

## **Gospel of Mark** *A Vertical Reading*

### **Mark's Ending:**

First things first. Mark's Gospel ends at 16:8. We can determine this confidently. However, this ending seems abrupt and literarily leaves some untied strings. In this presentation, I attempt to suggest a possibility for a reasonable context behind Mark's ending. For this suggestion, I am dependent upon the traditional understanding of the historical context of Mark's Gospel. Many scholars feel a likely context for Mark's Gospel is in Rome by a disciple of Peter, whose name was Mark, who preserved traditions from Peter's own preaching in Rome. The time frame for the Gospel's production usually is figured around the time of Nero's persecution, during which time church tradition indicates both Peter and Paul were martyred. I offer here a reading based upon the two themes I will develop below combined with this traditional provenance for Mark's Gospel under the shadow of Peter's preaching in Rome.

### **Two Themes:**

*Theme 1: Identity of Jesus—suffering Son of Man*

*Theme 2: Failure of discipleship—suffering discipleship*

#### **I. Theme 1: Identity of Jesus**

##### *A. Announced up front*

1. Mark opens with “Jesus Christ, Son of God” (1:1)

2. Narrative significance

a. *Crucial issue inaugurated*

i. Narrator's voice: once (1:1)

ii. Heavenly voice: twice

1.) baptism, 1:11

2.) transfiguration, 9:7

b. *Confessional response required*

##### *B. Advanced by plot: “messianic secret,” questions, accusations*

1. Wilderness temptations (1:12–13)—Jesus hears the voice of Satan tempting him, trying to derail the public ministry before it can begin.

2. Demon exorcisms (1:24–25, 34)

a. *Demons' cry*: “We know who you are! The Holy One of God!”

b. *Jesus' command*: “Be silent!”

c. *Mark's device*: Jesus' command to silence is part of Mark's narrative device, his “messianic secret” theme. The demons confess Jesus' identity, but are commanded to silence by Jesus. The expectations of both disciples and crowds mistakenly could be incited to political revolt by these premature announcements. Mark's “messianic

secret” theme shows how Jesus controls the progressive revelation of his true identity to his disciples. This control is made necessary because the disciples have limited understandings of what Jesus’ messianic role will actually involve—dying on a cross. They will have to grow into that understanding of his messiahship. That growth will not come easily.

3. Healing the paralytic (2:7)
  - a. *Jesus’ declaration*: “Your sins are forgiven!”
  - b. *Scribes’ question*: “Who is this who speaks this way?”
4. Casting out demons (3:22)
  - a. *Scribes’ declaration*: “He has Beelzebul!”
  - b. *Jesus’ question*: “How can Satan cast out Satan?”
5. Storm at sea (4:41)
  - a. *Jesus’ question*: “Why are you so fearful?”
  - b. *Disciples’ question*: “Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?”
6. Caesarea Philippi (8:27)
  - a. *Jesus’ question*: “Who do people say that I am?”
  - b. *Disciples’ answer*:: “Some, John the Baptist; others, Elijah; some one of the prophets.”

## II. Theme 2: Failure of discipleship

### A. *Feeding Miracle Cycle* (Mark 6–8)

1. Five thousand fed (6:30–44)
2. Walking on water (6:45–52)
  - a. *Disciples’ consternation*: “It’s a phantom!” (v. 49)
  - b. *Narrator’s Clarification*: “but their hearts were hardened” (v. 52)
3. Four thousand fed (8:1–10)
2. Boat ride (8:14–21)
  - a. *Disciples’ need*: brought no bread, only one loaf on board (v. 14)
  - b. *Jesus’ First Metaphor*: “beware the leaven of the Pharisees” (v. 15)
  - c. *Jesus’ Second Metaphor*: “Having eyes, do you not see?” (v. 18)
  - d. *Jesus’ Meaning*: “Do you not yet understand?” (v. 21)
  - e. *Mark’s Strategy*: structuring the narrative to establish the metaphorical connection between physical sight and spiritual perception as crucial to the story line. This will be played out immediately in the story of the healing of the Blind Man of Bethesda, which itself is the prelude to the story of Peter’s Confession at Caesarea Philippi.

