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The Way of the Cross in Mark's Gospel

The *way* is an important designation used in the early church to articulate the newfound faith in Jesus (see Matt. 22:16; Acts 9:2; 18:25; 19:9; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

This article will examine the usage of the word *way* in Mark and draw some theological and pastoral implications.

Mark 1:2 reads, "It is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way'—a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" ¹ Mark quotes Isaiah 40:3. When a New Testament (NT) writer quotes or alludes to an Old Testament (OT) text, the literary and thematic context of the OT text needs to be taken into account in the interpretation of the NT passage. ² Even though Isaiah 40:3 is only a slight reference, we shall see how important this reference is in the Gospel of Mark, and how the whole message of Isaiah needs to be considered in order to understand the gospel. ³

Isaianic New Exodus in Mark

One of the themes Isaiah addresses, in chapters 40–55, includes the New Exodus in the context of God's people in Babylonian bondage. ⁴ Along with Isaiah 40:3, ⁵

consider Isaiah 43:16–19: "This is what the LORD says—he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: 'Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.'" ⁶

These passages revisit the mighty display of Yahweh's power in the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian captivity. While Isaiah 40:3 says that the *way* is prepared by Yahweh, Isaiah 42:16; 43:16–19; and 49:11, 12 say that the *way* is prepared by Yahweh for His people. There is no distinction between "the road of Yahweh and the road of Israel, for Yahweh travels with His people, as He did in the Exodus." ⁶ The *way* signifies the salvific act of God on behalf of His people. By alluding to Isaiah 40:3, Mark draws on the Isaianic New Exodus as the background context to understanding his gospel.

This Isaianic New Exodus theme is not drawn on again in the Gospel until Mark re-introduces the word *way* in Mark 8:27. ⁷ Scholars have generally acknowledged Mark 8:27–10:52 as the theological nerve

center of this Gospel. ⁸ In this section, charged with "outbursts of predictive energy," Jesus announces three passion predictions and attempts to clarify for His disciples the nature and substance of His mission. ⁹ Mark 8:27 reads, "Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way He asked them, 'Who do people say I am?'" Mark's reference to the word *way* here is intentionally used to lead his readers back to Mark 1:2; Isaiah 40:3; and possibly 43:16, 18. On His first use of this word, Jesus asks His disciples His identity, which is an important theme in Mark. "God himself had declared Jesus to be his Son (1:11, cf. 9:7), with the demons chiming in with fearful acknowledgment" as well (1:24; 3:11; 5:7). ¹⁰ The disciples confirm that He is the Messiah, after which Jesus declares that the Son of Man must suffer many things, die, and be raised again.

Interestingly, the concept of *way* is used while the disciples are in Caesarea Philippi. It was a major Hellenistic city built by Herod Philip in honor of Augustus and boasted a shrine for the emperor cult. In addition, this city had also been a place where the god Baal had been worshiped. Therefore, in the midst of a city dedicated to false gods, Jesus' true identity is revealed. The revelation of the identity of

