

“I See Men as Trees Walking” (Mark 8:22-26)
- But Is There an Old Testament Connection?



Christ Healing the Blind Man, Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734)

Introduction

Jesus' healing of the blind man outside Bethsaida is recorded in Mark 8:22-26. This miracle differs from Jesus' other recorded healings because it takes place in two stages. After the first stage, the man reports that he sees “men as trees walking”. After the second stage, he sees everything clearly.

As is recognised, e.g. in R. T. France' commentary on Mark, the miracle is set in the context of the Disciples' partial understanding of Jesus' identity and mission, and Jesus' choosing to heal in this “partial then complete” way is widely seen as linked to the Disciples' need for further enlightenment.

However, there are, I think, two further questions that can be raised in connection with the miracle:

Question No. 1

The first is the intriguing question of the fact that we are specifically told that the man initially saw men as trees walking. Literally, the text says (in v. 24):

And having looked up, he was saying, “I see the men, for as trees I see [them] walking”.

R. T. France points out in his commentary that here, “[them] walking” refers back to the men, not to the trees (Greek grammar enables that distinction to be made!) He suggests the sense would be given by the following translation:

“I see people walking, but they look like trees”.

But why should this man see men walking, who, in doing this, look like trees? It is a most

unusual observation! We will come back to this, but just for now we note that there is a close link between men and trees as “types” of men (and of kingdoms) in Scripture. A particularly helpful book that looks at this topic is *Through New Eyes—Developing a Biblical View of the World* by James B. Jordan.

Question No. 2

The second question is why Jesus took the man out of Bethsaida to do the healing, and afterwards ordered him not to go back to the village, nor to tell [it] to anyone there. (There is a textual variant here, and we are following the Received Text.) Part of the explanation perhaps has to do with Christ’s desire for secrecy noted elsewhere in Mark’s Gospel. Also, if we are seeing a parallel between this miracle, and the Disciples’ (particularly Peter’s) slowness in understanding Jesus’ identity and his mission, then we note that silence is enjoined there also (Mark 8:30).

Is there something about Bethsaida though that might have a bearing on this apparent need to exclude the village from the miracle? I suggest there is. In books “harmonising” the events of the Synoptic Gospels, this healing is shown as occurring *after* Jesus has made His famous pronouncement against Bethsaida (Matt. 11:20-23):

“Then He began to denounce the cities where most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. “Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you it will be more bearable on the day of judgement for Tyre and sidon than for you”.

It seems that Bethsaida itself is to be judged, and for Jesus to give them the opportunity to see yet another miracle, but without repenting, would only add to their condemnation.

Are These Two Questions Connected?

Well, clearly they are connected in some way in this passage! But is there anywhere else in the bible where a city under judgement occurs in conjunction with a failure to distinguish between men and trees?

Indeed there is!!

In the “Rules of War” in Deuteronomy Ch. 20, there is a most interesting verse (v. 19) in reference to the procedure the Israelite army was to follow when besieging a city. It is actually a difficult verse to translate (as will be briefly discussed in the Appendix to this article), but here are two translations—the Septuagint and the ESV.

i) Deut 20:19 (Brenton Septuagint Translation):

“And if thou shouldest besiege a city many days to prevail against it by war to take it, thou shalt not destroy its trees, by applying an iron tool to them, but thou shalt eat of it, and shalt not cut it down: Is the tree that is in the field a man, to enter before thee into the work of the siege?”

Of particular interest for us are the words:

“Is the tree that is in the field a man to enter before thee into the work of the siege?”

ii) Deut 20:19 (ESV Translation):

“When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you? “

The corresponding words are:

“Are the trees in the field human that they should be besieged by you?”

I currently prefer the Septuagint translation since the Hebrew in v. 19 has the word *bo* meaning “to go in” or “to enter”, and the ESV does not have a word to correspond to this. Also, Deut 20:20 suggests that the purpose of cutting down the fruit trees would have been for the construction of siegeworks (?siege engines) for the prosecution of the war, and the Septuagint translation of v. 19 indicates that these trees would actively participate in the siege, (rather than, passively, be besieged as in the ESV).

[Note: v. 19 speaks of “its” trees—i.e. the trees belonging to the city. This is perhaps a reference specifically to the fruit trees, or “the trees of the field” - as opposed to other trees in the vicinity which are not fruit trees, and are not considered to be “owned” by the city.]

The “argument” of Deut. 20:19-20 seems to be that the Israelites should keep the fruit trees (even if they, being near the city, would have been useful in the siege). The reason for this course of action would appear to be that the Israelites would be able to make use of these trees after the siege. It is an act of faith, even though, like the “non-combatants” in Deut. 20:5-7, it would appear to make warfare and the siege more difficult, and it also corresponds to being faithful to God’s promise to give them a fruitful land. This enjoyment of the land is also hinted at in the other “war regulations” in Deut. Ch. 20—as discussed briefly later in this article.

It is interesting that this particular rule is expressed in terms of distinguishing between men (who can participate in the siege) and fruit trees which can’t! Failure to distinguish between men and trees will still enable judgement to be passed on the city, but fruitfulness and blessing will be lost: it would thus be a sort of “half-way house” in fulfilling God’s promises and requirements.

