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"She was twelve years old" (Mk 5.42). A Note on Jewish-Gentile Controversy in Mark's Gospel.

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The early church was greatly preoccupied with the question of Jewish-Gentile relationships, and this preoccupation comes through clearly in the NT and later writings. /1 It is therefore highly likely, even before an examination of the text of the earliest gospel, that at some level of the tradition, perhaps even in Mark himself, the accounts of certain incidents will reflect Jewish-Gentile controversy at the time of their composition or redaction. That individual stories and episodes were used for polemical purposes is well-known; that a number of them in Mark's Gospel reflect their earlier use in polemic, or even reflect Mark's own view in the debate, should cause no astonishment. It is therefore a source of some surprise that in treatments of Mark's gospel so little attention has been paid to the question.

A convenient point of departure for such a study is the healing of Jairus' daughter, and in particular the statement that she was twelve years old: ἦν γὰρ ἐτῶν δώδεκα (no MSS discrepancies according to Soutar and Nestlé). Why does Mark include this piece of information? A glance at some of the commentaries justifies the statement at the conclusion of our opening paragraph. Many authors make no particular comment. /2 Others suggest various reasons. W. Hendriksen, for example, /3 says, "Mark probably adds this to prevent the reader from misinterpreting the term of endearment 'little girl' ". According to C.E.B. Cranfield, /4 5.42 "looks like the sort of detail that someone who was present would remember: her age may well have been mentioned at the time." H.B. Swete comments /5 that the clause "justifies περιεπάτει- the child was of an age to walk", and in this he is followed by V. Taylor. /6 S.E. Johnson recognizes /7 that the figure may have some significance but confesses himself unable to say what it is.

In arriving at our own conclusion, we may allow ourselves to be guided by four elements in the pericope, which might at first sight be of comparatively little

significance:

- (1) Mark notes that Jairus was a synagogue-ruler (v22)
- (2) Jesus "expels" everybody apart from the parents and three disciples (v40)
- (3) Jairus' daughter was twelve years old (v42)
- (4) After the cure (or raising), Jesus told the disciples
- (?) to give the girl something to eat (v43)

If the story is imagined as being addressed to Gentile converts flushed with their invitation to enter the Kingdom "ahead" of the Jews - and from what we can conclude from Mark's gospel, this is not unlikely - it might be understood as follows. The girl, who represents in her age the tribes of Israel, is laid low with a temporary illness (v23). Some think her actually dead (v35), excluded from life forever. Jesus does not intervene in that quarrel; he simply says that God will raise her up (v39). He takes her by the hand, and she rises at once and walks about (v42). Finally, Jesus offers her a place in his kingdom - give her something to eat (v43). At this, the story's readers can be expected to react only with (unjustified) astonishment (v42). This understanding does not exclude others in the mind of the pericope's editor or in that of others who had handed the story on. The latter is still related as a miracle-story with catechetical elements and details suggesting an eye-witness source. As a polemical weapon, however, it might be paraphrased thus: the Jews as a nation were "dead" because they failed to recognize their messiah. Even though few of them would turn to Jesus in faith, however, the Jews would not forgo the blessings of God's promises: they would in time be raised up and permitted to enter the kingdom. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact thrust of the pericope in its original setting. If we grant that the story is concentrated on the girl who is raised (or cured), and that in its present place it is addressed to Gentile converts, it is probably to be regarded as a caution to the over-enthusiastic Gentiles who could see no place for Judaism in the new world. On the other hand, if the story were originally retailed to Jews (as is probable), it could equally well serve as a warning (unless they believed in Jesus, they would not be raised from their sins) or as an encouragement (the Jews would be raised because of God's merciful salvation in Jesus). Perhaps these purposes

are not contradictory. A small complication is introduced if the expulsion of the mourners is granted symbolic significance. This will be mentioned below (no.5)

