

# OpenTheo

## October 19th: Isaiah 1 & Mark 3:13-35

October 18, 2021



### Alastair Roberts

The beginning of Isaiah's prophecy. The choice of the Twelve.

My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here:

<https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you are interested in supporting this project, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or buying books for my research on Amazon ([https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref\\_=wl\\_share](https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref_=wl_share)).

You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

## Transcript

Isaiah chapter 1. The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken. Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.

The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know. My people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly.

They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot, even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds.

They are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil. Your country lies desolate. Your cities are burned with fire.

In your very presence foreigners devour your land. It is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.

If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah. Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom. Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah.

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the Lord? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings.

Incense is an abomination to me, new moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations. I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates.

They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you.

Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes.

Cease to do evil, learn to do good. Seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.

But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice. Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers.

Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.

They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them. Therefore the Lord declares, the Lord of hosts, the mighty one of Israel, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself on my foes. I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with a lie and remove all your alloy.

And I will restore your judges as at the first and your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed by justice and those in her who repent by righteousness.

But rebels and sinners shall be broken together and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed. For they shall be ashamed of the oaks that you desired and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen. For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers and like a garden without water.

And the strong shall become tinder and his work a spark and both of them shall burn together with none to quench them. Isaiah stands at the head of the major prophets, a group that includes Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and usually Daniel. They are referred to as the major prophets on account of the length of the prophetic books named after them, not necessarily on account of their personal importance.

While the book of Isaiah is the longest of the major prophets by chapters, it is only the third longest of the books in Hebrew words, after Jeremiah and Ezekiel. However its prominence in the canonical imagination is pervasive and profound. With the book of the Psalms, it is easily the book that is most cited or alluded to within the New Testament and has even been considered as a fifth gospel by various figures over church history on account of the prominence of its witness to the anticipated salvation of the Lord.

Despite its prominence and the brilliance of its testimony to the Lord's eschatological deliverance and establishment of his people, the book of Isaiah presents significant challenges for its interpreters, for whom it can be quite an unwieldy book. Chief among these challenges is the fact that the prophecies of Isaiah speak to and across such a wide span of historical contexts. The first 39 chapters of the book seem to speak into various historical contexts that are very immediate over the period of Isaiah's ministry.

This is a period dominated by the growing threat of Assyria beginning around 740 BC and including events such as the Syro-Ephraimite war, the overthrow of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and Sennacherib's invasion of Judah and the unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem around 701 BC. The historical setting of the message of the later chapters, however, seems to differ. Chapters 40-55 appear to speak into a context of exile in Babylon from around 605 BC when a small initial group of exiles from Judah's nobility, including people like Daniel, were taken, to 539 BC when Babylon was defeated, Cyrus made his decree and the first Jews returned to the land.

The concluding chapters, generally reckoned from chapter 56-66, are, many scholars have argued, more related to the period of the earlier return, in the concluding decades of the 6th century BC, during the Persian period. In addition to speaking to different contexts, these chapters also seem to be part of broader literary structures that suggest that they are to some degree distinct bodies of material. Even by the 12th century, as John Goldengay notes, the Jewish scholar Abraham Ibn Ezra was already noting the existence of a pronounced seam within the material of the Book of Isaiah and suggesting that the book might be the product of two different authors, one who wrote chapters 1-39 and another who wrote the later chapters.

In 1892 the scholar Bernhard Duhm argued that the concluding chapters of the book, after chapter 56, represented a further body of material, one that presupposes a temple that is either rebuilt or in the process of being so. This understanding of Isaiah, held in some form or other by a large majority of scholars, typically speaks of First or Proto-Isaiah chapters 1-39, Second or Deutero-Isaiah chapters 40-55 and Third or Trito-Isaiah chapters 56-66. These three Isaiahs refer principally to different sections or sources of the book, different layers of its composition, rather than to three different individual authors.

While the first part of the book is attributed to Isaiah the Sememath, some scholars argue that the last proposed section of the book is the assembled work of various authors. While this theory of three Isaiahs is strongly associated with the scepticism of higher critical liberal scholarship, we ought to recognise that the questions that give rise to it aren't questions that depend entirely upon liberal assumptions about scripture for their force. While liberals, for instance, might doubt the existence of true predictive prophecy and rule out the declaration of Cyrus' name in advance of his birth in Isaiah chapters 44 and 45 as impossible, the force of the questions doesn't merely dissipate for those with a belief in predictive prophecy.

