

THE BLIND MODEL:
THE ROLE OF BARTIMAEUS IN MARKAN DISCIPLESHIP (10:46-52)

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INTRODUCTION

Most consulted commentaries agree that discipleship is an important topic in the Gospel of Mark.¹ In this paper the focus is on Mark 10:46-52 within the whole Marcan narrative. The research question is how Mark expects the (implied) reader to respond to the depiction of discipleship in the chosen passage within the Gospel.²

The research method used is narrative criticism. It is in the first place applied to the exegesis of Mark 10:46-52, but also used for evaluating theological statements on discipleship in Mark. The two main sources used for the methodology are *Mark as Story* by David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie; and *What Is Narrative Criticism?* by Mark Allan Powell.³ The focus of narrative criticism is “to read the text as the implied reader.”⁴ Thus, the aim is not to look for the role the text plays in the tradition, what Jesus intended with the sayings or even what really happened, but to investigate what is “*in the text* that indicates [how] the reader is expected to respond.”⁵

DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK 10:46-52

Looking for the meaning of discipleship in the story of Bartimaeus means looking for understanding through the text within the context of the surrounding passages.⁶ There is a strong connection is between Mark 10:46-52 and the preceding story (10:32-45); first, there is the identical question Jesus poses to John and James (10:36) and to Bartimaeus (10:51), and second there is the ἐν τῇ ὁδοῦ motive (10:32, 52).⁷

To see again

Jesus poses two identical questions: “What do you want me to do for you?” The following conversation however is quite different (10:37-40, 51-52). James and John ask to be seated at the side of Jesus when he is in his glory. The blind man asks to see again. Why are those two pleas contrasted with each other? What is wrong about the reaction of James and John? Chrysostom argues that they are expecting to share in the glory without recognizing him to suffer before that.⁸ They are about to enter Jerusalem (10:32-33) and the two brothers want to assure their place in the kingdom they are expecting Jesus to establish upon the entry in Jerusalem.⁹ Mark tries to communicate that they only focus on the glorification of the son of humanity and not on the preceding suffering. The fact that they talk with Jesus about the glory on the verge of his prophesied death (8:31; 9:31; 10:33) clearly shows a

¹ This is deeply supported by narrative criticism, the methodology of this paper (see Robert C. Tannehill, “The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role,” *JR* 57 [1977]: 402).

² The translation used is that of David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie (*Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2nd ed. [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999]: 10-38).

³ *Ibid.*; Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* Guides to Biblical Scholarship New Testament Series (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ Vernon K. Robbins, “The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52) in Marcan Theology,” *JBL* 92, no. 2 (1973): 224.

⁷ Ronald J. Kernaghan, *Mark*, IVPNTCS (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007): 207.

⁸ Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* 8.31, in Thomas C. Oden, and Christopher A. Hall, eds., *Mark*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament II (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 149.

⁹ James A. Brooks, *Mark*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1991), 168.

misunderstanding.¹⁰ The problem is not fact that there will be no glory—because Jesus also predicts his resurrection—the problem lies in the timing of the disciples’ question. Contrary to the preceding prophecies, in 10:33 it is much more concrete and actual since Jesus connects the suffering and death with the journey to Jerusalem.¹¹

But even a bigger problem lies in their misunderstanding of the structure of the kingdom—which Jesus has taught them in the preceding stories. Thus, in response to their misunderstanding, Jesus again explains the structure of the kingdom: “Whoever wants to be most important among you will be a slave to all. For even the son of humanity came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as ransom for many” (10:43-45). The story of Bartimaeus shows the practical application of this; Bartimaeus recognizes Jesus as a high king, but at the same time realizes that this king is going to serve him.¹² He has a faith that can be described as “insistent.”¹³ Moreover, it was insistent on one point; the blind beggar wanted Jesus to interrupt his journey to Jerusalem and help him.¹⁴ These verses are the lesson to be learned by the disciples because of their misunderstanding, but it is also a lesson the implied reader has to learn: magnitude in the kingdom is attained by smallness. After the teachings on the kingdom (8:34-35; 9:35, 42-50; 10:14-15, 21, 24-31, 42-45) Mark provides an example of how this ought be understood. Bartimaeus clearly understands Jesus’ having a high position; he calls him twice the son of David and Rabboni—a strengthened form of Rabbi¹⁵ and an elaboration of James and John’s appeal to him as teacher¹⁶—but at the same time he asks his servitude. Jesus’ identity in Mark is primarily that of the suffering servant.¹⁷ Bartimaeus acknowledges this.

