

Craig L. Blomberg, Ph.D.

*Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies
at Denver Seminary in Littleton, Colorado*



I. Introduction to the Earthly Ministry of Jesus

A. Wilderness Experience

After being baptized by John, Jesus goes further into the wilderness. One might have expected Him to embark immediately on His more public and popular phase of ministry after this commissioning. Instead we read in the opening verses of both Matthew 4 and Luke 4 that God allowed Him to be tested by Satan, the famous temptation of Jesus over a forty-day period of His sojourning in the Judean wilderness. It is interesting to note the three specific types of temptations that Matthew and Luke describe here. Jesus is encouraged to turn stones miraculously into bread to satisfy His hunger, to receive all of the kingdoms of the world in response to worshiping the devil, and to throw Himself off the portico of the temple to be supernaturally rescued by angels. All of these temptations test and tempt Jesus to bypass the way of the cross, to take a purely triumphalist approach to His ministry, and yet one which would have fatally compromised His mission.

B. Three Human Temptations

It is also interesting to compare these three temptations to the descriptions of the full range of human temptation to sin in 1 John 2:16, described there as the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. There is also a fairly close correspondence with the elements that tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden in Genesis 3:6, when that first pair saw that the forbidden fruit was desirable and pleasing to the eyes and able to make one wise. It seems therefore that the temptations of Jesus teach us what the writer to the Hebrews in 2:17-18 puts more didactically, namely that Christ was tempted in every way like unto ourselves, yet

Matthew 4:1

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

Turn stones to bread

The Kingdom of the world

Throw yourself down

Hebrews 2:18

Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.

Pattern in John 2-4



without sin. Because of that, He is able to intercede for us, and He is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses in whatever form of human temptation we experience.

II. Jesus' Initial Ministry

Following the temptations, Jesus' public ministry does begin; but as we mentioned in the previous lesson, the initial phase of His ministry is still largely one of obscurity, one in which He is not well-known by all of the masses throughout Israel. This phase of Jesus' ministry is described uniquely in the gospel of John, chapters 2-4.

A. Jesus' First Disciples (John 1)

John 1, to which we have already alluded in the context of John the Baptist, does give additional information about Jesus' first disciples. Several are mentioned by name there: Simon Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael who is often equated with Bartholomew of the Synoptic Gospels' lists. From the second half of John 1, we learn that disciples were not all called by Him suddenly for the first time without any previous exposure to Him, as one might think if one read only the Synoptic Gospels.

B. Cana to Cana (John 2-4)

But the particularly distinctive contribution of John's gospel to the early phase of Jesus' public ministry comes in chapters 2, 3, and 4. In fact, there is a literary unity to these chapters in that they begin in the city of Cana in Galilee and they end in the city of Cana in Galilee, each time with Jesus working a miracle there—the only two references to Cana anywhere in the four Gospels. If one takes a brief overview of this three-chapter sequence of John 2–4, one in fact sees the beginning of the pattern that will characterize the first half of John's gospel more generally: signs and discourses, or miracles and sermons if you like, interspersed—often relating to one another.

Each of these key elements of John 2–4, the initial phase of Jesus' ministry, focuses on one of the ways in which Jesus is bringing something distinctively new to the Judaism and to the culture more generally of His day. The miracle

of new wine, of wine when the old wine had run out, miraculously transformed from large jars of water, when interpreted in light of Jesus' own parable-like teaching in Mark 2 and elsewhere of new wine for new wineskins, suggests the symbolism of a newness to the religion that Jesus was bringing. Specifically, a new joy as wine in the context of wedding festivities symbolized joy and rejoicing for the ancient Israelites.

Continuing on in John 2, we read of Jesus cleansing the temple, apparently from John's perspective a different event from the temple-clearing incident that occurred in the final week of Jesus' life as narrated in Matthew and Mark. Although some of the details are similar, the main point in John 2 seems to be against the temple being used as a place of commerce, particularly those precincts of the court of the Gentiles that were designed to be the one place where people who were not Jews could come and worship and pray to God. It also becomes an opportunity for Jesus cryptically to predict His death and resurrection, although John makes it clear that even His followers did not understand that saying until after those events had transpired.