There is at least one biblical instance of a prophecy of an individual's name long before his birth, in 1 Kings 13.2 where Josiah's name and his actions in Bethel are foretold to Jeroboam the son of Nebat almost 300 years before Josiah's birth. In that instance the foretelling of the name of the figure is clearly part of the prophecy. Exegetically, however, although some might place a lot of emphasis upon Isaiah 45.3-4, it's not immediately obvious that the Lord is foretelling Cyrus' name there.

There is also the fact that, rather than presuming a situation that wouldn't make full sense until about 150 years later, the text seems to speak as if it were addressing a live situation with events already set in motion by the Lord. While the historical period of Isaiah's ministry lay under the shadow of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, chapters 40-55 seem to presuppose a situation of Babylonian power and Jewish captivity. Some might see this as akin to delivering prophecies about the fall of communist Russia around the time of the American Civil War and the Pax Britannica.

Even if we believe in predictive prophecy, that God could reveal such events and names, there is still the tricky question of what sort of sense such prophecies would make to their first hearers at a time when the world order looked extremely different, pressing the question of whether God would reveal events in such a manner. Perhaps the book of Isaiah, like the Psalms of David or the Proverbs of Solomon, is a book that takes its name from the originator of a tradition or body of material and its contents are not exclusively written by the man to whom it is more directly attributed. Such arguments have persuaded most scholars.

However, there is vigorous pushback from some more conservative commentators and this pushback is also moving with some of the grain of more general scholarship from the late 20th century onwards. This scholarship, while maintaining the hypothesis of different sources, is much more inclined to place its accent upon the unity of the material of the book in its final canonical form. Such a position is most associated with the work of Brevard Charles who published his commentary on Isaiah in 2001.

Charles and those associated with his School of Biblical Scholarship of Canonical Criticism emphasise the final received form of the text over the disparate textual layers and sources that many higher critical scholars have prioritised in a manner that fractured the canonical text. While in Charles' understanding the text had a prehistory of formation from various sources and through the hands of various editors or redactors and has different blocks of material within it, the final canonical form as a single book has an integrity, unity, coherence and authority that warrants its centrality as the proper object of biblical scholarship. This recognition encourages appreciation of the ways in which the book of Isaiah, even were we to accept the existence of textual seams within it, nonetheless exhibits a literary unity with connections and structures to be observed across all of its material, not merely in component sections.

Conservative scholars like Alec Matthea, challenging the hypothesis of three different Isaiahs, have questioned the strength of some of the assumptions being made by advocates of that position. As Matthea observes, the shadow of Babylon has fallen over the face of the text before chapter 40 begins. While Judah's relations with Babylon were friendly for much of the period of Isaiah's ministry, and they even conspired together in their foreign policies, chapter 39 very naturally anticipates the period of Babylonian dominance, directly foretelling the Babylonian captivity that provides the context of the chapters that follow.

The message concerning Babylon and the return from captivity, Matthea argues, also presupposes a context of faithful opposition to idolatrous practice within the land, a context that existed prior to the Babylonian captivity. The movement from the Assyrian to the Babylonian and then on to the Persian period might not be as unreasonable as many think. Besides this, there is strong textual and other evidence that the book of Isaiah was treated as a unity from the time prior to Christ, with no actual seam in the text whatsoever between chapters 39 and 40 in some of our earliest copies.

For Christians, there is also the further consideration that the New Testament routinely refers to the book in a way that seems to assume single authorship. For instance, in John chapter 12, verses from so-called first and second Isaiah are both referred to, but are both spoken of as the words of Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied over the reigns of at least four kings of the southern kingdom of Judah – Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah.

His ministry seems to have begun in the 740s BC and he was active until at least the end

of the 8th century. This period was one of great upheaval in the region, with the rising power of Assyria overwhelming the northern kingdom and almost the southern kingdom too. Assyria's regional dominance would last for almost the entirety of the 7th century as well, before their defeat at the hand of the Babylonians.

