
Isaiah in Mark

Lesson 11

“Mark 12”

Objective: To understand how Isaiah is used by Mark to proclaim the good news to his original audience and to understand how this should be understood by us today. How should the gospel message impact our lives. The historical and cultural barriers often cause us to miss, or even misinterpret the message of Mark. This then inhibits transformation into the image of Christ.

Materials: Books, Journal articles, Targums, the Syriac Peshitta and interviews.

Procedures: To outline the issues that confront us as we seek to comprehend more fully the powerful ways that the Old Testament, and in particular Isaiah challenged and transformed the world-view and the lives of first century believers. In doing this, it is hoped that we can then transform that understanding into a contextual milieu that will allow our lives to be impacted by the Gospel in the powerful, transformative way that it impacted that first audience.

As we begin chapter 12, the account known as the parable of the vineyard Mark once again appeals to Isaiah. The Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7¹) provides the equation of the vineyard with Israel that lies behind this parable. We need to note, however that there are significant differences here in Mark: In Isaiah the vineyard itself is at fault for yielding sour grapes; in Mark the fault for the bad fruit lies not with the vineyard, but with the tenants, who refuse to give the owner of the vineyard his portion. Another difference between Isaiah and Mark is that in Isaiah the vineyard is destroyed while in Mark it is the tenants that are destroyed while the vineyard is then given to others. In the Gospel account there is no judgment upon the nation of Israel as a whole in the way there is in Isaiah. Instead, judgment falls upon the leaders of the temple.²

In the imagery of Isaiah 5:2, the passage that underlies Mark 12:1, parts of this imagery were interpreted, in Judaism, as the

¹ I will sing to my love—a song to my lover about his vineyard. My love had a vineyard on a fertile hill. ² He built a hedge around it, removed its stones, and planted a vine. He built a tower in the middle of it, and constructed a winepress. He waited for it to produce edible grapes, but it produced sour ones instead. ³ So now, residents of Jerusalem, people of Judah, you decide between me and my vineyard! ⁴ What more can I do for my vineyard beyond what I have already done? When I waited for it to produce edible grapes, why did it produce sour ones instead? ⁵ Now I will inform you what I am about to do to my vineyard: I will remove its hedge and turn it into pasture, I will break its wall and allow animals to graze there. NET.

² Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), p. 129.

Temple and its altar. In *1 Enoch 89:73*³, Craig Evans argues that by the first century there was already an equation of “tower” with Temple.⁴ In the Targum of Isaiah this same idea is conveyed.⁵ Such an assertion appears to be corroborated by a recently published fragment from Qumran (4Q500) which appears to be based on Isaiah 5:1-7 and which links the wine vat with “the gate of the holy height,” which is an apparent reference to the Temple mount as a tower.⁶

You may well be asking what difference does all of this make to me and to my understanding of this passage of Scripture? It is important for us to recognize the context of Mark, where Jesus here, at chapter 12, is still engaged in debate with the religious authorities. Chapter 11 has just ended with Jesus asking them a question regarding the baptism of John the Baptist. In chapter 11 we also have the cursing of the fig tree, and the cleansing of the Temple. At 11:28

³ They again began to build as before; and they raised up that tower which is called the high tower. But they started to place a table before the tower, with all the food which is upon it being polluted and impure. Charlesworth.

⁴ Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord* (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 119-120.

⁵ Isaiah 5:2 “And I sanctified them and I glorified them and I established them as the plant of a choice vine; and I built my sanctuary in their midst, and I even gave my altar to atone for their sins; I thought that they would do good deeds, but they made their deeds evil.” Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum, The Aramaic Bible*, Vol. 11 (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 10.

⁶ Joseph M. Baumgarten, “4Q500 and the Ancient Conception of the Lord’s Vineyard,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* (1989) 40, pp. 1-6.