In John 3, we read of the famous discourse between Jesus and a prominent Pharisee, Nicodemus. Here in John 3:3 and 3:5 are the famous passages about being "born again," or another way to translate that same expression is to be "born from above." So after a new joy at Cana in Galilee and a new temple and a new place of worship, namely Jesus Himself in Jerusalem in the second half of chapter 2, John 3 proceeds to speak of a new spiritual birth. Physical birth, genealogy, ancestral descent are not enough to confirm one's religion, one must have a relationship with God through Jesus for him or herself. Following the discourse with Nicodemus appears also the very famous text of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever would believe in Him might not perish but have eternal life." John 3 continues with a reference to the ministry of John the Baptist, with the recognition that John's ministry must increasingly give way to Jesus' in prominence.

John 3:16

*For God so loved the world
that He gave His one and only
Son, that whoever believes
in Him shall not perish but
have eternal life.*



Then in chapter 4 comes another very famous discourse between Jesus and the woman at the well in Samaria; here Jesus very clearly reveals Himself as the Messiah. He glosses over the debate that separated Jews from Samaritans as to which mountain they should worship God on by speaking of the day that was coming, and now was, in which one would worship neither on this mountain, Mount Gerizim in Samaria near where the discussion was occurring, nor in Jerusalem, but all those who would worship God would worship Him in spirit and in truth.

The story about Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman is perhaps most striking however because of who it was that Jesus was talking to. Not only was she a woman who a good man in ancient Israel would not have a conversation with alone in an open place unattended to (John tells us the disciples had left at this time); but also she was a Samaritan, and John makes it clear that Jews had few intimate dealings with Samaritans if they could avoid them. She also was a woman with an immoral reputation. We do not know the precise circumstances of the five husbands she had had or the man she was now living with, but at the very least she would have had the stigma that is associated with one who is an immoral woman.

Jesus overcomes all three of these barriers, in striking contrast to His much less promising conversation with Nicodemus who is berated for not understanding, even though he is a Jew, a man, and a very moral and prominent, upright Jewish religious leader. The striking contrast could scarcely be stronger. As we mentioned, John 4 then closes with another healing miracle, this time of a Gentile nobleman's son in Cana in Galilee. So the two parts to John 4 together combine to stress the new universal offer of salvation that Jesus' ministry was bringing. Although Jesus is not yet prominent during this opening phase of His ministry, it is very clear that He is bringing something new through all of these stories that are narrated in John 2-4.

Mark 1:15

"The time has come," He said. "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Outline of Mark 1:1-8:30

1. Introduction of Jesus (1:1-20)
2. Healing Miracles (1:21-45)
3. Controversy Stories (2:1-3:6)
4. Discipleship & Opposition (3:7-35)
5. Parables (4:1-34)
6. Nature Miracles (4:35-6:6a)
7. More Discipleship & Opposition (6:6A-29)
8. More Nature Miracles (6:30-56)
9. Clean and Unclean (7:1-8:21)
10. Physical & Spiritual Eyesight (8:22-30)

III. Galilean Ministry - Part 1

A. Introduction

As Jesus finally returns to Galilee and begins to minister in an itinerant fashion there on a regular basis, for approximately a year's time, he finally becomes much better known. This initiates the much more public phase of what has been called His year of popularity. As they did with John the Baptist, the Synoptic Gospel writers begin with an introduction to the summary of Jesus' message.

B. Kingdom of God Is at Hand

Mark and Matthew both describe Jesus as preaching, as John had, that the kingdom of God was at hand. Mark says explicitly in 1:14,15 that Jesus goes on to command people to repent and to believe in the Gospel. Luke in his own way, as we mentioned in our introduction to Luke, begins his description of Jesus' public Galilean phase of His ministry by describing Jesus preaching in Nazareth. The parallels in Matthew and Mark suggest that this actually occurred a bit further into Jesus' public ministry, but Luke narrates it up front as a kind of headline or programmatic introduction to Jesus' claim of what he was all about. Here we recall Jesus' words quoting Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, the Year of Jubilee is at hand, the year of the Lord's favor." He is proclaiming release to the captives, sight to the blind, healing for many different kinds of sick and injured people, and good news to the poor.

