

The Blind Man from Bethsaida

Leslie M. Galicinski

April 7, 2008

Table of Contents

Introduction:.....	3
The Text: Translation and Analysis	3
Redactive Placement	5
The Healing	7
Bethsaida.....	7
Why a Two Step Healing?.....	8
Conclusion:.....	9
Bibliography.....	11

The Blind Man from Bethsaida

Mark 7:22-26

Introduction:

It was because of the miraculous healings that crowds pursued Jesus. While He did not always want the news of healings broadcast, Jesus was deliberate and open in his preaching and teaching and set out to visit many towns of Judea and Galilee. He bore witness to the healings as an authentication of his teaching and to bear witness to who He was. (Matthew 11:3). The way in which Jesus taught was multifaceted, and He used various means to reach the hearts and minds of his disciples. Jesus not only used the *fact* of the healings, but also used the *way* in which each healing was done to teach his disciples, leaving them with many “ah-ha” moments to look back to and reflect upon. One such episode is the “two-step” healing of the man from Bethsaida in Mark’s gospel. This is the only account in the New Testament, which shows Jesus performing a miracle, which is not apparently successful on the first attempt. This pericope along with the healing of the deaf man in Mark 7:31-37 occur only in Mark’s gospel and are both miracles omitted by Matthew and Luke. Most redaction critics¹ see Mark as placing this episode in a strategic place in the unfolding drama of his gospel for a number of purposes. The most commonly held one is to illustrate the blindness of the disciples with respect to who Jesus is and the purpose for which he came. As the healing of the blind man takes place in stages, so the disciples must go through a multi-step, intimate hands-on experience with Jesus in order to fully understand His mission. My approach in this paper is to focus on the significance of the episode itself and to analyze how the way in which the healing occurred would have spoken to the disciples at the time and in subsequent recollection. In addition, I will examine what this episode teaches us about how God uses healing to restore and to teach.

The Text: Translation and Analysis

Mark 8:22-26 Kai. ercontai eij Bhsaiðan kai. ferousin autw/ tuflon kai. parakaloušin auton iða autou/alyhtai²³ kai. epilabomenoj thj ceiroj tou/tuflou/ exhnegken auton exw thj kwmhj kai. ptusaj eij ta. ommata autou(epiqeij taj ceiraj autw/ ephrwta auton(Ei; ti blepeij²⁴ kai. anableyaj elegen(Blepw touj anqrwpouj oti wj dendra orw/ peripatouhtaj²⁵ eiða pa, in epeqhken taj ceiraj epi. touj ofqalmouj autou(kai. diebleyen kai. apekatesth kai. eneblepen thl augw/ apanta²⁶ kai. apesteilen auton eij oikon autou/ legwn(Mhde. eij thn kwmhn eise, qhij

Literal Translation (I have retained the historical present)

¹ Johnson, “Mark 8.” 372 is just one example of many

Mark 8:22-26 And (so) they come to Bethsaida, and some people bring to him a blind man and are begging him to touch him. ²³ And grasping the blind man's hand, he led him out of the village, and having spit into his eyes, and having laid hands on him, he was asking him: "Do you see anything?" ²⁴ And regaining his sight, he was saying: "I see men but I see them like trees walking." ²⁵ Then again, he put his hands on his eyes and he saw through clearly and was restored, and he began to see everything with great clarity. ²⁶ And he sent him to his home, saying: "Do not even enter the village."

Variants:

There are a number of textual variant readings of verse 26, which can quickly be narrowed down to two², the one above and: " Mhde. eiphj ei j thn kw mhn " "Do not even say anything in the village." Most modern translations use "enter". Some add a footnote with "say" as a variant. Others, like the NKJ use both "Neither go into the town nor tell anyone in the town.". Westcott and Hort³ support "enter", because it is simple and direct and linguistically superior. Their arguments are compelling. Others prefer "say", because it supports the theme of Messianic Secret. I am going to use "enter" on Westcott and Hort's logic and because I believe that it better fits the narrative. Another variant names the village as Bethany, (Bhqani a D pc it) but is rated as improbable (D) and an attempt to solve some of Mark's geographical issues.⁴

Analysis:

In this short passage, Mark uses five different verbs for "seeing" and also an adverb thl augwj (clearly), that has an interesting nuance. Joel Marcus⁵ develops a novel interpretation of the passage by assuming the *extramission* theory of vision. This common ancient theory presumed that people and animals saw, not by means of light entering the eye, but by beams that come out of the eye. In this theory, these beams stay anchored to the eye, and travel to the object of sight, striking it and transmitting the image, which is perceived back to the eye along the beams. The principle sign that this theory is assumed is the adverb, thl augwj, which is commonly translated "clearly" (verse 25b). The word literally means "in a far shining way" and denotes radiance, as of the sun or some object, which emits great glory or light. This theory also explains the use of the various different verbs for seeing. In the initial interrogation, the common word for seeing Bl epw is used. As Jesus spits into his eyes and lays hands on him, he "looks up" anabl epw. Johnson points out that anabl eyaj is used in three ways. It can simply mean "to look up" (Luke 19:5, 21:1, Mark 16:4). It can also mean to look up in prayer (Mark 6:41, 7:34). However, whenever the word is used with reference to blindness, it *always* means regaining of sight. (Mark 10:51, Matt. 20:34, Luke 18:41, Matt. 6:5, Luke 7:22, John 9:11, 15, 18, Acts 9:12, 17, 18, 22:13). Johnson argues that this

² Ibid. 373

³ Westcott, *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek*. 157

⁴ Guelich, *Mark 1-8*. 235

⁵ Marcus, "A Note on Markan Optics.." 251

overwhelming evidence means that, in the initial touch, the man regained his sight, yet did not see clearly, implying that further therapy was needed.

After the second touch the man then “saw through” *diebl epw*. This word is often translated “see clearly”, but literally means “to see through”. It is used in Matt: 7:5 and Luke 6:42 in the context of removing the log from your own eye so that you can “see through” to remove the speck in your brother’s eye. The use of *diebl epw* indicates a breakthrough in sight which allows the beams from the man’s eye to break through to the objects probed in sight.

The last word used for seeing is *embl epw*, which means to fix ones gaze upon and distinguish clearly what is seen. It is the through the addition of the second touch that the man is able to see clearly, and without distortion. In the context of extramission, it means that the beams were able to reach the object of vision and reflect back a *true* indication of what is seen. Marcus’ translation of verse 8:25b is:

“And his vision broke through, and it was restored, and the far shining beams of his eyesight fell on things in the outside world from that moment on”⁶

Keir Howard posits a theory⁷ of healing in this passage, which supports an initial restoration, but from a modern medical point of view. He explains that the distortion that the man observed (men like trees walking) is common when a cataract is removed, but no replacement lens is inserted. In such a case, objects are distorted and enlarged greatly in size. His theory is that, in the first touch, Jesus pushed the man’s crystallized cataract into the vitreous chamber of the eye. This occurs with relative ease in overly mature cataracts. The man was now able to see, but everything was enlarged and distorted. In the second touch, Jesus recreated a proper lens that allowed the man to see clearly. This would be consistent with the theory that sight was actually restored upon the first touch, but that a further touch was necessary to fully clarify vision. In this scenario Jesus is the expert physician dealing with the physical defect in a way that is easily explainable and provides an object lesson to the disciples.

Redactive Placement

Most commentators⁸ see significance in the redactive placement by Mark of three healing pericopes; the first being the healing of the deaf man in 7:31-37, the second being the Bethsaida blind man and the third being blind Bartimaeus in 10:46-52.

Below is an outline of the order:

- Healing** of the deaf man (7:31-37)
 - Jesus feeds the four thousand (8:1-10)
 - Pharisees demand a Sign (8:11-13)
 - Disciples forget to bring bread – Jesus’ rebuke (8:14-21)
- Healing** of blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26)
 - Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ (8:27-30)
- First foretelling* of suffering, death & resurrection

⁶ Ibid. 252

⁷ Howard, “Men as trees, walking .” 164

⁸ Johnson, “Mark 8.” 371

The transfiguration, Healing of the Boy (9:1-29)
Second foretelling (9:30-32)
 Argument about who is the greatest (9:33-37)
 Discussion about ministry in Jesus name, temptations to sin, divorce
 (9:38-10:10)
 The Children Come, The rich young man (10:13-31)
Third foretelling (10:32- 34)
 Request of James & John for places of honour (10:35-45)
Healing of blind Bartimaeus

