

It is interesting that our first canonical Gospel (which is our first Gospel, whether canonical or noncanonical), Mark, does not have the story of the Virgin birth and in fact shows no clue that it is familiar with the stories of the Virgin birth. On the contrary, there are passages in Mark that appear to work *against* the idea that Jesus' mother knew anything about his having had an extraordinary birth.

There is a complicated little passage in Mark 3:20-21 about Jesus' family coming to take him out of the public eye because they thought he was crazy. It is a difficult passage to translate from the Greek, and a number of translations go out of their way to make it say something that it probably doesn't say. The context is that Jesus has been doing extraordinary miracles, attracting enormous crowds, and raising controversy among the Jewish leaders. Jesus then chooses his disciples and they go with him into a house. And then come our verses.

In the Greek the passage literally says that "those who were beside him came forth" in order to seize him, because they were saying, EXESTH. The two problems are: who is this group that has come, and what does it mean that he EXESTH? It is widely thought among translators and interpreters - and I think this has to be right - that "those who were beside him" means "his family." It cannot mean the disciples, because they are already with him in the house. It must be people who were personally attached to Jesus (that's what the phrase "were beside him" means). And so that appears to leave his family members. No one else is "on his side," as it were.

Why then did his family members come? Because they thought he was EXESTH. Whatever the word means, it can't be good. The whole point of this section of Mark is that Jesus is finding opposition everywhere he turns, despite all the miracles he is doing. The Pharisees are against him because they don't think he has authority to do the things he does (2:24, 3:2). They become so outraged at his activities that they team up with the Herodians to decide to kill him (3:6). The scribes are against him because they think that he has blasphemed against God (2:6) and that he does his mighty works because he is possessed by the Devil, Beelzebub (3:22). Even his family members - those who stand beside him - think that he EXESTH.

The word EXESTH literally means "to stand outside of oneself." It is a phrase comparable to the English phrase "to be out of your mind." In other words, it means "he has gone crazy."

And so 3:21-22 can be translated "Now when his family heard these things they came out in order to seize him, for they were saying "He is out of his mind."

Some translators don't like that way of putting it, not because of any grammatical or lexical issues with the Greek, but simply because they can't get their heads around Jesus' family members thinking that he has gone crazy. And so, to avoid the problem, they sometimes change the translation - not because of what the Greek says, but because of what they think it *ought* to say. And so they translate it as saying that his family has come to take him out of the public eye because "people were saying that 'He is beside himself.'" (Thus the RSV, for example.)

This is really taking liberties with the Greek. In Greek, the subject of a sentence is often not expressed because it can be found in the form of the verb itself. I will try to explain this simply. In English, when we write or speak a sentence that requires a pronoun ("I" "you" "He" "she" "they" "Those ones" "These ones") we actually give the pronoun. In Greek and

other “inflected” languages, the pronouns are already built into the verb. So the verb is spelled differently, with a different ending, whether you want the subject to be “I” “you” “she” “we” etc. It was *possible* for Greek to use pronouns, of course, and it often does when it wants to place special emphasis on the subject. But in normal speech it was not necessary.

Now the rule is that if a sentence containing a verb does not have an explicit pronoun, and the subject within the sentence itself is ambiguous, then the implied subject (found in the ending of the verb) is the immediately preceding noun or pronoun (or other substantive). So that if you have a sentence that says “He jumped over the ditch,” you actually do not know who the “he” is unless you look in the preceding context and see, right before this sentence, something like, “James ran into the field.” Then you know that the “He” that is jumping over the ditch is James.

Apologies for the grammar lesson here, but it matters. In Mark 3:21, when it says “for they were saying” there is no noun or pronoun expressed to indicate who the “they” is. And so, by the rules of grammar, it almost certainly refers to the closest antecedent, which in this case is “those who were on his side,” i.e., his family. In other words, the ones who came to seize him were the ones saying that he is out of his mind.

The RSV translators were not happy with that view though, evidently because of its implications. But its implications are the very point of the passage and of this post. (As I’ll explain in just one second.) Still, not liking what the verse actually said, the RSV translators interpreted it and re-translated it so the English says something different from the Greek. Their English version adds the word “people” – not found in the Greek – to explain who, in the translators’ opinion, were saying that Jesus had gone crazy. And now what the story means is that the family of Jesus wanted to take him from the public eye because there were people out there saying that he was nuts. But that’s not what the Greek says. The Greek says that the family came to seize him because they were saying that he was nuts.

And who would be included in his family? It becomes pretty clear later in the chapter. For once again his family members come, and we’re told that it is “his mother and his brothers” (3:31) – in another interesting passage where Jesus appears to reject them in favor of his followers (3:31-34).

What does all this have to do with the Virgin birth? Mark does not narrate an account of Jesus’ birth. Mark never says a word about Jesus’ mother being a virgin. Mark does not presuppose that Jesus had an unusual birth of any kind. And in Mark (you don’t find this story in Matthew and Luke!!), Jesus’ mother does not seem to know that he is a divinely born son of God. On the contrary, she thinks he has gone out of his mind. Mark not only lacks a virgin birth story; it seems to presuppose that they never could have been a virgin birth. Or Mary would understand who Jesus is. But she does not.

It’s no wonder that when Matthew and Luke took over so many of the stories of Mark, they decided, both of them, *not* to take over Mark 3:20-21. They had completely different views of Jesus’ mother and his birth.



[The Virgin Birth and the Gospel of John](#)
[Why Was Jesus Born of a Virgin in Matthew and Luke?](#)