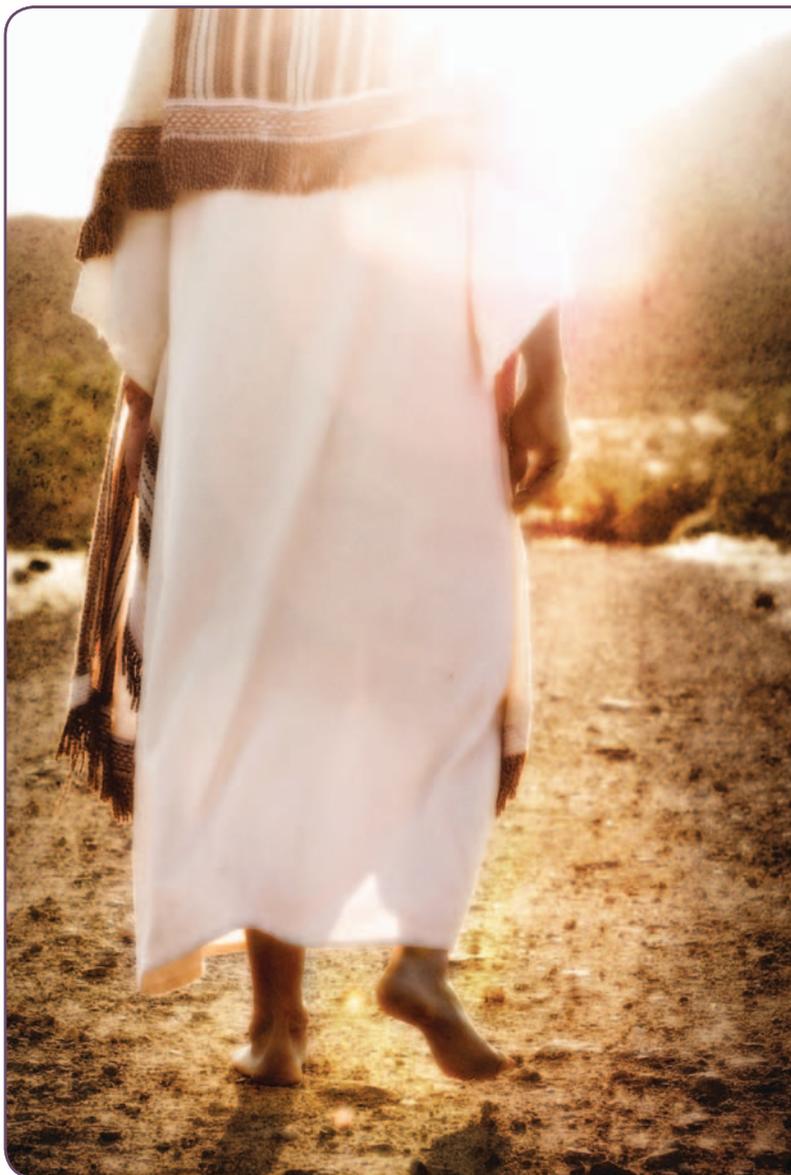
Jesus, here in Caesarea Philippi, counters the claims of past and present pretenders to godhood. Jesus is, in fact, God in human flesh and has demonstrated His power over nature, demons, sickness, and death (cf. Mark 1:22–27; 4:35–41; 5:1–43).¹¹

The Way and the Cross in Mark's literary structure

Mark uses the word *way* with increased frequency in Mark 8:27–10:32. Mark 9:33, 34 has a reference to the disciples arguing while they were on the *way*. The next use of

the *way* is in Mark 10:17: "As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. 'Good teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" This incident recounts the story of the rich young ruler who eventually turns away from Jesus. The last reference to the *way* in the section of Mark 8:27–10:32 is in verse 32, which reads, "They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him."

At the end of this important section, Mark identifies where the *way* leads: it leads to Jerusalem, where Jesus will be crucified. Drawing on the Old Testament background, the use of the *way* in Isaiah leads to the conclusion that the *way* is, in fact, a fulfillment of the Isaianic New Exodus. This New Exodus in Mark is not from Babylonian captivity, but rather from the captivity of Satan and sin and far exceeds the prophecy of Isaiah 43:16–19, which pointed to God already transcending what He did in the Exodus of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Typologically, the Cross now becomes the zenith



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of God's redemptive activity, superseding His redemptive work in the historical Exile and Exodus.

The Way and Discipleship

Mark wrote with a deep conviction that Jesus was *leading* the way to Jerusalem for Jesus knew what would befall Him there. On the other hand, the disciples were astonished either because they were beginning to understand the teaching of Jesus in relation to His death or because of their obduracy to comprehend the actions of Jesus in leading the way. In any case, Mark 10:32 is one of the central verses to unlock the commitment and passion of Jesus to fulfill the mission set out for Him by His Father.

A strategically placed reference to the *way* occurs in Mark 10:52, which recounts the story of blind Bartimaeus. Why has Mark now used the word *way* to conclude the story of Bartimaeus when he has already concluded his section on the passion predictions at Mark 10:32? He creatively placed two stories, Mark 8:22–26 and Mark 10:46–52, on either side of Mark 8:27–10:32 to illustrate the nature of discipleship.

