The Meaning of Ἐξέστη in Mark 3:21

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Abstract:
In examining Mark 3:21, scholars over the last century have focused their attention on the identity of οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ. The consequence is that scholarship has reached an impasse in determining who claims that Jesus has gone mad (ἐξέστη). The following paper attempts to focus instead on the meaning of Ἐξέστη in Mark 3:21 as a key to solving the interpretational difficulties that have surrounded this verse and the pericope in which it is found (Mark 3:20–30). I propose that Ἐξέστη means “he has amazed” as opposed to the traditional sense of “he has gone mad.” Moreover, it is the crowd, not οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ, who makes this claim about Jesus. This eases the exigency of locating the identity of οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ since we are no longer required to explain why either of these groups would claim Jesus's insanity. This approach is strengthened by a literary pattern spanning Mark’s Gospel from the beginning until the passion narrative in which the crowd responds positively to Jesus, especially in contrast to religious leaders.

Keywords: Mark 3:21, Ἐξέστη, crowd, narrative criticism, redaction criticism
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Introduction

The grammatically ambiguous text of Mark 3:21 has often puzzled interpreters. Scholars have primarily focused on the identity of οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ who go out to seize Jesus as the crowd forms a mob around his home. These also, according to the traditional translations of the passage, claim that Jesus has gone out of his mind. Some identify this group as his disciples; others claim it is his family. The assumption is

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1 These include the following: KJV, NRSV, NIV, NASB, and ESV.


This perspective seems motivated in part by a desire to protect the holiness of Mary. This explains the vociferous defense of this reading in Roman Catholic circles. Yet, the strongest reason for accepting this reading was brought to my attention by Fredrick J. Long who notes that immediately before this passage in Mark 3:14, Jesus identifies the disciples as those who will be μετ’ αὐτοῦ (a similar construction). Moreover, as Long noted, it seems natural that the disciples would view their first duty with Jesus to be crowd control. However, as we will see, I find the strongest support to lie with those who identify οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ as Jesus’ family.


This reading also has support from Jerome (“Letter CVIII, To Eustochium,” http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.XXII.html). There are two pieces of evidence, which point to this as the preferred reading. For one, Ben Witherington notes from a rhetorical perspective that the introduction of the family in Mark 3:21 parallels their “ reappearance” in 3:31 as part of a chiastic structure containing 3:20–35 (Mark, 153). Also, William L. Lane believes that this construction is intentionally different from the one used to describe the disciples in order that the reader may separate the two groups even though this construction in Koine Greek
that οἱ παρ’ αὐτῶν are not only the implied subject of the participle ἀκούσαντες, finite verb ἔξερχομαι, and the complementary infinitive κρατῆσαι, but also of the finite verb ἔλεγον.4 On this assumption, the hermeneutical crux is to identify which group (his family or the disciples) misjudges the character of Jesus and makes the derogatory comment about him.

Yet, little attention has been paid to the Greek word used to describe Jesus here. What does it mean to say that Jesus ἔξεστη? Many modern, scholarly translations of this verse have interpreted this verb as in some way referring to Jesus’s madness.5 In fact, this is the interpretation we generally find for this verb since the publication of the Vulgate, which translates it as in furorem versus est. Curiously, however, several scholars have noted that this is a unique meaning for this verb in the Gospels.6 Elsewhere in the Gospels and Acts we find that ἔξιστημι has a more positive sense of mental “displacement,” that of “amazement” or “awe.” Surely, the preference for the negative meaning in modern translations is due to grammatical issues. After all, Mark does not provide an object for this verb. As such, it most likely carries an intransitive sense: among the possible meanings for this verb in the intransitive, the one that makes the most sense is that which translators since Jerome have adopted.7

In contrast, the following paper argues against the long-held consensus of translating ἔξεστη to refer to Jesus’s madness. Rather, I propose here that this verb carries the more positive and causative

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4 See Best for the rationale for taking the implied subjects of these verbs as the same, “Mark III,” 309–12; Cf., Moloney, Mark, 80–82; Steinmueller, “Exegetical Notes,” 357–59.

5 E.g., NRSV—“he has gone out of his mind”; NASB—“he has lost his senses”; NIV—“he is out of his mind.”


7 For the semantic range of this verb, as well as its usage in the transitive and intransitive, see BDAG, s.v. “ἔξιστημι”; LSJ, s.vv. “ἔξιστημι,” “ἐξεστάω.”
connotation of “he amazed.” Moreover, it is δράκος, not ὁι παρ’ αὐτοῦ, who make this claim about Jesus. The role of ὁι παρ’ αὐτοῦ is to go out to seize Jesus to protect him from the admiring crowd. This paper will attempt to redirect the debate about the identity of ὁι παρ’ αὐτοῦ since I will argue that it is not this group who makes this claim about Jesus and that the claim is not even negative. Thus, the concern over preserving the character of the disciples or Jesus’s family is in vain. Succinctly, I argue here for a reading of Mark 3:21b that may be translated: “And having heard, the ones near him [the disciples or his family] went out to take hold of him; for they [the crowd] were saying that he has amazed [us].”

