

3.0 The Journey to Jerusalem

3.1 Who is Truly Blind?

We will begin our study of the Journey to Jerusalem account by commenting briefly on the framework that encloses it. The last miracle in Galilee is the restoring of sight to the man at [Bethsaida](#) (8:22-26); the last miracle of the Gospel, which occurs at the end of the journey as they begin the last arduous ascent from [Jericho](#) towards Jerusalem, is the restoration of sight to the blind beggar Bartimaeus (10:46-52). It is unusual in that he is the only person cured by Jesus in Mark who is known by his own name. Usually, the evangelist just leaves the identity of people rather vague: a man, a woman, or a child. If he wants to go beyond that, it is simply something such as “Peter’s mother in law” or “the daughter of a synagogue official called Jairus.” Why he breaks the pattern in this case, we do not know. It may be that the individual was known in the Christian community, since “following along the way” becomes later in the Acts a technical term for discipleship and conversion, and Mark wishes to point Bartimaeus out as an ideal follower of Jesus. Mark’s repetitions are important. In this case, they give us a leading clue in how we are meant to interpret this lengthy section. Blindness and new sight are its leading theme. The first cure occurs with difficulty. Again, this is a most unusual occurrence in the miracle tradition, since all the other healings take place instantaneously. Jesus appears to use a healing remedy - the use of spittle and mud and the laying on of hands. The cure is only partial, “I can see people, but they look like trees walking” (8:24) and the action must be repeated before a final cure is achieved (8:25). The cure of Bartimaeus on the other hand is instantaneous and complete. Again, Jesus normally sends people back to pick up the thread of human life, he did not allow the Gadarene demoniac for example to follow him, but does nothing to prevent Bartimaeus from “following him along the way.” Clearly, Mark wishes to draw out attention here to restoration of sight and discipleship. What Jesus is combating in this section more than the physical blindness of a few chance people who invoke his aid is the spiritual blindness of the disciples who have failed to recognize the implications of following him.

3.2 Discipleship and the Cross

The shadow of the cross began to fall over Jesus from the early days of the ministry in Galilee (3:6). The description of John’s execution and burial (6:17-29) is almost like an overture to the death of Jesus. The journey to Jerusalem has three passion predictions, which serve as milestones or direction-indicators along the way (8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34):

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- [Mark 8:31-33](#) - And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. *And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him.* But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men.”
- [Mark 9:30-32](#) - They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he would not have any one know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” *But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him.*
- [Mark 10:32-34](#) - And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and *those who followed were afraid.* And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise.”

Each of these passion predictions contains two elements: a detailed summary of the passion and resurrection and a comment on the response of the disciples. These could be called passion-gospels in miniature. They reflect the final form of Mark’s passion gospel, and this might raise this question for us: “did Jesus predict in detail the kind of death which was waiting for him in Jerusalem?” It should be very clear by now that in Mark we always have to reckon with the evangelist’s tendency to take up the words of Jesus and represent them in the light of the later experience of the Church. The passion story would have been well-known. Paul quotes to the Corinthians “what he received” that Christ did for our sins according to the scriptures; that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures. It would appear to be highly likely that the Passion predictions here have achieved their final detailed form through the growth of the passion story in the early church. We might ask “did Jesus expect to die in Jerusalem?” The evidence of the Gospel, however, suggests the following possibilities:

- Jesus may have anticipated a death by stoning; this was the usual form of death penalty in ancient Israel for serious contravention of the Law.

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- The fate of the beloved Son in the parable of the Wicked Tenants (12:1-12) is murder. If Jesus meant to apply this to himself, he may have anticipated that his enemies would murder him.
- Death by [crucifixion](#) was a Roman punishment, reserved particularly for offences against the state such as revolt.