Application of Deut. 20:19 to Mark 8:22-26

Before we discuss this interesting possibility, please note that the order of the words in Deut. 20:19 in Hebrew is “tracked” by the order of the words of Mark 8:24 in Greek:

Hebrew (Deut 20:19): For man tree field that it may enter before you in the siege

Greek (Mark 8:24): I see men as trees walking

As noted earlier, Jesus' two-stage healing of the blind man is usually seen as corresponding to the Disciples' partial understanding of Jesus' identity and mission. Thus Peter correctly recognises that Jesus is the Christ (Mark 8:30). But very soon after that, Peter shows that he actually has nevertheless misunderstood what Jesus being the Christ will entail—namely suffering, death and resurrection, and he is rebuked by Jesus regarding this (Mark 8:31-33). Jesus is indeed the victorious Anointed One, but as well as defeating His enemies, He also brings life, fruitfulness and blessing to believers. However the path to that “double result” is through suffering and the cross. Peter's partial understanding then would correspond to the man at the stage where he is unable to distinguish between trees and men: both Peter and the man are in need of further enlightenment!

Similarly, in Deuteronomy, it is possible to win the victory over the city, but in a way that produces only devastation. However, the path to victory required in Deuteronomy 20:19-20 both defeats the enemy as well as producing the promised fruitfulness and blessing in the land for Israel. But it is necessary to distinguish between fruit trees and men to achieve this! A further possible link between the fruit trees in Deut. Ch. 20 and Jesus' true identity and mission is that fruit trees were created on the third day—corresponding typologically to Jesus' resurrection on the third day.

Earlier in Deut, Ch. 20 we also read of three categories of future blessings and fruitfulness in the land which also are not to be sacrificed for the sake of war: a new house, a newly planted vineyard, and a betrothed wife. (Israel is a house, a vineyard and a wife.) These, like the fruit trees (Israel is a fruit tree also—olive, fig etc!) are *future* blessings at the time of the war or siege. Warfare in this way, that reduces the number of fighters or limits the use of resources, was thus an act of faith in God's promises to Israel—and those who fear and lack faith were excused fighting (verse 8). I briefly discuss the structure of Deut Ch. 20 in the Appendix.

There are possible links between Bethsaida and Jerusalem, and also between the besieging of a city in Deuteronomy, and Jesus' coming in judgement on apostate Jerusalem in AD 70, (although Bethsaida rejected Christ directly, Jerusalem in AD 70 rejected Christ by its persecution of believers (e.g. Matthew Ch. 24, Revelation). But, shortly after the healing in Bethsaida, Jerusalem will also be the place where Jesus leaves the Temple, and where the Jewish leaders reject Christ and put Him to death, and where Jesus, through his resurrection, gains the victory and also blessings for believers. In the case of Bethsaida, the man who was healed came out of the city and was told not to return, and likewise, believers were told to come out of Jerusalem/Babylon - both “physically” and “spiritually” - prior to its destruction, in AD 70 (Matt 24:15-22; Rev. 18:4; Hebrews 13:12-13).

Finally, as noted by R.T. France, Mark 8:22-26 marks a turning point in the ministry of Jesus in several ways. In particular it is around this time that Jesus starts to prioritise teaching His disciples and that He starts the momentous journey south to Jerusalem. Bethsaida is thus a sort of “pointer” to events in Jerusalem which are at the heart of Jesus' mission.

I hope this is a helpful, and plausible, attempt to link this OT passage to Jesus' two-stage healing of the blind man in Mark, although I realise that I have probably missed lots of possible connections! All comments and corrections gratefully received!

Appendix

i) A Note on Translation (Particularly the Septuagint).

Some translations of Deut. 20:19 introduce the word “food” - for example, the NKJV:

“When you besiege a city for a long time, while making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them; if you can eat of them, do not cut them down to use in the siege, for the tree of the field *is* man’s *food*.”

This is an attempt to make sense of the rather enigmatic expression in the original Hebrew, but the word “food” is not found at this point in the text.

As mentioned earlier, I suggest that the Septuagint translation is likely. The Septuagint treats the last part of Deut. 20:19 as a question. It is possible that this is a reasonable inference based on the original Hebrew even if the text is understood literally as a statement rather than a question, but it is also possible, I (tentatively!) suggest, that there may also be a grammatical aspect to this. In the Hebrew Masoretic text of this part of Deut. 20:19, we have:

בְּמִצּוֹר	מִפְּנֵיךָ	לְבֹא	הַשָּׂדֶה	עֵץ	הָאָדָם	כִּי
to besiege	before you	that it may go	(of) the field	tree	(the) man	for

Here, the word man (adam) (the second word from the right) is preceded by the definite article, “ha”, (where the vowel, a, is a *Qamets*). However, this depends on the “pointings” given to the original (un-pointed) text by the Masoretic scholars. The “h” at the beginning of the word could also be understood to be the interrogative particle, (which in this particular case would actually be “he”—where the vowel, e, is a *Seghol* (e.g. *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar* Section 8.10)). I think it is quite likely that the Septuagint translators understood it in this way. This also has the advantage of making both “man” and “tree” anarthrous (i.e. both lacking the (definite) article!) which means they can be compared/contrasted more exactly).

ii) The Central Role of Trees Being Like Men in Deut 20:19-20

Structurally, the seven word phrase shown above in Hebrew comes at the centre of Deut. 20:19-20 both by theme and by word count. I have tried to illustrate this chiasmic structure in Figure 1 on the next page.

iii) There is also a chiasmic aspect to Deut. 20:5-20—Figure 2 on the next page:



