

The Divided House Revisited: A Narrative Reading of Mark 3:20–35

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Mk 3:20–35 presents one of the more challenging narratives in the Gospel of Mark, often interpreted as depicting tension between Jesus and his family (Mk 3:20–21.31–35; cf. Mt 12:46–50; Lk 8:19–21). In particular, the verb ἐξέστη in Mk 3:21 has frequently been understood as implying that Jesus was regarded as “out of his mind,” contributing to a reading of the passage in terms of rejection or as a reaction aimed at defending the honor of Jesus’ family (May, 1987, pp. 84–87).

This study re-examines the pericope through the lens of narrative criticism, focusing on its intercalated structure (Mk 3:20–21 || Mk 3:22–30 || Mk 3:31–35). It argues that this compositional framework provides the key to interpreting both the ambiguous expression οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ and the verb ἐξέστη in Mk 3:21. Rather than treating these elements in isolation, the analysis considers their function within the narrative as a whole.

To the author’s knowledge, the interpretation of ἐξέστη grounded in its lexical and structural parallel with ἔξω στήκοντες (Mk 3:31) within the intercalation has not yet been systematically developed in scholarship. This reading suggests that the pericope does not portray Jesus’ family as rejecting him, but rather as moving from apparent misunderstanding toward recognition.

1. Delimitation

The scope of the analysis encompasses Mk 3:20–35, as defined by the house setting in which Jesus is present and teaches. This spatial marker provides a coherent narrative frame that unifies the pericope and distinguishes it from the surrounding material. The reference to the house at the beginning (Mk 3:20) and its implicit continuation throughout the scene establish a stable locus for both action and discourse.

Clear shifts in both theme and setting in the adjacent passages further support the delimitation. The preceding pericope (Mk 3:13–19), which narrates the appointment of the Twelve, takes place on a mountain. At the same time, the subsequent section (Mk 4:1) introduces Jesus' teaching in parables by the Sea of Galilee. These changes in location – from mountain to house and then to the Sea of Galilee – as well as the transition from the selection of disciples to parabolic instruction, reinforce the coherence of Mk 3:20–35 as a distinct narrative unit.

2. The Text and Its Structural Outline

The pericope exhibits a typical Markan intercalation A–B–A' (May, 1987, 83; Boring, 2006, p. 103; Moj, 2018, pp. 363, 369–370, 376), often referred to as a “Markan sandwich” (Tuckett, 2001, p. 894; Edwards, 1989, pp. 197, 209–210) or a framing narrative (Ahearne-Kroll, 2001, p. 11; Resseguie, 2005, pp. 54–55). Section A depicts Jesus at home and foregrounds the motif of his household or kin, whereas section B presents his teaching on “a house divided.”

For the reader's convenience, the Greek text of Mk 3:20–35 is presented below with its structural arrangement. A translation reflecting the author's argument will be provided in the conclusion of the article.

[A]

[20] Καὶ ἔρχεται εἰς οἶκον· καὶ συνέρχεται πάλιν [ὁ] ὄχλος, ὥστε μὴ δύνασθαι αὐτοὺς μηδὲ ἄρτον φαγεῖν. [21] καὶ ἀκούσαντες οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ ἐξῆλθον κρατῆσαι αὐτόν· ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη.

[B]

[22] Καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς οἱ ἀπὸ Ἱεροσολύμων καταβάντες ἔλεγον ὅτι Βεελζεβοὺλ ἔχεικαὶ ὅτι ἐν τῷ ἄρχοντι τῶν δαιμονίων ἐκβάλλει τὰ δαιμόνια. [23] Καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτοὺς ἐν παραβολαῖς ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς· πῶς δύναται σατανᾶς σατανᾶν ἐκβάλλειν; [24] καὶ ἐὰν βασιλεία ἐφ’ ἑαυτὴν μερισθῆ, οὐ δύναται σταθῆναι ἢ βασιλεία ἐκεῖνη· [25] καὶ ἐὰν οἰκία ἐφ’ ἑαυτὴν μερισθῆ, οὐ δυνησεται ἢ οἰκία ἐκεῖνη σταθῆναι. [26] καὶ εἰ ὁ σατανᾶς ἀνέστη ἐφ’ ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἐμερισθῆ, οὐ δύναται στῆναι ἀλλὰ τέλος ἔχει. [27] ἀλλ’ οὐ δύναται οὐδεὶς εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν τοῦ ἰσχυροῦ εἰσελθὼν τὰ σκεύη αὐτοῦ διαρπάσαι, ἐὰν μὴ πρῶτον τὸν ἰσχυρὸν δῆσῃ, καὶ τότε τὴν οἰκίαν αὐτοῦ διαρπάσει. [28] Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πάντα ἀφεθήσεται τοῖς υἱοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὰ ἀμαρτήματα καὶ αἱ βλασφημίαι ὅσα ἐὰν βλασφημήσωσιν· [29] ὃς δ’ ἂν βλασφημήσῃ εἰς τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, οὐκ ἔχει ἄφεσιν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ἀλλ’ ἔνοχός ἐστιν αἰωνίου ἀμαρτήματος. [30] ὅτι ἔλεγον· πνεῦμα ἀκάθαρτον ἔχει.

[A’]

[31] Καὶ ἔρχεται ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔξω στήκοντες ἀπέστειλαν πρὸς αὐτὸν καλοῦντες αὐτόν. [32] καὶ ἐκάθητο περὶ αὐτὸν ὄχλος, καὶ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· ἰδοὺ ἡ μήτηρ σου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί σου [καὶ αἱ ἀδελφαί σου] ἔξω ζητοῦσίν σε. [33] καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς αὐτοῖς λέγει· τίς ἐστὶν ἡ μήτηρ μου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί [μου]; [34] καὶ περιβλεψάμενος τοὺς περὶ αὐτὸν κύκλω καθημένους λέγει· ἴδε ἡ μήτηρ μου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί μου. [35] ὃς [γὰρ] ἂν ποιῆσῃ τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, οὗτος ἀδελφός μου καὶ ἀδελφὴ καὶ μήτηρ ἐστίν. (NA 28)

A key feature of Markan intercalation (A–B–A’) is that, despite apparent thematic overlap, sections A and B function in deliberate contrast (Moj, 2018, p. 365). This aspect has been insufficiently emphasized in the interpretation of Mk 3:20–35. If the central section (B) depicts rejection by the scribes from Jerusalem, it follows that the framing sections (A and A’) should not be read as reiterating rejection, but as introducing a distinct and contrasting motif. This hypothesis will guide the analysis that follows.

3. Contrast and Conflict

Contrast and conflict are central to the narrative dynamics of Mk 3:20–35, as they generate tension and highlight key interpretive

moments (Crimella, 2015, p. 147 [the “Tel Aviv School”]; Resseguie, 2005, pp. 201–202). The passage employs *synkrisis* (σύγκρισις), the juxtaposition of contrasting figures, to sharpen the reader’s perception of the events.

At the surface level, a tension appears to exist between Jesus and his family (Resseguie, 2005, p. 201). This tension has at times been mitigated by interpreting the intercalation (Mk 3:20–21 || Mk 3:22–30 || Mk 3:31–35) as contrasting the relatively benign concern of Jesus’ relatives with the overt hostility of the scribes from Jerusalem (Collins & Attridge, 2007, p. 226).

However, the primary and explicit conflict in the pericope occurs between Jesus and the scribes (Mk 3:22–30), who represent the first named antagonists in the Markan narrative (cf. Mk 2:6). The entirety of Mark’s narrative is carefully structured around Jesus’ conflicts with the authorities, first in Galilee and then in Jerusalem (Rhoads, 1982, pp. 415, 418). The scribes in Mk 3:22 represent the first indication of conflict with Jerusalem, which will later become a hostile place toward Jesus and ultimately the site of his death.

Accusations of scribes in Mk 3:22 are twofold: first, that Beelzebul possesses Jesus, and second, that his exorcisms are effected through the power of Satan. This confrontation anticipates the broader trajectory of the Gospel, in which opposition from religious authorities intensifies, culminating in Jerusalem as the place of Jesus’ death.

Jesus’ response reframes the conflict at a theological level. By arguing that a divided kingdom or household cannot stand (Mk 3:23–26), he exposes the internal incoherence of the accusation (Tuckett, 2001, p. 894). The logic of conflict itself becomes a means of refutation: if Satan were acting against himself, his power would collapse. The contrast is further sharpened in the opposition between the Holy Spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον; Mk 3:29) and the unclean spirit (πνεῦμα ἀκάθαρτον; Mk 3:30).

Within this framework, the tension involving Jesus’ family assumes a different significance: rather than representing genuine opposition, it belongs to the sphere of apparent misunderstanding. The narrative thus establishes a distinction between true and perceived conflict, locating the former in the scribes’ opposition. At the same time, the stance of

Jesus' family is progressively reframed in a different light. In this way, contrast and conflict function not only to generate narrative tension but also to guide the reader toward a deeper understanding of Jesus' identity.

4. Literary Techniques and Devices

The literary and rhetorical features of Mk 3:20–35 play a decisive role in shaping the reader's interpretation of the pericope. Devices such as repetition, structural patterns, and wordplay are not merely ornamental but function as interpretive signals embedded within the narrative. In particular, they provide the framework for reassessing key terms such as ἐξέστη (Mk 3:21), whose meaning cannot be determined in isolation from the text's broader literary design. The following analysis will examine these techniques to show how they guide the reader toward a more coherent understanding of the passage.

4.1. Repetition

Repetition serves to accentuate the author's theological emphasis (Rhoads & Michie, 1983, pp. 46–47; Resseguie, 2005, p. 44) and to construct the narrative backdrop, which is crucial for understanding Mk 3:20–35. In this pericope, particular attention is drawn to the motif of the "house." The term describing the house where Jesus is found (Mk 3:20) is masculine (acc. sg. οἶκον), whereas in his discourse, Jesus uses the feminine form, which may denote a "household" or "home-community" (Mk 3:25 – nom. sg. οἰκία [2×]; Mk 3:27 – acc. sg. οἰκίαν [2×]). It is worth noting that the first term appears only in A, while the second appears only in B (cf. section 3).

Attention to repetition clarifies not only the structure of the pericope but also that of the Gospel as a whole (Resseguie, 2005, p. 44). The forms of repetition include simple lexical repetition (οἶκος / οἰκία), motif repetition (the "home" in connection with the mother and relatives in Mk 3:31–35), and thematic repetition, particularly in relation to discipleship, where the "house" becomes an image of the community

gathered around Jesus (Resseguie, 2005, p. 46). Trainor has explored this motif in *The Quest for Home* (2001). Alongside its Christological and catechetical significance, the text also displays an ecclesiological dimension: the house with Jesus at its center becomes an image of the Church. Notably, in Mark, the houses whose ownership remains unspecified are precisely those that Jesus enters and uses; cf. Mk 2:1; 3:20; 7:17, 24; 9:28, 33; 10:10 (Painter, 1999, p. 500).

Further repetitions reinforce the narrative structure. For instance, the phrase καὶ ἔρχεται in Mk 3:20 and Mk 3:31 marks the beginning of two units that frame the pericope, forming the characteristic Markan intercalation (A–B–A’).

A	Mk 3:20–21	καὶ ἔρχεται
B	Mk 3:22–30	
A’	Mk 3:31–35	καὶ ἔρχεται

A repetition can be observed involving ἐξέστη (Mk 3:21) and other verbs derived from ἵστημι in Mk 3:24–26. The passage features a double occurrence of σταθῆναι, the aorist passive infinitive (Mk 3:24–25), as well as στῆναι, the aorist active infinitive (Mk 3:26), along with the verb ἀνέστη (“has risen”) in the same verse.

This pattern of verbal repetition highlights that the preposition ἔξω and the verbal root ἵστημι occur both in Mk 3:21 (ἐξέστη) and in Mk 3:31 (ἔξω στήκοντες), thereby creating a subtle lexical and thematic connection between the two passages.

Mk 3:21	ἐξέστη
Mk 3:24	σταθῆναι
Mk 3:25	σταθῆναι
Mk 3:26	στῆναι
Mk 3:26	ἀνέστη
Mk 3:31	ἔξω στήκοντες

The narrative strategy also employs emphatic repetition in Mk 3:31–35: references to Jesus’ mother and relatives occur five times. This repetition emphasizes the concept of the “home” as a community defined by its members.

ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτοῦ	Mk 3:31
ἡ μήτηρ σου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί σου [καὶ αἱ ἀδελφαί σου]	Mk 3:32
ἡ μήτηρ μου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί [μου]	Mk 3:33
ἡ μήτηρ μου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί μου	Mk 3:34
ἀδελφός μου καὶ ἀδελφὴ καὶ μήτηρ	Mk 3:35

4.2. Rhetorical Devices

Rhetorical devices significantly contribute to a text’s semantic depth and interpretive potential, while also strengthening its persuasive impact (Resseguie, 2005, p. 20). Through their deployment, narrative elements acquire greater vividness and affective resonance, guiding the reader beyond the surface level of meaning. In the present pericope, such devices are not merely ornamental but contribute decisively to the articulation of its theological message. In what follows, particular attention will be given to chiasmus and wordplay as the primary rhetorical strategies that structure and enrich the narrative.

4.2.1. Chiasmus

The structure of Mk 3:20–35 seems to be outlined as follows: accusations are directed against Jesus in Mk 3:20–22 – first by his family (vv. 20–21) and then by the scribes (v. 22). Jesus then responds to these charges (Mk 3:23–27), issues a warning concerning blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mk 3:28–30), and concludes with a redefinition of his true family (Mk 3:31–35) (Evans, 2003, p. 1075). This narrative can be represented in a chiastic pattern X–Y–Z–Y’–X’ (Harrington, 1990, p. 604; Malina, 2002, p. 111):

[X] Mk 3:20–21			the charge made by the family
	[Y] Mk 3:22		the charge made by the scribes
		[Z] Mk 3:23–27	Jesus' defence
	[Y'] Mk 3:28–30		Jesus' judgement on the scribes vv. 28–29 + narrator's judgement on the scribes v. 30
[X'] Mk 3:31–35			Jesus' judgement on his family

However, as will be demonstrated below, the chiasmic structure remains intact even if element X is interpreted differently (cf. sections 5.2.2; 6; 9.4–5). Such a reinterpretation does not disrupt the formal symmetry of the pattern but rather refines its semantic coherence, allowing the correspondence between X and X' to be understood on a more nuanced level.

4.2.2. Wordplay

The principal wordplay employed by the Gospel of Mark and examined in this article concerns the subtle semantic nuance of the verb ἐξέστη in Mk 3:21. The term (cf. BDAG, s.v.) generally denotes the induction of a state of consternation or astonishment. Its semantic range varies depending on whether it is used intransitively or transitively. The terse usage in Mk 3:21 allows for both interpretations, or at least does not exclude either.

