
Isaiah in Mark

Lesson 8

“Mark 8”

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.

The feeding of the four thousand, is the second story of Jesus feeding people in the Gospel of Mark. The scene does not change here between the healing of the deaf mute and the feeding of the crowd in chapter 8. The setting for this miraculous feeding appears to have been the region known as the Decapolis (7:31). The disciples have not been mentioned in the last two stories but they reappear here. They face the same problem here as they did at 6:35-36. It appears as if they have learned nothing from that previous experience when Jesus fed the five thousand.¹ As we begin this miraculous feeding we see the heart of Jesus, as he has “compassion” (σπλαγχνίζομαι) on the crowd because amazingly they have been with him for 3 days already and they have nothing to eat. He is concerned that if he sends them away without feeding them they will faint on the journey. Here Jesus shows the tremendous care and concern for the people that certainly is in alignment with the care and concern that we find in Isaiah, attributed to Yahweh (Isaiah 49:8-10; 54:7-8; 63:9). We need to be continually aware that in Isaiah we have, as a backdrop, the message of the exodus story. This

¹ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), p. 79.

same backdrop then carries over into the Gospel of Mark as supplemented and augmented by the additional clarifications provided through Isaiah's prophecies.

There is a great deal in Mark to suggest that Mark's primary concern is not so much to describe the path of the suffering servant, Jesus, as it is important that the audience understand that Mark's point is that participation in the Isaianic New Exodus (the Way) inevitably involves recognizing and affirming two critical things: 1. That Jesus is not only the Messiah of Israel, the royal son of God, but in a unique and extraordinary way the divine Son of God. 2. That, as the three-fold passion predictions indicate, that in Yahweh's wisdom the redemption of Israel in the new exodus redemption is predicated on the path and resurrection of "true Israel" namely in the person of the Son of Man.² The feeding of the four thousand is a part of the effort on the part of God to identify the true nature of Jesus and to provide information that would help those who are not to blind to be able to ultimately be able to see this.

² Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2000), p. 223.

This feeding takes place in the wilderness, in the desert, which is truly an amazing feat. Imagine feeding four thousand people in a place devoid of grocery stores, or any other means of acquiring supplies. Without a doubt, this miracle will have brought to the minds of the audience of Mark the exodus wanderings of Israel and challenged them in their identification of Jesus. The mental association with the exodus narrative, recalling the manna miracle of Exodus 16 is striking, but the echoes continue in the verses that follow as the Pharisees demand a sign (8:10-13), and in the warning from Jesus regarding their demanding of a sign associated with the concept of leaven (8:14-21). The Jewish people tested God in the wilderness. They now test him again in the form of Jesus. Besides being influenced by the text of Exodus 16 and the immediately following account of the testing of Moses at Masa and Meribah at Exodus 17. The most striking parallels in this section are those between Exodus 17:1-7 and Mark 8:10-13 when the Pharisees came and began to argue with Jesus demanding a sign in order to test Jesus as Israel had tested God in the wilderness. Important, in this context,

are also the passages from Psalm 78:17-18³, and 95:8-10.⁴ In common with the theme of Mark 8:11-13 is the theme of testing (**πειράζω**). In addition, the mention of the wilderness also provides a link here and then there is a linkage with the hardened heart at Mark 8:14-21.⁵


This whole account stands in the context of Isaiah's visions of what a new rescue from God would look like for the people of God. The centrality of the exodus theme in Scripture is crucial for understanding the heart of God. He desire to rescue his people and to deliver them to the land of his promises, to a place where he dwells in their midst and is truly in relationship with them. So often today we are not immersed heavily enough in the world of Scripture to see the connections that are continuously being made in order to create understanding of the nature of God, his plan for the future of his people and the call of God to the hearts of people in their present

³ **Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert. ¹⁸ They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved.** NRSV.

⁴ **⁸ Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, ⁹ when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.**

¹⁰ **For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways."** NRSV.


