

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
FOR THE FEBRUARY 5, 2012 BIBLE STUDY LESSON

Focal passage (lectionary): Mark 1:29-39

1:29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.

1:30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.

1:31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

1:32 That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.

1:33 And the whole city was gathered around the door.

1:34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

1:35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

1:36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him.

1:37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."

1:38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

1:39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

General background information: the "messianic secret" of Jesus

Beginning in the early years of the 20th century, scholars studying the gospel of Mark have used the term "messianic secret" to refer to passages in which Jesus asks (or orders) that he not be identified as the Messiah. Verses such as the one in the focal passage are used as support for the idea; there are passages in the other synoptic gospels that are also cited. There are two reasons given for the existence of this concept.

(1) Historical – Jesus did not want people to identify him with the Messiah because of the confusion that this would bring and the potential hindrance of his mission. Recall that there were a number of different views about the Messiah in 1st century Judaism, most of which were popular imaginings based on interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures. According to these imaginings the Messiah would usher in an era of peace and prosperity – as one pseudepigraphical work put it, when the Messiah came every acre of ground would produce 10,000 grapevines, each vine would produce 10,000 grapes, and each grape would produce 10,000 gallons of wine. This miraculous abundance is hinted at in one of Jesus' miracles (the feeding of the 5000), and in John's gospel this miracle is enough to make the people anxious to proclaim Jesus as king.

The other expectation for the Messiah was that he would be a military leader, who would rid Israel of foreign invaders and establish a new kingdom that would be supreme over all others. It isn't hard to imagine how such a conception would make Jesus' mission difficult – it might even result in his arrest and execution at a time and place not of God's choosing. It could also spur individuals to commit acts of what we today would call terrorism; there were already groups in Judaea that assassinated Roman soldiers and committed other acts of uncivil disobedience. Jesus would have been a rallying point that could have brought the wrath of the Romans down upon the people; the book of Acts mentions two individuals who had drawn a following and posed a threat to Rome, and Josephus, the historian, recounts several others.

(2) Theological – Several of the "messianic secret" passages relate that Jesus forbade demons from identifying him. This may have been for a historical reason (he didn't want evil spirits to be witnesses) but also theological – beings such as demons would know Jesus for who he really was and this was something that Jesus wanted each individual to perceive. At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asks the disciples who people think he is, then who they (the disciples) think he is. Peter provides the "right" answer, and, in Mark, Jesus tells the disciples to keep this secret. The reason seems to be that faith must be appertained individually, otherwise it's not faith.

Background information on the focal passage:

In the era of open-on-Sunday restaurants many of us have forgotten that families used to gather together after church for a meal, often the best meal of the week and the only one at which all family members were present. Mark's gospel hints that this tradition is ancient – after services at the local synagogue Jesus and his followers go to Simon's house to enjoy the Sabbath afternoon (remember that Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday). However upon arriving they discover that Simon's mother-in-law is ill. The reference to Simon's mother-in-law is found in all of the synoptic gospels (though set at different times in Matthew and Luke) and has led to speculation regarding what happened to Simon's wife and how it was that he became the first pope, given that popes are required to be celibate. Most scholars assume that Simon's wife had died by the time Jesus called him to be a disciple; the requirement for celibacy did not become official Catholic doctrine until the 13th century. This doctrine is not considered *dogma* (infallible and immutable) and there are provisions for the appointment of married clergy and even for a married man to be elevated to the papacy.

The point of this story, however, is on Jesus' authority, this time over disease (which was often thought to be the result of demonic influence, making this a parallel to the story from last week's lesson). Note that for Mark the issue of healing on the Sabbath is not mentioned at this time, perhaps further demonstrating that Mark's audience was composed primarily of Roman converts – believers who came to faith in Christ without having been proselytes of Judaism.

Mark then notes that "at sundown" the community brought to Jesus those who were ill, whether physically or mentally (demon-possessed). Jesus cured "many" of those with physical ailments – commentators have wondered why he didn't cure all of them – and cast out many demons – again, not all of them. And, as with the story of the possessed man in the synagogue, Jesus prevented the demons from speaking, "because they knew him". Those who discount the concept of the "messianic secret" (see above) suggest that Jesus forbade the demons from speaking because he didn't want the kind of testimony that they would give as to his identity. In much the same manner Paul, while in Ephesus, cured a demon-possessed girl because she was following him and Silas proclaiming their identity. Sometimes the character of the witness reflects on the message, and that has been suggested as the reason for Jesus' admonition. It's also possible that Jesus didn't want people to have a mistaken notion of who he was – speculation about the Messiah was rife and there were a number of conflicting views regarding who the Messiah would be and what he would do – some looked for a military leader, others for a religious reformer, and still others expected someone who would bring about an era of prosperity. It's worth noting that in Mark Jesus begins to instruct his disciples about the suffering role of the Messiah after he asks them who people think he is.

The story concludes with a description of Jesus going off into a solitary place to pray. Matthew and Luke indicate that after he comes back he calls out a select group to be his "inner circle" from among those that had been drawn to him, but Mark doesn't mention this, having put the call of the first disciples prior to the arrival in Capernaum. Jesus' statement that he needed to be moving on is not just an acknowledgement of the need to spread the word of the coming of God's kingdom but also that those who follow Jesus should not be attracted solely by the wonders that they see or hear about. Jesus makes a tour of the towns of Galilee, visiting the synagogues and casting out demons. This concluding statement once again demonstrates Jesus' power, something that would have been of interest to a Roman audience, again suggesting who Mark's audience might have been.