### B. *Confession at Caesarea Philippi Cycle* (8–10)

1. Blind man at Bethesda (8:22–26)

- a. *Prelude*: the literary introduction to Peter’s confession
  - b. *Two stage healing*: key to Mark’s use
    - i. Performance difficulty: the only miracle recorded by any gospel indicating Jesus had difficulty with the miracle. (This should present no problem to an understanding of Jesus’ miracle-working power: Mark himself clearly indicates that in some places Jesus could do *no* miracle; cf. Mk. 6:5.)
    - ii. Two stages: (1) minimal sight (“like trees walking,” v. 24); (2) full sight (“saw every man clearly,” v. 25)
  - c. *Mark’s Point*: parabolic of the disciples’ two-stage perception of the true meaning of Jesus’ messiahship
    - i. False messianic expectations: the realities of a life surrounded by rumors, false hopes
    - ii. Genuine faith: the realities of the suffering Son of Man, true messiah
2. Peter’s So-called “Confession” (8:27–38)
- a. *Jesus’ question: asked in two parts*
    - i. General: “Who do people say that I am?” (v. 27)
    - ii. Pointed: “But who do *you* say that I am?” (v. 29)
  - b. *Peter’s response*: “You are the Christ!”—genuine understanding? No. Seen both in Jesus’ immediate response to Peter here and in Peter’s counter-response and then later action at Gethsemene.
    - i. Jesus’ response: *First Passion Prediction* (8:31–38). Jesus suddenly shifts the discussion to teaching about the Son of Man. Who brought up that topic? Weren’t we talking about messiah? Jesus teaches that the Son of Man will suffer and die. Then, Jesus predicts his own suffering and death. Apparently he is this Son of Man? The rules of the messiah game have been completely rewritten in the middle of the game. Jesus defines who he is by redefining who messiah is.
    - ii. Jesus’ demand: *Take Up Your Cross* (8:34). Jesus then personalizes the meaning of his messiahship. The discussion of who messiah is, is not academic. The nature of messiahship determines the nature of discipleship. If suffering and death is the true path of the master, then that is the true path for the disciple. Any heavenly reward then will depend upon earthly discipleship now.
    - iii. Peter’s rebuke: Peter’s response to Jesus’ teaching about the Son of Man (v. 32).
    - iv. Jesus’ counter rebuke: “*Get behind me, Satan!*” (v. 33), the same voice heard in the wilderness

temptations (1:13) Jesus now hears in Peter’s rejection of the suffering Son Man. The same rebuke given to unclean spirits (1:25) is given to Peter. Why so harsh? Mark makes clear: “And seeing the other disciples” (8:33). Peter is the leader. Where Peter goes, the disciples will go. If Peter does not get Jesus’ true identity right, no disciple will. Peter’s present perception of what messiah means is unclear and imperfect, clouded by wrong-headed notions no more valuable than the rumors swirling about Jesus in his ministry on the part of the crowds in general.

3. The Transfiguration (9:1–32)

- a. *Heavenly voice*: “My Son, Hear him!” (9:7)
- b. *Divine approval*: pointedly making the point to Peter that Jesus’ teaching on the Son of Man just given at Caesarea Philippi is not up for discussion in the coffee shops of Capernaum. Jesus’ distinctive Son of Man teaching is divinely ordained, divinely approved, and divinely authoritative. Son of Man is non-negotiable truth about Jesus’ identity as messiah.
- c. *Seeing Jesus*: Mark anticipates his plot development. He continues to draw upon the sight metaphor established with the healing of the Blind Man at Bethesda. Being able to “see” Jesus fully in all of his messianic glory will require looking from the perspective of the foot of the cross. And only an earth-shattering experience can make the cross the glory of God. That earth-shattering experience will be the resurrection of Jesus. The Transfiguration, then, is a “meta-metaphor”—an even larger metaphor of vision built on a given metaphor of sight. Here, the meta-metaphor is about the need for personal transformation built on the original metaphor of spiritual perception—the need for a personal experience of the resurrection of Jesus that validates the cross as the crown of the true messiah and transforms one’s entire perspective on life by shattering all illusions about Jesus’ identity derived from the messianic mirages in the desert of public opinion. The miracles and ministry of Jesus just might help you to see an inkling of the truth of messiah, rather vaguely, like the Blind Man at Bethesda seeing “men like trees walking,” but only the second stage of healing, the cross and resurrection, will give you full insight into the true nature of Jesus’ identity as messiah.
- c. *2nd Passion Prediction* (9:30–32): following the Transfiguration, the second of three Passion Predictions

is made. Jesus reaffirms to the disciples that the Son of Man’s messianic destiny is death.