It is more likely that Jesus, as a Jewish prophet, would have foreseen death by stoning or by mob-violence more likely than death by crucifixion. Peter responds to the first passion prediction by taking Jesus aside to “rebuke him” (8:32). The second is met by incomprehension on the part of the disciples (9:32). The third is followed by a request from James and John to have seats of honour in the Kingdom (10:35-36). Also high-lighted is the disciples’ fear; they no doubt believed that they were setting out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. At the very least, what lay before them would be a happy time of celebration of national and religious identity. At best, Jesus would repeat the signs and wonders of Galilee in Jerusalem and soon have the religious leaders and aristocrats of Jerusalem eating out of his hand, and they would be there as the leading lights in a renewed Jerusalem! But here he is talking about death and danger. Mark is at pains to point out the failure of the disciples to understand that the way of Jesus is one that must pass through death. He also stresses the fear that begins to grip them as they register bewilderment at what Jesus says. Fear of the cross is always a major obstacle to discipleship.

3.3 [The Transfiguration \(Mark 9:2-10\)](#)

(a) The Text

[2] Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a [high mountain apart](#),¹ by themselves. And he was transfigured² before them, [3] and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. [4] And there appeared to them [Elijah](#) with [Moses](#), who were talking with Jesus. [5] Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”³ [6] He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. [7]

1 According to tradition this is [Mount Tabor](#), [16 km southwest of the Sea of Galilee](#). This identification is conjectural.

2 The Greek verb, *metamorphóomai* (μεταμορφόομαι – *to be changed in form*), implies temporal transformation.

3 Peter’s enigmatic statement suggests that providing a shelter for Jesus along with Moses and Elijah portrays Jesus as just one more Old Testament-type figure on the same level as the other two figures.

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Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”⁴ [8] Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. [9] As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. [10] So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

(b) Commentary

The starkness of the journey narrative is relieved only by the account of the Transfiguration. The only disciples who are given a glimpse of Jesus are Peter, James and John. Peter has already rebuked him for speaking about suffering and death (8:32); the other two will ask for seats in the Kingdom (10:37). The three of them will also be invited to share the horror of his prayer in the garden but will fail to keep awake (14:33.37.40-41). For a moment now, the clouds part and this enigmatic man is seen in gleaming white in the company of the great ones of Israel’s past, Moses and Elijah, and voice from heaven proclaims that the one who has spoken about the most shameful death imaginable the Son of God. What lies behind this strange story? Some interpreters have tried to find a rationalist explanation for the story while preserving some of the details in the text. Thus, for instance, they would suggest that the play of sun-light and mist on a high mountain gave the disciples the allusion of a cloud covering them and that Jesus looked different due to some trick of the light or even that his face lit up with joy when he suddenly understood that his death might be a necessary part of God’s plan for him. I do not think we can fruitfully understand the story in that way. High mountains, clouds and prophetic visions are common enough in the Bible. We can think for example of Moses on [Mount Sinai](#) (Exod 19) or the Prophet Elijah on Horeb (1 Kings 19:9-18), or of Moses bringing the seventy elders who share the care for the people up the mountain with him where they eat and drink and see YHWH (Exod 24:1-11).

It is clear that the evangelist is proclaiming Jesus once more as the glorious Son of God as he has done at the baptism and as he will do at the moment of death. The disciples are still a confused bunch: Peter does not know what to say beyond the desire to build a few huts so as to remain basking in the glory a while longer. When the moment of glory passes - they see no one but only Jesus and as they make their way down the hill, he warns them to say nothing until after the Resurrection. The reference to Resurrection provides a second clue. Unlike the three other Gospels, Mark has no account of an

⁴ For those who have ears to hear, the passions predictions were a validation of Jesus’ claim to messianic sonship. Since God’s favour rested on Jesus in the most sombre moment of his ministry, so too God’s favour would rest on the Markan Community in its trials.

appearance of the Risen Lord beyond a promise of seeing him in Galilee. The Transfiguration is a foretaste of such a meeting and it looks forward to the triumph of Jesus. In this sense, the disciple who is living in the midst of a suffering Church is reminded that the Lord whose way leads through the Cross can only be finally known in the triumph of the Resurrection.

