin and disease, healing and forgive-

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ness are interrelated concepts. Healing is conditioned by the forgiveness of God and is often a demonstration of that forgiveness [2C7.14; Ps103.3; 147.3; Is 19.22; 38.17; 57.18f]. In a number of texts, healing and forgiveness are interchangeable terms [Ps 41.4; Jer 3.22 Hos 14.4].

“Healing is a gracious movement of God into the sphere of withering and decay which are tokens of death at work in man’s life. It was not God’s intention that man should live with the pressure of death upon him. Sickness, disease and death are the consequences of the sinful condition of all men. Consequently, every healing is a driving back of death and an invasion of the province of sin....Jesus pronouncement of pardon is a recognition that the man can be genuinely whole only when the breach occasioned by sin has been healed through God’s forgiveness of sins.” Lane, [1974] p.94

“...man’s essential distress...does not consist in his transient lot in life, with its many vicissitudes, but his alienation from the living God, in his life in sin and guilt.” van der Loos, H. [1965], *The Miracles of Jesus*, Leiden p262.

2.6

scribes

The presence of the scribes in the house indicates that they are not at this time in opposition. This incident will be one of the places where they become so. We have already noticed that Mark has brought forward the contrast between the teaching of the scribes and that of Jesus - “ a new teaching, with authority.

Scribes were men schooled in the written Law and its oral interpretation. They were admitted to a closed order of legal specialists only after they were deemed to be fully qualified and then they were set apart by the laying on of hands. Mentioned frequently in Mark’s gospel, but only once favourably [12.28-34]. As guardians of the teaching office they challenged Jesus concerning his message and his refusal to submit to the *Halakha*, the oral law, which the scribes regarded as binding in its authority.

In their hearts

Mark uses the word διαλογίζομαι, which generally is used for a verbal discussion [8.16-17; 9.33; 11.31], here it is an internal discussion within themselves that they are having.

2.7

he blasphemes

In the third rhetorical question they ask there is really only one answer that they anticipate, “No one” but God can forgive sins. Blasphemy is a capital offence [Lev.24.10-16] and it will be on this charge that Jesus is actually eventually condemned [14.64] so this is a serious matter.

2.8

in his spirit

Jesus’ supernatural discernment is not figured as strongly as it is in other Gospels, but see in Mark 5.30; 12.15.

2.9

Which is easier? To say...or to say...

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By bringing the issue into the open, Jesus makes a powerful Christological claim, and at the same time, he makes clear that it is the forgiveness that makes such a contribution to the healing of the man.

He is also making a clear demonstration of his authority. He is not afraid to deal with the scribes and also their inherent questions. And his answer goes to the power of demonstration. That if he can do the one – heal – then he has authority to do the other – forgive sins. [James 5.15].

A visible proof is hard evidence whereas a verbal claim to forgive sins invites skepticism or unbelief. To tell a paralysed man to get up and walk exposes the speaker to ridicule if it does not happen, but how can a claim to have forgiven sins be falsified? The connection forgiveness and healing is foundational to the demonstration that Jesus gives.

See 3.4; 11.30; and 12.37 for the way Jesus uses the counter-question in situations of debate.

The setting up of a question, which has two comparisons is an idiom only attested in the sayings of Jesus [here, 10.25 and Lk 16.17].

2.10

the son of man

Structurally, the verse appears to be having Jesus addressing the scribes, and then half way through what he says he turns to the paralytic.

The expression Son of man is first appearing here. It will recur at 2.28 and then not again until its central role in the Way section [8.31-10.52] where it provides the key to the self-disclosure to the disciples. It occurs twelve times more after here. France [2202] p 127-8, makes a summary here which makes the following points:

[a] It appears to be a distinctive, self-designation which Jesus uses to refer to himself.

[b] it derives, at least in part from Daniel 7.13-14. This text is often centrally relevant to the understanding of the Gospel texts that use the expression 'Son of Man'. It is also used more widely than the Daniel setting.

[c] it was not in current use at the time of Jesus by scholars and did not have any messianic significance; although it does have some meaning like that in later Jewish literature.

[d] so its distinctive use is generally accepted to be Jesus own choice of a term with, for him, clear messianic overtones, but without a ready-made nationalistic content such as was carried by terms like "Messiah" or "Son of David".

Know that the Son of man has authority to forgive sins upon the earth

The authority that Jesus is claiming here is to forgive sins, not to simply declare them to be forgiven. That is the whole point that the scribes picked up; they saw it to be infringing a distinctly divine prerogative.