Neither Matthew (9.18-26) nor Luke (8.40-56) seems to share the outlook of Mark's account as we have interpreted it (and this in itself is instructive). Matthew calls Jairus simply Ἰαίρων and omits the girl's age and Jesus' final command about food. For Matthew, the incident seems to serve a catechetical purpose: the girl represents every Christian called to new life, and she represents also the beneficiaries of Christian imposition of hands. (On the other hand, he retains Mark's detail of the length of time for which the woman with bleeding had been suffering: 9.20) While Luke calls Jairus an official of the synagogue, this seems simply to draw attention to his importance as a local dignitary. Luke retains the reference to the girl's age (8.42), but apparently only to express the more fully Jesus' compassion. The girl was an only daughter (a detail peculiar to Luke) and was moreover just nubile and in Luke's account, the order to give the girl something to eat seems to be included to emphasize the reality of the cure (cf Lk 24.41-43) and perhaps Jesus' thoughtfulness.

Our understanding of the pericope 5.21-42 is borne out by a closer consideration of other Markan episodes particularly in this and in the following section of Mark's gospel. To these we now turn.

1. After the selection of his closest disciples, whom Mark names "The Twelve" (3.16) to show his readers Jesus' intention of founding a new people of Israel to replace, or succeed to, the old one, Jesus is involved in a controversy with the doctors of the law. The argument ends with Jesus' condemnation of "slander against the Holy Spirit" (3.29), which we may interpret as the Jews' wilful refusal to accept Jesus as messiah (this must be the force of their accusation recorded in v22).

2. In the teaching in parables that follows, Mark sees it as God's intention that the Jews should misunderstand Jesus' message so that that message can be offered to Gentiles. The Jews are termed "those who are outside" (ἐκείνους τοῖς ἔξω (ἔξωθεν) 4.11), a phrase which applies to Jews a term habitually used of unbelievers. /8 In

Mark's interpretation of the parable of the mustard-seed, it is possible that he sees in "the birds" (4.32) a reference to the Gentiles invited after all into God's Kingdom. /9

3. In the episode of the calming of the storm (4.35-41) Mark has brought out Jesus' mission to the pagans. Jesus' sleep is the symbolic repetition of his death. In the face of death he rises up. Under the frightened eyes of his disciples, Jesus' gesture prefigures the power of the risen Lord, a power of salvation even for the pagans in their sin. /10 Mark here seems to be expounding and defending the preaching of the gospel to Gentiles - a thesis defended likewise in the subsequent story of the Gerasene swine (5.1-20)

4. The pericope in 6.1-6 (unbelief in Nazareth) poses the question: why did the Jews of Mark's own time reject Jesus when so many Gentiles were becoming Christians? Mark's answer is that it is their own fault. Their own blindness and stubbornness (the refusal to accept the miracles of Jesus as signs of his messiahship) had closed their minds to God's power. He continues by describing how Jesus has to send his disciples out on a wider mission (6.7).

5. In the subsequent section of his gospel (6.7-8.33), Mark describes in particular journeys mainly outside Galilee on which Jesus was at pains to train his closest disciples. His account of the two miraculous (?) feedings, 6.30-44 (The Five Thousand) and 8.1-10 (the Four Thousand), leave the reader in no doubt that Jesus' messianic gifts were offered to, and in (representative?) part accepted by, both Jews and Gentiles. /11 (The account of the first incident, particularly 6.33 and 34, is perhaps intended to identify the crowd as the common people or as believing Jews - ἐπέγνωσαν πολλοί or ἔγνωσαν αὐτοῦς - as opposed to the leaders, μὴ ἔχοντα ποιμένα.) Could this be the significance also of another detail peculiar to Mark in the pericope of Jairus' daughter? We refer to the comment that Jesus allowed the girl's parents (and the three disciples) into the girl's room with him, having "expelled" or "exorcised" (ἐκβαλλών) the rest of the household. If the mourners and crowd represent those Jews who would still refuse to accept Jesus, the purpose of the