Assuming an intransitive usage, the verb ἐξίστημι takes on the meaning “to be beside oneself,” i.e., “to go out of one’s mind,” a sense also favored by BDAG for Mk 3:21. In its transitive usage, however, it signifies “to cause astonishment,” “to amaze,” or “to astound” (cf. Lk 24:22). By way of analogy, one may point to the English idiom “He outdid himself,” which denotes surpassing one’s previous achievements or standards – whether in a positive or negative sense. The present study adopts an interpretive approach that explores the possibility of reading ἐξέστη in Mk 3:21 as a transitive form.

Maintaining the assumption of narrative intercalation, the new wordplay in Mk 3:31 opens up two complementary interpretive possibilities.

On the one hand, ἔξω στήκοντες may be read in its literal sense as “standing outside”; on the other, in light of the semantic range of ἐξέστη in Mk 3:21, it may also evoke a state of astonishment. Within this framework, the attitude of Jesus’ family, who do not fully understand his activity, can be interpreted as characterized by an affective response. The parallelism between Mk 3:21 and Mk 3:31 (elements X and X’ of the chiasmic structure in section 5.2.1) thus reinforces this reading, integrating emotional dimension into a coherent rhetorical effect.

The analysis of literary techniques and rhetorical devices demonstrates that the structure of Mk 3:20–35 is both deliberate and interpretively decisive. Repetition, intercalation, and wordplay link the narrative’s framing sections and support a unified reading. In this regard, the interplay between ἐξέστη (Mk 3:21) and ἔξω στήκοντες (Mk 3:31) proves particularly significant and merits closer examination.

5. Close Reading

Close reading examines the semantic ambiguities of words within a text, attending closely to the text itself rather than to the historical or cultural contexts that produced it, as argued by Resseguie (2005, pp. 23–24). The following analysis focuses on Mk 3:21 and 3:31, with particular attention to the verb ἐξέστη.

The verb ἐξέστη may be understood as referring not to Jesus but to the crowd, a reading that is grammatically possible. However, in the immediate context, the noun ὄχλος (“crowd”) is further from the verb than the reference to Jesus, making such an interpretation less likely.

The combination ἔξω + ἴστημι, as demonstrated in section 5.2.2, admits several possible meanings: (1) “to stand outside,” (2) “to be out of one’s mind,” or (3) “to amaze.” From a narrative perspective, however, only the third option proves coherent. Assuming that a parallelism is posited between the outer sections of the intercalation, the first proposal fails to account for Mk 3:21, where Jesus cannot be described as “standing outside.” In contrast, the second introduces a contradiction, attributing madness both to Jesus (Mk 3:21) and, by implication, to his

family (Mk 3:31). By contrast, the interpretation in terms of astonishment preserves the semantic parallelism and aligns with the broader narrative development.

Notably, in its other occurrences in Mark (2:12; 5:42; 6:51) and elsewhere in the NT narrative tradition, the verb consistently denotes astonishment; cf. Mt 12:23; Lk 2:47; 8:56; 24:22; Ac 2:7, 12; 8:9, 11, 13; 9:21; 10:45; 12:16 (Holland, 2017, pp. 10–11). The verb in Mk 3:21 may therefore be understood in the sense that “Jesus amazed,” rather than implying madness (Holland, 2017, p. 6). Otherwise, this would constitute the only instance of such a motif in the Gospel of Mark (Painter, 1999, p. 506).

Taken together, these observations demonstrate that the semantic and rhetorical features of key expressions in Mk 3:20–35 are best understood within the narrative as a whole. In particular, the interpretation of ἐξέστη as “amazement” rather than “madness” not only accords with its usage elsewhere in Mark but also preserves the coherence of the intercalated structure and supports the movement of the narrative from apparent misunderstanding toward recognition.

6. Author, Reader, and Narrator

Narrative criticism distinguishes between the implied author, the real author, the implied reader, and the real reader, while also recognizing the narrator as a distinct voice within the text. These categories are particularly helpful for interpreting Mk 3:20–35, where meaning emerges through a carefully constructed narrative strategy.

A key feature of this strategy is the intercalated structure (A–B–A’), in which the framing sections (A and A’) stand in contrast to the central section (B). While section B presents explicit opposition to Jesus from the scribes (cf. section 4), section A initially appears to depict a similar stance on the part of his family. At first reading, the real reader may thus gain the impression that Jesus’ relatives depreciate him.

However, a more attentive reading – guided by the structural contrast between A and B – leads to a reassessment of this impression

(cf. section 6). The implied author appears to exploit this initial ambiguity as part of a deliberate narrative strategy. Through the narrator's guidance and the interplay of lexical and structural cues, the reader is invited to recognize that the apparent parallel between the family and the scribes is, in fact, misleading.

In this way, the text stages a subtle interaction between the real author and the reader. What seems at first to be a narrative of rejection is gradually reinterpreted as a movement toward recognition. The narrator facilitates this shift by framing key statements (Mk 3:21; 3:30) and directing attention to their deeper significance. Ultimately, the reader discovers that the stance of Jesus' family is not one of rejection but of astonishment, and that true belonging to his "house" is defined not by biological ties but by a response to him.

7. Settings

In examining the temporal and spatial dimensions of the narrative (Resseguie, 2005, p. 94) in Mk 3:20–35, it becomes evident that these elements are not merely descriptive but function as integral components of the narrative strategy. They help reframe the perceived tensions within the pericope, especially regarding the reconfiguration of kinship and the transition from misperception to insight.