Thus, Bartimaeus’ regained *sight* is preceded by *insight*. This passage and the other about a blind man (8:22-26) structure the Gospel and indicate that in the section in between (8:27-10:45) Jesus did not only give “physical sight but spiritual insight to his disciples.”¹⁸ Clement of Alexandria interprets as follows: “Receive Christ, receive power to see, receive your light, that you may plainly recognize both God and man.”¹⁹ The lexicological connection between the story of the two brothers and that of Bartimaeus supports an interpretation of James and John having spiritual blindness and the blind man spiritual insight. This is typical for minor characters in Mark; that they have a great insight in who Jesus is and what he does and that they are contrasted with the disciples.²⁰

The theological message Mark tries to convey is not so much that Jesus gives spiritual insight, but that he gives it to those who ask it of him. Since the disciples already have made up the right “sight”—Jesus will establish his kingdom and that they ought to share in it—they are not open to receiving sight. Bartimaeus merely asks Jesus to see, and after retrieving sight, decides to follow Jesus. In this way the implied reader of the Gospel can identify with the blind man. They also do not see Jesus, but in the story of Bartimaeus Mark shows that

¹⁰ Augustine, *The Gospel of John* 28.5.2, in Oden and Hall, *Mark*, 149.

¹¹ Jakob van Bruggen, *Marcus: Het evangelie volgens Petrus*, CNT (Kampen: Kok, 1988), 232.

¹² Augustine, *The Harmony of the Gospels* 2.65, in Oden and Hall, *Mark*, 153; Kernaghan, *Mark*, 209.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Brooks, *Mark*, 174.

¹⁶ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 210.

¹⁷ Marla J. Schierling Selvidge, “‘And Those Who Followed Feared’ (Mark 10:32),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (1983): 397.

¹⁸ Brooks, *Mark*, 172; see also Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark’s Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2008), 171.

¹⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 11, in Oden and Hall, *Mark*, 153.

²⁰ Kernaghan, *Mark*, 207-8.

blindness is an obstacle that can be removed.²¹ The readers are to have a part in establishing the kingdom.²² Discipleship is listening to the teacher and asking him for sight to understand the teachings.

Following on the way

An fuller understanding of discipleship in Mark 10:46-52 comes with the study of the ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ in Mark. ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ is first mentioned in 8:3, but there the meaning is different than the other passages; it is about the way people will go back home. The other usages refer to the way Jesus is going with his disciples (8:27; 9:33, 34; 10:32, 52). Every time ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ is followed or preceded by the prediction of Jesus' suffering (8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34, 45), which shows the importance of the motive.

The ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ motive in the stories about John and James and that of Bartimaeus draws the attention to a different development in the pericopes. James and John are already on the way with Jesus. They however do not fully recognize *how* the way is followed. They grasp the end, but not the marks of suffering *on* the way. Bartimaeus on the other hand is not on the way yet. He is not a follower of Jesus. He realizes (at least a part) of Jesus' identity and thus asks for help. He does not ask of Jesus to have future privileges, but to receive sight. This enables him to follow Jesus on the way. So, while John and James want to use the way with Jesus as a means to acquire personal gain, Bartimaeus uses his personal gain as a means to follow Jesus on the way. This is what Mark is trying to communicate through this central passage on discipleship; following Jesus on the way is "not a way to gain favor or to be rewarded."²³ It is about taking up the cross (8:34).