Jesus is challenged and the chief priests, scribes and elders ask him by what authority he is doing all these things. They are afraid of Jesus (11:18) and they are looking for a way to kill him. They fear his charisma, they fear that they cannot control him and they fear that he will take away their power and authority. In the light of all of these circumstances, while standing in the Temple courts Jesus begins telling them the parable of Mark 12 regarding the vineyard.

Instead of being conciliatory and peaceable Jesus ratchets up the tension with this parable. You can be certain Jesus understood the history of the interpretations of Isaiah 5 and he fully expected his audience, especially the authorities, to be aware of those interpretations. Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem as we are told in chapter 10 (32-34), knowing full well what lay ahead, and Jesus pursues the agenda that will ultimately lead to his death. The parable draws upon the imagery and interpretations of Isaiah's prophecies and intensifies exponentially the impact of the message of Jesus here. Without a doubt the authorities will have understood from the very first sentence that Jesus was talking about Jerusalem, the Temple and its altar. They will also have understood that Jesus

was from the first designating them as tenants. God is the owner of the vineyard, the tower (the Temple), and the wine press (the altar), are all recognizable to them and they are tenants who have been left in charge to manage the vineyard.

Verse 2, begins perhaps in a manner that would be expected, as the owner of the vineyard sends someone (a slave), a prophet, to collect from the tenants his share of the produce of the vineyard. The question you may be asking is what is God expecting from the tenants? Is he expecting his cut of the gold, the grapes, the wine, the other offerings, or something else. To answer the question of what he expected; the place to look is in the message of the prophets to the tenants that has come over and over and over through the centuries. Perhaps no place says it more precisely and concisely than Micah 6:8.⁷ The message of the slaves (the prophets) has persistently and consistently been a call to the people to be loyal to God and his nature. The response of the tenants has consistently been the same; they beat and killed the prophets.⁸ In verse 6, we have a change as

⁷ **He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?** NRSV.

⁸ 1 Kings 19:10, 14; Matthew 23:37; Luke 11:47, 49; 13:33-34; Acts 7:52; 1 Thessalonians 2:15.

the owner of the vineyard sends his son, the heir. The tenants see an opportunity here and so they seize the son, as Jesus would soon be seized, they kill him, and they throw him out of the vineyard. Here Jesus predicts that the actions of the religious authorities would indeed result in his death.

The tension in the story has now built to a crescendo and the question is what will the owner of the vineyard do now. We are not left wondering as the answer comes hot on the heels of the question. He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. In this way, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple and the passing of custody of God's vineyard to others. In verse 10 Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:22-23. He does this while standing in the Temple courts themselves. For anyone who has visited the present day remains of this ancient Temple it is impossible to avoid being awed by the massive stones, some larger than buses, carved with such care and accuracy as to fit together with perfection. In Mark 13, Jesus will talk about these stones and prophesy their downfall. In the context here then the quote from the Psalms purveys Jesus as the cornerstone of the new Temple that is to come.

The old Temple made with human hands will be replaced with the new Temple that is not made with human hands, with Jesus being the chief cornerstone.

It is of interest to me that even today there is so much interest in the physical Temple in Jerusalem. In the early second century there was tremendous interest in the Temple too, among the Jews. In around 132 A.D. a messianic figure arose among the Jews who came to be called Simon Bar Kochba⁹ after the prophesy in Numbers 24:17 regarding the star of Jacob. Simon put together a formidable force that held the Romans at bay and delivered several defeats to them. During this period when the lines between Christianity and Judaism were not nearly so clearly defined as they are today Justin Martyr serves as one of our most important literary sources. His writings are the nearest in time to the events and he does reference the revolt. In his *First Apology*, Justin asserts that Christians should only suffer persecution at the hands of the Jewish rebels, if they refused to deny Jesus as the Christ and blaspheme. One of the major aims of this revolt was to throw off the yoke of the Romans so that

⁹ Shimon ben Kosiva was his real name.

the Temple could be rebuilt. This was a great force of unity for many Jews, but certainly not for Christians who looked forward to a different kind of Temple, one not made with human hands.