In Mark 8:22–26, Jesus heals a partially blind man. After Jesus places spit on the man's eyes, he reports that he sees people that look like trees that are walking. Only after Jesus places His hands on his eyes is the man healed by Jesus. Mark has placed this story before Mark 8:27–10:32 to portray the inability of the disciples to understand the mission of Jesus. On the other hand, Mark 10:46–52 recounts the healing of blind Bartimaeus. This healing is meant to recall Isaiah 42:16, which is a Messianic prophecy pointing to the ability of the Messiah to heal the blind.¹² In addition, Bartimaeus exemplifies true discipleship, and the use of his story here is drawing on the call of the disciples in the early part of the Gospel.¹³ As the

disciples give up their boats and employment, so Bartimaeus gives up his cloak. That this story emphasizes discipleship and contains deep symbolic significance is evident in the "conspicuous lack of emphasis on the course of the miracle itself . . . no healing word or gesture, no demonstration of the cure and no choral acclamation."¹⁴

Most importantly, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the *way* in Mark 10:52, which is a metaphor of the Cross. While Jesus' disciples have failed to grasp the realities of discipleship, Bartimaeus has. Jesus demonstrates His empathy and power by giving His time and consideration to one of Israel's most insignificant members of society. This final episode in Mark's Gospel provides a fitting conclusion to Jesus' public ministry as He heads toward Jerusalem.¹⁵

Mark used the *way* (and the Holy Spirit) to be an illustration of the Cross and the human response to what Christ has done for us there. Christ's true identity can only be fully grasped and appreciated in the light of Calvary's love, hence its significant use in Mark 8:27. The two stories on either side of Mark 8:27–10:32 illustrate the differing responses to the Cross—initial misunderstanding in the case of the disciples or acceptance in the case of Bartimaeus. The story that makes use of the *way* motif in Mark 8:27–10:52, that of the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17–22), is tragically the response of rejection. The *way* also serves as a paradigm of discipleship in Mark's Gospel. Like Bartimaeus, disciples are invited to leave everything and follow Jesus along the *way*.

Conclusion

As pastors, we, too, are on the *way* with Jesus. He leads in His ministry through each of us. The call of Bartimaeus reminds us that we must surrender all to Jesus. Bartimaeus persevered. He would not leave Jesus until he had his

miracle. As pastors, there may be times when we question God's plans for us and our church. There may be times when we are like the disciples who could not see properly. We do not understand the *way* in which God is leading us. Bartimaeus reminds us to persevere in our relationship with Jesus. Our miracle is on its *way*. Remember, Jesus has already walked this *way* and triumphed. The *way* offers the privilege of fellowship with Him and a share in His victory. 

- 1 All Scripture references are from the New International Version.
- 2 This principle was first articulated by C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Substructure of New Testament Theology* (London: Collins, 1952), 126–33.
- 3 According to Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, Biblical Studies Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 54, "in literary antiquity the role of the prologue was, by convention, to provide an indication of what is to be said so that hearers can know beforehand what the work is about." Further, Watts suggests that "the gospel of Jesus Christ is that gospel about which Isaiah wrote," 56, 57.
- 4 On the Exodus motif, see B. W. Anderson, "Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, eds. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson (New York: Harper, 1962), 177–195.
- 5 The ideas are developed from Isaiah 11:16 and 35:8. According to Klyne Snodgrass, "Streams of Tradition Emerging From Isa. 40.1-5 and Their Adaption in the New Testament," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 8 (1980): 24–45 (41), states that "the themes of 40.5 that are developed later such as the theme of the effectiveness of the Word of God (55.11) or all flesh being affected by God's activity (66.23)."
- 6 John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, Anchor Bible 20 (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1968), 17.
- 7 M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 37, suggests that the motif of "way" is used in 2:23; 4:4, 15; 6:8; 8:3; 11:8; and 12:14. We will not consider these verses due to the constraints of this article. The references before 8:27 are, in fact, incidental and add no hermeneutical weight to the motif I am addressing in this article. Due to constraints of this article, I will not engage with every occurrence of the term *way*.
- 8 Cf. Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary 34B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 3, 4.
- 9 Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 425.
- 10 Evans, 14.
- 11 Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 240.
- 12 Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 34, writes, "The removal of blindness is linked to the picture of the holy highway upon which the redeemed of the Lord return to Zion with the exultant singing. Thus, . . . opening eyes of the blind, and the way of the Lord are interrelated themes."
- 13 The verb "call" (*phoneo*) is repeated three times in verse 49, emphasizing the discipleship focus of this pericope.
- 14 Christopher D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative*, SNTSMS 64 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 124.
- 15 Evans, 134.

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