That it can now be exercised "upon the earth" is consistent with the connection with the title son of man. The Daniel 7.13-14 text indicates that he will receive and authority that is exercised all over the earth.

This is the only place in the Gospels where the authority to forgive sins is connected with the fact that Jesus is the son of man. It was only after the resurrection that the Christian community began to see the awesome authority of Jesus. Here it is his forgiveness that the

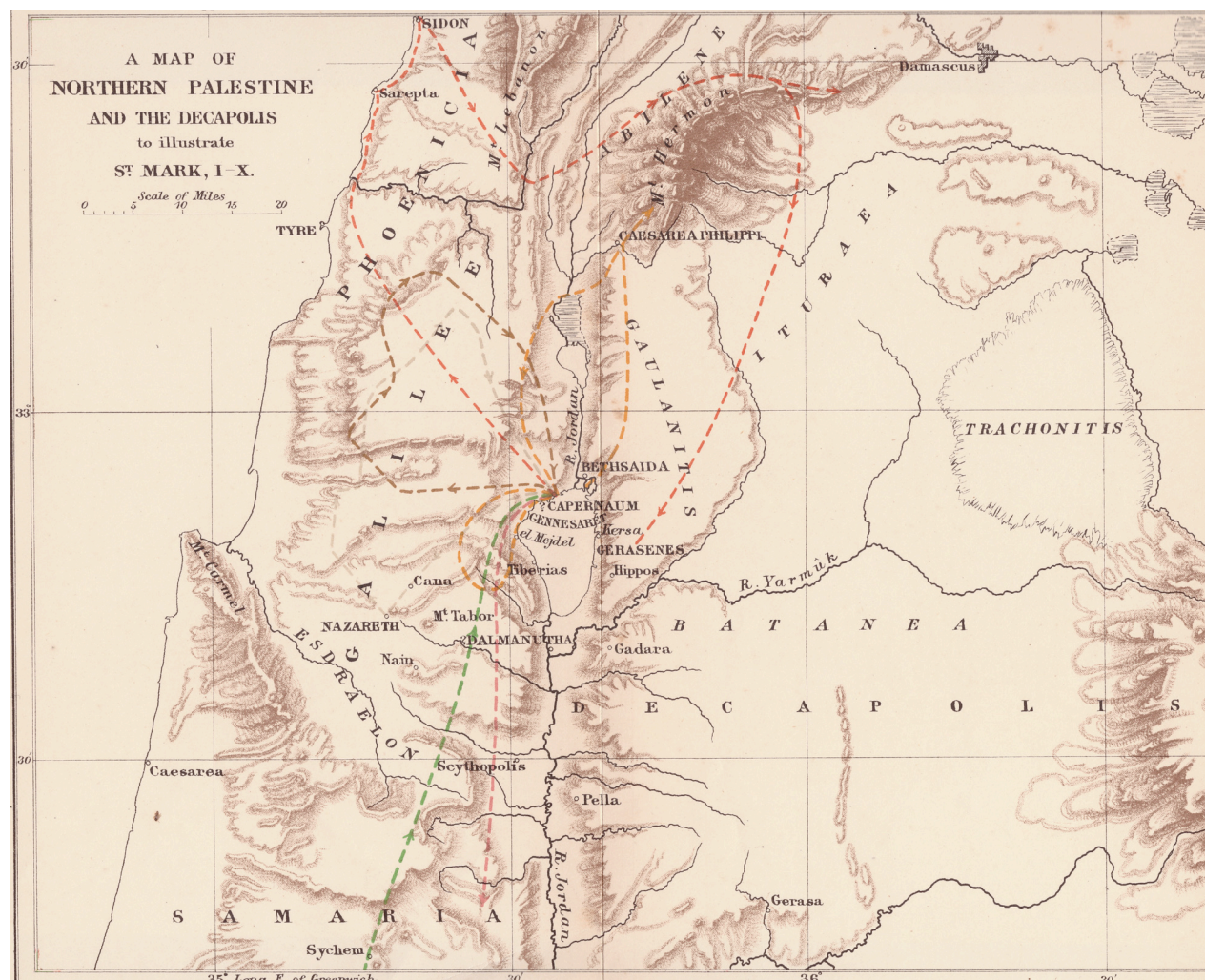
2.11-12

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The startling effect of Jesus' words was immediate and public. Here, unlike the leper, there is no attempt to restrict publicity. Jesus has a point to make and it is out there, it was meant to be noticed.

The main impression is that they are witnessing something which is unprecedented, but this time, the forgiveness of sins, and Jesus bold defence of his right to do so is a very new element.