⁵ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, in *The Anchor Bible series*, Vol. 27 (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 482-486.



reality. There is a sense in which all of us are on an exodus journey as God seeks to rescue all of us from our exile in the land of Egypt, the land of slavery. For us the slavery is not to Pharaoh, but to dark spiritual forces that in Mark are seen in the form of sickness, demon possession, storms, and agents of evil in the form of the religious leadership of Israel. As we continue to go through Mark, recognizing this type of visionary thinking comes through the focusing lens of Isaiah the prophet who challenges the ancient people of Israel as well as the generations that preceded them to reimagine God. As Stefan Alkier states, “Texts are relational objects composed of signs. No text is produced and received in isolation from other texts.”⁶

The concept of intertextuality is the concept of investigating the relationship between texts, such as the relationship between Old Testament texts and those of the New Testament. You might ask why we are talking about this now after 7 weeks of study. There are several reasons: one of those reasons is that for us this is perhaps a complex issue and sometimes it is easier to just enter the stream and see how it looks and then come back and explain the theory.


⁶ Stefan Alkier, “Intertextuality and the Semiotics of Biblical Texts,” in Richard B. Hays, Stefan Alkier, Leroy A. Huizenga, eds., *Reading the Bible Intertextually* (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), p. 3.



Another reason, is frankly this cuts against the grain of our general perceptions of not only biblical interpretation, but for many people their unrealistic perception that any given text can only have one meaning. Texts have both intended meanings and even unintended meanings, at least when it comes to our human understanding of them.⁷ We must recognize that God understands the human mind and heart far better than we can even begin to imagine. He also understands our individuality and that each person will have a different perception of words, phrases and sentences. Some of these differences may be intended to be perceived by the author, others may be unintended meanings that come from the person's background, frame of reference, as well as other factors that come from the hearer. These differences, become greater when the author writes in one language and the hearer reads a translation, or interpretation in another language.

Cultural differences can also have a major impact on understanding. At times we will hear a very different message than what was the message intended for the original audience. An

⁷ Stefan Alkier, "Intertextuality and the Semiotics of Biblical Texts," p. 3.



example of this can simply be linguistic with the same words having different meanings in different cultures. For instance a rubber in England equals an eraser in the English of Americans. To knock someone up in England means to go to their house and knock on their door, while it has a very different connotation in the U.S.

Winston Churchill popularized the saying that, “Americans and British are one people separated by a common language.” This type of thing holds true not only by those who speak the same language, but becomes more pronounced as we have different languages, cultures and times. This is one of the reasons that studying the Bible is so important. We are separated from the original audience of the Scriptures by thousands of years, physically by many miles, and culturally there is a wide disparity. What will have seemed simple and clear to them is complicated, confusing and our interpretation may totally different from their original perception. God knew there would be confusion and difficulty in communication and so over the millennia he sought to create a contextual framework that would reduce confusion and misunderstanding. For us, a huge part of this framework is the Old Testament. This is not only the case for us, it

was the case for the people of the first century that first encountered Jesus, and those that read about him through the works of the New Testament.

As we come to the Gospel of Mark, we need to recognize that Mark is framing his words, as he told us from the beginning, with the words of Isaiah the prophet. Those words themselves did not come in a vacuum but came as words built upon the foundation of the Old Testament. Particularly formative for the nation of Israel are the words that recount the birth of their family, their nation, Israel. These words come in the first five books of the Old Testament in what we call the exodus story, not merely what is recorded in the book of Exodus, but the whole of the story of the journey of faith beginning with Adam and culminating with the people of Israel crossing the Jordan and conquering the land. The conquest of the land is not merely about running out, or destroying, the inhabitants of the land, but represented the journey of the people of God to trust him and destroy sin and temptation from their lives.

