
Isaiah in Mark

Lesson 9

“Mark 9”

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.

Chapter 9 begins with an enigmatic verse that has proven tremendously challenging for commentators down through the centuries, and in our own time this is no less true. Some just conclude that Mark and Jesus got it wrong and that the expected coming of the kingdom of God has taken far longer than either of them anticipated. Perhaps, as is so often the case throughout history, the expectations that people have of God were just flat wrong. So often people have expected and anticipated God would do something in a certain way as if they had God figured out. I believe this is what is referred to as idolatry. God is mysterious, hard for us to comprehend, or even imagine. The expectation for what the coming of the kingdom of God would be like was perhaps something more like the image that he would come riding in on a white horse, sword in hand slaughtering the wicked as he went. That was not how God chose to introduce his kingdom to the world. He did not choose to bring it in along a path drenched in the blood of his enemies. True power does not need to begin its reign in slaughter in order to be true power. True power can be gentle, kind, loving, and patient. This is the message of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.

Saying all of that, it is certainly true that most that heard the words of Jesus as given in Mark 9:1 will have, and continue to, misunderstand them. This is so because they still hold a certain expectation in their heart and mind that comes from a vision of God that is more human than God, weaker than he really is, less patient, less kind, and less loving than the God revealed by Jesus. The saying of Jesus here in 9:1 is an authoritative proclamation marked as such by the phrase “Truly I say to you,” (ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν). There are two questions that bear heavily upon what our expectations should be of the result of this proclamation. One is what does Jesus mean in proclaiming that the kingdom will come in “power” before the time when, at least some, taste death (γεύσονται θανάτου); from those who were listening as Jesus spoke? The second issue is what exactly is he predicting? Perhaps it is the case that he is predicting something that looks very different from what they expect. Does it take more power to change a heart, or to inflict punishment, or death? In a few days there would be an event that at least some, think may qualify as the advent of the kingdom of God predicted by Jesus (the transfiguration). Whether one sees it as the advent of the

kingdom of God predicted by Jesus is likely to hinge upon what a person expects. Jesus appears to have no problem dashing the expectations of those that think they have it all figured out.

On another front leading to misunderstanding of this verse, is a failure to actually recognize what is actually said here. The verb used here to describe the “coming” (ἐληλυθυῖαν) of the kingdom is in the perfect tense, which indicates they are not to see the “coming” of the kingdom of God, but rather they are to witness the fact that it “has already come.” The prediction focuses not on the arrival of the kingdom, but the point at which its presence is clearly already a past reality. The idea that the kingship of God was already present was something that was declared in Mark 1:14-15,¹ and the present conflict that is taking place between Satan and the “kingdom” of God implies that the kingdom is already present. This truth, to some degree, remains a “mystery” (μυστήριον 4:11) that is visible to some and not to others. It comes as something that is unrecognized in its own time (4:26-29); at present it remains inconspicuous as a mustard

¹ 1:14 **Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”** NRSV. ¹⁵

seed, but at some point it will grow in such a way as to be obvious to all (4:30-32). The contrast in Mark chapter four is between the secret presence of the coming of the kingdom, and the future, open, and powerful manifestation, of the kingdom. It is the latter manifestation which will be seen by some (τινες) of those who are standing and listening to Jesus.²

On the heels of this prediction of Jesus at 9:2, we have the narrative stating that six days later Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a high mountain. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that in some way what happens starting at 9:2 is connected with the prediction of 9:1. We have the very precise designation of time, “Six days later,” and then the transfiguration (9:2-13) takes place. Surely this heavenly vision could be described using the term “power.” This vision was seen by only three of those that had been in the previous audience which definitely qualifies as “some” (τινες).³ Some have objected that this was not what they would have thought of as the fulfillment of such a grand sounding prophesy. Such an evaluation

² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, in The New International Greek Testament Commentary series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 344.

