

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Ten – Mark 6:1-29

Mark 6:1 - *Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.*

The Hometown – Nazareth in the Days of Jesus

Nazareth occupied about 60 acres, with a population of only about 200. In his writings Josephus named some 45 Galilean towns but never once mentioned Nazareth, and neither does the Talmud, which names 63 other Galilean sites. The insignificance of Nazareth provoked disparaging comments already in Jesus' day: **“Can any good thing come from Nazareth?”** (Jn 1:46).

Not so remote

Its reputation as “remote” is unfounded. First, it was less than an hour's walk from the district capital of old Galilee, Sepphoris, which was one of the largest construction projects in the Near East – a likely source of employment for Joseph and Jesus. Second, it lay near one of the most important trade routes of the Roman Empire, the road from Egypt to Damascus.

An Inescapable Label

The New Testament explicitly identifies Jesus as “the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee”. This small town was the residence of Mary and Joseph and the place where Jesus grew up. It was also the jumping-off point for his public ministry and the site of his first rejection.

Jesus of Nazareth

He is frequently referred to in the Gospel narratives simply as “Jesus of Nazareth” (Mk 1:24; Lk 18:37), and the titulus (official placard) that Pilate affixed to the cross referred to him as, “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS” (Jn19:19). Even his earliest followers were labelled “the Nazarene sect” (Ac 24:5).

A Puzzle?

Both Matthew and John, however, connected the origin of Jesus from Nazareth with an important precedent in the Bible. Matthew 2:23 states that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy, “He will be called a Nazarene.” What was Matthew referring to? No Old Testament text contains those specific words, and Matthew did not indicate the source of his reference.

The Branch of Jesse

It is very likely that Matthew was alluding to Isaiah 11:1, in which the Messiah is called a “Branch” (the Hebrew word for branch, netzer, the likely root of the name Nazareth). If this is the case, it is probably that this community, settled only a generation before Jesus by Jews returning from exile, was comprised of a Davidic tribe expecting a Messiah to arise – perhaps from within their very midst!

Isaiah 11:1-4 - *A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.*

Agricultural Village

Archaeological excavations have revealed that ancient Nazareth was an agricultural village. A modern reconstruction of an ancient farm, with fields, olive press, watchtower, carpentry shop, house and synagogue recreates life from the era of Jesus. The site, known as the Nazareth Historical Village, is located on the remains of a farm from the Jesus era.

Exact Replicas

The original farm has been restored with olive trees, terraces, ancient wine press, irrigation system and stone quarry. Exact replicas of first century houses, synagogue, ritual baths and olive presses have been replicated using the same methods as in the 1st Century. The scenes are brought to life as “Villagers” populate the farm and houses, living and working with the same type of clothing, pottery, tools and methods that Mary and Jesus would have used.

Video - <https://youtu.be/XSSck888nK8> - Nazareth Village

Modern Nazareth

Originally a small village, Nazareth has grown considerably, becoming the largest Arab city in Israel – in fact, the largest city in the northern part of the country, with a population approaching 80,000. The inhabitants are predominantly Arab citizens of Israel, of whom 69% are Muslim and 30.9% Christian. Due to its rapid growth and hilly location, Nazareth is crowded, with terrible traffic from dawn to dark – along roads designed by ancient donkey paths!

Mark 6:2-3 “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? 3 Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

Many who heard him were amazed

The people of Nazareth are amazed at what Jesus teaches and does, but they can’t get past the fact that he is simply a hometown boy. Remember, a few chapters ago his family thought he was out of his mind. Now the hometown crowd can’t figure out where a mere carpenter get this level of wisdom and ability.

“Where did this man get these things?”

Their question about Jesus is the third raised by those who have been amazed by his teaching and his deeds. First, a synagogue gathering asked, **“What is this?”** (1:27); next some teachers of the law and then Jesus’ disciples asked themselves, **“Who is this?”** (2:7; 4:41). Now, the question has to do with the origin or source of his deeds and teaching, **“From where is this?”**

Unfortunately, although the Nazarenes can answer the first two, the third proves to be an obstacle. They can’t seem to find the answer, which is simply: “From God”

Isn’t this the carpenter?

Jesus is described elsewhere as the son of a carpenter; here, we learn that Jesus took on the trade as well. The word **“tekton”** literally means someone who could work with wood, metal, or stone. He could be a builder, a mason, or a carpenter – or, in a small town, all three. Jesus would have been practical, capable, skilled, self-sufficient, and strong.

“Isn’t this Mary’s son”

Where’s Joseph? Most likely, since we do not hear of him after Jesus’ episode as a teenager in the Temple, Joseph has died. The townspeople of course know this, and so refer only to Jesus’ mother. But it is also possible that, as mentioned in previous weeks, the other brothers (and sisters) are children from a previous marriage of Joseph, and that Jesus is indeed Mary’s only son.

“And they took offense at him.”

You’d think the people of Nazareth would be delighted that local boy Jesus was making good and gaining fame. But it seems instead as though his fame is resented, and he is regarded with suspicion. Again, they can’t get past, “where did he get these things?” In Luke, we are given a fuller picture of the Nazareth synagogue event, after which the townsfolk not only rejected him but tried to kill him. Is the Mark telling of the same event, or an earlier encounter?

Mark 6:4-6 - Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.” He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

A prophet is not without honor except...

