CHAPTER THREE

TWO PRE-MARKAN CONTROVERSY COLLECTIONS

Why Two Camps of Conspirators in Mark?

While Mark alleges that five Jewish leadership groups shared a desire to have Jesus arrested and executed, he appears to compartmentalize them into two separate camps:

1. Chief priests + scribes + elders;
2. Pharisees + Herodians.

Instead of joining forces, these two sets of conspirators have no contact or communication with one another except when scribes and Pharisees are conjoined in 7:1, 5 (cf. 2:16). Never in their fourteen appearances do chief priests, in the one camp, encounter, much less conspire with, either Pharisees or Herodians in the other camp; elders never meet them either; in twenty-one appearances, scribes are never mentioned with Herodians, and, aside from the exceptions noted, not with Pharisees either.

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1 Chief priests, scribes and elders are conjoined in the following passages: 8:31; 11:27; 14:45, 53; 15:1. Sometimes, only the chief priests and the scribes are present: 10:33; 11:18; 14:1; 15:31.
2 Pharisees and Herodians are conjoined in 3:6 and 12:13 (and possibly in 8:15; see Chapter Two, note 15).
3 The exact reading in 7:1 is “certain of the scribes.” The variant reading in 2:16 is “the scribes and the Pharisees”; on the problem see Burkill, New Light, 223 n. 56; Bacon, Beginnings, 28-29; Dibelius, op. cit., 64; Taylor, op. cit., 173, 206, 209.
6 Chief priests are not present when Herodians appear; see 3:6 and 12:13; cf. 8:15.
7 Elders are mentioned five times: 8:31; 11:27; 14:43, 53; 15:1. They never appear with Pharisees or Herodians. The word “elders” does appear twice, however, in 7:1ff., a passage mentioning Pharisees. Yet here the term “elders” does not connote the specific leadership group we know from the Passion narrative, but rather simply “generations of teachers.”
9 The Sadducees are included in neither of the two conspiratorial camps. As a matter of fact, they appear only once, in 12:18ff. Compared to the other leadership groups, then, the Sadducees are insignificant to Mark; it is only their view on resurrection which accounts for their inclusion here. They take no part in any conspiracy against Jesus.
While the two camps thus appear radically segregated from each other, within each camp some allies are rigidly bound to others. Herodians never act or appear independently—their partners, the Pharisees, are always bracketed with them; whenever elders are mentioned, one can be sure their fellows, the chief priests, will be mentioned in the same breath, and the scribes as well. Not even the powerful chief priests manage to appear alone; nine times they are bracketed with one or both of their usual allies, scribes or elders, and the five instances when they seem independent are only illusory.

We propose to examine this pattern of rigid compartmentalization and the occasional departures from it, and to test the following hypothesis: that this redactional scheme derives from Mark’s utilization of three sources for his knowledge of Jewish leadership groups, and that Mark’s departures from this scheme result from his attempts to accommodate these three sources to one another and to his larger redactional aims. We acknowledge at the outset that our thesis cannot be fully

10 See 3:6; 12:13; cf. 8:15. The account of Herod Antipas in 6:14-28 does not involve Herodians in the sense pertinent here.
12 Cf. note 4. The five passages when they are mentioned independently are: 14:10, 55; 15:3, 10, 11. In all likelihood, however, 14:10f. was originally a continuation of 14:1-2, with verses 3-9 being inserted or interwoven; the chief priests in verse 10, therefore, are still working in concert with the scribes from verses 1-2. See R. Bultmann, The History of the Synoptic Tradition, trans. J. Marsh, Oxford, 1963, 262f.; Dibelius, op. cit., 181, 186, 205; W. L. Knox, op. cit., 117f.; cf. citations of G. Schille, Dibelius and Taylor by Donahue, “Introduction: From Passion Traditions to Passion Narrative,” in The Passion in Mark: Studies on Mark 14-16, ed. W. H. Kelber, Philadelphia, 1976, 7ff.; also V. K. Robbins, “Last Meal: Preparation, Betrayal, and Absence (Mark 14:12-25),” ibid., 29n. In 14:55, meanwhile, the chief priests are actually still joined with “the elders and the scribes” mentioned in 14:53; for in verse 55, the chief priests are bracketed with “the whole council,” evidently a reference to their usual partners mentioned just earlier. (Admittedly, in 15:1, the “council” seems distinct from the scribes and elders; one could therefore argue that, in 14:55, scribes and elders are absent and chief priests really do appear alone. But verse 55 begins a section considered by some scholars an interpolation and we fully agree. Cf. especially Donahue, “Temple, Trial, and Royal Christology: [Mark 14:53-65],” ibid., 61-79. Verse 55 should thus be seen as a loosely constructed transition between verse 53 and the trial scene in the Sanhedrin. The “council” was introduced from 15:1. The earlier tradition is reflected in 14:53 and 15:1 [Donahue, Are You the Christ?, 65] where chief priests do not appear alone but are bracketed with their two usual allies. It could also be argued, moreover, that, since 14:55 was constructed so as to continue 14:53, it is legitimate to assume that the scribes and elders present in 14:53 are still present in 14:55, even though they are not there explicitly mentioned.) Similarly, 15:3 continues 15:1, so the scribes and elders from verse 1 are still in the chief priests’ company in the appearance before Pilate in verse 3, and the same applies also to verses 10-11.