While Judah and Israel had benefited from a period of Assyrian weakness up until the end of the 750s BC, Assyria's power was in the ascendancy after that. With the accession of Tiglath-Pileser III to the throne, the northern kingdom of Israel, a tributary to Assyria, faced an existential threat to its north, losing territory to the Assyrians in the years that followed. The question of foreign policy was a keen one for both the northern and southern kingdoms in the decades that immediately followed.

Around 735 BC, Israel under Pekah the son of Remeliah and Aram or Syria under Rezin the king of Damascus, sought to make a stand against the Neo-Assyrian empire. However, Ahaz the king of Judah refused to join them, so Israel and Syria sought to bring Judah to heel. They inflicted devastating losses upon Judah and even besieged Jerusalem in the Syro-Ephraimite war that followed.

Ahaz, fearing the overthrow of his kingdom, appealed to Tiglath-Pileser and Assyria for aid, paying them to intervene against Aram and Israel. Refusing to heed the counsel of the prophet, Judah ended up creating a rod for its own back. The Assyrians defeated Damascus and Pekah was assassinated.

However, Ahaz entered into a deeply compromising treaty with Assyria and also imported elements of the pagan worship of Damascus, establishing an altar built according to the pattern of an altar in Damascus in the temple in Jerusalem. The Assyrians would later destroy the northern kingdom and deport its people. Israel fell to the Assyrians at the end of the reign of Tiglath-Pileser's successor Shalmaneser, or at the very beginning of his successor Sargon's reign, around 722 BC.

Perhaps recognising that the imperial hunger of Assyria had not been assuaged, Hezekiah, Ahaz's successor, shifted Judah's foreign policy, looking to the southern power of Egypt for aid instead. After Sargon fell in battle in 706 BC, Sennacherib became ruler of Assyria and launched a series of devastating campaigns in the region. In 701 BC, the threat all but overwhelmed Judah as Jerusalem almost fell in Sennacherib's siege.

The prophet Isaiah lived in eventful days, times during which it might have been difficult for Judah, faced with the might of the northern alliance of Syria and Israel and the great monster of Assyria, to heed Isaiah's message, holding its nerve and trusting in the Lord. The book of Isaiah begins with a bang, summoning the heavens and the earth to bear witness and delivering a searing indictment of the nation of Judah. Their land now lies desolate, their cities burned with fire, with only the smallest number of survivors left.

Had the Lord not mercifully spared them from utter destruction, they would have been

as devastated as the ancient cities of the plain, to which the prophet proceeds to compare them. The chief among the five cities of the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah, were the paradigmatic people of the land, destroyed by the Lord for their cruelty, wickedness and perversity, for which the Canaanites would later be vomited out of the land. In Genesis the text juxtaposes the hospitality of Abraham in chapter 18 with the failed hospitality of Lot and the wicked inhospitality of the Sodomites in chapter 19.

The story of the hospitality of Abraham culminates in the barren Sarah being made fruitful while the Lord rains sulphur and fire down on Sodom. And, unable to leave the ways of Sodom behind them, Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt and his daughters have incestuous relationships with their father. The pruned sexuality and generous hospitality of the recently circumcised Abraham is contrasted with the wild and perverse sexual behaviour and the violent inhospitality of the Sodomites, with one being made fruitful and blessed and the other barren and cursed.

The literary context and framing of the story of Sodom in Genesis foregrounds its significance for the subsequent memory of Israel, immediately after the deep formative event of the gift of circumcision as the sign of the covenant with Abraham, the visitation of the angels and the annunciation of the birth of the promised seed, Isaac. Sodom and its ways were directly and sharply contrasted with the ways that should characterise Israel. Sodom's destruction was a great historical landmark, a signal example of what Israel was to reject and a warning of what would befall them if they failed to do so.

One of the darkest moments of Israel's history occurred in Judges chapter 19 as the city of Gibeah behaved in a manner reminiscent of Sodom and suffered a similar fate. We all typically presume ourselves to be the good guys in the dramas in which we play a part. The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was a classic goodies versus baddies story.