The book of Isaiah, in particular, represents a new form of communicating the efforts of God to help his people journey to the

promised land through hope, reprimand, and renewed hope brought about through visionary words of expectation. The book of Isaiah brings to a new level the understanding of the message of the events of the exodus and creates an air of expectation among the people of Israel. By the time of Jesus, because of the continued failure of the nation of Israel to fulfill their perceived destiny, there was a renewed aspiration to have those dreams fulfilled. As is so often the case with human beings there were a variety of expectations and hopes, many based upon faulty understandings of the nature of God and his vision for his people. Into this mass of confusion, and expectant anticipation, comes Jesus to inaugurate the kingdom of God according to the vision of his Father. This then, brought Jesus into to conflict not only with the religious leaders of Israel, but more importantly into conflict with the agents of confusion and despair, the forces of Satan.

As in the original exodus dispute, testing and unbelief were prominent even in the face of the presence of God in the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day; the same things feature in the new exodus that had been prophesied by Isaiah (testing and

unbelief). Just as many did not understand God, or his intent (those that died in the wilderness), there will be many who will not understand God in the time of the initiation of the new exodus. This stands as the reason for the Mark to write his Gospel account, in order that the events surrounding Jesus might be understood in the proper context, the context God intended. One of the things that may be surprising to us is that not only do the religious authorities not understand events as they are unfolding in the light of the Isaiah and the exodus story, but neither do the disciples. We are continually made aware that not even the disciples understand the words and actions of Jesus. We do know that later they would come to understand more fully, but telling us of their journey to faith and understanding is meant to help us in our journey to faith and understanding. Even though we have made the decision to follow Jesus that does not mean that our journey is over, it means that we are now on the path to discovery and faith as disciples, not that we instantly understand all that we need to know about God. We are challenged to continue the journey of faith all the way to the end and to recognize that in so doing we follow those who have gone before.

Even our ignorance and confusion are a part of the journey of discovery.

At Mark 8:14 we are told that the disciples have forgotten to take bread, this is just after the feeding of four thousand people with 7 loaves. Jesus cautions them to watch out for the yeast (ζύμης) of the Pharisees (8:15). Yeast was a really big thing in Israel, on Passover they would eat bread that was unleavened, without yeast as a reminder, as a teaching tool. The term “yeast” is used metaphorically in a number of ways. At times it can symbolize evil (1 Corinthians 5:8), it can also be used positively as an image of the growth of the kingdom of God (Matthew 13:33). The main metaphorical force in the New Testament seems to be its powerful growth and influence (1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9), and as mentioned above with the Jewish Passover observance, which demanded the removal of yeast (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). Because of the variety of usages the metaphorical meaning here in Mark is not immediately apparent. It appears that the warning of Jesus is focused more upon the Pharisees and Herod themselves as enemies of Jesus rather than upon any specific connotation of yeast. After

verse 15, there is no further mention of “yeast,” or the warning against the Pharisees and Herod.⁸ The focus moves away from the warning, but the likelihood is that the warning of Jesus is meant to be taken against the corrupting influence of the Pharisees and Herod.⁹

At 8:16, the disciples express their confusion wondering if he is wanting bread. He becomes aware of their confusion and asks them why they are talking about bread (8:17). He then challenges them once again, with the theme that we have seen so many times from Isaiah regarding having eyes that fail to see and ears that fail to hear (8:18), to really see and understand. The section ends at 8:21 with the exclamation, “Do you not yet understand?” It appears that Jesus is warning his disciples that they are indeed infected by the same evil impulse that has hardened the hearts of his enemies, the Pharisees and the Herodians.¹⁰ By the time of Jesus there was a long tradition of the mystery religions and during the Hellenistic period there was this perception that one could be highly confident of the efficacy of

⁸ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 316.

⁹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, in the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), p. 260.

¹⁰ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 510.

understanding that came through initiation process into the secrets of these religions. To be one who had been initiated, was to be one to whom the mysteries had been revealed. To be one of those initiates was thought to transform them from being a mere mortal into a true spiritual insider. The revelation in Mark that the disciples are indeed blind, deaf, and hard of heart despite the fact that they have insider status shatters the complacency of the audience of this Gospel. If it is the case that the disciples, recipients of the mysteries, and chosen disciples of Jesus, are to be counted the same as outsiders. Who then is left on the inside?¹¹ We are left with this question hanging as if in mid-air.