My argument hinges upon a number of factors. First, Mark uses ἔξεστηµι verbs intentionally throughout his Gospel to depict the reaction to Jesus’s miracles. In fact, the other Synoptic authors also utilize it in their Gospels. In Mark 3:21, then, ἔξεστη specifically refers to how Jesus has amazed the crowd with his miracles. Second, Mark’s linguistic context (i.e., both the Septuagint and the ancient Greco-Roman world) points to this as the more likely meaning. Third, my interpretation of Mark 3:21 parallels the texts of Matthew and Luke, which also include the more positive sense of this verb as a reaction of the crowd. Fourth, there are several other arguments, both within and outside of Mark’s Gospel, that support this reading. In sum, I will argue for a complete reframing of this passage’s translation and of the scholarly debate on this verse.

Ἐξεστηµι and Miracles in Mark and NT Narrative

In the narrative literature of the NT, ἔξεστηµι has a restricted semantic range. Almost unanimously, this verb connotes a positive, albeit disrupted, mental state. Commonly, this verb is translated as “astounded,” “amazed,” or “astonished” in popular translations like the NRSV, NASB, and NIV. The only exception is Mark 3:21, where these translations interpret ἔξεστη as: “he has gone out of his mind,”
“he has lost his senses,” and “he is out of his mind,” respectively. They see the semantic freight of this verb as resembling 2 Cor 5:13 where it certainly refers to a derogatory assertion about one’s mental state.\(^8\)

Nevertheless, commentators have not focused enough on the way this verb is utilized within its specific genre, that is, NT narrative. Not only does \(\varepsilon\xi\sigma\tau\eta\mu\) carry the more positive meaning throughout this larger body of literature, it does so within a specific context. This verb always (unless Mark 3:21 is the only exception) refers to the reaction of a group after a miraculous act.\(^9\) Except for Acts 8:11 where it refers to the crowd’s response to Simon the Magician, these miracles are of divine nature. The chart below lists the instances of \(\varepsilon\xi\sigma\tau\eta\mu\) in NT narrative literature with their context and common translations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>NRSV, NASB, NIV</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matt 12:23</td>
<td>(\varepsilon\xi\sigma\tau\alpha\tau)</td>
<td>amazed, amazed, astonished</td>
<td>Crowd’s response to the healing of the demoniac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 2:12</td>
<td>(\varepsilon\xi\sigma\tau\alpha\tau)</td>
<td>amazed, amazed, amazed</td>
<td>Crowd’s response to the healing of the paralytic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 3:21</td>
<td>(\varepsilon\xi\sigma\tau\eta)</td>
<td>out of his mind, lost his senses, out of his mind</td>
<td>Crowd’s(^{10}) claim about Jesus after following him to his house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 5:42</td>
<td>(\varepsilon\xi\sigma\tau\eta\sigma\alpha\nu)</td>
<td>overcome with amazement, completely astounded, completely astonished</td>
<td>Crowd’s response to the restoration of the little girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 6:51</td>
<td>(\varepsilon\xi\sigma\tau\alpha\tau)</td>
<td>utterly astounded, utterly astonished, completely amazed</td>
<td>Apostles’ response to the stilling of the storm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^8\) On this parallel between Mark 3:21 and 2 Cor 5:13, see France, *Mark*, 167.

\(^9\) Another exception could be Luke 2:47, in which those in the temple are amazed at the boy Jesus’s teaching. This depends on whether one sees this event as miraculous.

\(^{10}\) I.e., “the ones near” Jesus. See notes 2 and 3 above.
We may suggest from the evidence above that this verb has a specific semantic range in NT narrative literature. It almost always refers to the reaction of a group after a miracle of some sort. Both Mark 2:12 and 5:42, which surround 3:21, depict a crowd amazed at a miracle of Jesus. In Mark 6:51, the disciples are amazed after Jesus stills the storm. My contention is that the verb in Mark 3:21 denotes the crowd’s response to what occurred in 2:12 and it sets the stage for the responses in 5:42 and 6:51. In Mark 2:12, the crowd is amazed at the healing of the paralytic and the accompanying note that they “were glorifying God” clearly points to the positive meaning of this verb. The
reference to Mark 2:12 in 3:21 becomes stronger when we realize that both events take place in parallel settings. The healing of ch. 2 occurs at Jesus’s home (Mark 2:1) and with a crowd so large that “there was no longer room for them; not even in front of the door…” (2:2). In Mark 3:21, he refers to the crowd to claim that Jesus “has amazed” them before. Now this astonishment leads them to surround and fill his house again because they desire to see more of these miracles and the man who performs them.

Scholars have yet to see this connection, which unlike most interpretations of this passage converges well with the data at hand in the Gospel.11 As we read Mark’s narrative synchronically while considering the crowd’s response up to Mark 3:21, this is the only possible meaning of ἔξιστημι the reader would be accustomed to supply. Moreover, nowhere in Mark does the crowd respond negatively to Jesus’s miracles. The miracles of Mark 5:42 and 6:51 continue this literary pattern of positive reactions.

We may also see that Mark intentionally uses this verb to describe a reaction to miracles because it contrasts with other similar words throughout his Gospel. For example, in Mark 5:20; 6:5; 10:32; 12:11; and 12:17, he employs θαυμάζω to describe reaction to Jesus’s teachings and other actions. In Mark 1:27, those present in the synagogue θαμάζων at both Jesus’s teaching and his exorcism of the man with the unclean spirit. Given that there are two objects of the crowd’s amazement, Mark assigns a different verb altogether to describe the reaction of the crowd. So, of the nine instances in Mark in which there is a response to an action or teaching of Jesus, the evidence suggests that the author intentionally presents a clear demarcation with his verbal usage to describe a similar response. It is most likely, then, that the response in 3:2 carries the same, positive connotation as the other instances of ἔξιστημι.

11 Timothy Dwyer enumerates the importance of the wonder motif in Mark, although he follows the traditional interpretation of Mark 3:21 (“The Motif of Wonder in the Gospel of Mark,” JN 57 [1995]: 49–59; and The Motif of Wonder in the Gospel of Mark [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996]).
Mark, the earliest Gospel,\textsuperscript{12} sets the tone for the other Evangelists to utilize this literary pattern. Matthew only picks up on it once, but in an important place as we will see below. Luke, nevertheless, utilizes this form extensively in his Gospel and Acts as demonstrated in the chart above. What we have is a literary pattern utilized by the Evangelists, namely that Jesus’s miracles received a response that is consistently described with ἐξίστημι.

Interestingly, this use of ἐξίστημι is rare in the ancient world. Barry Blackburn, who follows Gerd Theissen, notes that pre-Christian literature seldom marks a response to miracles, but when it does, θαυμάζω and ἐκπλήσσω are used.\textsuperscript{13} The most likely explanation for the NT’s connection of ἐξίστημι to a positive reaction to a miracle is an underlying tradition that circulated throughout Christian communities.

Since Jerome, one of the primary reasons ἐξίστημι has been translated in the intransitive sense of madness is because no object is supplied for the verb. In fact, standard lexicons note that the transitive or causative sense of this verb often takes additional words.\textsuperscript{14} If we were to translate it as I propose, we would expect to find ἡμᾶς following the verb. But two factors suggest that an object is not needed. First, examples from other ancient Greek literature suggest that an object is not needed to complete the sense of the verb. Second, examples from other ancient Greek literature suggest that an object is not needed to complete the sense of the verb.\textsuperscript{15} This is not a typical grammatical construction, however, it does appear in literature beyond

\begin{footnotes}
\item[14] See BDAG, s.v. “ἐξίστημι”; LSJ, s.vv. “ἐξίστημι,” “ἐχιστάνω.”
\item[15] Cf. Pausanias, \textit{Descr.} 3.17.8; Plutarch, \textit{Publ.}, 13.2. I acknowledge that these instances carry different semantic freight than what I propose in Mark 3:21. Yet, the uses of ἐξίστημι are so broad in the ancient world that translations of “madness” and “amazement” are seldom found outside of the Bible. Nevertheless, these examples underscore the fact that transitive verbs in ancient Greek do not always require objects.
\end{footnotes}
the “lower,” Koine Greek of Mark. Moreover, Daniel B. Wallace notes that transitive verbs will often omit the subject if it is implied due to Greek’s economical nature.\(^{16}\) So, in 3:21, Mark’s readers would infer the omitted object (i.e., the crowd—recalling the crowd’s similar response to Jesus’s miracle in 2:12). Second, this is consistent with Mark’s usage elsewhere. In 14:16, after Jesus’s command to the disciples to prepare the Passover meal, Mark writes καὶ εὗρον καθὼς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς. How do we know what the disciples “found”? We must infer it from the previous context just as we must do in 3:21.

My argument also requires that the crowd is the group making this claim about Jesus. Because this reading departs from the dominant translation since Jerome, it requires clarification regarding the subject of the verb. Scholars have intensely debated whether the implied subject is Jesus’s disciples or his family.\(^{17}\) They then link the subject of ἔλεγον to the nearby οἱ παρ’ αὐτῷ. Since the structure of the passage is a typical Markan “sandwich” (i.e., when a recurring element appears at the beginning and end of a block of material) and since the family of Jesus is mentioned in 3:31, I read (with many others) οἱ παρ’ αὐτῷ as referring to Jesus’s family.\(^{18}\) However, the proximity of οἱ παρ’ αὐτῷ to ἔλεγον suggests that if this phrase does describe his family, they are the ones who make this claim about him.


\(^{17}\) See notes 2 and 3 above.

\(^{18}\) Witherington, *Mark*, 153; Stein, *Mark*, 180; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 271; France, *Mark*, 165–66. Each of these commentators note the use of the sandwich structure to determine this. As with Mark 3:21, there is no condemnation of Jesus by his family in 3:31, so if his family were οἱ παρ’ αὐτῷ, we cannot say that the connection of these two verses indicate that Jesus’s family misunderstands him. As we will see below, this is not necessary for Mark to make his point about the household. Rather, Jesus’s family brings new definition to the new, boundary-less family (i.e., the church) that Mark’s Jesus seeks to create. Regarding the use of the sandwich structure, this device helps us to understand the identity of the οἱ παρ’ αὐτῷ, but it has no bearing on the claim made about Jesus.
Another option for the subject is ὁ ὄχλος in 3:20, which no scholar consulted has defended.19 An obvious objection is that ὄχλος is singular while the verb is plural. However, since ὁ ὄχλος is a collective noun, subsequent verbs that take it as the subject may reflect this. Indeed, Wallace notes that this phenomenon often occurs as a subconscious action of the writer when the referent is nearby.20 In fact, Mark does just this in 3:32 when he writes καὶ ἐκάθητο περὶ αὐτῶν ὄχλος, καὶ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· ἤδιον ἡ μήτηρ σου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί σου ἔξω ζητοῦσίν σε. The proximity of this phenomenon with ὄχλος so near to 3:21 suggests that Mark does the same in the passage under examination.

Another factor that has led interpreters to overlook ὁ ὄχλος as the subject of ἔλεγον is that they have read ἔξεστη as necessarily intransitive.21 If Mark had more clearly marked the object of ἔξεστη, we would be able to read the verb causatively and more readily make the connection to the crowd’s similar response in 2:12. Nevertheless, when we see Mark’s tendency to refer to ὁ ὄχλος as the implied subject of plural verbs in combination with his economic style of occasionally leaving off objects from transitive verbs, the interpretation of this passage becomes readily understandable. We no longer need to be caught up in the debate about whether Jesus’s disciples or his family make this unflattering claim about him, because neither does. Rather, it is the crowd that does so and the claim they make is, to the contrary, quite positive: the crowd declares their amazement at his miracles. This adds a new dimension to the long-running debate about the interpretation of this passage.

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19 However, Best admits that this is a grammatical possibility (“Mark III,” 312).


21 This is most evident in the minority interpretations of this passage in which some scholars claim that ὁ ὄχλος is the subject of ἔξεστη, which allows the verb to remain transitive (Wansbrough, “Mark 3:21,” 234; P.J. Gannon, “Could Mark Employ Auton in 3,21 Referring to Ochlos in 3,20?” CBQ 15 [1953]: 460–61; Steinmueller, “Exegetical Notes,” 357). Yet, Wansbrough’s thesis has been thoroughly critiqued by many scholars (e.g., Wenham, “Meaning,” 299; Stein, Mark, 180–81; France, Mark 165, n. 32).
One may ask, in opposition to my thesis, why I would choose to point out Mark’s intentional linguistic style while simultaneously noting his poor grammar. Should we read Mark either with more charity toward his syntax than I allow or should we not read so much into his verbal intentionality? As redaction criticism has demonstrated, the Evangelists were not concerned to write unbiased accounts. In fact, in comparing the Synoptic Gospels, we can discern the themes that were important to them against those of their counterparts. Here I claim that Mark intentionally uses ἔξιστημι verbs in response to Jesus’s miracles. Yet, Mark’s care in revealing the importance of the crowd in responding to Jesus’s miracles is not the same as averring his grammatical clarity. Scholars have long noted Mark’s difficult syntax while simultaneously drawing out his emphases. Thus, we can posit that Mark 3:21 uses ἔξιστη to communicate a particular point within an admittedly ambiguous grammatical context.

Ἅξιστημι and Mark’s Linguistic Context

At this point, we must be wary of arguing solely on the basis of “verbal parallelogramia.” Instead, we must consider this verb’s broader context beyond the NT. ἔξιστημι is widely attested in the ancient world. Although it has no single common meaning, it carries the general semantic freight of “displacement.” However, we find that by the first century CE this verb carries a broad range of meanings, including that its meanings can be subdivided into its physical sense as we often find in political history (i.e., “abandon” or “move someone”), and its mental sense as we unanimously find in the Gospels and often in medical texts. In fact, we find that it means everything from “to

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deviate,” and several other meanings and the lexicons distinguish clearly, context is important to determine its specific meaning. What is more, the lexicons distinguish between its transitive and intransitive senses on the basis whether or not the verb takes an object as well as whether the verb appears as a first or second aorist. But, as we have seen above, the former does not universally apply and the latter is unhelpful here since appears in the same form in both the first and second aorist.

So, we can only state that the ancient Greek linguistic context affirms the two translational options before us. If anything, an examination of the semantic range of and its cognates shows that there are more options available than we might expect. Indeed, I find it puzzling that scholars have not more frequently reexamined the semantic range of this verb in Mark 3:21 given the confusion this verse has caused interpreters. It pushes us to examine both the context of the verb, as well as other aspects of its context beyond ancient Greek literature.

This leads us then to investigate whether Mark is drawing from the Septuagint. According to the marginal notes of the NA this would appear to be the case. It lists as possible allusions Ps 69:9, Isa 28:7, and Zec 13:3. Among modern commentators, Adele Yarboro Collins is the sole scholar consulted to note a connection to one of these texts—she sees strong support of the traditional reading of this passage from Ps 69:9. For her, a link exists in how Jesus (in Mark 3:21) and the Psalmist (in 69:9) are each ridiculed by their

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26 Cf. Pausanias, Deser. 3.17.8.
27 Cf. Plutarch, Pomp. 10.2.
28 BDAG, s.v. “εξίστημι”; LSJ, s.vv. “εξίστημι,” “εχιστάω.”
29 For the sense of “madness,” see Dioscorides Pedanuis, Mat. Med. 4.73; Hippocrates, Coac. 429; Hippocrates, Aph. 6.59.1. For amazement, see Musonius fragment 8p. 35H., Philippides, Com. Fragment 27K.
30 BDAG, s.v. “εξίστημι”; LSJ, s.vv. “εξίστημι,” “εχιστάω.”
respective families. She writes, “The reproach and shame borne by the speaker are connected…with the misunderstanding of his charismatic activity.”32 Yet, this link is purely thematic for her since ἐξίστησθαι does not appear in the Septuagint of Ps 69.9. And, if my evaluation of Mark 3:21 is correct, we cannot conclude that this verb is used in a derogatory sense, nor should we identify the subject as Jesus’s family.

This negative judgment pertains to Zech 13:3 as well. This verse is situated within an “oracle against the nations” in which fathers and mothers shame their false prophet children. Thus, any allusion in Mark 3:21 would have to be from the side of those who claim Jesus is mad. Yet again, we run into similar objections: we must assume that Jesus’s family makes this declaration and there are no syntactic or verbal parallels here.

The most likely parallel is Isa 28:7 in which God condemns Ephraim for its drunken pride. In the LXX, we find a lexical parallel in the claim about prophets and priests who ἐξέστησαν διὰ τὸν οἶνον. Moreover, we find a syntactic parallel with the implementation of the causal conjunction γὰρ. It appears possible that Mark, if he is drawing from Isa 28:7, depicts the crowd as claiming Jesus to be a drunkard like one of the prophets of Ephraim. Yet Mark does not indicate elsewhere that Jesus is perceived as drunk. And, as we have already seen, the only person or group up to this point in Mark’s Gospel who would have reason to make any negative remarks against him is the religious leaders. Although there are linguistic and vague thematic connections between Isa 28:7 and Mark 3:21, the contexts of these passages do not offer a strong enough link between them.

Indeed, in the LXX one is hard-pressed to find an ἐξίστησθαι verb carrying a meaning that entails madness. Of the thirty-seven occurrences of ἐξίστησθαι verbs in the LXX, it carries the sense of amazement six times.33 Isa 28:7 is the only instance in which we could interpret this verb with a sense of madness, even though it carries the

32 Collins, Mark, 227.
sense of physical “staggering.”34 The other instances in the LXX reveal the broad semantic range of ἐξίστη verbs that we find in other Greek literature.35 If Mark were drawing upon the LXX for this passage, it would not be to support any particular translation of ἐξέστη.

### Mark 3:21 and the Synoptic Problem

Oddly, scholars have largely ignored the relationship between Mark’s version of this narrative and those of Matthew and Luke.36 Given that Greek literature and the LXX have not produced desirable parallels to understand this passage, we must now investigate the relationship between Mark 3:19b–30 and parallel passages in Matt 12:22–32 and Luke 11:14–23. The chart below displays these parallels and attempts to match similar sections of these texts with like colors.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19b Then he went home 20 and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. 21 When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” 22 And the scribes</td>
<td>22 Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see. 23 All the crowds were amazed and said, “Can this be the Son of David?” 24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by</td>
<td>14 Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. 15 But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler</td>
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34 The latter is the approach of the NRSV.
35 Cf. 1 Sam 4:15—“the raiders trembled”; Isa 16:3—“do not betray”; Jb 5:13—“the schemes are brought to an end”; 2 Chr 15:6—“God troubled them.”
36 The only scholar who sees a Synoptic parallel here is Steinmueller, who argues that the crowd is amazed (“Exegetical Notes,” 357–58). However, interpreters have since followed John Dominic Crossan in seeing Mark 3:21 as a work of Mark’s own hand, to the point that Guelich notes that there is no parallel between Mark and the other Synoptics (John Dominic Crossan, “Mark and Relatives of Jesus,” NovT 15 [1969]: 46–55; Guelich, Mark 1–8, 168).
who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” 23 And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “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 up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 27 But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

28 “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; 29 but whoever blasphemés against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—30 for they had

Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.” 25 He knew what they were thinking and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. 26 If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? 27 If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. 29 Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property, without first tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered.

30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. 31 Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be of the demons.”

16 Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. 17 But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. 18 If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? —for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. 19 Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 20 But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. 21 When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. 22 But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted
said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

and divides his plunder. 23 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”

From the outset, we see why scholars have often overlooked the parallels between these passages. For one, there is a different frame between Mark’s version of this story and the other parallels. Mark 3:19b sets his narrative in Jesus’s home. The discourse on the divided kingdom is prompted by the claim (by the disciples, his family, or the crowd) that Jesus ἐξέστη (Mark 3:21) and the scribes’ accusation that he has Beelzebul (Mark 3:22). In Matthew (12:22–24) and Luke (11:14–15), on the other hand, the narrative begins with Jesus casting out a demon. Luke includes a plea from the crowds to perform a sign (11:16). In Matthew, the crowds are amazed and the Pharisees claim Jesus has Beelzebul. In Luke, some of the crowd is amazed and others claim Jesus has Beelzebul. Also, in Matthew (12:25) and Luke (11:17), Jesus knows what his accusers are thinking, whereas in Mark, we are not told whether Jesus hears the accusation or intuits it.

Moreover, each of these accounts is respectively set within a different place the Gospels. Mark places this pericope after Jesus appoints the disciples (3:13–18) and prior to the discourse on his true family (3:31–35). This narrative in Matthew follows an editorial insertion concerning Jesus’s fulfillment of an Isaianic prophesy (12:15–21) and before the discourse on a tree and its fruit (12:33–37). Luke positions it after two discourses on prayer (11:1–13) and preceding another discourse on unclean spirits (11:24–26).

Nevertheless, two points guide us to seeing a parallel with 3:21. The first is that there must be an underlying source that includes the discourse on the “house-divided” and its narrative. Matthew and Luke were certainly aware of the narrative frame of the “house-divided” discourse given their knowledge of Mark, but they both chose to
include another narrative tradition. That Matthew and Luke agree so closely points to a common written source with some slight editorial adjustments. Yet, the hypothetical Q source, which includes the material Matthew and Luke share against Mark, only contains sayings of Jesus. Why, then, do they agree against Mark in a purely narrative section?

We could posit several explanations. One is to say that Matthew and Luke share another source that includes narrative material. Yet, this would provide only one example of such a source and one would have to explain why Matthew and Luke so seldom agree against Mark with narrative material. Another option is to argue that Q includes narrative material, but this theory meets the same challenge as the prior one. Finally, one could also adopt the theory that Luke used Matthew as a source. However, the arguments against this theory are too numerous to recount here.37

The most likely proposition is that there is an underlying tradition that all three share (whether written or oral). That is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all had access to some source in which the discourse on the strong man was packaged and each tailored the narrative to suit his needs. The most illuminating rationale for this is that Matthew and Luke often correct Mark’s difficult grammar.38 We have already established that the grammar of Mark 3:21 leaves many ambiguities, and that it has long disconcerted interpreters. This explains why Matthew would edit Mark’s ἐξέστη into ἐξίσταντο (Matt 12:23), thus transforming the verb from causative to intransitive and clarifying the verb’s subject. Luke then avoids the trouble of reckoning with this verb altogether—we have already seen carries a broad semantic range—and describes the crowd as ἔθαψαν (Luke 11:14).

This leads to another rationale from redaction criticism. That is, Mark had knowledge of this narrative frame for the parable of the strong man, but chose to exclude it in keeping with his theological

37 Stein, Studying, 125–42.
38 Stein, Studying, 49–96.
emphasis of the household. Scholars have long noted the importance of the household theme in Mark, as he wishes to stress the idea that Jesus’s coming kingdom is a new eschatological household. Mark specifically chose to reframe the narrative such that the setting for the telling of the parable of the strong man is a house. He succinctly retained the connection of this story to Jesus’s miracles with the economical inclusion of ἐξέστη in Mark 3:21 while changing the narrative frame to fit his theological emphasis. This, in combination with the grammatical-redactional tendencies of Matthew and Luke, point overwhelmingly to a shared underlying source that contains Mark 3:21.

The second point that suggests Mark 3:21 belongs in parallel with Matthew and Luke is that, regardless of the narrative frame, all three Gospels preserve this pericope as a chreia. Specifically, it fulfills the requirements of pronouncement story, a “brief narrative ending with a pronouncement by someone in response to a saying or observation.” In the Markan passage we have a brief narrative of the crowd, the ὁ παρ’ αὐτοῦ, and the scribes in Jesus’s house, followed by Jesus’s response to the claims about him. His reply is a “response-sayings chreia.” Not only does Jesus respond to the claim about him, his statement also fulfills the requirement of including a participle to introduce the saying (in this case, προσκαλεσάµους). Within the response-sayings chreiai are, in order, a rhetorical question (3:23b), four consecutive parables (3:24–27), and a concluding aphorism (3:29–29). Duane F. Watson notes that the Evangelists had chreiai of Jesus at hand and these helped to shape their Gospels. If this passage were already developed as a comprehensive chreia, Jesus’s response in the form of parables was not disembodied, but rather came in tandem with the

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39 For the most thorough explication of this, see Michael F. Trainor, The Quest for Home: The Household in Mark’s Community (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001).
40 This comports with the grammatical insight above (n. 16), that causative verbs in Koine Greek will often omit an object for economical purposes.
surrounding narrative since it was the cause of the parable. Even though Matthew and Luke favor Q’s version of Jesus’s discourse, it is unlikely that Q as a sayings source would have provided the same narrative frame, and therefore, the same statements that initiated Jesus’s response.

Given the above, we can plausibly propose that Mark retains the same split reaction to Jesus initiating the parable of the strong man. In Matthew, the crowds are amazed at what Jesus does whereas the Pharisees condemn him, thus providing the setting for the discourse. Luke divides the crowd in their reaction to Jesus and he promptly responds. If my argument in this section is correct, Mark uses the same underlying narrative that leads to Jesus’s response, which leads to a similar split reaction. The crowd’s reaction is positive while the scribes, another set of religious leaders, provide the contrasting negative reaction. If this is the case, the ἐξέστη in 3:21 must carry its positive sense.

Other Evidence for the Split Response

There are a few other pieces of evidence that suggest Mark intends to portray a positive reaction from the crowd in 3:21. First, we will look to the Gospel itself to reveal Markan tendencies that point to this reading. Next, we will look to the extra-Biblical sources that support such a reading.

Primarily, Mark reveals two patterns that point to a positive reaction from the crowd in Mark 3:21, which is contrasted with a negative reaction of the scribes in 3:22. The first is that Mark consistently portrays the crowd’s reaction to Jesus as positive until the crucifixion. This is evident in Mark 2:12, 13; 5:21, 27; 6:45; 8:1; 9:14–17; 10:1; 11:8, 32; 12:12, 37. Moreover, Mark always sets the crowd’s response to Jesus in juxtaposition to that of the religious leaders. We see this in Mark 2:1–11; 13–17; 9:1; 11:18; and 12:28–37.
The meaning of ἐξέστη in Mark 3:21

The crucifixion provides a crucial turning point in Mark’s narrative whereby the crowd’s reaction to Jesus turns negative.44

The second pattern is that Jesus’s disciples always protect him from an adoring crowd, not an upset one. This is present in Mark 3:9; 6:36; 8:4; 10:48; and 14:47. Although the identity of ἐὰν παρ’ αὐτῳ in Mark 3:21 is often debated, nearly all commentators agree that it is Jesus who is seized and that either his disciples or his family is protecting him from the crowd.45 Where scholarship has failed in this respect is the reason for seizing Jesus. But, it would not be Markan style to indicate that they restrained him from an irate crowd and there is nothing in the context to indicate this. Rather, they restrained Jesus because the crowd adored him and wanted to come closer to this miracle worker. This sets the stage for the crowd’s positive reaction to Jesus, which the scribes soon attempt to squelch.

A significant objection to seeing Mark 3:21–22 as a split reaction to Jesus is the presence of the ἔξαλ that separates the two reactions. Typically, in the NT, and especially in Mark, ἔξαλ functions ascensively (i.e., “even”) or connectively (i.e., “and” or “also”).46 The presence of ἔξαλ in 3:22 has signaled to previous interpreters that Mark attributes a further negative accusation in 3:21. However, ἔξαλ may also serve a contrastive function, thus, indicating that two clauses are related but carry opposite meaning.47 In fact, the nature of ἔξαλ is not to relate two identical grammatical items, but simply to connect them. Thus, Steven E. Runge writes, “the use of ἔξαλ constrains the connected element to

44 Although interpreters have long conceived of the crucifixion as the climax of the Gospel, I direct the reader to the following for contrasting views: Morna D. Hooker, “Good News About Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” in Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect, ed. Christopher W. Skinner and Kelly R. Iverson (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 165–80; Mary Healy, The Gospel of Mark (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 320; Mary Ann Beavis, Mark (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 207.

45 Exceptions who claim that the crowd is the object of the verb κρατῆσαι include: Wansbrough, “Mark 3:21,” 233–35; and Steinmueller, “Exegetical Notes,” 357–58.


47 Wallace, Greek Grammar, 671–72.
be closely associated with what comes before, regardless of whether there is semantic continuity or not. The implication is that the elements joined by καὶ are of equal status. Context, then, is crucial to determine how a καὶ functions semantically.

Thus, καὶ alone is not sufficient evidence to refute a split reaction in Mark 3:21–22. Not only has the preceding analysis shown that the literary context of Mark’s Gospel urges us to view these verses as a split response, but we can point to at least two other places in Mark where this clearly occurs. In Mark 1:22, he uses καὶ to contrast Jesus’s teaching with that of the scribes, and in 9:14, Mark implements καὶ to contrast the positive reaction of the crowd with the negative reaction of scribes as both groups gather around the disciples. Since the latter example parallels the sequence and ethos of Mark 3:22–23 (only in this instance, the disciples draw a crowd instead of Jesus), this provides convincing evidence that Mark used καὶ where two things are contrasted. All of this, therefore, encourages us to read the first καὶ of Mark 3:22 as connecting two contrasted items.

Another literary argument for reading Mark 3:21–22 as a split reaction to Jesus is that, if we understand ἐξέστη in the positive sense, it illuminates the word play with the other ἴστη verbs in Mark 3:24–26. Because of the preponderance of these verbs in this passage, Mark intentionally links the claim about Jesus in 3:21 with his own response in 3:24–26 in an ironic way. That is, Mark’s Jesus plays on the different meanings of ἐξέστη to show that he is not “insane,” but rather the one who is overturning Satan’s kingdom.

What makes this the more probable reading is the way in which the word play enumerates the relationship between his miracles and the creation of a new household. Miracles are not and end in themselves, rather they point to the coming of God’s Kingdom.

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49 Runge, Discourse, 24.
50 Barry L. Blackburn, “Miracles,” DJG1, 549–59, especially sec. 3.2.
the work that builds the Kingdom by first destroying this kingdom (or household) of Satan. That Jesus can perform these miracles confronts not only Satan but also the religious leaders of his day who believed themselves to be the only ones rightly endowed with this authority from God.\textsuperscript{51}

The household theme is just as politically charged. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, the household was the place in which citizens would be trained in virtue for religious and public life.\textsuperscript{52} Moreover, it included various kinds of kinship relationships between the paterfamilias and the remainder of the household, including slaves.\textsuperscript{53} Jesus’s new household as we find in ch. 3 defies convention by creating new public and religious virtues, which then encompasses one kinship relationship to God for all who are obedient (cf. Mark 3:35). The real irony in Mark 3:20–30 is that Jesus’s amazing miracles are not just displacing the minds of the crowd, but the very foundation of Satan’s household and the social institutions of the ancient world. Jesus is not pushing back against detractors with the word play, but rather affirming that the statement of the crowd is true in a way they cannot yet see. The word play permits a political reading of this passage in a manner scholars have not been able to see with the traditional rendering of ἐξέστη.

Unfortunately, the early church did not produce many commentaries on Mark and early interpreters often preferred Matthew and Luke when quoting from the Synoptics, so, it is difficult to confirm my reading with the earliest interpreters. However, some evidence exists from the early church in support of a split reaction to Jesus in these verses. First, Aquinas’s \textit{Catena Aurea} preserves a comment from Pseudo-Chrysostom (ca. 5\textsuperscript{th} century CE) on this passage that states,


\textsuperscript{52} Craig S. Keener, “Family/Household,” \textit{DNTB}, 353.

“Ungrateful indeed were the multitudes of princes, whom their pride
hinders from knowledge, but the grateful multitude of the people came
to Jesus.” This implies an early Christian tradition of seeing the crowd
as adorers of Jesus in opposition to the skeptical scribes. This, then,
affirms my reading that the subject of ἐξέστη is the crowd.

Likewise, Tatian’s Diatesseron (2nd century CE) conflates this
episode with the parallel accounts of Matthew and Luke. Before the
Pharisees’ claim that Jesus has Beelzebul, Tatian writes, “And the
multitudes marveled.” Admittedly, this is the weaker of the two
points of early evidence since Tatian might have simply preferred the
Matthean and Lukan reading. Even so, this would only underscore
the legitimacy of the parallels between the Synoptics on this passage. In
addition to Pseudo-Chrysostom, who explicitly deals with the passage
from Mark, we find further evidence that the early church, at least in
the East, viewed the reaction to Jesus as split between the crowd and
the Pharisees.

Indeed, there appears to be a division in the early interpretation of
Mark 3:21 between East and West. Notably, Bede and Theophylact of
Ohrid follow the traditional reading that Jesus was “crazy.” All of
these can be traced to Jerome’s reading noted in the introduction.
Pseudo-Chrysostom, an Eastern interpreter writing soon after Jerome
and long before the Vulgate became the authoritative text, would still
be using the Greek text. As a Western writer, Bede would have been
familiar with Jerome’s reading. By the time Theophylact wrote his
commentary (11th century CE), Jerome’s text and interpretation would
have been familiar, if not authoritative.

In fact, the extant writings of these commentators are not the only
witnesses that the interpretation of this passage differed between East

54 Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Gospel of Mark*, Christian Classics Ethereal
55 Tatian, *Diatesseron*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, sec. XIV,
56 Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Gospel of Mark*, Christian Classics Ethereal
and West. Codex Washingtonianus, Codex Bezae, and the Old Latin attempted to clarify this verse by noting that the scribes and the people went out to seize Jesus, thus departing from either option in the modern debate about the identity of the όι παρ’ αὐτοῦ. It appears that these Western textual witnesses want to portray a mob, including the scribes, as those who go out to seize Jesus. In turn, this would lay the groundwork for Jerome's later reading, assuming he had access to one of these recensions. However, the Eastern textual traditions do not preserve this reading and Eastern interpreters like Pseudo-Chrysostom and Tatian, who would have read a version of these verses as they appear in the NA²⁸ (and most likely the older reading), understand a split reaction in Mark 3:21–22.

Therefore, there is a plethora of evidence both within Mark’s Gospel and outside of it that support the split reaction to Jesus, between that of the crowd in 3:21 and that of the scribes in 3:22. This split reaction supports my reading that Jesus has “amazed” and that this claim about him was from the lips of the crowd. Thus, I turn now to a reconstruction of the verse with concluding remarks.

Reconstruction of Mark 3:21 and the Ongoing Scholarly Debate

The above has provided evidence for a reevaluation of Mark 3:21. It offers us a new way to understand a verse which has long confounded scholars and commentators, and it brings us to a greater understanding of the Gospel according to Mark. My proposal is that the following provides the best translation of Mark 3:21: “And having heard, the ones near him [the disciples or his family] went out to take hold of him; for they [the crowd] were saying that he has amazed [us].”

We see that the reinterpretation of ἔξεστη impacts the remainder of the verse. First, we may understand κρατήσω in its less severe sense
of simply “using one’s hands to establish close contact” since we have recognized that οἱ παρ’ αὐτῶν are attempting to protect Jesus. Although I find it likely οἱ παρ’ αὐτῶν refers to Jesus’s family by means of the Markan sandwich structure, it is irrelevant for the purposes of this argument. Rather, οἱ παρ’ αὐτῶν is not the group that makes the claim that Jesus is supposedly mad even though few scholars have considered this as a viable possibility.\(^{58}\) As we have seen, the subject of ἔλεγον is ὁ ὄχλος from the prior verse. This reading keeps with Mark’s syntactic and narrative style and it further characterizes the crowd that has been following Jesus. This, then, shifts the debate in a new direction by introducing a party in the narrative whose value to this pericope scholars have underappreciated.

Moreover, the content of the crowd’s claim is not negative, as scholars have long supposed. Rather, the argument provided here suggests that the positive construal of ἐξέστη in Mark 3:21 is the most likely one. Beyond the grammatical and lexical issues that have been recounted, the greatest evidence for construing this verb positively is its literary context, both within the Gospel itself and its Synoptic parallels. No word stands in isolation, but the semantics of a particular word heavily depends upon that to which it stands in relationship. Moises Silva writes that “The principle of contextual interpretation is, at least in theory, one of the few universally accepted hermeneutical guidelines, even though the consistent application of the principle is a notoriously difficult enterprise.”\(^{59}\)

Certainly, there is a long scholarly history of viewing this verb with a negative connotation.\(^{60}\) But the context of this verb within its verse,
chapter, book, and collection of Synoptic Gospels provides the strongest evidence to view ἐξέστη, and thus the entire verse, in a new light. The positive reading reframes the verse in a readable fashion. It clarifies the word play between Mark 3:21–22 and 3:24–26. It expands upon Mark’s emphases of the crowd, miracles, and the household of Jesus. It comports with the parallels we find in Matthew and Luke. The positive reading of ἐξέστη provides a solid foundation upon which we may more clearly interpret the broader frames within which it is found.

In conclusion, my reading of Mark 3:21 offers a new perspective of a verse that has long frustrated scholars. Yet, in light of some of the earliest, Eastern witnesses and interpreters of this text, my reading is not so innovative. Accordingly, we can look to Jerome as the likely origin of the majority reading of Mark 3:21, an interpretation that became dominant, which later scholars have taken for granted. In stating this, I do not wish to diminish Jerome’s authority, but I do wish to acknowledge that even Jerome is captive to the larger tradition of New Testament interpretation. I hope that the preceding analysis yields hermeneutical fruit to enrich this great tradition.

disagree with Steinmueller is his decision to specify the disciples as the subject of ἔλεγον and the crowd as the subject of ἐξέστη in his translation.