The wicked Sodomites, like the Canaanites after them, were wiped out so that faithful Abraham and his faithful descendants could take their place. Israel would probably have been accustomed to telling its history in a way that presented the city of Sodom as a prominent foil of their identity as the descendants of Abraham. Isaiah's recollection of Sodom is an explosive deployment of the foundational narratives of Judah's history.

Rather than associating Judah with the one that they considered their father, Abraham, Isaiah highlights their resemblance to the wicked former peoples of the land whom the Lord dispossessed. Not only does Judah's likeness to the Sodomites invite the Lord's destructive judgement and their cutting off from the land, it also provokes a sacrificial crisis. When they are behaving like Sodomites, far from being received with divine pleasure, even Judah's multitudinous sacrifices and prayers become an abomination, a persistent stink in the nose of the Lord.

As we see in verses 11-15, Mashiach HaBertal observes that sacrifice as offering always

involves the potential of rejection. Ritual was intended to provide a shield and assurance to the offerer. As he writes, the fatal possibility of rejection gives rise to an important function of ritual, successful transfer.

Ritual is a prescribed procedure meant to guarantee the transfer's success. Adherence to detailed routine makes the passage from laying down to acceptance less fraught. Ritual is thus a protocol that protects from the risk of rejection.

Isaiah's challenge to Judah reopens the sacrificial crisis that the rituals of the Levitical system were presumed to resolve. Far from pacifying the Lord, the religious rituals of a wicked people incite his wrath and his intense displeasure, serving as memorials of the cruel and perverse conduct of the people who are offering them. What Judah regarded as its holy service, the Lord regarded as the trampling of his courts by an occupying force, a wearying burden and an abomination.

Under such conditions, instead of relieving the divine displeasure at their sin, Judah's religious ceremonies and rituals markedly intensified it. Were it not for the damn of the Lord's merciful forbearance, the divine wrath that they incessantly incited would long since have wiped the land clean of their memory. The prophets often challenged the idea that sacrificial worship granted people some sort of immunity from the judgement of the Lord.

Ritual cannot be abstracted from the broader behaviour of those who perform it, nor offering from the conduct and the hearts of the offerer. Ritual is not hermetically sealed from or exculpatory for the rest of life, as if one could shield the vicious conduct of an oppressive and impenitent people from the eyes and judgement of the Lord. The entire fabric of Judah's society is rotten, riddled through with the vilest oppression and injustice.

Peter Lighthouse suggests the possibility that the head in which there is no soundness might be King Uzziah himself, who had been struck as a result of his trespassing upon the house of the Lord. He sought to act in the capacity of a priest and he was struck with leprosy by the Lord as a result. The Lord is the one who hears the cries of the widow and the fatherless, but exhibiting the cruelty and the inhospitality that characterised the degenerate sodomites before them, Judah's corrupt leaders exploit the poor and pervert justice for the perpetuation of their decadent ease, rather than exposing the true character of the injustice and the corruption within the nation.

Israel's worship itself had been rendered subservient to this perverse system, a means of dissembling corruption and oppression and dulling the conscience of Judah to its enormities. Along with his condemnation, Uzziah's message offers Judah hope. If they will only repent of their evil deeds, cleanse their ways, pursue justice and plead the cause of the needy, the Lord will heed their voices when they cry to him for aid and they will be spared catastrophic judgement.



If they fail to do so however, the God who heeds the cries of the poor will devour them with the sword. The temptation to put faith in religiosity, to employ religious ceremonies and rituals as akin to compensatory moral offsets for our godless, oppressive and unjust behaviour is a perennial one. Treated in such a manner, what we suppose to be our worship of God can actually be an integral element of our oppressive and perverse societies, as if it were a valve designed to release the discomfiting pressure of uneasy consciences.

Uzziah mercilessly attacks hypocritical religiosity. He strips evildoers of excuses with which they sear consciences and shields with which they disguise their wickedness. Far from serving to minimise their exposure to judgement, the religiosity of an unjust, oppressive and perverse people places it in the very greatest apparel.

Lightly invoking the name and blessing of God upon a nation is the most dangerous sort of folly when a society is filled with injustice, cruelty and wickedness. True worship, by contrast, involves a searching indictment of all injustice. It corrects it and is a model for righteous behaviour.