We may follow Mark's account for the skeleton outline of Jesus' Galilean ministry. We do not have the time or space to include reference to every detail, particularly those that appear in the supplementary and fuller versions of Matthew and Luke, but it seems here that Mark is following an outline for the first roughly eight chapters of his gospel that proceeds thematically. It proceeds at times according to the different forms of Jesus' teachings and ministry. Most of Mark 1 has been called by some commentators a typical day in the life of Jesus the Healer (and also, we might add, Jesus the Exorcist.) We read in Mark 1:21 to the end of that chapter of several miracles of healing and of one exorcism that characterized one 24-hour period of time early on in Jesus' Galilean ministry. When we come to questions of

Myth?



Mark 3:22

And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

miracles a number of issues face the modern person: Can we believe in such apparently supernatural stories?

C. Question of Authenticity

If one is closed to the possibility of the miraculous in the first place, based on one's worldview, then one will seek to explain these stories in some other fashion. Perhaps the most common alternate explanation is that they are myths similar to the well-known myths of ancient Greece and Rome. But in fact those myths primarily dealt with gods or goddesses, who did not take on human form, of centuries past; and those that did involve human beings still referred to the heroes of old so many centuries removed from the time in which the myth circulated that no one could ever check the accuracy of the stories. In striking contrast, the stories about Jesus began to be narrated immediately during His lifetime and in the decades that followed, being put, as we discovered in earlier lessons, in written form within perhaps a thirty-year period of Jesus' lifetime.

This was a period in which hostile eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus still remained in Israel and could very easily have debunked these accounts if they were false. In fact, there is curious but significant backhanded testimony to the reality of Jesus' miracle-working ministry in some of the later Jewish writings, the Mishnah and the Talmud, that codified and put in written form many of the oral traditions that began to circulate in the time of Jesus. In several different places in these Jewish writings we read from a Jewish perspective, a non-Christian Jewish perspective that is, that Jesus was a sorcerer, a magician who led Israel astray.

Even the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, notes that Jesus was credited for being a miracle worker. Apparently these other historians and gatherers of tradition knew that they could not dispute that Jesus had the reputation for working miracles and exorcising demons; they merely tried to explain the source of His power differently. In fact, the first known occasion of such a claim appears in the Gospels themselves—in Mark 3 and Matthew 12, in parallel accounts where Jesus is accused of working exorcisms by the power of Beelzebub or Satan rather than by the power of God. There is good historical reason therefore for believing in the authenticity of the miracle accounts:

Mark 2:10

*"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"...
He said to the paralytic,
"I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."*

Jesus, a healer, healing a wide variety of diseases. Although, we must be careful not to superimpose a rigid pattern on Jesus' miracles of healing. In John 5, for example, there is one prominent occasion when Jesus encounters a large crowd of sick people by the pool of Bethesda all waiting to be healed and He only heals one of them. Apparently it is God's sovereign will and timing when and whom He chooses to heal.

D. Pronouncement Stories

Mark 2 forms a transition to the next package of illustrations of Jesus' Galilean ministry that the Synoptic Gospel writers provide: a series of stories that scholars have often called pronouncement stories because they climaxed in a significant, short, proverb-like pronouncement of Jesus. The first of these is actually a combination of a healing—Mark 2:1-12, the famous healing of the paralyzed man—and a pronouncement story. But it seems that the latter is the climax and the more significant element because Jesus pronounces this man's sins forgiven. He has healed his physical malady, but the more outrageous is His divine-like pronouncement of the man's sins forgiven. In fact, it is the power to work the healing that justifies this claim to be able to do what Jews believe only God ultimately had the right to do—therefore at least an implicit claim to deity, to the attributes and the prerogatives of the divine.

The subsequent pronouncement stories are perhaps not quite as dramatic or radical as that and yet all point in some way again to Jesus' newness over the old forms of Judaism, but also in a pointed way create some kind of conflict or controversy with the Jewish leaders. His pronouncement that it is not the righteous who need healing but the sick, His pronouncement that the Son of Man Himself is Lord even over the Sabbath: challenging in a variety of ways—through teaching about what can and cannot be done, through healing—to the various oral interpretations of the Jewish law, and therefore setting the stage early in Jesus' career for conflicts with the authorities that, although they would wax and wane, would ultimately culminate in His arrest and His crucifixion. In Mark 3, the bulk of this chapter deals also with further controversy over His ability to heal and to exorcise, to which we have already alluded.