The relationship between discipleship and "being on the way" (of suffering) is further affirmed by the use of the verb ἀκολουθέω.²⁴ The first words of Jesus in the Gospel (1:17; "Come after me") are responded by the first use of this verb (1:18). In the first part of Mark ἀκολουθέω is mostly used in a descriptive way; Jesus is being followed (2:15; 3:7; 5:24; 6:1). In some places it is used by Jesus to express what he desires of someone (2:14; 5:37). After the first mention of ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ Jesus starts to *explain* in detail what it means to follow him (8:34; 10:21, 28-29), next to Mark's use of the verb to merely describe an ἀκολουθέω situation (9:38; 10:32). It also becomes clear that Mark works toward a climax: in 8:27 and 8:34 ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ and ἀκολουθέω are close to each other; in 9:33-34 and 9:38 they become closer; in 10:32 even closer; but the closest is in 10:52 where ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ is used adverbial to ἀκολουθέω. Robert H. Stein mentions that these terms are often used to describe discipleship in the Gospel of Mark, but fails to fully acknowledge the development of the connection between the two toward 10:52.²⁵ It clearly suggests a climax in Mark's plot. After this, ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ is not mentioned anymore and the 'following' of Jesus fades. In 11:9 it is accompanied by going ahead of Jesus (contrast with 10:32 where Jesus is leading). In 14:51-54 it is a hesitant following of Jesus and in 15:41 it refers to following that happened before the described event.

The 'following on the way' is alluded in stories prior to 10:46-52. For example, the fact that the beggar throws off his cloak can be seen as a mere vivid detail, but the use of ἱμάτιον

²¹ Earl S. Johnson, "Mark 10:46-52: Blind Bartimaeus," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1978): 202-3.

²² *Ibid.*, 203.

²³ Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 126.

²⁴ Johnson, "Blind Bartimaeus," 202.

²⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2008), 497.

in the whole gospel suggests a more symbolic meaning (e.g. 2:21; 5:27-30; 6:56; 9:3).²⁶ The cloak represents what must be left behind to follow Jesus; “Simon and Andrew left their nets (1:18); James and John left their father as well (1:20).”²⁷ Thus, the reader is again reminded of the importance of leaving things behind in following Jesus. The rich man was not willing to do so (10:22, note that this verse is also preceded by the use of ἀκολουθέω).²⁸ The disciples were stunned that the rich will have difficulty entering the kingdom (10:24-26).²⁹ In 10:48 on the other hand they reject a possible follower who turns out willing to leave everything behind (10:50). The blind man had nothing to lose and thus illustrates Jesus’ teaching: for someone who has nothing to lose, it is easier to follow him.³⁰

Bartimaeus is a model disciple. Like the twelve, Bartimaeus is first called to come to Jesus. “The immediacy of his response to Jesus’ call matches that of the first disciples (1:16-20; 2:13-14).”³¹ Thus, the story of Bartimaeus is not primarily a miracle story, it a call story.³² He is transformed “from a beggar besides the road (10:46 [παρὰ τὴν ὁδόν]) to a disciple on the road (10:52)” and the fact that he receives sight while the other followers of Jesus stay “blind” is crucial for understanding Bartimaeus as a model disciple.³³ Bartimaeus follows Jesus on his way, while the disciples have difficulty doing this (10:32).³⁴ Mark wants his readers to respond to this story by following Jesus, despite suffering—a characteristic of the way.

DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK

In the following part we will examine whether the two findings—the disciples’ sight comes from the teacher and following is a way marked with suffering—are present in the entire Gospel of Mark. Of course it is—at least partly—true for the Scripture passage already referred to, but does Mark try to convey it in his entire Gospel?

Sight comes from the teacher

In the whole Gospel it becomes clear that the disciples do not fully see whom Jesus is and what he has come to do. The focus of explaining this however lies in 8:22-10:52.³⁵ This section deals with the “blindness” of the disciples—as seen before.³⁶ They do not grasp what Jesus is saying to them. That is why this section ironically is surrounded by stories of blind

²⁶ R. Alan Culpepper, “Mark 10:50: Why Mention the Garment?” *JBL* 101, no. 1 (1982): 132.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.; Eugene M. Boring makes the connection between this passage and the practice of taking off old clothes before baptism in the second century (*Mark*, NTL [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006]: 306).

²⁹ R.T. Franke, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 422.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark*, 210.

³² Paul J. Achtemeier, “And He Followed Him: Miracles and Discipleship in Mark 10:46-52,” *Semeia* 11 (1978): 120; Brooks, *Mark*, 173. To their argumentation, we want to add that the fact that nowhere else in the Gospel the name of the person healed is given, further suggests that it is call story; people who are called in the Gospel are named.