When Judah presented itself before the Lord in its worship, they were inviting his inspection of the entirety of their lives and recognising that fact, they needed to comport themselves accordingly in all that they did. The hollow practice of civil religion and cultural religiosity would be exposed and would ultimately betray all of those who had put their hope in them. Unless Judah would come to God for cleansing, repenting of their sins, learning to do good and seeking justice, correcting oppression, their presence before him would not be met with the Lord's pleasure.

The richest ceremonies would merely incite his wrath. To those who come in humility and repentance, however, the Lord promised that even the most egregious sins would be cleansed, their defilement would be purged and they would be rendered guiltless before the Lord. Through Isaiah the Lord gives his people an ultimatum.

But this is not like a typical ultimatum. An ultimatum is a final offering of terms before a complete breakdown of relations. At such a point one might expect that the Lord would give his people a choice between complete destruction and just hanging in there.

In an ultimatum one doesn't expect to be offered such favourable terms. But this is exactly what God gives to his people, not just the possibility of not being destroyed but a promise of the complete purging of their sins if they will respond. They must choose one of two paths.

Will they respond and receive the Lord's blessing or will they fail to respond and be condemned when the Lord comes to purge his people? A question to consider. Looking at the end of the book of Isaiah, can you see any parallel elements to those that we see at the beginning? Mark chapter 3 verses 13-35 That is, sons of thunder. Andrew and Philip

and Bartholomew and Matthew and Thomas and James the son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus and Simon the zealot and Judas Iscariot who betrayed him.

Then he went home and the crowd gathered again so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it they went out to seize him, for they were saying, He is out of his mind. And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, He is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.

And he called them to him and said to them in parables, How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.

But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man, then indeed he may plunder his house. Truly I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.

For they were saying, He has an unclean spirit. And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, Your mother and your brothers are outside seeking you.

And he answered them, Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother. In the latter half of Mark chapter 3 the company of disciples around Jesus starts to assume a greater prominence in the narrative.

They have been present to this point, but now they are more directly considered. The account of the choice of the twelve has some particular details that aren't found in either Luke or in Matthew. It begins with Jesus going up on the mountain and calling to him a particular selection of the disciples.

Perhaps we should recall Exodus 24 at this point, where Israel is constituted around Mount Sinai, with Moses, the priests and the elders going up on the side of the mountain, Moses going up to the very top, and then the rest of Israel gathered around. We might also connect the twelve with the patriarchs and Israel, the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve sons of Jacob. They don't just happen to be twelve people, it's important that they are twelve.

They were called the twelve and when Judas betrayed Christ and was dropped from their number, they had to choose a replacement because they had to have the full complement of the twelve present. They are appointed by Christ so that they might be with him, so that they might be sent out to preach and also that they might have

authority to cast out demons. The importance of proximity to a witnessing to Christ's life and hearing his teaching is paramount.

They need to be around Christ and with him and see the way he lives, see the way he prays, hear what he teaches and learn his explanation of his teaching. They are chosen also for a commission, that they might be sent out as his representatives to preach and to proclaim the gospel to the cities and towns of Israel. And they're granted authority to cast out demons, to continue Jesus' own ministry against the demons and the demonic forces at work in Israel.

The twelve are listed, beginning with Simon and James and John. They're the three core disciples. Simon is the first disciple in each list that we have of the disciples.

He's the leader of the twelve. Peter is the one who will speak as the natural spokesperson of the group. He's the one that will pioneer the mission on the day of Pentecost.

He will authorise the mission to Samaria and he will also break the new ground of mission to the Gentiles. Judas is the last in every list of the disciples. He's occupying the position of the least honour and we're told that he betrays Christ as well at this point.

So it explains in part why he is occupying the position that he is. We should observe that Jesus gives each of the three core disciples a new name, presumably declaring the sort of people that they will become. They are privileged in other ways.

They accompany him up the Mount of Transfiguration and also in Gethsemane. Why are they given the names that they're given? Well, Peter would become the rock. He would be an essential part of the foundation of the church.

The church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets and particularly the apostles. The apostles are the foundation stones in different ways and Peter is the key foundation stone of the apostles. He's the leading apostle.

He's an essential part of the foundation of the church. James and John are often said to be sons of thunder because they wanted to call down fire from heaven in Luke chapter 9 verse 54. Thunder, however, generally has more positive connotations in scripture, being associated with God's powerful voice.

God is generally the one who is associated with thunder and James and John will become strong and powerful witnesses bearing the thunder of God. Now, just as Peter the rock could become like the stumbling block for Christ as he sought to persuade him not to go to Jerusalem and to crucifixion, so the sons of thunder could fall into the trap of, in trying to call down fire from heaven, twisting the true significance of their name. In the Old Testament there are a few key people who have their names changed like Abraham and Sarai and Jacob and James, John and Peter should be included in this select group of

persons who have their names changed by the Lord.

The twelve are a band of brothers with Jesus and perhaps we should see in the background of this David's mighty men. Jesus is the Davidic king in Mark. He's the man of action.

He's going from place to place straight away, immediately and in the same way as David, he's surrounded by his mighty men. Like David, he has a larger group of mighty men and then he has a core group within that larger group. David has three mighty men who are particularly close to him, the core group of mighty men in 2 Samuel chapter 23 verses 8 to 12.

Although Jesus has many female followers, including a number who are seemingly more prominent in the narrative than certain members of the twelve, the twelve are all male. They're like a military company and they're prepared for doing battle against the demons, for scoping out the land, proclaiming the message of the kingdom and also acting as the guardians of the church and the foundation of the church in the future. Jesus goes back home to Capernaum and is once again completely mobbed by a crowd and it's making it very difficult for him to do anything.

His own family go out from Nazareth to seize him. They believe that he's lost his mind. Presumably they've been hearing strange reports from Capernaum and elsewhere and it's troubling to hear that his very own family was so disbelieving of his ministry.

But this is followed by conflict with the scribes from Jerusalem. So there's people coming from Nazareth, his own family, and there are people coming from Jerusalem. Once again Jesus' ministry of exorcism is front and centre.

It's important to see how central it is in Mark. Jesus is the exorcist in Mark so much of the time. He's going round and he's having these power confrontations with Satan and his demons.

This is a conflict, it's a battle that's being waged. Jesus is not just a teacher, Jesus is not just a prophet. Jesus is the man of action engaged in conflict and battle with Satan and his minions.

They accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the prince of the demons. But then Jesus gives a parable that explains he's the one entering into the house of Satan, the strong man, and plundering it. And he could not do that unless he had bound Satan.

Christ has come to deliver them from their oppression by Satan. In the background of Jesus' teaching here we should probably hear Isaiah chapter 49 verses 24-26. Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued? For thus says the Lord, even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued.

For I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children. I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the Lord your Saviour, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

While all other sorts of slander might be forgiven people, blaspheming against the Holy Spirit will not. When people attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to an evil spirit, they are maligning God himself. The point of Jesus here is to challenge those who are attributing the manifest work of the Holy Spirit of God to Satan himself.

While many people of tender conscience have struggled with this text, wondering whether they have committed the unforgivable sin, if you actually look at the context, it seems to be dealing with a very specific type of situation that involves direct and willful opposition and maligning of the work of Christ and the Spirit. Not only disbelieving, but presenting that work of the Spirit as if it were the work of Satan himself. As we look through the rest of the New Testament we see people like Saul of Tarsus being converted, someone who persecuted the Church, who was murderously opposed to Christ and all that he stood for.

And if Christ can save such a person as an example, then what we're dealing with here is a very extreme case of willful and persistent rejection of the Spirit of God, an attribution of that which is most holy to that which is most evil, unclean and perverse. Who are the insiders and who are the outsiders? It's a key question throughout this passage. Jesus has just chosen his disciples, the insiders, who will be the core group around him.

Then his own family prove themselves to be outsiders. They don't believe him, they believe he's mad and they try and take him away by force. Then he is challenged by the scribes as hostile outsiders.

And finally we see this contrast between the natural family and his disciples. Jesus speaks about those around him as his brothers, sister, mother. Jesus isn't just an independent teacher, an exorcist.

He's forming a family around him, a group of people who are not just followers but people who are sharing in a community of life with him. A question to consider. Why do you think that Jesus discriminated among his wider group of committed disciples and followers, choosing twelve to be especially close to him and three of them to be even closer?