Finally, at 8:22 Jesus and his disciples arrive in Bethsaida, their destination since 6:45. We are confronted with the strange encounter of the blind man who initially is only partially healed, and also initially we have Jesus using saliva in his healing process.¹² This story of healing is meant to follow the question of the previous section and to act as the answer. That this is the case is also reinforced by the narrative that follows about Peter. In the second

¹¹ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, p. 81.

¹² Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark*, pp. 81-84.

narrative, Peter recognizes the Jesus' messianic identity (8:29), but fails to attain to what that identity means for the future (8:32-33). Going back to the story of the blind man we note similarities with Isaiah 42:6-7 and here in Mark Jesus takes the hand of the blind man and heals his blindness. Jesus heals the man using dramatic gestures known from other ancient stories of miraculous healings. It should be noted that here in the context of Mark those gestures take on a deeper meaning. In the ancient literature there was often a correlation made between the physical healing of the eyes and the repair of spiritual vision (*PGM* 4.770-780). Suetonius also recounts the tale of the emperor to be, Vespasian, who healed a blind man by means of spittle (Suetonius, *Vespasian* 7.2-3). In the case of Vespasian the issue highlighted is one of royal authority.¹³

In ancient Judaism, there was the expectation that the messianic king would possess the ability to cure blindness; *4Q521* (one of the Dead Sea Scrolls) is a text where it is portrayed that the Lord will give sight to the blind along with being able to perform other healing miracles. The acclimation of Peter in association with

¹³ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, in *The Anchor Yale Bible*, Vol. 27A (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 597-599.

the healing of a blind man is not accidental and in part is meant to allude to the royal power of Jesus here in chapter 8 and also in 10:46-52.¹⁴ So the thing that we need to note here is that the healing of the blind man and the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah are intended to act in tandem and proclaim to the disciples of Jesus (not just the 12) the truth about the healing of Jesus. He certainly has the kingly ability to heal, but obstacles still remain. In the healing of the blind man after the application of the spit he is no longer blind, but he still does not see clearly. In the story of Peter, he is no longer blind, but he still is unable to see clearly as he will be able to see after finally receiving the healing touch of Jesus (this would come much later).

We are meant, I think, to make a comparison between the physical eyesight of the blind man that was healed and Peter on a spiritual level. Peter was no longer blind, but he still did not have his full spiritual vision. In Mark we are meant to understand that the spiritual insight of Peter, though there, is yet imperfect and with the touch of the master he will be restored to full spiritual sight. This is

¹⁴ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, p. 599.

very much in alignment with the theme of Isaiah. We see this lack of clear vision on the part of Peter as we read 8:31-33 where we have Jesus disclosing that he must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, the scribes, and be killed. Peter demonstrates that he does not yet understand the gospel message of Isaiah, especially the “suffering servant” passages such as Isaiah 53. In verse 33, we get to the source of his blindness with the rebuke of Satan and the fact that Peter had his mind focused on human things rather than divine things.


After this rebuke Jesus then calls the crowd with his disciples and lays out for them the connection between discipleship and suffering. One could not read the prophecies of Isaiah without at least wondering how the suffering servant passages will be worked out in the coming of the Messiah (Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12; 61:1-3). Jesus here proclaims how those passages will be worked out in his life and issues the challenge to those who would be his disciples that they too must “deny themselves,” take up their cross” and “follow him”. In verse 38, he indicates that if they are ashamed of him and his words then the Son of man will be ashamed

of them when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. In this section of Scripture Jesus challenges his disciples to have a vastly different perspective of the world. He challenges them to see honor and shame in the context of this new perspective and attached to the concept of covenant loyalty. All of this is set against the backdrop of the words of Isaiah the prophet.