7.1. Temporal Setting

Unlike many narrative units, Mk 3:20–35 lacks explicit temporal markers (Green, 2010, p. 93), thereby shifting the focus from chronological sequence to interpretive development. The events are presented in a compressed form that directs attention not to when they occur, but to how they are to be understood.

Accordingly, the narrative progression may be read as a movement toward recognition. The absence of temporal specification reinforces this dynamic: what initially appears as a misunderstanding – particularly regarding Jesus' family – is gradually re-evaluated. The narrative

thus foregrounds the process of perception rather than the sequence of events.

Within this framework, the motif of journey may be interpreted metaphorically as a process of perception unfolding over time (Resseguie, 2005, p. 100). The movement from Nazareth to Capernaum becomes a metaphor for the developing understanding of Jesus' family. Upon arriving, they find him surrounded by the crowd – a scene that evokes astonishment (ἔξω στήκοντες; Mk 3:31). The trajectory of Jesus' relatives thus culminates not in rejection, but in the recognition of his extraordinary identity.

7.2. Geographical Setting

The spatial arrangement significantly influences the development of the narrative (Resseguie, 2005, p. 21). In Mk 3:20–35, it is organized around a fundamental contrast. The central location is the house, likely situated in Capernaum, which functions as the primary locus of Jesus' activity (Rhoads & Michie, 1983, p. 68). Here he teaches, gathers followers, and redefines the concept of family. The house thus emerges as a symbolic space, representing a community formed in response to Jesus (cf. section 5.1). The listeners gathered within it anticipate the later image of the Church, whose members are described as “brothers” (ἀδελφοί; cf. Mk 3:34).

This space stands in implicit contrast to Jerusalem, from which the scribes originate (cf. Mk 3:22). Their arrival introduces conflict. It foreshadows the broader hostility that will culminate later in the Gospel (Crossan, 1973, p. 89). While the house signifies proximity, participation, and the possibility of recognition, Jerusalem embodies distance, opposition, and rejection.

This spatial contrast corresponds closely to the structural tension between sections A and B. What appears in the house (A) as misunderstanding – particularly in relation to Jesus' family – is fundamentally distinct from the explicit hostility associated with Jerusalem (B). The geographical setting thus reinforces the narrative dynamic, guiding the reader toward a reinterpretation of the apparent opposition within the pericope.

Taken together, the temporal indeterminacy and the symbolic centrality of the house form a coherent interpretive framework in which the setting does not merely function as a backdrop but actively shapes the reader's understanding of the narrative. In particular, it reinforces the distinction between apparent and real opposition and supports the movement from misunderstanding to recognition. Within this framework, even the reaction expressed in Mk 3:21 may be re-evaluated: rather than indicating rejection, it can be read as part of a developing perception that culminates in astonishment. The setting thus plays a decisive role in guiding the reader toward a reinterpretation of the pericope and its central question of belonging.

8. Characters

Narrative criticism pays particular attention to the configuration and function of characters within the story. In Mk 3:20–35, characterization is closely linked to the dynamics of misunderstanding, opposition, and the redefinition of belonging. The following analysis proceeds from the central figure of Jesus (9.1), through the collective figure of the crowd (9.2), to the opposing role of the scribes (9.3) and the ambivalent position of Jesus' family (9.4). Finally, special attention is given to the ambiguous expression οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ (9.5), whose indeterminacy brings these various groups into a shared interpretative framework and plays a crucial role in the pericope's narrative strategy.

8.1. Jesus

Jesus is the central figure of the pericope. Following the distinction between “round” and “flat” characters (Rhoads, 1982, p. 415; Resseguie, 2005, p. 123), Jesus may be described as a round character, marked by complexity and a degree of narrative unpredictability. His portrayal resists reduction to a single, stable interpretive category; instead, his words and actions continually exceed the expectations of other characters within the narrative. This complexity is evident in the way he

responds to accusations, redefines kinship, and articulates his mission in terms that challenge conventional social and religious frameworks.

8.2. Crowd

By contrast, the crowd functions as a comparatively flat figure. This designation should not be understood in a negative sense, but rather in technical narratological terms: “flat” characters are defined by a limited range of traits and a relative stability of response. Accordingly, the crowd’s reactions remain largely consistent and predictable, offering little development or surprise throughout the pericope (Rhoads & Michie, 1983, p. 134). Precisely through this stability, however, the crowd fulfills an important narrative function, providing a constant backdrop against which the complexity of Jesus’ characterization can stand out more sharply.

The crowd mentioned in Mk 3:20 appears to correspond to those seated around Jesus in Mk 3:32 (ἐκάθητο περι αὐτὸν ὄχλος) and Mk 3:34 (τοὺς περι αὐτὸν κύκλω καθημένους). In this way, the crowd takes on the role of disciples, analogous to the Twelve introduced in Mk 3:13–19.