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 345.

likely says more about their expectations, as well as regarding their understanding of the significance of the transfiguration, than anything else. The transfiguration reveals the nature of Jesus as the Son of God, as being greater than Moses, or Elijah, as the one whom God designates as his instrument of communication as his fulfillment of a promise made more than a millennium earlier, through Moses. We might perhaps expect that such a revelation would be done for a larger audience than for three, but we must not forget the thematic mantra that has been repeatedly placed before the readers of the Gospel of Mark about those who are blind. What is one who is blind going to do with the transfiguration, other than render an erroneous assessment of what they have seen. At the time of the transfiguration perhaps only these three are ready for that message?

There are no word for word citations of the Old Testament in the transfiguration account of Mark. However, the concluding words of the heavenly voice, “Listen to him!” (ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ), are so close to the exhortation of Deuteronomy 18:15⁴ “To him you shall listen” (אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׁמָעוּן, αὐτοῦ ἀκούσθε) that we might speak of it as

⁴ 18:15 **The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you—from your fellow Israelites; you must listen to him.** NET.

virtually being a quotation. The heavenly voice, which comes at the end of this narrative, represents the climax point toward which the entire narrative pericope has built. This is the point of this entire scene where we have the transformation of Jesus, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and the arrival of the overshadowing cloud. The suggestion by Peter, within the narrative, introduces a note of incomprehension and dramatic tension into the story that is not resolved until the voice sounds forth. Immediately after the voice comes, the vision ends.⁵

In the Old Testament context, the words from Deuteronomy 18 are part of the instruction from Moses to the children of Israel to obey the prophet that will arise after his death. As we move to the passage in Mark 9:7 then, the Markan transfiguration narrative identifies Jesus as the prophet who was to come after Moses, the one prophesied by him. By the time Jesus comes in the first century A. D., there was a strong eschatological expectation of the coming of this prophet like Moses. The fact that the larger Mosaic context is in view here in Mark 9, can be confirmed by observing that there is a

⁵ Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 80-81.

complex tissue of allusions in the transfiguration narrative to the Pentateuchal accounts of Moses. The primary parallels extend over two different passages, Exodus 24:1-2, 9-18 (the ascent of Moses up the mountain with Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu - notice the size of the audience that goes up the mountain with Moses) and Exodus 34:29-35 (the transfiguration of the face of Moses).⁶ The appearance of Jesus is transformed during the encounter on the mountain top encounter. The other worldly character of the scene of the transfiguration on the mountain points to the kingdom of God. Along with the Moses imagery, there is the added element of Elijah, which certainly would have lent an eschatological element to this narrative. This would likely have evoked the imagery, for the audience of Mark, of the coming of the kingdom of God with power. It seems evident that Mark intends his readers to see 9:1 as pointing ahead to the transfiguration narrative as its fulfillment. Undoubtedly, Peter, James and John will have received the affirmation of these words in 9:1 in witnessing what took place on the mountain. The transfiguration of

⁶ Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, pp. 81-82.

Jesus indicates that God is sovereign and that he was working out his purpose in the coming of the Messiah through Jesus.⁷

This whole issue of the expectations we have of God rides high on the horizon of our focus. Especially in the churches of Christ, we have come to believe that if we study hard enough we can come to understand God well enough to predict what he is going to do next, or in a given situation. The Pharisees had very much the same perspective and Jesus described that as blindness. God is mysterious and unfathomable by the human mind and heart. We understand this on some level, but on a practical level, that is perhaps too frightening for us, we have the tendency to keep defaulting to a less mysterious, more manageable, less frightening image of God that becomes like a teddy bear, or security blanket for us. The reality, was, and is, that God is hard for us to understand and that is okay, that is why faith is necessary and why the ancients were commended for having faith (Hebrews 11:2). We are called to trust God, to have faith that he is good; that he is in control, and that if we follow what he calls us to do, his great plan will work out not only for the universe

⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 346.

(that is a certainty), but for us as a human being; a human being that God has allowed to choose its own destiny.

Saying all of this, God wants to communicate with human beings and he had prepared the world and its contextual reality for just the moment when his Son would come. That context was created in order that people could recognize God when he came. There were prophecies, as well as other literature written, that created a context into which the Son of God came and would be understood more fully. Particularly regarding the coming of the prophet prophesied by Moses, in Exodus, there was a lot of interest and speculation during the first century of our era. We are not sure whether the visions of what would take place were widespread, but there was certainly considerable speculation as to what would happen in order to allow identification to be made of the great one that was to come. One place that such things are recorded is in the Pseudepigraphical writings such as in the second century B.C. writing

entitled *Ezekiel the Tragedian*, where we see the enthronement of Moses envisioned.⁸

There were also indications, in the Biblical context, such as in Daniel 7:13-14 of this type of vision.⁹ This was often linked with Moses' reception of a kingly scepter and a crown, and with mounting the throne. A similar interpretation of the event on Mount Sinai as an enthronement of Moses is described by Philo in his writing entitled the *Life of Moses*, which was written in the first century A.D.¹⁰ What is being described here, is Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai (his entry into the darkness where God was, cf. Exodus 20:21) and it is

⁸ *Ezekiel the Tragedian* ⁶⁸ On Sinai's peak I saw what seemed a throne ⁶⁹ so great in size it touched the clouds of heaven. ⁷⁰ Upon it sat a man of noble mien, ⁷¹ be-crowned, and with a scepter in one hand ⁷² while with the other he did beckon me. ⁷³ I made approach and stood before the throne. ⁷⁴ He handed o'er the scepter and he bade ⁷⁵ me mount the throne, and gave to me the crown; ⁷⁶ then he himself withdrew from off the throne. ⁷⁷ I gazed upon the whole earth round about; ⁷⁸ things under it, and high above the skies. ⁷⁹ Then at my feet a multitude of stars ⁸⁰ fell down, and I their number reckoned up. ⁸¹ They passed by me like armed ranks of men. ⁸² Then I in terror awakened from the dream. Charlesworth.

⁹ ¹³ **As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. ¹⁴ To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.** NRSV.

¹⁰ "For if, as the proverb says, what belongs to friends is common, and the prophet is called the friend of God, it would follow that he shares also God's possessions, so far as it is serviceable. For God possesses all things, but needs nothing; while the good man, though he possesses nothing in the proper sense, not even himself, partakes of the precious things of God so far as he is capable. And that is but natural, for he is a world citizen, and therefore not on the roll of any city of men's habitation, rightly so because he has received no mere piece of land but the whole world as his portion. Again, was not the joy of his partnership with the Father and Maker of all magnified also by the honour of being deemed worthy to bear the same title? For he was named god and king of the whole nation, and entered, we are told, into the darkness where God was, that is into the unseen, invisible, incorporeal and archetypal essence of existing things." 1.156b-158a. F. H. Colson, *Philo*, Vol. 6 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 357-359.

interpreted by Philo as an enthronement (“he was named god and king”). It should also be noted that Moses is referred to as a prophet, which is an epithet reminiscent of Deuteronomy 18:15, which is the verse referenced in Mark 9:7. The New Testament itself demonstrates an awareness of the relationship between the Moses typology and the kingship theme. In John 6:14-15¹¹ the people recognize Jesus as the prophet, that is the prophet like Moses, of Deuteronomy 18:15-18 fame, and as a result of this recognition they try to seize Jesus and make him king by force.¹² Both rabbinic and Samaritan tradition regularly spoke of Moses’ kingship and they often connected it with his ascent up Mount Sinai. For the reader of Mark, the striking connection between Moses’ transfiguring experience on Mount Sinai and his reception of God’s kingship, and the account of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain, as recorded in Mark, demonstrates Jesus’ own coming as Son of Man (8:38), his enthronement as king of the kingdom of God. For biblically literate readers, one of the chief functions of the Mosaic typology, in the

¹¹ ¹⁴ **“When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”** NRSV.