- d. *Discipleship Failure (9:33–37)*: “Who is the greatest?” this question comes immediately after the 2nd Passion Prediction. Could Mark be any more blunt about the disciples obtuseness? Here is the stark reality that the disciples utterly fail to get the point about the suffering messiah: *his* identity is *their* mission.
- e. *3rd Passion Prediction (10:32–34)*: the third of Jesus’ three Passion Predictions is given against the context of James and John’s request of Jesus for seats of honor in glory. Mark brings home the point that Transfiguration glory comes only through the cross—a point sorely misunderstood by Jesus’ own disciples.

C. Jerusalem Cycle (11–16)

1. Triumphal Entry (11:1–11)

- a. *Jerusalem’s Significance*: the fateful destiny of the suffering Son of Man
- b. *Crowds’ shout: “Hosanna!”*—yet again, another errant confession in the Gospel based on false messianic expectations
- c. *Healing of Blind Bartemaeus (10:46–52)*: another healing of sight story used as prelude, here as the prelude to the Passion Story in Jerusalem. Why? Jesus said: “Your faith has healed you” (10:52). Mark shows where true sight is gained for any true disciple—at the foot of the cross. The cross of Christ is the point of revelation about Jesus’ identity for a true disciple.

2. Garden of Gethsemene (14:50): Peter’s misunderstanding of Jesus’ identity as messiah in his so-called confession at Caesarea Philippi and the overall theme of discipleship failure are now woven tightly together by Mark.

- a. *Peter’s action (14:47)*: The sad truth of Peter’s errant confession at Caesarea Philippi is now brought home in the Garden of Gethsemene on the night Jesus is betrayed. Peter draws a sword—there’s his false messianic idea about who Jesus is—reinventing a new Judas Maccabees for a new day against the Romans (cf. Jn. 18:10).
- b. *Jesus’ abandonment*: Mark says rather simply: “all forsook him and fled”—just five words—but they bear the entire load of Mark’s theme of discipleship failure, the nadir of this narrative theme. Here truth lays exposed in its raw reality. The pathos of total abandonment will be given deepest voice in Jesus’ own cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:34).

3. Peter’s Denials (14:66–72): so what of the confession at Caesarea Philippi now, big boy? Mark’s theme of the utter failure of discipleship brought home acutely personally for both Peter and Jesus.
4. Centurion’s Confession (15:39): “*Surely this man was the Son of God!*”—the first true confession of Jesus from human lips since the opening verse, and the lips of a Gentile, no less! Here is the apex and climax of the identity theme. Here Mark encodes the truth from where will come the positive response to the “good news” about “Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God” (1:1). This positive Gentile response also gives meaning to Jesus’ mysterious words to the disciples at the Last Supper, “After I am raised, I will go before you into Galilee” (14:28), a direction the angels repeat to Jesus’ disciples after the resurrection, that Jesus “goes before you into Galilee” (16:7)—that is, Galilee of the Gentiles.
5. Empty Tomb (16:1–8)
  - a. *Divine command*: “*Go and tell!*”—the angel’s divine command (v. 7)
  - b. *Failure to obey*: “*They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid!*”—the women’s failed response, and the last words of the Gospel (v. 8). This is yet another episode of discipleship failure. They are commanded to go and tell. They tell no one. This episode, though, significantly happens *after* the resurrection in the narrative plotline.
  - c. *Mark’s Setting in Life*: This last word is a pointed word to persecuted Christians in Rome. Even after the resurrection, confessing who Jesus is has to play out in contemporary discipleship. So the question of Jesus to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi (8:29) still echoes hauntingly “But who do *you* say that I am?” And the call of the first Passion Prediction given to those disciples to “take up your cross and follow me” (8:34) heralds forth as the lions roar.