Thus, the crowd is presented as a cohesive, even idealized, community gathered around Jesus. Mark uniquely depicts this scene with spatial precision: Jesus stands at the center, surrounded by a circle of listeners within the house’s enclosing structure. This configuration – reminiscent of the ancient motif of a circle set within a square, symbolizing a divine presence concealed within the material realm (Burckhardt, 1967, 18–19; Critchlow, 1969, 84) – underscores the theological significance of the scene, suggesting that the gathered community participates in and surrounds a hidden yet active locus of the divine.

8.3. Scribes

The scribes play a central role in Mk 3:22–30 as representatives of opposition (cf. section 4). Coming from Jerusalem, they confront Jesus and accuse him of demonic possession. Yet their position is destabilized by his unanswerable questions. However, from a narrative perspective,

their being called toward Jesus (Mk 3:23) may suggest a partial inclusion within the circle gathered around him, complicating a strictly oppositional reading.

8.4. Family – Mother and Brothers

Jesus' family is unable to reach him because of the crowd and is thus portrayed as standing "outside" (Mk 3:31). In this respect, they resemble the scribes, who also misunderstand his mission.

However, the expression ἔξω στήκοντες may carry a double meaning, suggesting not only physical distance but also astonishment (cf. sections 5.2.2; 6). In parallel, ἐξέστη in Mk 3:21 may portray Jesus as one who amazes and astonishes. Within the Markan intercalation, this wordplay allows for a reinterpretation of the family's stance: rather than rejecting Jesus, they are depicted as standing in awe before him.

8.5. Οἱ Παρ' Αὐτοῦ (Mk 3:21)

As a *hapax legomenon* in the NT, the expression οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ resists precise identification of its referent (Crossan, 1973, p. 84). The construction of the pericope deliberately sustains this ambiguity, as the expression may denote the Twelve, the scribes, the crowd, or Jesus' family. While each of these interpretations has been proposed in scholarship, the phrase functions less as a fixed designation and more as a narrative device that invites interpretation. Its indeterminacy, rather than constituting a problem to be resolved, serves a strategic role within the Markan composition.

The phrase οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ denotes those associated with a given individual (BDAG, s.v. οἱ παρὰ τινος [παρά]). In constructions of this type, the referents are typically introduced earlier in the narrative (Lambrecht, 1974, p. 245), which suggests that Mk 3:20–35 should be read in continuity with the prior pericope (Painter, 1999, p. 498). The immediate context (Mk 3:13–19) suggests that οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ refers to the **Twelve**, recently appointed to be "with him" (ἵνα ὦσιν μετ' αὐτοῦ; Mk 3:14) (Holland, 2017, p. 7). This reading is reinforced by parallels in the Septuagint, where

the expression can denote close companions (e.g., Jonathan's associates in 1 Macc). On this basis, the interpretation that identifies οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ with the disciples offers a coherent explanation: they leave the house to restrain (κρατῆσαι) the enthusiastic (ἐξέστη) crowd (Guelich, 1989, p. 172)¹.

Alternative proposals identify οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ with the **scribes** (Mk 3:22), supported by some Western textual witnesses: *Codex Bezae* (D) and *Codex Washingtonensis* (W) (Guelich, 1989, p. 167), or with the **crowd**, understood as a collective subject (Holland, 2017, pp. 9, 15; cf. Mk 3:32: ὄχλος... λέγουσιν). While these interpretations offer partial explanations, they remain structurally unconvincing, since they do not integrate the opening scene in Mk 3:20–21 with its narrative counterpart in Mk 3:31–35. Consequently, such readings isolate Mk 3:21 from its narrative resolution and tend to revive interpretative possibilities that textual criticism has already largely excluded.

Identifying οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ with Jesus' family not only accords with the narrative logic but also coheres with the compositional strategy of intercalation (A–B–A'). Mk 3:21 (A) and Mk 3:31 (A') are connected by lexical and thematic correspondences, most notably ἐξέστη and ἔξω στήκοντες (cf. section 5.1). Read in isolation, ἐξέστη has often been interpreted as implying that Jesus was “out of his mind.” Within the intercalated structure, however, this interpretation becomes increasingly untenable. The parallel with ἔξω στήκοντες, when applied to Jesus' family, instead suggests a semantic field of astonishment rather than madness (cf. sections 5.2.2; 6). Additionally, it should be noted that, although it was previously observed that, in the LXX, the expression οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ most often refers to companions, in Prov 31:21 LXX the expression clearly refers to family, thereby providing additional support for such an interpretation in Mk 3:21.

¹ R. Stein (2008, p. 181) objects that in such constructions (κρατῆσαι αὐτόν – Mk 3:21) a singular pronoun cannot refer to a collective noun such as “crowd”, which typically governs plural agreement. However, this claim is not without exception; Rev 7:9 provides a counterexample (Cignelli & Bottini, 1995, p. 152). Moreover, this interpretation gains some support from textual variants: several manuscripts (α² A C L Θ et al.) read “they went” instead of “he went” in Mk 3:20, while *Codex Bezae* (D) reads “they went in”.

In summary, four main interpretations for οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ may be distinguished: A) the Twelve; B) the scribes; C) the crowd; D) Jesus’ family. While proposals A and D are the most plausible, only D fully accounts for the Markan intercalation. Accordingly, ἐξέστη (Mk 3:21) should not be understood as indicating madness, but rather in connection with ἐξω στήκοντες (Mk 3:31), suggesting amazement.