³³ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, PNT (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans), 331; see also Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark*, 208. Stein sees the use of “besides the road” in verse 46 as purely descriptive (*Mark*, 494), but fails to give good argumentation while the concentrated use of ὁδός seems to suggest otherwise.

³⁴ Byrne, *A Costly Freedom*, 171.

³⁵ Achtemeier, “And He Followed Him,” 115.

³⁶ Brooks, *Mark*, 32.

men who receive (in)sight.³⁷ Again and again Jesus tries to explain that following him is accompanied with suffering. It is his example that the disciples ought to be following. However, each of the predictions of Jesus' own suffering "is followed by some completely inappropriate response from the disciples. . . . In each case, Jesus goes on to elaborate the implications that the message of His passion must have for discipleship."³⁸ The disciples simply do not grasp it and the story of Bartimaeus is the climax of this misunderstanding; a blind man who sees while Jesus' proper disciples do not.

What does this mean for the reader? At first, in Mark the reader has an advantage over the disciples; he is informed that Jesus is the anointed one (1:1).³⁹ However, when Jesus asks Peter about his identity, Peter recognizes Jesus' role as the messiah (8:29).⁴⁰ From this point on the reader is at the same level as the disciples; both disciple and reader have to find out what Jesus being the anointed one means.⁴¹ In the first part the disciples have a lack of understanding; they do not know who Jesus is. In the second part "the issue shifts from a lack of understanding to misunderstanding."⁴² Thus in the Gospel, "neither the disciples nor the hearers/readers can rest on their insider status; in this the two groups are alike, not different."⁴³ There is no superiority of the reader over the disciples, but a deep identification. The reader identifies with the disciples because they are not flat characters, but round characters; they "represent neither white nor black but gray."⁴⁴ Through realizing this however, the reader is carefully instructed on the right sight, so that he does not fall into the same trap as the disciples.

In the final Markan story this is again visible, though somewhat less explicit. At the end of the Gospel the reader sees that the disciples misunderstand Jesus' way; Jesus is left alone with a promise.⁴⁵ With this tragic ending the reader realizes that "the outcome of the narrative is not a necessary one but could be rectified by even one disciple who understands, does not fear, and proclaims the gospel."⁴⁶ The ending of Mark asks of the reader who does not see Jesus to follow him in order to see him.⁴⁷ The crisis at the end "might be resolved in the lives of the people reading the story."⁴⁸ The problem that God seems to have forsaken Jesus (15:34) is resolved in the concluding verses (16:6). The problem of the fleeing disciples (14:50) however is not.⁴⁹ With the open ending the response to the final call in the Gospel (16:7) is not to be expected from the disciples, but from the reader.⁵⁰ Of course, the reader understands

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Henry Patrick Reardon, "The Cross, Sacraments, and Martyrdom: An Investigation of Mark 10:35-45," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 36, no. 1-2 (1992): 105.

³⁹ Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 139.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 140.

⁴² Ibid., 125.

⁴³ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Text and Contexts: Interpreting the Disciples in Mark," *Semeia* 62 (1993): 94.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 93; see also C. Clifton Black, *The Disciples According to Mark: Markan Redaction in Current Debate*, JSNTSup 27 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 251-2.

⁴⁵ Paul Danove, "The Narrative Rhetoric of Mark's Ambiguous Characterization of the Disciples," *JSNT* 70 (1998): 36.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁷ Jean-François Baudoz, "Prendre sa croix": *Jésus et ses disciples dans l'évangile de Marc* (Paris: Cerf, 2009), 128; cf. Byrne, *A Costly Freedom*, 258.

⁴⁸ Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark*, 16.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁰ Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 142.

that the call was somehow answered by the disciples, otherwise the Gospel would not have reached them and Jesus' prediction in Mark 13 would not have become reality.⁵¹

Outside 8:22-10:52 the goal of "rightly understanding" is less present *in the Markan depiction of good discipleship*. Discipleship as *understanding* the way is especially at stake in 8:22-10:52. Mark ensures that the reader understands what the disciples did not, and uses the characters of the disciples to establish it.⁵² However, this is not what Mark is primarily asking of the reader. He wants the reader to respond by *following* and that brings us to the second aspect.