3.4 Discipleship as Cross-bearing

As we have seen from the Passion predictions, Mark has his eyes on the future disciples of Jesus. If the cross cast its shadow over the life of Jesus from early in the Galilean ministry, it now begins to cast its shadow over the life of the disciples. The whole journey is an instruction on the cost of discipleship. The first passion prediction is followed immediately by a teaching on the price disciples must pay, but this programme is spelled out in concrete terms in the other major teaching sections of the journey narrative. We shall begin with a brief study of the programmatic statement on discipleship and cross-bearing (8:34 – 9:1). This block is addressed to “the multitude with his disciples.” Clearly Mark is broadening the context of the condition of discipleship. It contains two elements of teaching: the conditions of discipleship and a solemn promise introduced by “Amen, I say to you...” which promises that some of the disciples at least will see the Kingdom of God come with power. Each will now be discussed separately.

- **The Conditions for Discipleship:** “Taking up the Cross” could only have meaning in the light of the fate of Jesus. The saying about Cross-bearing is therefore best read as a saying of the Risen Lord speaking through his Church to the disciples in the post-resurrectional period. It is a willingness to abandon all counting the cost to follow in the way of Jesus, even if it should lead to the loss of life itself. To be “ashamed of Jesus and his words” is failure to witness to the Gospel in the face of hostile opposition. This too looks forward to a situation in the Church after Easter when Christians may be called up to make the sacrifice of their lives in martyrdom. If as was likely, Mark’s Gospel was written as a call to steadfastness and a word of comfort to a persecuted Church, we can see how in this section of his Gospel, he is clearly applying the model of the suffering Christ to the Church of his day.
- **The Promise That the Kingdom Will Come With Power:** The early Church expected the kingdom of God to break in upon it suddenly with a display of power. We know this from some of the references in Paul’s Letters and also from a book such as the Book of Revelation. It is highly likely that the community for which Mark wrote saw the time of persecution they were living through as a sign that the end time was close at hand. This need not surprise us too much. There seems to be an almost unquenchable human tendency to interpret a time of intense suffering as a

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preparation for the end times. In such a time, the word that the world as we know it is coming to an end and that final vindication of the weak is close at hand is truly “good news.”

3.5 Discipleship and Childhood

Between the second and third passion predictions, Mark devotes a great deal of attention to very concrete teaching. Two units take up the theme of childhood. In the first of these, the child is put in the midst of the squabbling disciples as model (9:33-37). In the second, Jesus blesses children who are brought to him (10:13-16). Both of these are examples of *pronouncement* stories. That is to say, they are carefully constructed so that they reach their climax in a pronouncement or solemn teaching of Jesus:

- [Mark 9:37](#) - “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”
- [Mark 10:15](#) “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

The attractive nature of these scenes sometimes prevents us from understanding clearly what is at stake in them. Childhood in the ancient world was not a bonny baby competition. Unwanted children were regarded as a burden; frequently they were exposed to either die or to be adopted by the childless as foundlings. A chilling reminder of the reality against which these pronouncements of Jesus should be read comes to us in the following letter of an Egyptian Hilarion to his young wife Alis: “I urge you and entreat you, be concerned about the child. If you bear a boy, let it live; if it be a girl, cast it out [to die].” Receiving a child in the name of Jesus was to receive and make room for the defenceless. To receive the kingdom of God “like a child” was to receive it with grateful heart and in utter powerlessness. To suggest the child as a model to disciples preoccupied about status in the coming Kingdom was a shocking assault on their values of self-esteem. The reference to the children evokes a further series of words about “the little ones” (9:42-48). These are not necessarily children, but are more likely those considered of weak faith in the Markan community. The members of the community are ordered to exercise the greatest attention in avoiding causes for stumbling for people of weak faith.

