
Isaiah in Mark

Lesson 6

“Mark 5”

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.

Rikki Watts puts forward the theory that Mark portrays Jesus as the Yahweh-Warrior of Isaiah. The question then becomes what indications do we see of this in Mark's Gospel account? Isaiah conveyed a picture of Israel's bondage to the nations, and behind this bondage are the idols, which are in fact the sources of the power and wealth of these nations arrayed against Israel. During the period that we often describe as the intertestamental period there was a growing perception of the link between idols and demons. The link of understanding was that demons were the source of power behind idols. While there is some allusion to this link in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Deuteronomy 32:17; Psalm 106:37-38), the relationship is made absolutely explicit in the Old Greek Translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that we often refer to as the Septuagint. Psalm 95:5 in the Septuagint reads: "because all the gods of the nations are demons (δαίμονια - אֱלִילִים), but the Lord made the heavens." In the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures of Isaiah 65:3, 11 the concept and indeed the word for demons is specifically added.¹ The

¹ **These are the people who provoke me to my face continually; they sacrifice in the gardens and burn incense on bricks to the demons, which do not exist, ⁴ and they fall asleep in the tombs and in the caves for the sake of dreams—those who eat swine's flesh and broth of sacrifices (all their vessels are defiled), NET.**

Targum for Isaiah has a very similar reading² to that expressed in the Septuagint.³

This perception of the association of idols with demons then continues, and even grows in the Intertestamental period and is prominent in the New Testament period as well.⁴ Notice too, the association not only with demons, but also notice the association with tombs and sleeping in tombs. As we approach the story of the demoniac from the country of the Gerasenes there are several things

^{2 3}“a people who *incite to anger* against my *Memra before me* continually, sacrificing in *your* gardens of *the idols* and *offering up spices* upon bricks; ... ¹¹ But you, *house of Israel*, have forsaken *the service of the LORD*, you have *forgotten the service of my holy mountain*, who set tables for *idols* and *mix bowls* for *their gods*. Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum*, The Aramaic Bible series, Vol. 11 (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), pp. 123-124.

³ Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2000), pp. 156-157.

⁴ *1 Enoch* 19:1 - “And Uriel said to me, ‘Here angels who have mingled with women stand, and their multiform spirits are mistreating humans and they will deceive them to offer sacrifices to demons until the great judgment, in which they will be judged with respect until perfection.’ ; 80:7; - All the orders of the stars shall harden (in disposition) against the sinners and the conscience of those that dwell upon the earth. They (the stars) shall err against them (the sinners); and modify all their courses. Then they (the sinners) shall err and take them (the stars) to be gods. 99:7 - and those who carve images of silver and of gold, of wood and of stone and of clay, and worship phantoms and demons [and abominations] and evil spirits and all errors with no understanding; and they will find no help in them. ; *Jubilees* 1:11; - And they will make for themselves high places and groves and carved idols. And each of them will worship his own (idol) so as to go astray. And they will sacrifice their children to the demons and to every work of the error of their heart. 11:4; - And they made for themselves molten images, and everyone worshiped the icon which they made for themselves as a molten image. And they began making graven images and polluted likenesses. And cruel spirits assisted them and led them astray so that they might commit sin and pollution. 12:20; - Save me from the hands of evil spirits which rule over the thought of the heart of man, and do not let them lead me astray from following you, O my God; but establish me and my seed forever, and let us not go astray henceforth and forever.” 22:17 - They slaughter their sacrifices to the dead, and to the demons they bow down. And they eat in tombs. And all their deeds are worthless and vain.

In the New Testament 1 Corinthians 10:20; Revelation 9:20.

to note, first this is Gentile country. If we did not know this from knowing the location and the history of the area we would know it by what happens later in association with pigs: Jews do not keep pigs, they are an unclean animal. Mark gives us all the details that seem to be setting the stage for a confrontation between the power of the nations (i.e. demons), and the warrior of Yahweh (Jesus). We have Jesus crossing the sea, and if we need to remember that the confrontation with the forces of evil began while they were at sea and Jesus overcomes them by calming the storm.