A way marked with suffering

Already in the beginning of the Gospel 'the way' is introduced (1:2-3); shortly after, following Jesus is inserted (1:16-20); and together they make it clear that following Jesus will be a central theme in the Gospel.⁵³ The central use of *ὁδός* and *ἀκολουθέω* in 8:22-10:52 illustrates this to the fullest, but it was already a major theme before (see references to *ἀκολουθέω* before) and stays to be even after the climax in 10:52. After the disciples having recognized Jesus as the messiah, they fail to 'see' the way the messiah *and his followers* are to take. The drama of not understanding is enforced by their responsive actions: the treachery of one of the disciples (14:20), the disappointing conduct of the disciples in Gethsemane (14:37-42), their flight (14:50), Peter's denial (14:66-72) and their absence during the worst suffering (15). Though Jesus had explained so many times, the disciples' actions testify of a failing *ἀκολουθέω*—which is of course caused by a misunderstanding. This shows that the Gospel—next to being about Jesus—clearly is about the disciples, "who are called in the first chapter and accompany Jesus and are taught by him throughout until they abandon him in chapters 14 and 15; they are the goal of the final revelation pointed to in 16:7."⁵⁴

For Mark discipleship was following Jesus in suffering and mission. He saw in the first disciples the same kind of triumphs and failures that characterized the disciples in his own church, and therefore he set forth the former as examples of virtues to imitate and vices to avoid.⁵⁵

Rhoads, Dewey and Michie convincingly conclude in their narrative study that "the story of Mark seeks to create ideal readers who will receive the rule of God with faith and *have the courage to follow Jesus whatever the consequences*."⁵⁶ Discipleship in Mark is taking on one's cross and following Jesus. It is a decision of faith, of trust in God—even in difficult circumstances.⁵⁷ The key for resolving the problematic identification with the weaknesses of the disciples is to understand that being a disciple of Christ means taking up the cross.⁵⁸ In his entire Gospel, Mark communicates that Christian discipleship means

⁵¹ Malbon, "Text and Contexts," 91.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵³ Johnson, "Blind Bartimaeus," 199.

⁵⁴ Boring, *Mark*, 3.

⁵⁵ Brooks, *Mark*, 30.

⁵⁶ Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 138, my emphasis.

⁵⁷ Baudoz, *Prendre sa croix*, 138.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

following Jesus on the way.⁵⁹ The ending leaves the reader with a persuasive dissatisfaction and motivates him to respond to the Gospel by becoming a disciple.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

The narrative theological exegesis of Mark 10:46-52, in close relationship with other parts of the gospel, shows that discipleship is not only a central theme of the passage, but of the whole Gospel. Mark 10:46-52 is the climax of Jesus' —or from a narrative critical point of view: Mark's—teachings on discipleship, but also bridges to what is still to come in the Gospel. It concludes the teachings on discipleship and encourages the reader to respond to them in a similar way as Bartimaeus did.⁶¹

The reader realizes that—despite the open ending—the Gospel was spread in the early church and is thus encouraged to take on his task in contributing to this as well, even through suffering.⁶² There is a deep identification between the reader and the disciples, who represent Jesus' calling, but also the struggle that comes with the calling.⁶³ It is important to understand—or *see*—the calling, but it is even more important to respond to this insight—by *following on the way*. Brendan Byrne beautifully summarizes this conclusion by describing the Markan theology of discipleship as follows:

“The disciples who responded so enthusiastically to sharing the messianic mission of Jesus as they originally understood it . . . start to hold back and display ‘blindness’ when he begins to make known the cost of that mission—to himself and also to those called to be his followers along the way. We who, like them, so often do badly when the cost emerges can take some comfort from the pledge of Jesus, at the high point of their failure, to go before them to Galilee where they can make a fresh start at following him along that ‘way.’”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ John N. Suggit, “Exegesis and Proclamation: Bartimaeus and Christian Discipleship (Mark 10:46-52),” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 74 (1991): 62.

⁶⁰ Yvan Bourquin, *Marc, une théologie de la fragilité: Obscure clarté d'une narration*, La Monde de la Bible 55 (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2005), 340-1.

⁶¹ Larry W. Hurtado, “Following Jesus in the Gospel of Mark – and beyond,” in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 13.

⁶² Baudoz, *Prendre sa croix*, 16.

⁶³ Hurtado, “Following Jesus,” 27.

⁶⁴ Byrne, *A Costly Freedom*, 264.

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