On a number of fronts the aim of this rebellious movement brings those loyal to its aims in conflict with Christian ideals. Whether or not Simon thought of himself in terms of being the Messiah of Israel or not that was certainly the way he was portrayed. His nickname relating to the prophesy of the star of Jacob from Numbers certainly casts him as a messianic figure that would serve to rival the Christian view of Jesus as the Messiah. In addition, the whole issue of a physical Temple made by human hands would have represented a major challenge to the beliefs of early Christians.¹⁰ Even from the context of Mark 12:11 there appears to be the understanding that this new Temple would not be a Temple made with human hands like the first two Temples had been. The aim and direction of the Bar Kochba rebellion put them on a direct collision course with Christians even causing some to perceive of Bar Kochba as the antichrist that had been predicted. For them he was a

¹⁰ Acts 17:24; Hebrews 9:24; cf. Revelation 21:22.

pretender, a false Messiah who was deceiving the people and part of that deception included the desire and plan to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem.

Joel Marcus also believes that in referencing the new eschatological Temple Jesus intends for us to understand this against the background of passages from Isaiah that deliver an expectation of Gentiles streaming to the end-time Temple. This expectation can be found to be particularly prominent in Isaiah 2:2-3¹¹ and 56:6-7. The introduction by Mark of a citation from Isaiah 56:6-7¹² into the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple (11:17) indicates that Jesus was aware of this end-time pilgrimage prophesy regarding the new Temple. This awareness stands in alignment with what we said regarding chapter 2, where Mark ascribes fundamental importance to the prophesy of Isaiah and interprets Jesus' "way" as the return of Yahweh to Zion (cf.

¹¹ **In days to come the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³ Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. NRSV.**

¹² **And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant— ⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. NRSV.**

Mark 1:2-3).¹³ Jesus sets the scene before them in terms of the prophecies that had been given so long ago by this Israelite prophet and in his story we see life coming into these prophecies as the reality begins to appear.

Certainly the religious authorities recognized that the parable that Jesus had just spoken was against them. They may have been a lot of things, but ignorant of the words of Scripture was not one of their shortcomings. They knew the words and they knew much about their meaning, but even these beautiful and powerful words of hope failed to bring them out of the blindness and the hardness of their hearts. Sometimes I wonder if am I blind too, often I wonder and I hope, and I pray that through the power of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit the blindness that so easily is induced by my own ego and my arrogance can be held in check. Here in this story we have Jesus continuing to struggle with these leaders giving them opportunity after opportunity to see and hear the truth, but their concerns, their desires, continue to blind and deafen them as they had for so many generations since these prophecies were given through Isaiah. These

¹³ Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, p. 121.

words should draw us to our knees in praise and awe of the gentleness and determination of a God that perseveres.

The response of the authorities shows the darkness of their hearts as they wanted to arrest him, but only failed to do so because of their fear. Over and over again they are motivated by fear in their actions. I firmly believe that not fear, but hope drove Jesus on and that same hope would empower those who would follow in his footsteps as they would face all dangers knowing the truth of the Gospel. God had indeed returned to Zion to redeem that which had been lost, not on a white horse but humbly, gently, passionately on a donkey. He in whom all power and glory rested continued to teach, to plead with those who sought to silence him and extinguish his life. In verse 13 we are told that they continue to lay traps for him, baited with praise and hypocrisy. They seek to cause him to make a statement against the Romans and paying taxes. How arrogant they were thinking they could outwit the author of life, the sustainer of all things the Logos. He easily sidesteps their trap, while cleverly not stepping in the other trap that had been laid. He clearly and

powerfully proclaims that loyalty must and should always belong first, last and always to God.