A particular feature of Mark's account of the Gerasene demoniac is the bracketing of the actual deliverance from the demons between the tomb dwelling (verse 2-3) and the presence of the swine (verses 11 ff.). Certainly these two motifs are unusual enough in their own right, but this combination has long led commentators to postulate that Isaiah 65:1-7 is their background. This seems even more likely when one notes the stated observation

of the presence of demons in the Septuagint version of Isaiah 65.⁵

Isaiah 65:1-7 is a scathing indictment of apostate Israelites, where tomb dwelling and the eating of the flesh of swine, which represents one of the most repugnant types of idolatry. In antiquity swine were linked with idol worship. They were offered as sacrifices to Zeus, Dionysius, Athena, Nemesis and to other subterranean gods in association particularly with fertility rites. There are numerous accounts of pigs being offered to the Roman gods, especially to Mars. Apparently, in the Roman world pigs were favorite sacrificial animals. No Roman tomb was legally protected without a pig being sacrificed, and demons were understood to have a particular liking for pigs.⁶

Turning to the Near East, it has been suggested that the sacrificial use of pigs by the Canaanites is at least partly the

⁵ I became visible to those who were not seeking me; I was found by those who were not inquiring about me. I said, "Here I am," to the nation that did not call my name. ² I stretched out my hands all day long to a disobedient and contrary people, who did not walk in a true way but after their own sins. ³ These are the people who provoke me to my face continually; they sacrifice in the gardens and burn incense on bricks to **the demons**, which do not exist, ⁴ and they fall asleep in the tombs and in the caves for the sake of dreams—those who eat swine's flesh and broth of sacrifices (all their vessels are defiled), ⁵ who say, "Stay far away from me; do not come near me, for I am clean." This is the smoke of my wrath; a fire burns in it all the days. ⁶ See, it is written before me: I will not keep silent until I repay into their bosom ⁷ their sins and those of their fathers—says the Lord—who burned incense on the mountains and reviled me on the hills; I will repay their works into their bosom. NET

⁶ Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, pp. 157-158.

background behind the prohibitions in Leviticus 11:7-8 and Deuteronomy 14:8. Archaeological evidence in Syria and Palestine further suggest the cultic significance of swine, for instance, a votive statue of a pig in Jericho (4th Millennium B.C.), pig bones under a stone slab in a sanctuary in Gezer (3rd-2nd Millennium B.C.), a libation container portraying a man carrying a pig (2nd Millennium B.C.), an alabaster pig in a sanctuary at Ai (2nd Millennium B.C.), and a cultic pillar with pig bones in a temple at Beth-Shean (mid 2nd Millennium B.C.). It is most probably the case that the linking of idols, demons, and pigs, in the ancient world, along with the issue of the tombs that formed a connection in the mind of Mark, and perhaps his audience with Isaiah 65. The story therefore links the powerful forces of “Legion” with images of demonic forces and the victory of Jesus over these forces is a victory over the kingdom of demons and of Satan.⁷

As we move note then, Jesus having thwarted the attempt made to prevent his invasion of Gentile territory with the storm, Jesus now establishes a beachhead in Gentile territory here in

⁷ Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, pp. 158-159.

chapter 5. The divine warrior motifs continue to build, both upon imagery from Exodus, but also upon the new exodus as prophesied by Isaiah. Having commanded the sea the representative of the Most High God now drowns the troops of the oppressive enemy of humanity as God drowned the Egyptians in the Red Sea.. That the imagery here is meant to be understood in military terms as a campaign is made clear by the numerous military allusions in this story: Legion (5:9); the Greek verb ἀποστείλη (“send”) is used in Josephus and Herodotus of ordering troop movement; the word for “herd” in 5:11, 13 can be used as a description for a group of military trainees (it is an odd word to use of pigs as they do not generally move in large herds); at 5:13 the word translated as “permission” (ἐπέτρεψεν) carries a secondary connotation of being a military command; the word in 5:13 translated as “rushed” (ῥομήσεν) is the term used for the rush of Pharaoh’s horses to their death in the sea.⁸