In order to get to this message, it is essential for us to be steeped in the historical background of the Old Testament and to recognize the difficulties that exist in the cultural, historical, and linguistic, gap between us and the original audience of Mark. As we bridge these gaps the message of Jesus is able to enlighten and cure our blindness. Without that enlightenment we are in danger of only seeing dimly and perhaps of being lost and confused. This can even lead to us being aligned with the enemy of God, Satan, as were the Pharisees and the Herodians.

Synopsis

As we come to the feeding of the four-thousand we are meant to hold in mind the context of Isaiah and its emphasis on compassion as a motivation for God's actions on behalf of his people. Seeing this trait in Jesus, allows us more fully and clearly recognize it as the motivation of God throughout history. Another aspect of this story is to recognize the back story of the exodus account as God has continually sought the redemption of his people. We are meant to recognize that each of us faces our own exodus story. We are challenged by the need for redemption from slavery, the need for us to trust God, and by the compassion of God as the motivation for this act of redemption. The Gospel proclaimed by Mark needs to be seen through the lens of the Isaiah prophecies, which articulate this perspective in very creative and powerful ways. Mark wants us to understand the vision of Messiah in a manner that aligns with the mind of God and not perhaps with that which may have been created by our own feeble imaginings. Jesus represents both the true Israel, and also acts as the instrument of God's redemption. He fulfills the destiny of Israel and of the Messiah of God. The challenge of



Isaiah is to see this, and not to be blind to it and Mark takes up this same goal. We can also see in this God's vision for humanity.

In this section of Mark, we are challenged to see rebellious Israel contrasted with obedient, faithful Israel. The vision here is not between the people that are blind and those who can see; in reality all are blind except the one who is the fulfillment of all that God envisioned, Jesus. The Pharisees, in calling for a sign most clearly demonstrate the common human tendency of seeking to test God rather than to trust God. The path of the new exodus is the same as that of the old exodus, it is a path of faith, trusting in God's righteousness and strength, in spite of the appearance of overwhelming odds against redemption. We are called upon to trust that God's vision of the world is indeed reality and not to trust in our own hearts and vision. In order to see all of this, we need to overcome the cultural, temporal, spatial and linguistic barriers that separate us from the message of Mark. The words of Mark are framed within the context of Isaiah's prophecies.

Mark calls upon us to recognize that the journey of faith is one that is fraught with dangers, distractions, enemies, and loss of hope, but that with God all things are possible. Jesus, as God's

representative brings that hope and message to life. With his touch, there is the possibility of truly having spiritual blindness cured. Failure to accept the vision put forward by Jesus leaves one in danger of blindness, and even of becoming the enemy of God. Jesus challenges his disciples to covenant loyalty, to trust God for their redemption, their vision, and their healing.

Questions

1. What are some ways that people have shown compassion to you during your lifetime?
2. What do you think Mark meant to convey when he says that Jesus had compassion for the crowd?
3. What do you think we are meant to understand about God and his compassion for people from the of the feeding of the four thousand?
4. How do Isaiah 49:8-10; 54:7-8; and 63:9 add context to the story of Jesus having compassion on the people?
5. How do you see echoes of the Exodus story in this chapter of Mark?
6. How is testing Jesus the same as testing God? How is it different?
7. What are some ways that people today test God?
8. What are some things that come to your mind as you think about God rescuing you?
9. What are some ways that your vision of God has been changed during your lifetime? Why did it change?
10. What are some ways that you see the Old Testament impacting your vision of who God is?

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11. What are some ways that our culture today impacts our vision of God?
 12. What are some ways that you think Mark's framing of his Gospel within the context of Isaiah has proved helpful to you?
 13. What are some consequences of a person being partially blind, both physically and spiritually?
 14. What are some ways that yeast and evil are the same?
 15. How is discipleship to Jesus connected to suffering?
 16. What does it mean to take up your cross?
 17. How does a person's perspective of the world transform daily actions?