

SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY

**EXEGETICAL STUDY OF MARK 2:15-17**

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## BRG400 – Introduction to Biblical Studies

**Assignment 3a: Exegetical Study of Mark 2:15-17**

Mark's narrative of the events at Levi's house (2:15-17), sometime after his initial call (2:13-14), shows the radical reversal of values associated with discipleship for the kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup> God and religion cannot be controlled through humanly established criteria.<sup>2</sup>

**General Contextual Observations for Mark 2:15-17**

Overall, the Gospel according to Mark can perhaps best be seen as a kerygmatic story – it proclaims the good news of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> After a prologue (1:1-13), the story falls into essentially two main parts (1:14-8:26; 8:27-16:8).<sup>4</sup> In Mark's perspective, Jesus himself is the pivotal figure in salvation history.<sup>5</sup>

The text, Mark 2:15-17, falls within a passage that begins with verse 13 and ends with verse 17. In the New Revised Standard Version, this section is labelled "Jesus Calls Levi".<sup>6</sup> This is a separate unit of tradition, shown by Mark using the connecting word, *palin*, (meaning "again") in verse 13.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, most scholars agree that Mark 2:13-17 is a literary unit developed by Mark from several originally different pre-Markan traditions

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<sup>1</sup> Francis J. Moloney, "The Vocation of the Disciples in the Gospel of Mark", in *"A Hard Saying": The Gospel and Culture* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), 77.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jack D. Kingsbury, "The Gospel in Four Editions", *Interpretation* 33 (1979): 364.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 364-365.

<sup>6</sup> *Holy Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 51.

<sup>7</sup> Walter W. Wessel, *Mark*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 634.

(for which there is little agreement as far as the origin of the various elements).<sup>8</sup> It is the second incident in a series of five in which Jesus comes into conflict with the religious leaders.<sup>9</sup> Maloney supports this conclusion by writing that the “context is made up of a series of five controversies in which Jesus draws and replies to criticism from the Pharisees as he freely pushes their interpretation of the Law to its limits and claims to be bringing salvation by doing so”.<sup>10</sup>

The section is introduced by the story of the calling of Levi, the tax collector (v. 14). The setting is “beside the sea” (v. 13) – that is, the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The fact that “the whole crowd gathered around him” (v. 13) indicates Jesus’ continued popularity with the crowds.<sup>11</sup> These two verses may possibly be a redactional introduction to 2:13-17.<sup>12</sup>

The text, Mark 2:15-17, has been described as a pronouncement story, which is a pericope that leads to a final pungent word from Jesus (in this case v. 17).<sup>13</sup> Form critics believe there is merit in considering the actual “pronouncement” as the historical words of Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Moloney, “The Vocation of the Disciples in the Gospel of Mark”, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Wessel, *Mark*, 634.

<sup>10</sup> Moloney, “The Vocation of the Disciples in the Gospel of Mark”, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Wessel, *Mark*, 634.

<sup>12</sup> Moloney, “The Vocation of the Disciples in the Gospel of Mark”, 76.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

### Closer Analysis of Mark 2:15-17

A change of place and time (the setting shifts from walking to sitting at a table in Levi's house) occurs in the transition from verses 13-14 to verse 15. There is now a dinner being held "in Levi's house" (v. 15). A textual note renders the wording in verse 15 as follows: "And as he sat [a textual note renders the Greek as *reclined*<sup>15</sup>] at dinner in *his* house, . . .". This seems to suggest that the tax collectors and sinners were having dinner with Jesus – that is, he was the host, not Levi. If this is correct, then the focus of the entire pericope (vv. 13-17) changes from Jesus calling Levi to the significance of the Messiah eating with sinners.<sup>16</sup> However, the context makes apparent that this was Levi's house, and that Jesus was the guest of honour.<sup>17</sup> Levi was a tax collector, likely a lesser official, who actually took money from the people.<sup>18</sup> Tax collectors were the most despised agents of an unjust system in the eyes of the Jews.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, in Jewish understanding of salvation, Levi is nothing – his occupation is unacceptable and he is a sinner, having given his allegiance to the hated foreign power that dominated God's land.<sup>20</sup> Yet, in calling him to discipleship (v. 14), Jesus offers him everything!<sup>21</sup>

"Sinners" (v. 16) denotes those people who do not follow the Mosaic Law as interpreted by the Pharisees.<sup>22</sup> It also referred to notoriously evil people and was commonly used of tax collectors, adulterers, robbers, and the like.<sup>23</sup> The Pharisees were a

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<sup>15</sup> *New Revised Standard Version*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Wessel, *Mark*, 635. Wessel attributes this insight to William L. Lane in his book *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 106.