3.6 Teaching on Divorce (10:2-12)

(a) The Text

Teaching on Divorce: [2] Some Pharisees came, and to test⁵ him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”⁶ [3] He answered them, “What did Moses command you?”⁷ [4] They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” [5] But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.⁸ [6] But from the beginning of creation,⁹ “God made them male and female. [7] For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, [8] and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. [9] Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” [10] Then in the house¹⁰ the disciples asked him again about this matter. [11] He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; [12] and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

(b) Commentary

We should notice initially that this little unit of teaching is divided into two scenes. While the teaching in the journey narrative is addressed mostly to the disciple, the first scene (10:2-9) is addressed to the crowd and takes the form of a controversy dialogue or pronouncement story with the Pharisees. The second scene takes place “in the house” and the audience consists of the disciples alone (10:10-12). The substance of the scene is an authoritative word of Jesus on divorce. The structure of the unit may help us in determining something of the import of the scene.

5 The test is either to bring Jesus into conflict with the Torah or with Herod Antipas who was cohabitating with his brother’s wife.

6 Divorce of wife by husband was the only divorce recognized by Jewish law.

7 The Mosaic Law provided for the possibility of regularizing divorce. It made no decision as to whether divorce was right or wrong. It also provided security for the divorced woman.

8 Jesus’ retort is designed to call attention to divine purpose in the matter of marriage.

9 The introduction of the creation narrative raises the matter to a far higher level by appealing to the purpose of God in marriage. Jesus appeals to the true character of human life as God intended it as against legislation based on fallen human nature.

10 Jesus goes beyond Jewish law. It is probably a gloss, accommodating Romano-Greek customary law.

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The crowd strictly speaking plays no part in this scene, but since the teaching given in their hearing, it is clearly intended for them. The controversial nature of the question is stressed by brief reference to the motivation of the Pharisees; the purpose of the question is “to test him.” The question of divorce is not in itself a trick question. We know from rabbinical texts that it was on the question of divorce that the Pharisees themselves split into “liberal” and “strict” groups. The reason for that was not so much the fact of divorce as its grounds. According to the Law, divorce could be granted to the husband (not the wife) on the grounds of “something objectionable” found in the wife (Deut 24:1-4). It was this rather vague statement of cause that was the grounds for disagreement. According to the strict interpretation, of the [School of Shammai](#), it was to be interpreted as adultery. For the more lenient [School of Hillel](#), it was anything in the woman that failed to please the husband, even burning his dinner! Trying to find where Jesus stood on the matter was an attempt to label him, to make him take side. Jesus’ answer is to take another text of scripture that states the ideal - it is from the starting point of God’s ideal plan for human relationships that the question of divorce must be treated. In arguing from the greater (God’s plan) to the lesser (this particular case and how the plan is to be implemented), Jesus is using a recognized rabbinical technique. The ideal of “two in one flesh” is the grounds on which marriage is to be viewed and therefore divorce is seen as a departure from the plan of God.

Scenes “alone with the disciples” as we have already pointed out tend to represent the Church after the resurrection. There are two cases considered, divorce by the husband was, as we have seen permitted by Jewish Law. According to Roman law, wives had a similar right. Should we envisage here a situation in which the early Church faces a dilemma? It has a word from Jesus about husbands divorcing wives; the situation of wives divorcing husbands was much less clear. In the light of the prevailing Jewish situation, Jesus probably never mentioned such a case. This scene shows the way in which the teaching authority of the early Church extends the teaching of Jesus to cover new situations.

It might be important here to add a very brief word about how we apply the teaching of Jesus to pastoral situations today. Given the limits of this note, it will not be possible to treat the entire question of the New Testament’s teaching on marriage in anything like the full manner it deserves. Firstly, the New Testament is very clear about the teaching of Jesus on the ideal. If anything, Jesus distinguished himself from the schools of the Pharisees by rigor in the matter of divorce. Mark seems to have recognized that such a teaching was potentially painful to many Christians by placing it within the framework of the way of discipleship as the way of the cross. For some people, the failure of marriage can be one of those situations in which they experience the “loss of life.” Secondly, we should recognize that the early Church did not simply apply the teaching of Jesus in an unthinking way to new situations. The teaching of the disciples “alone” is a witness to one way in which it attempted to address new situations.