¹² ¹⁵ **When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.** NRSV

transfiguration narrative, would be to drive home the association between the kingship of Jesus and the coming of God's kingdom.¹³ The transfiguration conveys the clear and powerful message that God's kingdom has indeed already arrived.

In Mark, the transfiguration narrative also points beyond itself to an eschatological event, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This connection between the resurrection and the transfiguration is highlighted and brought into focus at 9:9. Here Jesus not only predicts his death, but also his resurrection. This message will have resonated with the audience of Jesus more than it does for us today as they had traditions that both Elijah and Moses were raised up to God. The rabbis interpreted the phrase from Deuteronomy 34:6, regarding the fact that no one knew the grave of Moses, as meaning that Moses underwent a heavenly translation (that he was bodily transferred to heaven, cf. Jude 9).¹⁴ This event on the mountain, the transfiguration, would have certainly qualified as an event worthy of the coming of the "kingdom of God with power," for those who looked back on this event after the resurrection, as well as for the

¹³ Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, pp. 85-87.

¹⁴ Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, pp. 87-88.

three (some - **τινες**) who saw it with their own eyes.¹⁵ As we examine this passage you may be asking what this has to do with Isaiah? We must continue to remember that Isaiah is heavily reliant upon the exodus account and that much of what is understood in Isaiah must be comprehended through the filter of the Torah; the seminal event that produced a nation, namely the exodus. Without this background Isaiah itself is cut loose from its moorings to drift on an ocean of whimsy. We must be reminded that the good news that Mark is proclaiming is what is prophesied by Isaiah. The only direct mention of Moses in Isaiah occurs in chapter 63¹⁶ and appears as a petitioning prayer (a complaint) on the part of Israel against God. Certainly the

¹⁵ 2 Peter 1:17-18 - ¹⁷ For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. NRSV

¹⁶ 63:10 But they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit; therefore he became their enemy; he himself fought against them. ¹¹ Then they remembered the days of old, of Moses his servant. Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit, ¹² who caused his glorious arm to march at the right hand of **Moses**, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, ¹³ who led them through the depths? Like a horse in the desert, they did not stumble. ¹⁴ Like cattle that go down into the valley, the spirit of the LORD gave them rest. Thus you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name. ¹⁵ Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me. ¹⁶ For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name. ¹⁷ Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you? Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage. ¹⁸ Your holy people took possession for a little while; but now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. ¹⁹ We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name. NRSV.

transfiguration answers the complaint of Isaiah, and that of many others, who will have expressed despair at the silence, and what they perceived to be the inaction, of God. God answers their prayer by sending his Son.

As we move on to 9:11 the three disciples ask Jesus about the scribes assertion that Elijah must come before the coming of the Son of Man (the Messiah) comes. What they have just seen on the mountain makes them think that indeed Jesus is the Messiah, so perhaps the scribes are wrong, or perhaps they are still not quite convinced. In verse 12, Jesus affirms that the scribes are indeed correct in a very cryptic verse that perhaps alludes to Isaiah 53 in the notion of the sufferings (πολλὰ πάθη) that must be endured by Jesus. Though cryptic and vague, it seems that the context of Isaiah and the suffering servant lies behind the words of Jesus here. In verse 13, Jesus brings clarity explaining to them that Elijah has indeed already come. Mark appears to either expect his readers to make the connection themselves, or to elicit further discussion, by not explicitly linking Elijah with John the Baptist the way Matthew does

(17:9-13). Being vague perhaps is intended to encourage people to think and recognize the spirit of Elijah in John the Baptist.

At 9:14, they come down the mountain to find a great crowd gathered around the disciples, the disciples are there arguing with some scribes. The crowd sees Jesus and greets him, and Jesus asks what they are arguing about. Someone from the crowd then tells Jesus that he brought his son because he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak and that throws him to the ground. The man had asked the disciples of Jesus to cast out the demon, but they were unable to do so. In Isaiah 34:12 we are told that Israel, as part of their punishment for faithlessness to the covenant, shall be known as “No Kingdom,” a place inhabited by demons and unclean animals. At Mark 9:25 Jesus rebukes the demon and perhaps there is at least meant to be some recognition that the kingdom of God is indeed here in Jesus Christ.

The demon leaves the boy, after crying out (even though it is a spirit of muteness). Once again the disciples fail to understand and when they get to a place of privacy they question Jesus. They want to know why they could not cast the demon out of the boy. The

response of Jesus is that, “This kind is not able to come out except in prayer.” The answer that Jesus gives seems all the more striking as the word prayer never comes up in the actual story of Jesus casting the demon out, there is no mention of prayer in the story previous to his answer. Prayer also does not appear elsewhere in Mark as a miracle-working technique. After all, previously the disciples had been able to drive out demons. The problem encountered by the disciples, in part, has to do with this troublesome kind of demon. The reply that Jesus gives fits well with ancient conceptions that saw epilepsy as a disease that could only be healed by a god, or someone with divine power. The response of Jesus to the disciples question perhaps raises as many questions as it answers. This is in part the case because we have no record of Jesus having prayed in order to force the demon out of the boy. There is however, a character in the story that does pray (verse 24). The father cries out to the one who can heal his son and thus shows that the source of the power for driving out or controlling demons is not a gift like others, but the source of authority over demons comes from God.¹⁷ The response of


¹⁷ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, in the Anchor Yale Bible series, Vol. 27a (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 665-666.

the father could certainly be viewed as a prayer, a prayer to Jesus, God's son, to overcome his unbelief and to trust in God.

At 9:30-32 we have Jesus teaching privately to his disciples and telling them plainly that he is going to be betrayed, killed and that he will rise again. Verse 32 makes it clear that the disciples still fail to comprehend, and yet they are afraid to ask him to explain. Certainly the fact that the disciples had difficulty understanding the message of Jesus will have provided comfort to those that would read the Gospel message of Mark later and struggle with understanding. A part of being a disciple of Jesus is struggling to understand. As we move into the next section (9:33-37) we continue to see that the disciples do not understand Jesus, or the nature of the kingdom of God. Their vision continues to be clouded by their expectations, their preconceived notions regarding the kingdom and what it will be like. Their arguing over who will be the greatest demonstrates their lack of understanding. In order to continue to teach them, he first of all questions them regarding their argument, and perhaps they at least had some inkling that what they were arguing about was inappropriate, as they remained silent.

Jesus then goes on to demonstrate that he actually knew what they were arguing about and he seeks to explain the nature of God's kingdom, by telling them that if someone wants to be first he must be last, he must be servant to all. Today, the church still struggles with this. How do we choose our leaders in the church? Do we choose them for their leadership abilities, or for their serving abilities? How many churches today choose their leaders because they look like Jesus, and how many choose a leader because he looks like Caesar? Jesus then goes on to demonstrate his message to them by taking a child in his arms and challenging them, **"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."** As is often typical for Jesus he then just stops without further explanation. He expects his disciples to understand, and not just to comprehend, but to act. The kingdom of God comes in unexpected ways, to unexpected people. Jesus continues to challenge their expectations of God and his kingdom, and of power, and authority and how they should be used.

In 9:38-9:41, Jesus deals with a statement from his disciples regarding an encounter they had had with a man driving out demons



who was not one of the disciples of Jesus. Jesus tells them not to stop him. He lays out a principle that perhaps should be better understood today among the people who claim Christ as Lord. He tells them, “Whoever is not against us is on our side.” This is a hard saying for us. So often we in the church give our best and greatest energies to getting everything right and yet the call of the kingdom is to serve, to heal, to bless, and to love, not to have all the right answers to all the right questions. As Harvey Pruitt said of the Christians being lined up and shot in Syria, they are not likely checking out the doctrine of the person standing next to them to see how they worship, how they take communion, how they sing, they are proud to stand next to those that will not deny Christ, who will give their lives rather than deny his name. Jesus makes it clear that not denying Christ is more than words, it is actions, actions that serve others. By our actions we proclaim the Gospel and it is based upon our actions that assessment will be made regarding our reward (cf. Revelation).