Mark 2.13-17 The Calling of Levi to discipleship [Matt 9.9-13; Luke 5.27-32]

The call of Levi takes place like the fishermen, except that the man's occupation is different and his place in society is vastly so. It is a provocative act of Jesus to have among his associates someone who is making his living in the way Levi does. It risks the disapproval of the religious establishment.

In the last section, we saw that any thought of Jesus acting in ignorance is clearly dispelled. Now there is a public awareness of the work of Jesus which will have to be assumed and in the light of which his claims and actions will find challenge and disturbance.

Now, in this section we will see Jesus challenged and he will make clear that it is not only permissible for him to mix with tax collectors, it is totally in accord with his mission. The focus falls on sin and forgiveness, on rejection/exclusion and acceptance. The meal with the tax collectors and sinners demonstrates the inclusive-

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ness of the kingdom of God. If Mark sees this as typical of the messianic banquet, the guest list is not what many people would have expected. [After Franks].

2.13

Jesus had withdrawn to a lonely region – in this Gospel he usually does this after a major miraculous and impressive event. This use by Mark is all the more obvious here because the seat of the toll would have been back in the city.

2.14

Capernaum, the first town of importance around the northern end of the Sea which would be encountered by travelers from Philip's territory and from the Decapolis, functioned as a border town between the tetrarchies of Antipas and Philip. Hence the site of the tax office.

The τελώνης was not the person who collected the poll tax mentioned in 12.14, which was a direct tax levied by the Roman government in Judea since AD 6. In Galilee, which was not yet under direct Roman rule, a variety of taxes were levied by Antipas. Most prominent was the custom tax levied on goods in transit.

It is probable that Levi was a customs officer, working for more powerful middlemen who would be responsible to Herod Antipas for the provincial customs revenue.

When a Jew entered the customs service, not only was he regarded as an outcast from his society, that included his disqualification as a judge, or witness in a court session and he was also excommunicated from the synagogue. His disgrace extended to his family circle.[After Franks & Lane].

Beside the sea [lake]

Serves to remind us of call of the four fishermen.

2.15

sitting at meat in his house

Levi is so joyous he throws a banquet, inviting his friends who are called

“tax collectors and sinners”.

Lane [1974] p101, footnote 30, points out that customs officers were not ‘publicans’. A publican δημοσιώτης – which normally renders the Latin *publicanus* – never occurs in the Gospels. Publicans were Roman officials of equestrian rank; but subordinate officials, usually Jewish, were the customs officials, as Levi is here.

“Sinners” here is a technical term for persons that the scribes saw as showing no interest in the scribal tradition. They were particularly despised because they didn’t eat in a state of ceremonial cleanness and they did not separate the tithe. For the Pharisees, “sinners” were those who did not subject themselves to Pharisaic ordinances – they called them the people of the land [‘am har aretz]. They were not sinners because they violated the law, but because they did not endorse Pharisaic interpretation.

his disciples

This is the first time that Mark has used the word μαθητής for those who are following Jesus by his call.

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2.16

the scribes of the Pharisees

These were spiritual descendents from the Hasidim who had been so zealous for the Law in the repressive times of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

They criticize Jesus because he doesn't make the distinction between 'righteous' and 'sinners' which was an essential component of their way of pious expression. They considered it disgraceful for him to sit at table with those unversed in law. They were offended.

2.17

"the strong have no need of a physician..."

This proverb, which the Pharisees would have accepted as a valid maxim, was the basis for Jesus to sit at the tables of customs and tax men; the common people. He defends the company he keeps on the grounds of their need. He was willing to accept the scribal distinction but he limits his own activity to the outcasts.

I have not come to call the righteous but sinners

He cannot mean "call" to the meal – he is not the host. The most obvious known reference we have is the public preaching of Jesus which we saw in 1.14-15 where people are called to repent and believe in the good news [which is that the kingdom has drawn near]. Luke makes it explicit in this section with his statement a "call to repentance".

No one could object to Jesus calling people to repentance as sinners; what they found unacceptable was the breach of social and religious convention into which that mission led Jesus. Jesus determination to make a new community of forgiven sinners, led him into conflict with them.

Mark 2.18-22 The Question about Fasting [Matt 9.14-17; Lk 5.33-39]

We now turn from feasting to fasting. On both issues the religious establishment takes issue with Jesus. A scribal traditional stance which would take issue with the welcoming of sinners by eating with them, will also find fault with an unacceptable fasting regime which fails to exclude. The issue is addressed by a further reference to feasting – at the bridegroom's presence.