comment is to suggest that some Jews - those with sufficient faith in Jesus - are invited into the girl's bedchamber to participate in the miracle, while the rest of the people - those who "laughed at him", v40 - are excluded. /12 Of the eighteen uses of ἐκβάλλω in Mark (to include 16.17), twelve refer to the exorcism of demons (and one each to Jesus driven into the wilderness, 1.12, a leper dismissed by Jesus, 1.43, one's eye, 9.47, the temple traders, 11.15, and the son in the parable of the tenants, 12.8). It is difficult to resist the temptation to see in 5.40 an allusion to Jesus' many exorcisms, the implication being that the extirpation of unbelief is an important part of Jesus' assault on Satan. This, however, seems to lead to a tension: is Jairus's daughter thought to represent Israel as a whole or only a remnant? There may be no conflict; or possibly the story reflects two different, or at least contrasting, uses in the Jewish-Gentile polemic; or finally the construction put on ἐκβάλλω here may be too fanciful, and the girl represents quite simply the Jewish people without further qualification.

Further, the related account of the cure of the woman with bleeding (5.25-34) can be read as an expression of Jesus' attitude to ritual purity as understood in Jewish circles. He can be imagined as commenting that henceforth faith, not ritual practice, will determine membership of the Kingdom. He had no word of reproof for the desperate woman who, though unclean, touched a Rabbi (Lev 15.25ff). She had suffered for twelve years; in other words, salvation comes to her (the Jews) through faith in God's messiah, not in (vain) attempts to fulfil the law. /13

6. The incident of the blind man at Bethsaida (8.22-26) possibly functions as a symbolic account of Jesus' disciples' growth in faith, culminating in Peter's confession ("He saw everything clearly", 8.26; cf also 7.31-37 (healing of deaf man) and 11.46-52 (healing of Bartimaeus)). It could also, however, particularly in view of its juxtaposition with 8.14-21 (a warning against the leaven of the Pharisees and a reprimand for the disciples' persistent incredulity) act as a symbol of the Gentiles' coming on whom a realisation of Jesus' proper stature gradually dawns while the Jews are left in their blindness (or deafness).

7 Jesus' predictions of death and suffering (8.31;9.12, 30-32; 10.32-34) are a bitter comment on the Jews' response to his ministry (as well as a clarification of Mark's understanding of discipleship). This comment is further exemplified in 9.38-41, which mentions a man exorcizing in Jesus' name although he was not one of the Twelve. A possible intention of this pericope is to convey a reprimand to those who thought that Jews only should receive God's salvation and that no one else should benefit from messiah's powers. This interpretation, if correct, and the remark in 8.26 (Jesus' injunction to the blind man at Bethsaida) suggest that Mark's (?) thoughts on Jewish-Gentile relations have not been carried through totally.

8. In the incident of the cure of the epileptic boy immediately after the Transfiguration (9.14-29), the reference to Deut 32.5 in v19 suggests that Jesus is expressing a complaint at Israel's inability to welcome God's messiah in faith. Jesus nevertheless cures the boy because of the father's vestigial belief expressed in v22b and 24.

9. On the other hand, the section 11.12 - 14.2 seems to suggest that the exclusion of the Jews is permanent as well as culpable ("May no one ever again eat fruit from you", 11.14). This might represent one strand in early Gentile (but not Pauline) Christian thinking on the problem of the place of the Jews in God's plan. It has been incorporated into Mark's structure side by side with other material of which the Jairus' daughter story, in one of its uses, is representative.

10. Finally, it is possible that Mark wishes to record in 14.25 a vow of abstinence on Jesus' part as an act of intercession on behalf of the Jews. At the crucial moment of approaching judgement, Jesus intercedes with God for his people. /14 It is somewhat strange, however, that if this were the case, Mark does not make the matter clearer, as his words in 14.18 and 20 suggest that Jesus did partake of the meal. A possible reply might be that Mark has not understood the passage in this way and therefore is not using it polemically.