In the both the deaf man and the Bethsaida healings, men are brought by some people to Jesus. In the third healing, Bartimaeus, upon hearing of Jesus' passing by, creates such a ruckus that people rebuke him telling him to be quiet. The contrast in the passivity of the first two men and the active urgency of the third is striking. The first two healings require a hands-on therapeutic session with Jesus, using touch and spittle, while the third is an instantaneous spoken healing, by a man who exhibits great faith. In between the two blind healings, Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, after which, Jesus foretells his suffering, death and resurrection *three times*. With each foretelling the disciples are first, hostile to the idea (8:32), second, bewildered (9:32) and third, still without understanding (10:37).

Mark appears to place the healing of the deaf man (7:35), the feeding of the 4000, and the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida to illustrate that, just as these men were deaf and blind and required hands-one therapy by Jesus, so the disciples are also blind and without understanding and likewise will require such care by the Great Physician. This is highlighted by the disciples' lack of understanding and distress at having insufficient bread (8:16), which occurs just before the healing in Bethsaida. At this critical point, Jesus rebukes his disciples accusing them of being both *blind* and *deaf* and so without understanding.

¹⁸ Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹ When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." ²⁰ "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." ²¹ And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" Mark 8:18-21 ESV

Also significant is the absence of this episode in Mathew and Luke. Both Johnson and Gundry⁹ point out that neither Mathew nor Luke's purpose is served by highlighting the blindness of the disciples. But Mark has clearly placed the healing of the deaf man and the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida in such a way so as to bracket the miraculous feeding, the disciples' own blindness, and Jesus' rebuke. The symbolic dullness and blindness of the disciples will require hands on therapy from Jesus as illustrated in the three foretellings and the teaching that goes on between them. This therapeutic teaching is necessary because, while the disciples come to understand that Jesus is the Messiah, they do not understand the necessity of his suffering and death. Their own vision is distorted and they see a distorted vision of His destiny. A second touch from

⁹ Gundry, *Mark*. 421

the Master will be required. Unlike the healing, where the second touch comes immediately, their second touch will not come until Pentecost.¹⁰

The Healing

Two unusual aspects of this healing episode stand out. The first has to do with the village of Bethsaida. Jesus first leads the man, by the hand, out of the village. Then after healing him, he admonishes him strongly, not to go back into the village. The second unusual aspect is the two-step healing process, which occurs in no other gospel account of any of Jesus' healings.

Bethsaida

I shall start by looking at the significance of Bethsaida. This village was a fisherman's settlement on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee that acquired the status of a city. John states that Philip, Andrew and his brother Peter were from Bethsaida (John 1:44, 12:41). While some scholars believe that there were two towns of the same name one to the east of the Jordan and one to the west,¹¹ E. W. G. Masterman argues, that this is not necessarily the case and that the present excavation at el Tell fits all the descriptions of Bethsaida.¹² He relies on both biblical evidence and that of secular historians. Josephus¹³ writes that the village of Bethsaida was advanced by Philip to the dignity of a city and called it Julias, named after Caesar's daughter. This village was in a hilly area somewhat above the sea of Galilee, so as to take advantage of cool summer breezes and a breathtaking view of the sea. I had an opportunity to visit the ruins at el Tell in May of 2007, and it is indeed a magnificent location. Our tour guide, Arie Bar David, a messianic Jewish believer, explained that the village was built on two levels. The lower level was where the fisherman lived and the upper level was a wealthier area that catered to royalty and officials who loved the location for its natural beauty and proximity to Caesarea Philippi and to the Sea. The ruins of a large synagogue testify to its importance. As a playground for the rich and powerful, as well and a habitation of fishermen, the village would have been full of all the pleasures and vices of a modern day Las Vegas. Both Bethsaida and Chorazin, a nearby village were objects of curses by Christ due to their lack of repentance. (Matt. 11:21) While the village was raised in status to a city, it remained organizationally a village¹⁴.

These factors are significant in illuminating why Jesus led the man out of the village and then forbid him to re-enter it. The episode starts with some people bringing the man to Jesus and begging Him to heal him. It is their faith that is highlighted. While Jesus

¹⁰ Gundry argues that the healing can hardly symbolize a breakthrough in recognition of Jesus as Messiah, for that does not occur in the gospel. I see no need to confine this to the gospel narrative as the gospel was clearly written post Pentecost, and a full realization does come though the Holy Spirit at that time.