This does not end their attempts to trap Jesus as the Sadducees tried to trap him by a story that was probably the stock and trade of their dispute with the Pharisees. This story is possibly based upon the *Book of Tobit* where we have a woman who indeed had 7 wives and they all died on their wedding night before they could consummate the marriage, and certainly leaving no children. The Sadducees were an influential Jewish sect that likely had their origins sometime in the second century B.C. It appears that as a sect they did not survive the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. This is the only time that this group is mentioned, by name, in the Gospel of Mark. The name of the Sadducees likely derives from Zadok, a descendant of Aaron who lived during the time of David and Solomon (2 Samuel 8:17; 15:24; 1 Kings 1:34; 1 Chronicles 12:28). His offspring constituted the legitimate high-priestly line in later biblical times (Ezekiel 40:46; 43:19, etc.). Although the high priesthood of Israel was usurped by the Hasmonean rulers in the second and first centuries B.C. some of the Zadokites and their aristocratic supporters,

who eventually became known as Sadducees, remained powerful and influential in the running of the Temple and the country as a whole.¹⁴

Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 20.197-199) specifically mentions that Ananus (=Annas) II, who was high priest in A. D. 62, was a Sadducee. Some have also argued that Ananus I, and his son-in-law Caiaphas (the high priest at the time Jesus was executed) were probably also all Sadducees. The Sadducees were wealthy, elite, and associated with the high priesthood (cf. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.298; 18:17). According to the writings of Josephus (*Wars of the Jews* 2.165) they did not believe in rewards, or punishments, in the afterlife. In their doctrine, the soul disappears, or perishes at death. Another aspect of the Sadducees is that they seem to have rejected the oral laws of the Pharisees and some even conjecture that they rejected everything except the Torah in a manner much like the Samaritans. If they only believed in the Torah this would then explain their rejection of the resurrection which comes only in the Prophets. It would certainly seem to make sense that an elite group such as the Sadducees would be suspicious of the Prophets, who

¹⁴ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, in the Anchor Yale Bible, Vol. 27A (New Haven CT: The Anchor Yale Bible, 2009), p. 1121.

pronounced many searing prophecies against the rich. Care must be taken though as neither Josephus nor the New Testament ascribes to them a rejection of the Prophets.¹⁵

The question from the Sadducees is indeed a sophisticated and fraught question. There are many intricacies to this question. If there is no resurrection then this question is easy to answer, but if there is, then this is an amazingly difficult question. Part of the basis of the difficulty of this question relies upon the preconception that in the resurrected life relationships, such as marriage, that began in this life, continue in the next life. In some sense keeping in mind previous answers that Jesus had given regarding divorce and God's opposition to this they may have caused the Sadducees to think this question would trap Jesus at the very least into alienating the Pharisees, but perhaps in fully trapping him. In so many ways, the question asked by the Sadducees seems a natural question, but they truly ask it in an awkward fashion. The question, as asked by the Sadducees, comes from the perspective of Levirate marriage where if a brother died

¹⁵ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, pp. 1121-1123.

without leaving an heir his brother would marry her, have children, and raise them as heirs of the brother.¹⁶

Jesus deftly answers their question beginning in verse 24 starting with by chiding them for neither knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. At verse 25, then Jesus answers them first of all stating unequivocally that people do indeed rise from the dead, but that when they do they neither marry, nor or given in marriage. He gives no biblical authority for his assertions simply stating it as fact. He says they will be like the angels. He gives no further explanation of this answer, but then moves on to cite authority for his assertion that there is indeed a resurrection where God speaks to Moses from the burning bush and states that “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” In verse 27, Jesus then states that God is the God of the living and not of the dead. Whatever we might think of the answer of Jesus it seems to have silenced his inquisitors with regard to this question. We must indeed be careful as we often extrapolate out from this answer beyond the evidence. Certainly one

¹⁶ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, pp. 831-832.

place where this has been done is when interpreting Genesis 6:1-4 in light of what we think Jesus says here.

That is a dangerous thing to do and it goes beyond the evidence here. Jesus cites very specifically and particularly here in his reference to angels that he is talking about angels in heaven, not their capabilities, or their abilities for sinful and rebellious activity as may be what is in view in Genesis 6. Just as we must be careful in extrapolating understanding of angels in general from this passage, we must take care in extrapolating too much about what it says about heavenly life. This passage is indeed brief and not intended to answer all those other questions that we may have. This question is really directed as an answer to the question of the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

Quickly, at least that is how it appears from the context here, one of the Scribes comes up and questions Jesus, also possibly hoping to trap Jesus, but maybe genuinely seeking an answer. Jesus answers this question decisively and after this, no one dared to ask him any further questions. Instead, Jesus begins to ask them questions while he is teaching. He asks them about the Messiah. He

asked them a question regarding the Messiah and how the Messiah could be both the son of David and his Lord too. Certainly the audience of Mark's Gospel would have a ready answer to this question as they read these words after the resurrection of Jesus. He continues to teach and warns them to beware of the scribes who appear to be righteous, but in reality are not. In a somewhat veiled manner he indicated that they will get their due.

As Jesus so often does, he leaves them with a positive example to of the attitude that truly is godly and correct, calling their attention to a poor widow who puts two small copper coins in the treasury. Though the amount may not mean much to those counting the collection, God knows as Jesus does, that the poor widow has given all that she has to live on. She now lives on nothing more than faith and trust and the clear implication is that this is far more honorable than the vast sums given from the wealth of the others observed. Once again we must remember that Mark's Gospel is set into context as that which was prophesied by Isaiah the prophet and repeatedly he and the other prophets call upon Israel to recognize the poor and lowly. Certainly this aspect of the Gospel continues the theme that

what God values is not what man values and wealth is not a mark of the blessing of God. It perhaps even elevates poverty to a blessing of God. Certainly it does if wealth is gained at the expense of others, and held onto as a source of security and power.

Synopsis

This section begins with Jesus in the midst of conflict with the Jewish leaders of the Temple cult. The scene here is right in the midst of the Temple itself and in the midst of this conflict, that will have certainly been escalated by the cleansing of the Temple, and by his popularity among the people, Jesus tells a parable that draws heavily upon powerful imagery. That imagery is based, at least in part, upon prophecies delivered by Isaiah. In this imagery, Jesus condemns the rulers as murderers and thieves. Needless to say this does nothing to relieve tensions between him and the authorities.

Perhaps in an effort to tear him down in the sight of the people they begin to ask Jesus a series of questions intended to entrap him, or perhaps to make him look foolish. Instead, what happens is that Jesus ends up being elevated in the eyes of the people and the intensity of his indictments against the rulers escalates. He continues, in the midst of all of this conflict, to teach the people and they are delighted with his teaching, which further exacerbates the conflict. In each of his answers Jesus gives to their questions,

astonishing answers are given that powerfully silence his critics while at the same time delighting the crowds. Ultimately Jesus once again challenges the worldview of his audience by highlighting the gift of a poor widow to the Temple treasury. Jesus continues to challenge his audience to see, and hear, and be healed.

Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus speaks to people using parables?
2. Why do you think Jesus refers to prophets as slaves here?
3. Why do you think people feel that they know better than God what should take place?
4. What do you think it means for the Israelites to want to kill God?
5. How is all sin really about seeking to kill God?
6. How does God deal, in the parable, with the disobedience of the tenants? What can we learn about the nature of God from this?
7. Why do you think the religious authorities are so afraid of Jesus?
8. In your experience, do people react well to situations when they are afraid? Why or why not?
9. What is loyalty? How is it expressed?
10. What does the word resurrection mean to you? Why?
11. What is the purpose of marriage?

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12. What do you think it means to love God with all your heart? What will this look like?
 13. How can Jesus be both the descendent of David and his lord?
 14. What are some signs that a person might be arrogant?
 15. Why do you think Jesus commends the poor widow over the wealthy here?
 16. What is a lesson that we can learn from poverty that we cannot learn from wealth?