In 9:42-48, Jesus warns his disciples about putting a stumbling block in front of children. For those that do this, it would be better if

they had not been born. At verse 43, he tells them that it would be better for them to cut off their hand or foot than to sin. He challenges them with the consequences of sin. Here Jesus proclaims that the consequences are to be cast in to “Gehenna (hell)” (γέενναν - Gehenna) into the “unquenchable,” the “asbestos” (ἄσβεστον) fire. This is the Greek word (ἄσβεστον) that we use to describe a mineral compound widely used in construction in the 20th century. Jesus describes the fire of “Gehenna (hell)” as “unquenchable.” I guess it has been as far back as I can remember that I have been taught about “heaven” and “hell”. I suspect that many people have had that same experience and yet as I began to look at what the Bible actually says about “hell” the story is not what I expected. What people normally think of when they think of the term “hell” is most often a place of individual, corporal and eternal torture, that is applicable to all ages (before and after Christ), and to all nations, but such concepts are actually missing from the pages of the New Testament. Only at Matthew 25:46 do we have a word (κόλασιν) used that in any way even approaches our traditional understanding of the term.¹⁸

¹⁸ Dimitris J. Kyrtats, “The Origins of the Christian Hell,” *Numen* (2009) 56, pp. 282-297.

We also need to note that Jesus is never presented as introducing new ideas about the afterlife; except for the teaching that the kingdom of God was immanent. All the warnings and admonitions given by Jesus seem to take for granted what was already commonly accepted, by at least some of the well-established trends within the Judaism of his time. He appears to be able to teach regarding this subject of punishment without any need for additional elaboration: information that only could come from knowledge outside the realm of human experience. Frequently in the Gospels, and in Mark, Jesus appears to expect that, after death, men and women would either enter the kingdom of God (also known as the kingdom of heaven, or simply as paradise), or they would be cast into *Gehenna*. All Jews would know that the Greek rendering of the valley of Hinnom outside of Jerusalem, was the place where the Canaanites were said to have offered their children to their god Moloch (sometimes spelled in a number of different ways such as Melek). The valley of Hinnom is simply a location in Nehemiah 11:30, and Joshua 15:8, but in Jeremiah 7:31-32, 19:2-6; 32:35 it is the place

where innocent children are burned in the fire.¹⁹ The Maccabees (in the second century B.C.) chose the valley as the place in which to burn the corpses of their enemies. Around 1200 A.D. Rabbi David Kimhi, in his commentary on Psalm 27 remarked:

**Gehenna is a repugnant place, into which
filth and cadavers are thrown, and in which
fires perpetually burn in order to consume
the filth and bones, on which account, by
analogy, the judgement of wicked is called
“Gehenna.”²⁰**

This explanation from Kimhi seems totally plausible as an explanation for our understanding of Gehenna, however, the explanation he gives finds no actual support in literary sources, or archaeological data from the intertestamental (ca. 420 B.C. - around the birth of Christ, or some date to John the Baptist), or rabbinic periods (70 A.D. - 1000 A.D). There is, in fact, no evidence that the valley was in fact a garbage dump at all during the time of Jesus.²¹

¹⁹ Dimitris J. Kyrtats, “The Origins of the Christian Hell,” *Numen* (2009) 56, pp. 282-297.

²⁰ Lloyd R. Bailey, “Gehenna: The Topography of Hell,” *Biblical Archaeologist* (1986) 49, pp. 187-191.

²¹ Lloyd R. Bailey, “Gehenna: The Topography of Hell,” *Biblical Archaeologist* (1986) 49, pp. 187-191.