<sup>17</sup> Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 583.

<sup>18</sup> Moloney, "The Vocation of the Disciples in the Gospel of Mark", 76.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Wessel, *Mark*, 635.

<sup>23</sup> *The NIV Study Bible: News International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 1902.

group of especially rigorous followers of the law who first appeared during the reign of John Hyrcanus (135-105 B.C.) and later gained great power and prestige under the short rule of Salome Alexandra (76 to 65 B.C.).<sup>24</sup> They were not priests, but lay teachers and experts in the law, demanding not only strict obedience to all the laws in the Pentateuch, but also to the “oral torah” which they called a “fence around the law” – built on the traditions and teachings of the great scribes and religious leaders since the days of Ezra.<sup>25</sup> Their strict interpretations of the law created an attitude of pride and arrogance toward others who did not keep all the law.<sup>26</sup> This outlook is reflected in their question to Jesus’ disciples when they “saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors” (v. 16): “Why does he eat [other ancient authorities add *and drink*<sup>27</sup>] with tax collectors and sinners?” (v. 16) To eat and drink with Gentiles was an infraction of the ritual law and involved ceremonial uncleanness – tax collectors were classed with the Gentiles and consequently were considered among the social outcasts.<sup>28</sup> In fact, according to Pharisaism, God’s grace extended only to those who kept his law.<sup>29</sup>

The specific reference in v. 17 to Jesus’ call of sinners to the Kingdom is profound – indeed a “final pungent word from Jesus”.<sup>30</sup> It suggests that the basis of fellowship at the table was *messianic forgiveness*, and the meal itself was an anticipation of the messianic banquet.<sup>31</sup> Also, as a doctor ministers not to healthy persons, but to the sick – so Jesus

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<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Boadt, “The Closing of the Old Testament”, in *Reading the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 522.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 522-523. On a positive side, Boadt also notes that “it was through the Pharisees and their love of learning and study of the Bible that the enduring system of synagogues in every local community arose. It was also through them that the Old Testament canon was completed and preserved”. (p. 523)

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 523.

<sup>27</sup> *New Revised Standard Version*, 51.

<sup>28</sup> Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 583.

<sup>29</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, 1902.

<sup>30</sup> Moloney, “The Vocation of the Disciples in the Gospel of Mark”, 74-75.

<sup>31</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 106 (emphasis his), quoted in Walter W. Wessel, *Mark*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 635.

came not to call the “righteous” (that is, the self-righteous), but “sinners” (that is, those alienated from the life of God).<sup>32</sup> Finally, this word of Jesus strikes the keynote of the Gospel.<sup>33</sup> The new thing in Christianity is not the doctrine that God saves sinners (no Jew would have denied that) but the assertion that God loves and saves them *as sinners* – which is the authentic and glorious doctrine of true Christianity in any age.<sup>34</sup>

### Conclusion

In sum, Mark 2:15-17 shows “that discipleship cuts through all barriers of conventional religion, because Jesus of Nazareth who issues the call cannot be contained within the correct and proper limits of conventional religion”.<sup>35</sup> Jesus’ call is to salvation – however, in order to share in it, there must be recognition of need.<sup>36</sup> A self-righteous man is incapable of recognizing that need, but a sinner can.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Wessel, *Mark*, 635.

<sup>33</sup> A.M. Hunter, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, Torch Bible Commentary (London: SCM, 1967), 40-41 (emphasis his), quoted in Walter W. Wessel, *Mark*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 635.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Moloney, “The Vocation of the Disciples in the Gospel of Mark”, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Wessel, *Mark*, 635.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

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