Like Isaiah before him, the author of Mark exploits exodus imagery to proclaim God’s new act to deliver his people from

⁸ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), p. 54.

oppression (Isaiah 40:3; 43:2, 16-17; cf. 63:10-14). This time God is not just seeking the deliverance of Jews from the hands of the Gentiles; rather he is delivering all people, both Jews and Gentiles from the oppression of the Destroyer. When the man from Gerasene faces “the Son of the Most High God,” his demonic power is thwarted and he blusters in confusion and fear, and responds with words commonly used by exorcists, “I adjure you by God.”⁹ The battle has already been won as the demons recognize the one whom they have come face to face with, and there is no hope for them of victory. Jesus commands them, gives them permission, to enter into what was normally a sacrificial offering to their power, to their idols. It is interesting that the pigs seem to be smarter than people and prefer death over life lived under the possession of demons. They rush to their death in the very sea that only a short time ago was also under the control of demonic forces.

Before we move on from this encounter of Jesus with the demoniac, it is perhaps an opportunity for us to address some assumptions regarding the nationality of the demoniac. The general

⁹ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, pp. 54-55.

view is that the demoniac is Gentile. This perspective is in part fostered by the interest of Mark in the Gentile mission, the presence of the pigs, the geography, and the dwelling in a tomb. There are several problems, however with this identification: 1. No where in the context is the nationality of the demoniac given and the only other time we have Jesus having an encounter with a Gentile, in the Gospel of Mark, is his encounter with the Syrophenician woman whose daughter was demonized (7:24-27; cf. Matthew 15:24). In this encounter Jesus expressed a reluctance to help. 2. We know, historically that during the Maccabean expansion, under Alexander Jannaeus, he seized Gerasa (82 B. C.). We also know that from this time onward a number of Jews remained in this region. 3. As far as the person sleeping in a tomb being unacceptable for a Jew, certainly there is much about the demoniac that is unacceptable to a Jew, such as the demon possession. 4. A great many commentators see Isaiah 65:1-7 as the background for Mark's account here, and that account is describing Jews and not Gentiles.¹⁰ In light of this, at the very least we should avoid making the inference that Jesus is in this account

¹⁰ Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, pp. 165-166.

undertaking a mission to Gentiles at this point. Perhaps instead we should view what is recounted here as a reference to the prophetic view of God's mission to the Jews as prophesied by the prophet Isaiah.

At 5:14 we come to the response of the local inhabitants. What are we to make of their response to what Jesus has done? The account of their reaction to the great miracle of Jesus is unusually long. Unlike the reaction of the people on the other side of the lake the reaction here is one of fear, and the result of that fear is not a welcome to a great miracle worker, but rather a request to leave their area. We are not told that this great miracle resulted in any following on this side of the lake outside of the one freed from the demons. Their reaction is that they feel better off without the disturbing presence of Jesus.¹¹ Unfortunately, this same response is still common. Jesus, the real Jesus, the one who challenges us to see the reality of our world and our lives is not welcome. So often the reaction is to transform the real Jesus into a figment of our imagination that provides us comfort and peace, but does not

¹¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), pp. 231-232.

challenge us and call for us to change who and what we are. Idolatry takes many forms, and we should insure that we think long and hard before we claim to know what Jesus would do in a given situation. Certainly we are called to ask that question, but it should be done with great care and contemplation. Our response should be more than a verbal response, it should be a changed life and certainly a changed allegiance.