The earliest evidence that we actually have for the definite location of the Valley of Hinnom, whether it be identified with the Kidron Valley, that of the Tyropoeon Valley, or the Wâdy-er-Rabâbi comes from 1 Enoch 26-27 (ca. 300 B.C.).²² The valley of the sons of Hinnom (Gehenna) most likely received its designation as a place of punishment due to the offering of child sacrifices here and not because it served as a dump. We also need to note that it is in the Book of Isaiah that we have a number of teachings that we find repeated in Mark's Gospel regarding the nature of this place of punishment.²³ There are a number of excellent articles and books with regard to this topic if someone would like to do further study.²⁴

²² James A. Montgomery, "The Holy City and Gehenna," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1908) 27, 24-47

²³ Isaiah 66:24 - **And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.** NRSV

²⁴ Dimitris J. Kyrtats, "The Origins of the Christian Hell," *Numen* (2009) 56, pp. 282-297. Lloyd R. Bailey, "Gehenna: The Topography of Hell," *Biblical Archaeologist* (1986) 49, pp. 187-191. James A. Montgomery, "The Holy City and Gehenna," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1908) 27, pp. 24-47. N. Wyatt, "The Concept and Purpose of Hell: Its Nature and Development in West Semitic Thought," *Numen* (2009), pp. 161-184. Edward Fudge, "The Final End of the Wicked," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (1984), pp. 325-334. Clement J. McNaspy, "Sheol in the Old Testament," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (1944), pp. 326-333. Hans Scharen, "Gehenna in the Synoptics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1992), pp. 454-470. Walter Burkert, "Pleading for Hell: Postulates, Fantasies, and the Senselessness of Punishment," *Numen* (2009), pp. 141-160. Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, Third ed. (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2011). Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, in the Supplements to Novum Testamentum series, Vol. XCIII (Atlanta GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998).

What is important for our study is the recognition that for Mark's readers, the conceptual world of the abode of the dead, and the method of final punishment is heavily reliant upon Isaiah. We need to be aware that so many of our modern concepts regarding "eternal" punishment and the afterlife are the result of syncretism of Greek ideas in a way that would have been totally foreign, if not downright heresy for the original readers of Mark. We are today heavily influenced by the teachings of Plato that have down through the centuries crept into our theology and are today considered orthodox because they represent the traditional view and not because they are biblical. In Mark 8:48 we are drawn back to a conceptual world that is clearly based upon the words of Isaiah the prophet.²⁵ It is this conceptual frame of reference offered by Mark's anchoring of his gospel account within the prophecies of Isaiah and the Old Testament scriptures that holds the meaning firmly in check not allowing it to drift widely into the realm of speculation and Greek philosophy. This is not the place to go into great detail on this subject, but a few things need to be pointed out: 1. Ideas of the

²⁵ Isaiah 66:24.

eternal nature of the soul are more Greek than Jewish. 2.

Destruction is most often associated with ideas of judgment rather than eternal, perpetual suffering. 3. Gehenna as conceived of in Judaism differs a great deal from our common conceptions of hell. 4. Our conceptual construct of Gehenna impacts on our understanding of heaven and the afterlife in general. These are perhaps concepts that can be studied in more detail at another time.

As we complete this long chapter in Mark we come to 9:49 where we have a passage that talks about “salt.” It is likely the case that behind this passage stands Leviticus 2:13.²⁶ Over time there also became an association between the fire and the salt, and then also it is likely that as people viewed the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, there was the connection of judgment with fire and salt. These are words that would have brought to the mind of the ancients the idea of judgment, and of course here there is a connection with the punishment of Gehenna. In this same vein is still the context of the place where the worm never dies, and the cure for worms was salt. Salt kills worms. Unsalty salt is worthless and so

²⁶ **You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.** NRSV.

here the call is not to be worthless, but to be salt in the world, into our internal world. We are called to have salt in ourselves, which in turn will kill the worms and make us a sacrifice suitable for the kingdom of God. A sign of this saltiness is our ability to live at peace with those around us. We are to live our lives in communal harmony and this is a sign of the wisdom that comes from God (cf. James 1:17²⁷).²⁸

²⁷ **Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.** NRSV.