Focal passage (Formations): Genesis 37:2b-11, 19-20, 26-27; 45:4-5

37:2b Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.

37:3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves.

37:4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

37:5 Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more.

37:6 He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed.

37:7 There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf."

37:8 His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

37:9 He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

37:10 But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?"

37:11 So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

37:19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer.

37:20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall see what becomes of his dreams."

37:26 Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?

37:27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed.

45:4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

45:5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

Background information on the focal passage:

Genesis 37 begins the final major section of the book, being almost exclusively devoted to the story of Joseph, who is, by the Biblical account, Jacob's favorite son, being the elder son of his favorite wife, Rachel. The chapter opens with a brief statement designed to resume the story of the patriarchs, which ended in chapter 35 with the death of Isaac – Genesis 36 interrupts the flow of the narrative to provide a list of the descendents of Esau. The opening verse relates that Jacob "settled" in the land, rather than wandering through it as his father Isaac did.

Verse 2 appears in the NRSV as "This is the story of the family of Jacob", but would be more accurately translated "These are the generations of Jacob". The word translated "story" or "generations" is the Hebrew word *toledoth*, and appears at the beginning of each of the major sections of Genesis, as in Genesis 2:4, where it appears in the phrase "These are the **generations** (*toledoth*) of the heavens and the earth..." This verse (Genesis 37:2) introduces us to the main character in the story to follow, Joseph, the son of Rachel. The story of Jacob and Rachel, how he toiled 14 years in order to marry her and how she was his favorite wife can be found in Genesis 29. Joseph, whose name means "God will increase", received more than his fair share of attention. The story relates how Jacob had a special coat made for Joseph. Traditionally, based on the KJV translation of the phrase *kethoneth passim*, this coat is known as the "coat of many colors". The phrase is difficult to translate because it appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures; by the time of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) the scribes translated the phrase as "coat with stripes". The Wyclif Bible translated the phrase as "cote of many colours", and this passed into the KJV and from there into common parlance. The idea of a multi-colored coat became the basis for Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, which premiered in 1968.

The issue, however, is not whether it was a “multi-colored coat” or a “coat with sleeves” but rather what that garment symbolized. In a semi-nomadic society the amount of effort necessary to gather the materials, have them dyed and turned into a coat would have meant the coat was quite valuable; if we take the translation as “coat with sleeves” it could be an indication that Joseph wasn't required to do as much work as his brothers, so he could wear something to cover his arms. Whatever the actual translation of the phrase, Joseph's brothers recognized the coat for what it was – a perquisite that Joseph got and they didn't. It's doubtful that this episode in and of itself was enough to spur them to the actions they would subsequently take, but it may have well been the last straw.

The story relates that Joseph was sent by his father to find his brothers. He first looks near Shechem, a city with a long history and association with the Israelites. In Genesis 12 Abram builds an altar to Yahweh and Yahweh confirms the covenant that God offered to Abram regarding the land of Canaan. The city was known as a commercial center, being located on one of the major north-south trade routes from Egypt to Asia Minor; the city is mentioned in the “Amarna correspondence” (clay tablets dating to the 1300s BCE) as being the center of a kingdom controlled by a Canaanite warlord who recruited mercenaries from the “Habiru” inhabitants of the land (there is an etymological relationship between “Habiru” and “Hebrew”, though the former term more likely stands as a social rather than ethnic designation). A man named Shechem, from the city of the same name, raped Dinah, Jacob's daughter, but later agreed to marry her; Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, refused to let her marry until Shechem and all his companions were circumcised. While they were recovering, Simeon and Levi slaughtered the lot of them, which angered Jacob and caused them to lose their share of the deathbed blessing that Jacob bestowed on his sons. In the New Testament Shechem is known as Sychar, the location of Jacob's well and the site of the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4). Eventually Joseph locates his brothers at Dothan, a town north of Shechem.

As Joseph approaches, his brothers see him and decide that this would be the perfect opportunity to eliminate him. They refer to him as “that dreamer” – the focal passage omits the verses in which Joseph tells of his dreams regarding his family, but it is as a dreamer (and an interpreter of dreams) that Joseph makes his reputation, as it were. At this point the story seems to contain two different versions of the brothers' decision. In the first, the oldest son, Reuben, suggests that they throw Joseph into a pit rather than kill him; in the second it is Judah that makes this suggestion. Additionally in the first version of the story Joseph is sold to Ishmaelites, in the second he is sold to Midianites. Rabbinic commentators dealt with this seeming contradiction by saying that Joseph was sold to Ishmaelites who, in turn, sold him to Midianites, who in turn sold him to the Egyptians. It's clear from the “punch line” of the story (Genesis 45) that Joseph was able to see God's hand in what must have seemed like an unfortunate turn of events.

Joseph's “identity” as a dreamer is echoed in the New Testament in the experiences of another Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, who likewise has dreams that guide him through the birth of Jesus and the subsequent flight of the family into Egypt and their eventual return.