At verse 18, we have the request of the demoniac to go with Jesus. Here you will find that most commentators will say that Jesus refused his request primarily because he was a Gentile. This is an easy answer to a conundrum not actually addressed by Mark. This is information that is in dispute as noted above. We know that Jesus has already chosen the twelve and adding another to their number would change that number in Scripture. The number twelve is an important number. We know that there are others who were disciples of Jesus that traveled with him, as we have the account in Acts of one to replace Judas (acts 1:15-26). All we know for sure is that Jesus asks him to remain where he is and he sends him to witness to the people of that region. It is perhaps in the interest of

the people of this region that Jesus leaves a witness that will proclaim powerfully the coming of the kingdom of God.¹²

At 5:21, we once again have Jesus crossing the sea. The response of those on the other side of the sea stands in stark contrast to the response of those he had just left behind. Once again a large crowd gathers around him and we have one of the leaders of the synagogue, named Jairus, approaches Jesus begging him to come and heal his daughter, who is near death. As we come to this section, care needs to be taken or we will leave with a different emphasis than the original audience. It is perhaps not the case that our emphasis, which is likely to be focused on the powerful miracles is not present, but that we miss other aspects, which would have been of special importance to a Jewish audience. They would have been aware that the woman who had the bleeding for twelve years was ritually unclean and as such was excluded from worship and normal human fellowship. She should not be touching others in the crowd and certainly she should not be contaminating Jesus with her ritually

¹² Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, The Anchor Bible Commentary series, Vol. 27 (New Haven CT: The Anchor Yale Bible, 2005), pp. 352-354.

unclean touch.¹³ What she does is bold and likely an act of abject desperation.

The daughter of Jairus may at first blush seem to be different as there would be no reason for Jesus not to touch her as long as she is still alive, but once she is declared dead that all changes (5:35). There is the prohibition of touching corpses (Numbers 5:2; 19:13; 31:19). It is also interesting to note that in this story we do not have a name for either of the females in the story, only the name of Jairus is given. It is almost as if they are inconsequential, and perhaps this will have been the view of the audience, but not so to Jesus. His healing and calling of attention to the woman with the bleeding elevates her status. At first, she is afraid because she does not know what to expect from Jesus, but this woman who has been excluded from worship and fellowship from her people, who was nameless, is not only healed, her ritual purity is restored and she can now participate in fellowship with others and worship before God. Surely there is here a lesson that the kingdom of God comes to restore purity, relationship and status to those who have been separated

¹³ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, pp. 56-59.

from God.¹⁴ They are both restored not only to health but to relationship.

It is perhaps worth noting that the daughter of Jairus is 12 years old, the age that normally would move her from being classified as a child to full covenant membership as a part of the people of God. It is at this age that in girls in Modern Judaism undergo the the Bat Mitzvah. Boys undergo a similar ceremony at the age of thirteen. We need to be aware though that this is likely a distinction that came about in the middle ages and likely has no equivalent meaning in the time of Jesus. As a child Jairus' daughter would have been marginalized in many ways from the life of the community, but the focus here is perhaps to be seen in the fact that as being dead she was ritually unclean. Jesus does not let this stop him from performing the great miracle of raising her from the dead. As we remember the word of Mark that the message he brings is the "good news" that was prophesied by the Prophet Isaiah, perhaps we should be reminded of the words of Isaiah 65:17-25: ¹⁷ **Behold, I am ready to create new heavens and a new earth; and the first things will not**

¹⁴ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, pp. 56-59.

be remembered or come upon the heart. ¹⁸ But rejoice and be happy forevermore over what I am creating because behold, I am creating Jerusalem as a source of joy, and its people as a delight. ¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people; **no longer shall be heard the voice of weeping or the cry of distress.** ²⁰ **No longer will there be from there an infant which lives a few days, or an old person which does not fill out their days; for the one who dies at one hundred years will be considered as a child and the one who misses a hundred will be considered cursed.** ²¹ They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²² They will not build and another inhabit; they will not plant and another eat; for as the days of a tree the days of my people will be, and my chosen the work of their hands they will wear those things out. ²³ They shall not toil for vanity, or bear children for terror; for they will be a seed of the blessing of Yahweh and their offspring with them. ²⁴ Before they call, I will answer, while they are still speaking I myself will hear. ²⁵ The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion like the ox will eat straw, but the

serpent's food will be dust! They will not do evil, or destroy on all of my holy mountain says Yahweh.

The imagery of the Prophet stands as the backdrop for the ministry of Jesus. We are intended to see the powerful in-breaking of the kingdom of God into the domain of Satan where illness and death have become normal. Along with this normality has come the pushing to the margins of those who are afflicted and powerless. Jesus steps into the midst of this normality and shatters the stereotypes and demonstrates power over illness and even over death itself. He also challenges his audience to recognize that God seeks relationship and that through faith the power of God shatters the old order with its hopelessness. It brings instead hope and in this account there is a call for faith. The audience is called to recognize the hand of God moving in the world and to trust God. This was the message of Isaiah and this remains the message of the Gospel proclaimed by Mark. Mark writes with the expectation that his audience will live under the umbrella of hope as conveyed by the words of Isaiah the prophet.

Synopsis

As we come to this chapter it is important that we keep in mind the words of Mark concerning the message that he is going to convey as being the “good news” prophesied by Isaiah the prophet. Keeping that in mind, it is helpful to recognize that Mark in this chapter portrays Jesus as the Yahweh-Warrior of Isaiah. As such Jesus does combat in chapter 5 with the forces of Satan, with demonic forces. He combats the power behind the idols of the nations and defeats them. Jesus even does this involving the pigs, the very sacrificial animal that were a favorite in the demonic idolatry of the nations. Jesus does this after going through the heart of enemy controlled territory, the sea. As part of this Yahweh-Warrior imagery with the author of Mark we see the imagery from the exodus account that is highlighted by Isaiah brought into focus. This can be seen in the sea, and the drowning of the enemy in the sea.

We need to be careful as we make assumptions regarding the nationality, or ethnic background of the demoniac. The text does not make this clear, and this could have easily been conveyed

to us. We need to remember that there were Jews living in this region and there. The response of the local inhabitants, of the this region, is not the same as it was for those residing on the other side of the sea. Their response to the miracle is one of fear and they express that they would be better off without Jesus. This is often the response of people today to an encounter with Jesus. We are not informed as to why Jesus did not allow the demoniac to go with him, some speculate that it is because he is a Gentile: such speculation goes beyond the text.

As Jesus once again crosses back over the sea we have the encounter with Jairus, his daughter, and with the woman who suffered from hemorrhages. In this encounter we see the tremendous power of Jesus both to heal and to conquer death itself. The strongholds of Satan are no match for the power of Jesus. Not even the power of contaminating uncleanness slows the advance of the kingdom of God, that power overcomes all that opposes the encroachment of the kingdom of God. The “good news” foretold and foreshadowed so long ago in the words of the prophet Isaiah is breaking into the world of men.

Questions

1. When you think of a warrior what do you imagine?
2. What are some things that you think of when you hear the expression Yahweh-Warrior?
3. How does the ministry of Jesus, thus far in Mark, challenge your perspective on the warrior of God?
4. What are some ways that you can see that having Isaiah as the background for Mark's gospel account challenges you?
5. How do you think demons affect our world today? Why?
6. Why do you think Jesus having power over demons is an important part of the "good news?"
7. What are some of the different ways that you have seen people respond to Jesus?
8. Do you think nations today still receive power from demons? Why, or why not?
9. What are some idols that you think exist today?
10. How do you think the forces of evil are associated with those idols today?

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11. How do we today know where God wants us to serve?
 12. What are we to do if the place where we desire to serve is not where God wants us to serve?
 13. What are some things that people consider to be unclean today?
 14. How should we demonstrate our faith in God today when it comes to illness? Should we go to the doctor or just pray?
 15. Why do people fear death so much?
 16. What do you think the message of Mark is here regarding our perceptions of death?