¹¹ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

¹² Masterman, "Chorazin and Bethsaida." 408

¹³ Josephus, *Judean Antiquities 1-4*. xviii,II.I

¹⁴ Gundry, *Mark*. 422

could have healed the man on the spot, instead, he takes him *by the hand* and *leads him* out of the village. Some argue that His purpose is simply secrecy. Jesus is trying to conceal his identity and to not draw attention to himself. I disagree, for as Guelich¹⁵ points out, taking him out of the village did not result in secrecy as there were still men walking about that he could see. More likely is that Jesus has a reason for taking him out of the village and prohibiting him from re-entering it. Another possible motive might have been privacy so as to be able to properly converse with the man. However, given the admonition to not re-enter the village, a more plausible explanation is that Jesus did not want the man, having recovered his sight, to be subject to the visual stimulation of the vices that the village presented. In many cases of restoration, Jesus' exhortation was to "go and sin no more" (John 5:14, 8:11). Once sight is restored, there is to be no returning to the former lifestyle. Indeed Jesus makes all things new.

Another significance of the man being led by the hand to a private place outside the village, is its typifying of Jesus' ministry with the disciples. He is leading them "by the hand" throughout the villages of Judea, to rectify their blindness and help them to see (Mark 8:18). Jesus' gentle therapeutic manner is being illustrated. The disciples are being reminded that Jesus will continue to touch them until they can see clearly.

Why a Two Step Healing?

The question, which is often asked of the passage, is why Jesus chose to heal in two stages in this case. In other instances like blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:52, Jesus does not even touch the man but simply heals him with a word. I propose that the two step healing process is not an incomplete healing requiring a second attempt, but rather is a deliberate object lesson that Jesus employs that prefigures the disciples' own experience and will serve to remind them, in retrospect, of how they themselves have come to a clear and perfect understanding of His plan of salvation.

The two-step healing process will highlight the need for both a first and second touch from Jesus to bring them to a place of complete clarity of vision about his mission. As I have described, the linguistic evidence supports that, in the initial touch, the man's sight was restored. He moved in that instant from being blind to seeing. However, his sight was not yet perfected and he saw only distorted images that confused him. In the same way, Peter's confession and Jesus' three-fold prediction of his suffering and death, was the initial revelation of God's plan to them. They saw it and understood it at a basic level, but could not put it completely into perspective, so as to see clearly its implications. A second touch would be required to bring them to a point of complete clarity. This second touch would be the breakthrough that would allow "the beams of their vision to break forth and see". This second touch would not come until Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon them. During the interim period of distorted vision and distress, they could rely on the promise that Jesus gave them that the Holy Spirit would come and give them power and understanding. I propose that this two step healing process was an object lesson, that would give them hope in that interim time as they reflected on these things and waited for the Holy Spirit. It would confirm their understanding afterwards as they reflected and meditated upon it.

¹⁵ Guelich, *Mark 1-8*. 237

After leading the man out of the village, Jesus spits on the man, laying hands on him and simultaneously questions him asking if he sees anything. This is reminiscent of Jesus questioning the disciples just a few verses earlier “Do you still not perceive or understand?” The man then “looks up” (anabl epw) and sees distorted images that he describes as men like trees walking. As I have shown, anabl epw here means that his sight was restored at that moment, yet his vision was still not clear. So too the disciples have a measure of understanding yet they do not see clearly. Further hands-on therapy by Jesus is necessary. In the case of the blind man, the further therapy is laying his hands on the man’s eyes. Likewise, Jesus will also need to keep his hands on the disciples so that they might see clearly. While the man’s sight is now completely clear, such a restoration for the disciples is to come. However, in retrospect, they will be able to look back on this episode and see how poorly they saw the plan for Jesus’ rejection, sufferings and ultimate vindication at this point. So, the way in which Jesus brings about this healing becomes an object lesson for the disciples.