E. Discipleship and Opposition

But in this context Mark 3 frames the controversy with the Pharisees and scribes with references to the question of who Jesus' true family is. Already early on, in Mark 1:16-20, we have read of the Synoptic version of the call of Jesus' first disciples, and we recall from John 1 that this was not necessarily the first time that Jesus' followers had met Him. But it is in Mark 3, apparently at a certain distance into Jesus' Galilean ministry, when we first receive the names of all Twelve when apparently now the formal call to Jesus' followers is given, and from this point on these Twelve will uniquely follow Jesus almost everywhere He goes.

Rabbis were commonly known to have disciples in Jesus' day and the decades and centuries thereafter, but what was striking about Jesus was that He took the initiative to call the disciples and not vice versa. It was also striking that He called twelve, the same number as the tribes of Israel; almost certainly an implication here is Jesus is constituting or reconstituting a new or true Israel. It will only be as people come to Him, rather than through the Jewish law, that they will have a right relationship with God.

F. Parables

The final literary form and portion of Jesus' teaching that Jesus' great Galilean ministry in its opening phases introduces us to comes in Mark 4 (and parallels), which largely comprise a chapter of teaching in parables. The parable, a short story designed to drive home in sharp rhetorical fashion an important theological truth, was a well-known rabbinical form. But the rabbis used it largely to exegete and interpret Scripture, whereas Jesus uses it to explain about the kingdom of God, God's dynamic reign or rule, breaking into human history through the ministry of Jesus.

Mark 4:11-12 describes Jesus' purpose or strategy in teaching in parables, and paradoxically there was not only an illuminating function—revealing truth—but there was also a concealing function, as Jesus explains that the insiders, His disciples and the others with them who are open to Jesus and His person and His claims, will gain further understanding about the kingdom through this

Mark 4:11

He told them, "The secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables..."

Mark 4:30

*What shall we say the
Kingdom of God is like...?*

**The Kingdom of God
is like...**



form of teaching, but to those who are outside He says everything in parables. Then He goes on to allude to and to quote portions of Isaiah 6—that He speaks to outsiders in parables lest they hear and understand, see and perceive, turn and be forgiven. What is going on here? Well, in the context of Isaiah it is clear that certain kinds of prophetic and sometimes cryptic speech can be used by God to confirm in judgment those who have already begun to resist His will. It is not an irreconcilable predestination to eternal life without Christ. Isaiah 6 ends with a prophecy of the return of a remnant, and as long as people are open to Jesus they may return to Him.

Perhaps it is worth commenting here that in the context of Mark 3, and in the parallel passages in Matthew 12 and Luke 11, we learn of an unforgivable sin that is called blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. But in context that is something that is not said to actually have happened, only that Jesus' opponents are in danger of it and those who are given this strong warning are those who are not His followers—not His would-be followers, not even interested inquirers, but those who have not followed Jesus but opposed Him virtually from the outset of His ministry and will continue to impose Him implacably to the cross. No passage in Jesus' ministry or anywhere in the Gospels, whether in parables or in more straightforward teaching, ever says that anyone who genuinely wants to become a follower of Jesus is prevented from doing so in this life.

G. Responses to the Kingdom

The parables also introduce us to the revealing function of explaining the kingdom of God—the parable of the sower that describes the various responses to the kingdom. Not all will respond positively, but some—perhaps a surprisingly large number—will: The seed growing secretly, which describes how we do not understand how God's spiritual seed takes root and grows throughout this life and yet a harvest is assured; in Matthew 13, the parallel account of the wheat and the tares and the parable of the dragnet that promised Jesus' kingdom triumphing despite opposition in many forms; the little parables of the leaven and the mustard seed, also found in Matthew and in other places in the gospel of Luke; the promise of the kingdom's growth to surprising proportions despite inauspicious beginnings;

and back in the gospel of Mark, the parable of the lamp and its need not to be hidden under a bushel so that all might hear. These and other parables, despite their at times cryptic functions that required Jesus to illustrate and to explain and to decode them, also gave—in some very practical, down-to-earth fashion—explanations for first-century Jewish peasant Galileans of what Jesus understood the kingdom of God to be about.