The ambiguity of οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ thus serves a deliberate rhetorical function: it initially destabilizes the reader’s expectations, only to be resolved through the narrative framing. What appears as misunderstanding or rejection (“he outdid himself”) is ultimately reconfigured as a response of astonishment (“he amazed [the people]”). In this way, the pericope portrays Jesus not as rejected by his family, but as one whose identity exceeds familiar categories, leaving even those closest to him standing in awe.

The characterization in Mk 3:20–35, as outlined above, moves from clearly identifiable figures to an intentionally ambiguous designation that gathers them into a common interpretative field. The expression οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ thus functions as a narrative hinge: it initially blurs distinctions between the various groups, only to reconfigure them within the broader perspective of the pericope. In this way, misunderstanding, opposition, and proximity are not final categories but stages within a process of recognition. Consequently, true belonging is redefined – not in terms of physical or social proximity to Jesus, but in relation to his identity, which exceeds conventional categories and elicits a response of astonishment. Those who were παρ’ αὐτοῦ (“from him”; Mk 3:21) have the potential to become περὶ αὐτὸν (“around him”; Mk 3:32.34).

9. Story and Plot

Narrative analysis differentiates between story (the sequence of events) and plot (their meaningful arrangement) (Ludwig, 1995, p. 146; Czernski, 1997, p. 186). In Mk 3:20–35, these two levels largely coincide, as the events are presented in chronological order, allowing the reader to follow the unfolding action from within the narrative perspective.

The plot may be structured in five stages: (1) exposition (Mk 3:20a), (2) initiation of action (Mk 3:20b), (3) complication (Mk 3:21, 31–32; 3:22–30), (4) resolution (Mk 3:33–34), and (5) conclusion (Mk 3:35). This progression highlights the central tension of the pericope and its eventual reinterpretation.

Two major plot patterns may be identified: a U-shaped (comic) pattern and an inverted U-shaped (tragic) pattern (Resseguie, 2005, p. 204). The interpretation of ἐξέστη in Mk 3:21 proves decisive for determining which structure is operative. If the verb is understood in the sense of astonishment, the narrative follows a U-shaped trajectory: an initial moment of tension gives way to clarification and resolution, culminating in a positive reconfiguration of Jesus' family as those who stand in awe before him (cf. ἔξω στήκοντες in Mk 3:31).

By contrast, if ἐξέστη is taken to imply madness, the narrative assumes an inverted U-shape: the initial misunderstanding intensifies and culminates in a statement that appears to distance Jesus from his biological relatives (Mk 3:33–35). Such a reading, however, fails to account for the broader narrative and rhetorical dynamics of the passage.

Beyond these structural patterns, the pericope also exhibits features of a "plot of revelation." Aristotle described this as *anagnorisis* (Lausberg, 1998, §§1213–1215), a movement from ignorance to recognition (Resseguie, 2005, p. 205). In Mk 3:20–35, this dynamic is particularly evident in the portrayal of Jesus' family. Initially positioned outside and associated with misunderstanding, they are gradually reinterpreted within the narrative framework as witnesses to Jesus' extraordinary identity. Their stance, described in Mk 3:31, may thus be read not as exclusion, but as the threshold of recognition. The interplay between the plot of action and the plot of revelation leads even the initially unaware attentive reader to a moment of insight by the end (Resseguie, 2005, p. 204).

Accordingly, the plot of Mk 3:20–35 is best understood as a movement toward revelation: what begins as an apparent misunderstanding is ultimately transformed into a response of astonishment. In this way, the narrative once again supports interpreting ἐξέστη not as madness, but as conveying a reaction of profound astonishment.

10. Narrative Strategy

Mark frequently employs the technique of intercalation, in which one narrative is interrupted by another and then resumed. This compositional strategy directs the reader's attention to the central section as the interpretive key for the surrounding material. In Mk 3:20–35, the inner episode (Mk 3:22–30) reframes the outer narrative and provides the theological lens through which it is to be understood.

Within this framework, Jesus proclaims the emergence of a new, eschatological household. He redefines family not by biological ties but by obedience to the will of God. The narrative thus emphasizes that bonds of faith surpass bonds of blood (Ahearne-Kroll, 2001, p. 22; Lamb, 2012, p. 262). In this sense, even figures traditionally associated with biological kinship – such as Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ – are implicitly reinterpreted in terms of discipleship.

The pericope also functions as a response to accusations directed against Jesus, both during his lifetime and in the early reception of the Gospel. He is charged with being out of his mind (wordplay in Mk 3:21) and with acting under demonic influence (Mk 3:22). These accusations recur in the Synoptic tradition (cf. Mt 12:22–29; Lk 11:14–23) and are echoed in Jn 10:20². The narrative strategy does not merely refute these claims but reconfigures them. What is perceived as madness is revealed as misunderstanding, and what is attributed to demonic power is shown to be the work of the Holy Spirit.

In this way, the intercalated structure leads the reader beyond the level of accusation toward a deeper interpretive question. If Jesus is neither mad nor possessed, then his actions demand a different explanation.