²⁸ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, pp. 692-699.

Synopsis


From the very first verse, this chapter begins with controversy and all the way through there are aspects that are controversial for us today. The first of these, has to do with the expectation that a person has of the words of Jesus regarding the kingdom of God coming with power in the sight of some living at the time of its proclamation. It is most likely that this is a reference to the transfiguration that occurs shortly after these words (6 days). We need to be careful that our expectations do not blind us to working of God.

On the mountain we have the scene of Moses and Elijah appearing, and of the appearance, and the likeness of Jesus being transformed. All of this takes place in the sight of James, Peter, and John and it very much seems reminiscent of Moses going up on Mount Sinai with Aaron, Nadab and and Abihu. There is also the cloud of the presence of God and after Peter asks an impertinent question a voice from the cloud makes it clear that Jesus is indeed the son of God and he is the one that should be listened to by the disciples. This scene indicates that Jesus is the

fulfillment of the prophecies regarding the coming of a prophet like Moses and more than that he is indeed the son of God. This is clearly an indication that the kingdom of God has indeed come with power as God's own son is testament to this fact. We have here an indication that God has indeed crowned Jesus as king of his kingdom. We also have an answer to the complaint of Isaiah 63:16 that God does not acknowledge the crying out for deliverance of Israel. He has answered.

As additional confirmation of the status of Jesus we have the incident at the foot of the mountain where the demon possessed boy is relieved by Jesus of a demon that normally could only be removed by a god, or his agent. Jesus shows his power to do this by removing the demon after being petitioned by the boy's father.

In chapter 9 we have further indication that the kingdom coming into the world, through Jesus, may surprise people as he predicts his death and resurrection. For those immersed in the context of Isaiah, especially Isaiah 53, this should come as no surprise. It becomes clear that the disciples still do not comprehend the message of Jesus as they argue about who will be the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus makes it clear that his kingdom



comes not to the strong and powerful, but to the weak and humble. He specifically uses the example of a child here to demonstrate what he means.

At 9:42, Jesus begins talking about Gehenna, a word that is translated in some versions as “hell.” Built on the foundation of Isaiah, Jesus teaches his disciples that it would be better to lose a part of their body rather than to be cast into Gehenna. There is a great opportunity here to apply some good biblical teaching regarding “hell” and “Gehenna.” Much of our modern conceptual framework is flawed due to the intrusion of Platonic ideas. Jesus clearly wants his disciples to know that there will indeed be a judgment and that they need to live in such a way as to avoid that consequence.

Questions

1. How do you envision the coming of God to look like? Why?
2. What are some things that you find to be mysterious about God? Why?
3. How would you define power?
4. Do you believe that the threat of punishment acts as a deterrent? Why, or why not?
5. What is the purpose of punishment?
6. Is there a type of judgment that is more about justice than punishment? If so what is it? If not, define justice to prove your point.
7. What are some of the things that one expects of a great king?
8. What do you expect the kingdom of God to be like? Why?
9. What is faith? Why do you think God values faith?
10. What do you think it means for us that Jesus is enthroned as king?
11. How does the death of Jesus fit into the kingship of Jesus?
12. How do you think the various parts of Scripture are related to each other such as the Torah to Isaiah, and the Old Testament to the New Testament?

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13. What do you think the disciples of Jesus were meant to learn from Jesus removing of the demon from the epileptic boy?
 14. How would you define prayer?
 15. Why do you think the disciples of Jesus have so much trouble comprehending his teaching?
 16. How would you define leadership? How is the leadership advocated by Jesus different from the leadership advocated by the world?
 17. What do you think should be some of the main traits for leadership in the church?
 18. Why should we fear “Gehenna?”
 19. What should such fear cause us to do, and become?
 20. What are some ways that we can help promote peace in our world, in our community, our church and in our families?