Jesus is not the initial issue, it his disciples who fail to observe the tenets of John the Baptist and the Pharisees in the matter of fasting. It is a question of differing practices of certain renewal movements in the Judaistic setting. The implication is that there is a superior claim on the basis that strictness of fasting has the merit that the practice of Jesus' disciples does not.

On the understanding that his disciples are governed by the teaching of their rabbi, the question is taken up by Jesus. He refuses to compete, He is interested to proclaim that his disciples are living in the light of the present kingdom of God and that their perspective will supersede even the newer forms of religious expression. A sober footnote indicates that feasting and joy is not the whole story for Jesus disciples.

His mission is shown to be different in kind to the current attempts to bring new life into the Jewish religious commitment. Even the movement of John the Bap-

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tist, which will continue to be shown in a good light which Jesus will continue [6.14-16; 8.28; 11.29-33] is not in the same category which, as John predicted, has now continued on and superseded John and brought the message of which John was part to a new fulfillment.

2.18

the disciples of the Pharisees

The Pharisees did not take on disciples, although some of the scribes did. What is meant here is a wider group of people who were very influenced by the Pharisaic ideas and followed, as far as they could, their practice. At the time of Jesus the Pharisees would fast on Monday and Thursday.

The OT only requires a fast on the Day of Atonement – day for the cleansing from sin and the affliction of the soul [Lev 16.1-34; 23.26-32; 35.9; Nu 29.9-11; Ex 20.10]. It was a fasting of repentance in preparation for propitiation of their sins.

the disciples of John

These had submitted to his baptism of repentance and no doubt were carrying on with his principles that repentance involved. John's prophetic word had certainly made clear that a change of life was incumbent upon those who had received his baptism of water.

2.19-20

Jesus poses a counter-question, "Can the bridal guests mourn during the bridal celebrations?"

It may just have the power of a proverb; the implied answer being, "of course not!" Neither his disciples or their opponents would have understood the veiled reference to the messianic feast, for Jesus had not yet spoken of his special mission [8.32].

It is the joy that the disciples have in the master in the current presence of their master which is central to the issue. Jesus is the source of their joy and lack of fasting. This is confirmed by the sober reference to the time when he will be taken away from them – on 'that day' they will fast – as an act of mourning as they experience their sorrow.

2.21-22

The two parables may have a wider application that the immediate context of fasting. Their relevance is certainly broader. But they do address the challenge implied in the question as to why his disciples do not fast.

If Jesus and his disciples had taken up the renewal movement of the Pharisee-style, they would have been trying to put a new wine [patch] into an old skin [garment]. They were fasting for the coming of the kingdom; but the kingdom had come. So their preparations of mechanical kind perpetuated the old and leads to the fracture of both wine and skins. All is lost their way.

That they were blind to the new time. The images of the garments, the wine and the feast are all pointers to the messianic banquet. [The parable of the man with no wedding garment is driving along the same theme.]

Jesus' presence and person are the radical new element – the bridegroom is here.

Mark 2.23-28 Plucking the grain on the Sabbath day [Matt 12.1-8; Lk 6.1-5]

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2.23-24

The fourth controversy recorded in Mark has the disciples plucking grain, a quite legitimate action [De23.25]. But it occurred on the Sabbath. So the issue turns not upon the grain plucking, but the day on which it was done. The action was interpreted as reaping, and so a matter of work done [Ex 34.21].

The reference to the ripe grain is often taken as a piece of chronological information establishing that the ministry in Galilee would have lasted at least one year. Ripe grain would imply a time after Passover, from April to June. Others see this is not so accurate. Passover does mark the beginning of the harvest, but ripeness of grain can come earlier, in sheltered places.

2.25-26

Jesus is recorded as answering them with an appeal to Scripture, 1 Samuel 21.1-6. But the problem centres around the reference to Abiathar being the high priest at the time David received the five loaves. It was not Abiathar who was the priest who gave David the loaves, but Ahimelech. Abiathar was the son who escaped and later served David.

This recounted incident does not go to the issue of the Sabbath. Rather the incident calls attention to the relation between David and his men and Jesus and his disciples [...and they that were with him... x2]. This is the association between the historical incident and the present issue.

Jesus point is that on both occasions pious men did something forbidden. That God did not condemn David for his actions indicates the narrowness with which the scribes interpreted the Law – and not in accordance with the tenor of Scripture. David's authority to override a legal prohibition is taken as the basis of Jesus' approval of the 'unorthodox' actions of his disciples.

The crucial phrase is "...which is not permitted to eat, except for the priests...". These words resume the technical legal terminology in which the Pharisees had cast their question.