Our tentative conclusion, therefore, receives some support. It is that Mark has a message for his readers.

God did not reject the Jews, although they have merited exclusion from the church by their own conduct. Their exclusion, or at least that of the remnant, is not permanent. More importantly, the Gentiles are privileged to hear the gospel because in his own preaching Jesus had declared that his message was equally for them. At the same time there are elements in Mark's Gospel which betray a previous (or unassimilated) polemical use of the texts.

Such an understanding of Mark's Gospel also sheds light on the problem of the 'messianic secret'. The 'secret' is a device whereby Mark expresses the fact that the Jews had turned a deaf ear to Jesus' message and that therefore the Gentiles were to benefit (5.18-20). This is not necessarily to say that Mark has imposed an artificial and distorting device on the "facts". It could be that Mark sees in Jesus' (historical) prohibition to publicize his messiahship among the Jews an additional argument in defence of his own thesis. Further, it might have implications for the date and place of Mark's Gospel, or at least for some of Mark's material, /15 and also for the relationship between Mark's theology and that of Paul, to which on this point at least it seems very close.

The foregoing treatment of this potentially important question leaves more unsaid than said. The purpose of this Note, however, has not been to treat the matter exhaustively but to suggest a possible line of enquiry for someone with more competence in the field than myself.

Notes

- 1 For the purpose of this Note, it is sufficient to refer to M. Barth, Ephesians (The Anchor Bible), Doubleday, New York 1974 I, 130ff and elsewhere; J. Daniélou, The Origins of Latin Christianity (A History of Early Christian Doctrine III), Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1977, 17ff and elsewhere.
2. Amongst authors of the briefer commentaries, we need mention only here C.F.D. Moule, Mark (Cambridge Bible Commentary), C.U.P., London 1965, 1978, 45; A.M. Hunter, Saint Mark (Torch Bible Commentaries), SCM Press, London 1978², 66.
3. W. Hendriksen, Mark, The Banner of Truth Trust,

Edinburgh 1976, 214

4. C.E.B. Cranfield, Saint Mark, (Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary), C.U.P., London 1979², 191
5. H.B. Swete, Commentary on Mark, Kregel Publishers, Grand Rapids (1913), 1977, p109 - a view also found in the Gloss: Thomas Aquinas, Catena Aurea in loc (Marietta 471)
6. V. Taylor, The Gospel According to Saint Mark, MacMillan, London, 1966², 297
7. S.E. Johnson, The Gospel According to Saint Mark, (Black's NT Commentaries), London, 1977, 106
8. Cf 1 Cor 5.12; Col 4.5; 1 Thess 4.12
9. J. Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus, SCM Press, London, 1954, 79 quoting Manson (in a footnote missing in the author's Rediscovering the Parables, SCM Press, London 1966).
10. X. Léon-Dufour, Études d'Évangile, Ed. du Seuil, Paris 1965, 127-9.
11. Thus A. Richardson, The Miracle Stories of the Gospels, SCM Press, London 1948, 97-98. But cf Moule, op.cit. (N.2 above), 60
12. Note here the possible force of the Greek - they derided him, and so Jesus put them out, a nuance missing in many translations; cf 5.33 and the remarks in G. Wigram, Greek Concordance of the NT, Bagster, London 1976, App. Pt II, 11
13. Thos Aquinas had already seen, in a slightly different framework, that the woman represents the synagogue: Super Evangelium S. Matthaei Lectura, in Mt IX, 20 (Marietta 781)
14. J. Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus, SCM London 1977, 207-218
15. For the general problem, see e.g. R.P. Martin, Mark - Evangelist and Theologian, Paternoster Press, Exeter 1979, 51-79. Martin makes no mention of Jewish-Gentile controversy in Mark.