Conclusion:

What can we conclude from this “two-step” healing episode about the way that God heals? Sometimes, healing is instantaneous (Bartimaeus). Sometimes it requires only a remote word from Jesus (Centurion’s servant). However sometimes, as in this case, it is incubational, requiring repetition of an intimate touch by the Master to complete the process. While I have shown that the man’s sight was restored at the initial touch, he still could not see clearly until Jesus had touched him again. The importance of continual dialogue with Jesus, represented by prayer, is highlighted. There is a conversation that takes place here and Jesus is operating as the Great Physician, with perfect bedside manner. Continual proximity to Him until one is healed is required. Finally, an admonition to stay away from temptation is included in Christ’s word to us. “Do not even enter the village”. There must be no returning to the seat of sin and temptation.

While Jesus was concerned with healing people, that was not his ultimate objective. He came primarily that people might have eternal life in His name. The vehicle for that life was to be the gospel, which required an understanding on the part of the disciples of why Jesus came. Such understanding is the spiritual sight that Jesus frequently alluded to. The Pharisees who claimed to be able to see, were in fact blind. (John 9:39). For the disciples that full understanding and clarity of sight would not come until Pentecost. But once it came there was no stopping the wildfire of the gospel from igniting the world. On looking back over this healing episode, the disciples would have been able to see what Jesus was trying to show them. Sometimes both healing and insight require time and repeated touches from the Master. This should be an encouragement to those who seek healing and are not healed completely immediately. It also gives us insight into the way in which spiritual growth and insight occur. Persistence, patience and confidence in Jesus, the Great Physician is required.

One additional aspect of this episode is worth considering. If we accept the hypothesis that Jesus used the way in which he healed to provide object lessons to the disciples, then there is another possible object lesson that surfaces. Given that the disciples receive fully restored vision at Pentecost, their recollection of this episode might lead

them the recognize Pentecost as Jesus' second touch through the Holy Spirit. In that case, what else might the village represent? Having come out of Judaism, the disciples were to wrestle with the question as to the extent that Jew needed to remain in Judaism and obey the laws of Moses to be a follower of Jesus. (Acts 15). Could it be that the village also represents, Judaism? Jesus is leading the disciples out of Judaism, out of the village, where he restores their sight so that they can see clearly. Now that they can see, they are told, to not even enter the village. There is to be no reversion to old ways. Jesus has made all things new, and the New Covenant age is upon them.¹⁶

Les Galicinski

¹⁶ My own hypothesis – perhaps the subject of another study

Bibliography

- Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2006.
- Cole, R. A. *The Gospel According to Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*. Rev. ed. Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press ; Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, 1989.
- Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Liturgical Press, 2005.
- Dupont, B. "The Markan Journey : A Tale of Two Blind Men." *Emmanuel* 106, no. 1 (2000): 35-38.
- Guelich, Robert A. *Mark 1-8:26*. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989.
- Gundry, Robert Horton. *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993.
- Hiebert, D. Edmond. *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.
- Howard, J Keir. "Men as trees, walking : Mark 8:22-26." 37, no. 2 (1984): 163-170.
- Johnson, E S. "Mark 8:22-26 : the blind man from Bethsaida." 25, no. 3 (April 1979): 370-383.
- Josephus, Flavius. *Judean Antiquities 1-4*. Leiden: Brill, 2000.
- Keller, M. N. "Opening Blind Eyes : A Revisioning of Mark 8:22--10:52." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 31, no. 4 (2001): 151-157.
- Larsen, K. W. "Seeing and Understanding Jesus : A Literary and Theological Commentary on Mark 8:22--9:13," 2005.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rvh&AN=NTA0000054765&site=ehost-live>.
- Marcus, Joel. "A Note on Markan Optics.." *New Testament Studies* 45, no. 2 (April 1999): 250-256.
- Masterman, E. W. G. "Chorazin and Bethsaida." *The Biblical World* 31, no. 6 (June 1908): 402+407-419.
- Meyer, Marvin W. "Taking up the cross and following Jesus: discipleship in the Gospel of Mark" 37, no. 2 (November 2002): 230-238.
- Onwu, N. "The distorted vision : reinterpretation of Mark 8:22-26 in the context of social justice." 19, no. 1-2 (1980): 46-52.

Ross, J. M. "Another Look at Mark 8:26." *Novum Testamentum* 29, no. 2 (April 1987): 97-99.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. Fully rev. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1979.

Westcott, Brooke Foss. *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek: With Notes on Selected Readings*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988.