2.27-28

Lord of the sabbath

Stand on their own, the discourse with the Pharisees breaks off at 26. Both Mtt and Lk understand that the Lord of the Sabbath applies because Jesus has a greater authority than David. So they do not make reference to the expression that the Sabbath was on account of man, not man on account of the Sabbath.

"Lord of the Sabbath" was an expression which is a stock phrase. We are led to take it here as a statement of the validity of an action. So we might take 'Lord' here as simply meaning a person of superior authority.

But that may not be the end of it. If it were taken as a title, then there is only one Person for whom that title was appropriate, and that was God Himself – the keeping of the sabbath was in order to honour Him. We see this in the OT phrases, "a sabbath to God [ex.16.25; 20.10, Deut 5.14] and also the expression "my sabbaths" [Ex 31.13; Lev 19.3; Ezek 20.12-13].

Here we see another escalation in the authority of Jesus. We have seen Him so far as :

[1] Lord in his teaching and action

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- [2] Lord of spiritual powers that oppress men and women
- [3] Lord of physical sickness and weakness
- [4] Lord, so as to forgive sins
- [5] and now Lord of the sabbath

Mark 3.1-6 The Man with the withered hand [Matt 12.9-14; Lk 6.6-11]

The narrative takes us, after the walk through the cornfields, to the attendance of Jesus and his disciples as they come into the synagogue. The atmosphere is fairly charged now though, as the announcement that Jesus had made about the Sabbath is digested; now they are “watching him “ to see what he would do. They are now engaged in a hostile search for further evidence of Jesus’ fairly unorthodox stance.

In fact, the climax of this episode is not so much the teaching on the Sabbath, as the increasing hostility and now clear rejection of Jesus by the religious establishment.

3.1 withered hand

Either as a result of polio or stroke [1 Kings 13.4]

3.2 ...to accuse him...

Mark sets the attention for the reader upon the ensuing altercation with “they” – by which we understand those of the previous incident. Already we are being prepared that the emphasis will fall, not so much upon the miracle, but upon the meaning for the opposition and Jesus. Mark is setting us up to see that the Pharisees and the Herodians will amalgamate in their opposition to Jesus. Surely we are being pointed forward, even at this early stage, to the conflict in Jerusalem.

3.3 stand forth!

Here it is Jesus who takes the initiative in a clearly public way in asking the man to stand up and come into the middle of the assembly.

In asking the surrounding people what is permitted on the Sabbath, we note that his adversaries are silent before him.

As we work through these early five conflicts, we are keeping our eye on the last five in Jerusalem. We see this pattern of initiative repeated there. In 12.34 Mark records that no one dared ask him a question, while in 12.35 Jesus seizes the initiative in the concluding conflict narrative. This is a structure that is clearly the work of Mark.

3.4 to save life or to kill...to do good or to do ill...

This is an extreme way of putting it. And so we see that Jesus is not driving to discuss the idea that delaying one day in treating an ill person will be a matter of life or death so much as he is looking to override the definitions of ‘work’ which the scribes, with all their ingenuity, had prescribed. Together with his previous teaching, he is to show that the Sabbath is for man; this positive approach to the Sabbath observance is a principle that is so elastic it would be hard to rule out any

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act except that which, in itself, was not acceptable.

3.5

grieved at their hardness of heart...

The attitude of cementing of their hearts towards him, which is the opposite of a repentant and soft heart, grieves Jesus and makes him angry.

3.6

Pharisees and Herodians

The Pharisees have featured in the three conflicts that have gone before [2.16,18,24]. Their alliance with the Herodians is a new element, dropped on the reader here. The groups will be associated again in 12.13, and with hostile intentions to Jesus.

The party takes its name originally from the supporters of Herod the Great, but here, it would be supporters of his son, Herod Antipas. The Herod family controlled the appointment of the High Priests before AD 6 and after AD 37; since most of those elected were from the house of Boethus [as opposed to the Sadducees, who held the office under Roman patronage AD 6-37].

If so, then the Herodians were in fact the Boethusians. While their religious sentiments are not directly in line with the Pharisees, their co-operation to silence a reformer is a matter of common interest – as we shall see in Jerusalem.

We need to remember that it will be Herod Antipas who will execute John the Baptist, an act which Jesus sees as indicative of his own fate [9.12-13].

...to destroy him...

It is ironic, that on the same Sabbath, where this discussion took place concerning whether we should do good or ill, to save life or to kill, the opponents plot to destroy Jesus.

The enjoyment of the wedding guests and the plotting of another group to destroy him stand uppermost in our minds as we read.