This is the first time in this Gospel that the term prophet is applied to Jesus; he has come like a prophet and is rejected like a prophet, and will suffer the inevitable fate of a prophet, just as John did, in verses soon to follow. Jesus’ rejection in his own hometown foreshadows his rejection by his own people whom he came to deliver — a rejection that will culminate in Jerusalem.

He could not do any miracles there

This verse makes it seem as though Jesus’ ability to perform miracles is dependent upon the cooperation and faith of those receiving. But is it instead that few from Nazareth even came to Jesus for help, other than “a few sick people” who risked the scorn of the town and came to him?

Mark 6:7 - Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.

Two by Two

They are instructed to travel in pairs, perhaps for security, but perhaps also because the Old Testament instructs that two witnesses are necessary to provide valid testimony in court in many verses; eg - (Deuteronomy 19:15 – “One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses”).

Authority over Impure Spirits

We have seen in earlier chapters how the ministry of Jesus stirred up considerable spiritual opposition. Jesus, in granting the apostles “authority,” means that these impure spirits would have to respond to the apostles’ commands, in that they now were functioning as full representatives of Jesus. This authority, as we will see, implies a healing ministry as well.

Mark 6:8-11 - These were his instructions: “Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

Just a staff!

The prohibition against “purse, bag or sandals” is another reference to the urgency of the mission, and the need to completely depend upon God to provide what is needed. The Hebrew nation, wandering the desert for 40 years, noted this unusual miracle: (Deuteronomy 29:5) - Yet the Lord says, ‘During the forty years that I led you through the wilderness, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet.

Socioeconomic Contrasts

While this passage says to not bring a “purse,” which is to say “money,” Matthew records (10:9-10): **“Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts.”** In contrast, Luke (9:3) has **“silver.”** Mark writes (6:8-9): **“no copper in your belts.”** The socio-economic range of all three audiences – Gold, Silver, Copper - is revealed in these differences!

Shake the dust off your feet when you leave.

Jews shook the dust from their feet when they returned to Israel from Gentile territory – from “unclean” to “clean” land. The gesture here may serve as a prophetic warning that the defiant will be cut off from Israel for failing to respond to the reign of God or as a sign that they were washing their hands of them (Acts 18:6), as if to say, “We do not even want your dust.”

Mark 6:12-13 They went out and preached that people should repent. 13 They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

The Basic Message

“Preached that people should repent” is shorthand for, “preached the same message as Jesus.” Remember Mark recorded Jesus’ first sermon this way: **“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”** While Mark records effectiveness in deliverance and healing, he does not mention the gaining of followers. However, the next sections begins with telling us that Jesus’ name **“had become well known.”**

Mark 6:14-16 - King Herod heard about this, for Jesus’ name had become well known. Some were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” 15 Others said, “He is Elijah.” And still others claimed, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.” 16 But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!”

Herod Who?

Herod Antipas ruled Galilee in Jesus’ time. He succeeded his father, Herod the Great, and served as tetrarch (appointed by the emperor Augustus to rule over one quarter of his father’s kingdom) from 4 B.C. until 39 A.D., throughout the lifetime of Jesus. In his father's will, Herod Antipas was appointed tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea (the east bank of the Jordan).

“Who do people say I am?”

Mark 8:27-29 - Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” Note that there was widespread belief in the possibility of Resurrection – at least of Elijah or John the Baptist!

Mark 6:17-20 For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom he had married. 18 For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” 19 So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, 20 because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Marriage Troubles – Political, Social, Religious

Herod was first married to Phasaelis, a daughter of Aretas IV, an Arab leader. Later, he divorced her in order to marry Herodias, the wife of Herod Antipas' half-brother Philip as well as being the daughter of Aristobulus, Herod’s uncle, and therefore Herod’s niece. The outraged Aretas began a border war that led to serious military losses for Herod Antipas.

The divorce also touched off religious protests at home because marrying the wife of his half brother (and niece!) was forbidden and regarded as incest. Antipas would have deemed John’s attack on his remarriage as a political threat.

Mark 6: 21 Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. 22 When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, “Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.” 23 And he promised her with an oath, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.” 24 She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?” “The head of John the Baptist,” she answered. 25 At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

Where it Happened

Josephus identifies the prison as Machaerus. This fortress-palace (like Masada and Herodium) was situated atop a mountain in southeastern Peraea, five miles east of the Dead Sea and thirteen miles southeast of Herodium. Josephus described the citadel as luxurious.

Sins upon Sins

Accused by John of incest, Herod’s young stepdaughter captivates him with her presumably erotic dancing, which also hints of incestuous lust. The lascivious behavior at Herod’s court would also have been considered disgraceful to a pious Jew. The party is rife with paganism: the presence of dancing girls at a stag party (Herodias is not present), a drunken king doing the bidding of a woman, and the beheading of a prophet on a whim.

Mark 6:26-29 The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, 28 and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. 29 On hearing of this, John’s disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Where did they bury John?

During 4th century AD, the tradition began about the remains of John the Baptist being buried in Sebastia, in what was Samaria, now part of the West Bank. Ancient writers describe the pagan reaction against the Christians in 361-362 under the reign of Emperor Julian the Apostate, when the remains of John the Baptist were taken from the tomb and burnt, then the ashes dispersed. However, some of the remains were rescued by passing monks. A part of a forearm remained; this is now on display at the Topkapi palace in Istanbul.