2 Similar incriminations appear in the Tannaic texts (*bSanh* 43a, 107b; cf. *Sot* 47a). They are mentioned in early patristic texts of Justin Martyr (*Dial. Cum Tryph.* 69), Origen (*Against Celsus* 1, 6; 8, 9. 39), and Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 2, 6) (Harrington, 1990, p. 604).

Conclusion

The narrative analysis of Mk 3:20–35 demonstrates that the apparent tensions within the pericope – between Jesus and his family, between accusation and response, and between misunderstanding and recognition – are not incidental but carefully orchestrated through Mark’s compositional strategy. Central to this strategy is the intercalated structure (Mk 3:20–21 || Mk 3:22–30 || Mk 3:31–35), which provides the hermeneutical key for interpreting the entire passage.

Within this framework, the ambiguity of *οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ* (cf. section 8.5) functions not as a textual problem to be resolved, but as a deliberate narrative device. Although several identifications remain possible, interpreting the phrase as referring to Jesus’ family proves most consistent with the structural, lexical, and thematic coherence of the pericope. The narrator thus traces the movement of Jesus’ relatives toward recognizing him as more than merely one of their own.

This reading is reinforced by the close parallelism between Mk 3:21 and Mk 3:31 – evident not only in the repetition of *καὶ ἔρχεται*, but especially in the interplay between *ἐξέστη* and *ἔξω στήκοντες* (*ἔξω* and the verbal form of *ἴστημι*). When read in light of the intercalated structure, this lexical correspondence serves as wordplay that reorients the reader’s understanding of the episode.

Accordingly, the widespread interpretation of *ἐξέστη* as implying madness (cf. sections 4.2; 5) proves inadequate. While such a reading may appear plausible in isolation, it becomes increasingly untenable within the broader narrative context. By contrast, the semantic field of astonishment offers a more coherent explanation, one that preserves the text’s internal consistency and aligns with its rhetorical and theological development.

This reinterpretation also clarifies the nature of conflict within the pericope (cf. section 4). A crucial distinction emerges between apparent and real opposition. Whereas the scribes represent genuine hostility toward Jesus, his family’s stance falls within the sphere of misunderstanding and is progressively reconfigured. The plot dynamics (cf. section 10) support this reading: when *ἐξέστη* is understood in terms of

astonishment, the narrative follows a U-shaped trajectory culminating in recognition; the alternative reading (“madness”) produces an inverted structure that disrupts this coherence. In Aristotelian terms, the pericope exhibits elements of *anagnorisis*, as characters – and, by extension, the reader – move from ignorance to insight.

The spatial setting further reinforces this development. The house (cf. sections 4.1 and 7.2), in which Jesus teaches and gathers a community, serves as a symbolic center of meaning. This “household” transcends biological kinship and is defined instead by response to Jesus. Within this setting, belonging is redefined: spiritual bonds take precedence over familial ties, and even those closest to him are drawn into a process that leads beyond misunderstanding.

When considered as a whole, these elements form a consistent and integrated interpretive perspective. The pericope does not present Jesus as rejected by his family, but rather depicts a process in which initial misunderstanding gives way to recognition. His identity surpasses conventional categories and cannot be adequately explained by reductive readings. Accordingly, Mk 3:20–35 directs the reader beyond misinterpretations of madness or possession toward a central Christological question: who, then, is he?

In light of the foregoing analysis, a translation of the passage is proposed below – one that seeks to reflect Mark’s wordplay within the structure of the intercalation:

[A]

[20] Then he entered a house, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. [21] When his relatives heard about this, they went out to take hold of him, for it was being said that he was exceeding himself.

[B]

[22] The scribes who had come down from Jerusalem were saying, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” [23] And he called them to himself and spoke to them in parables, saying: “How can Satan cast out Satan? [24] If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. [25] And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. [26] If Satan has risen against himself and is divided,

he cannot stand, but his end has come. [27] No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man; and only then can his house be plundered. [28] Truly I tell you, all sins will be forgiven the people, and whatever blasphemies they utter; [29] but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" – [30] because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

[A']

[31] Then his mother and his brothers arrived, and feeling amazed they sent to him and called him. [32] A crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, seeking you." [33] And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" [34] And looking around at those seated in a circle about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! [35] Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Abstract

The Divided House Revisited: A Narrative Reading of Mark 3:20–35

The article offers a narrative analysis of Mark 3:20–35, focusing on the intercalation structure ("Markan sandwich") and the motif of the "house." It demonstrates how repetition, rhetorical devices, and chiasmic patterns shape the interpretation of the pericope. Particular attention is given to the expressions οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ and ἐξέστη, proposing its reading in terms of "amazement" rather than "madness." The author argues that the text does not depreciate Jesus' family but portrays their gradual movement toward faith. Ultimately, the "house" becomes an image of the community of disciples, where spiritual bonds surpass blood ties.

Keywords: Gospel of Mark; Mark 3:20–35; narrative analysis; intercalation; house, οἶκος, οἰκία; Jesus' family; οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ; ἐξέστη; biblical rhetoric; discipleship

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