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We also find Paul, for instance, in 1 Corinthians taking up a number of the new situations, but recognizing that the teaching of the Lord, despite its clarity, does not cover every human eventuality. Paul freely admits that in some cases, he has no authoritative teaching from the Lord (for instance, if an unbelieving husband will not allow a believing wife to freely follow the way of Jesus) and so asks them to trust his pastoral common sense in applying the teaching in new situations which the Lord did not envisage: “To the rest / say, *not the Lord*, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her” (1 Cor 7:12). Is it possible that we find a similar situation in the Church today to what Paul, and Mark, found in theirs - namely human situations in which we need to maintain the ideal of Jesus while recognizing that there must be new responses to new situations?

3.7 Wealth and Power

The other great theme that is taken up here is that of powerlessness and poverty in following Jesus. The image of the child will have prepared us for this. It is however taken up again in a number of other units within this section. Obviously, some of these Galilean fishermen thought that following Jesus was a good career move. If Jesus was about to restore the kingdom to Israel, then it offered them a particular claim on the fruits of the kingdom. Probably, there was already some inner group among the disciples - Peter, certainly, but also James and John the Sons of Zebedee, and quite likely Judas as the treasurer of the group. In such a climate, arguing about how was the greatest (9:34) was less about present situation and more about future prospects. Even the lesson of the child is lost on them, for John immediately recounts how he saw someone casting out demons in the name of Jesus and tried to stop him (9:38-41). If the final goal is temporal authority in the Kingdom, then its present commodity is spiritual power and John wishes to corner the market in that particular commodity. The answer of Jesus is that he does not need that sort of protection - the doing of good in his name is enough “he who is not against us is for us.” This extends even to the sharing of the humble goods of water from the well.

One of the most poignant scenes in the Gospel must be the rich would-be follower of Jesus (10:17-22). He is an ideal Jew in terms of his keeping of the commandments, but the one thing lacking to follow Jesus, namely total despoliation, is difficult. It gives rise then to the demanding teaching on riches (10:23-27). Humanly speaking, it is impossible, but not for God.

A scene between Jesus and the sons of Zebedee follows the third passion prediction (10:35-40).¹¹ If anything, this is a lash of biting irony applied to the back of the apostles.

¹¹ It is interesting to see how the other evangelists handle this episode. Matthew makes the mother of the sons of Zebedee the petitioner for seats for her boys while Luke omits it altogether. Luke also transfers a great deal of this material into the setting of the Last Supper; table-fellowship, particularly at the Eucharist is where Christians learn the meaning of the servant authority of Jesus.

The First Synoptic Gospel: §3 – The Journey to Jerusalem

They approach as if asking for a favour. It is however an obsequious humility. They have already made up their minds about what they want - seats at the right and left in the kingdom. Jesus however turns the tables on them. The only thing, which is in his power to share with them, is his cup and his baptism. It is quite likely that they would have initially have thought of “cup” as signifying close intimacy (only close friends drink from the same cup). In Biblical terms however, the cup is often a symbol for fate and death. The word baptism should be taken in its original meaning of “total immersion,” of being soaked in suffering. The way of discipleship is stark - it is cup and baptism, not throne.

The request of the brothers gives rise to another dispute among the disciples. They are angry with James and John, not because their request indicates a failure to understand the way of Jesus, but no doubt because they suspect that the two brothers were guilty of a bit of sharp practice getting their request in ahead of the others. The rivalry of the disciples is the rivalry of worldly leaders “the rulers of the gentiles” who are tyrants. The disciples of the Son of Man must follow his way of service, even to the point of giving their life for the ransom of many. The crash-course of training in discipleship thus comes to an end with one of the clearest statements in the Gospel of the meaning of the death of Jesus as sacrifice: “For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45).