

## Jesus as Disciple of the Kingdom

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### Introduction:

The traditional descriptions of Jesus as Messiah, Son of God, and Savior confine him to ethnical, religious and metaphysical descriptions that tend to alienate those who want to find in him an example for life and for Christian praxis. Something similar happens with the roles of prophet and servant. The first one could be interpreted too narrowly in terms of gender (most of Israel's prophets were men) and the second one may send the wrong message to those people in society that already have a secondary position, such as women and ethnic minorities. For people whose lives are defined by continuous and ill-rewarded service, the description of Jesus as the ideal servant is not comforting.<sup>1</sup>

We need a more inclusive and liberating model, one that can speak to people who have always felt that the Jesus proclaimed by the *kerygma* is too divine, too out of touch with reality. For one thing, this Jesus seems often to be playing a game called "Now I'm human, now I'm not." Just when one begins to identify with a down-to-earth Jesus -the one who eats with sinners and publicans, who is thirsty and asks water from a woman in Samaria, who cries in front of the tomb of his friend Lazarus- the game changes. Now Jesus is divine, the Son of God, the agent of God's final kingdom, an almost unreachable character who predicts his death to the last detail, forewarns his followers of the impending coming of the last days, and ascends to heaven in a cloud as two heavenly figures tell the perplexed disciples that one day he will return in the same way as he now ascends. The game of biblical chess ends with a tied when the Orthodox Church meeting at Chalcedon in 451 proclaimed that Jesus was "fully human and fully divine." Thus, Jesus of Nazareth was made into this impossible entity that can only inhabit the world of

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 72-73.

theology and abstract thought but never, or seldom, the real world of contemporary women and men.

Yes, we need a new model and I would like to suggest that this model is the one that sees Jesus as the ideal disciple.<sup>2</sup> What would it mean to see Jesus, in the gospel of Mark primarily but also in the other gospels, as the supreme example of discipleship? Among other things, it would require to re-read the titles and roles traditionally associated with him –Son of man, Son of God, Son of David, Messiah, prophet, etc.- from the perspective of discipleship. What would be the implications of such a reading for Christology, Theology, Ecclesiology and, especially, for Christian praxis? In the present essay I will explore the possibilities and ramifications of such a proposal.

### **I. Jesus, disciple of the Kingdom: a historical possibility**

Nowadays, and thanks to the work of the Jesus Seminar and other historical and sociological reconstructions of Jesus' life,<sup>3</sup> we are accustomed to speaking about the Jesus' movement which is seen as a precursor of what later became the early church as represented by the writings of the NT. This was a movement of wandering charismatics composed of traveling apostles, prophets and disciples that relied on a group of sympathizers that took care of their everyday needs.<sup>4</sup> During this time it was the kingdom of God, rather than the death of Jesus, which held salvific value. The kingdom was seen as the message and Jesus as the messenger. To this time belongs some of the earliest stratum of the Q tradition. Even Paul testifies to this early stage (remember that Paul's letters and Q's earliest traditions come roughly from the same time period, 50-66 C.E.). We have Paul advising believers to have the "faith of Jesus" and that God justifies the

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<sup>2</sup> I already anticipated this, ever so intuitively, in one of my publications where I say: "In the gospel of Mark Jesus is the one who embodies authentic discipleship." And also, "The gospel of Mark is then more about discipleship than it is about Christology, it is more about who is a true disciple than it is about who is the real Messiah." Osvaldo D. Vena, "The Rhetorical and Theological Center of Mark's Gospel," in Guillermo Hansen, ed., *Los caminos inexhaustibles de la Palabra*, edited by (Buenos Aires: Lumen/Isedet, 2000), 343-345.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Theissen, *Sociology*, 8.

one who has this faith (Rom 3:26). Jesus also exhorts disciples to have faith in God and he obviously sees himself as one who has such faith.<sup>5</sup> All of this would agree with the idea that Jesus is the messenger of the kingdom, someone like John the Baptist, and not the message.

But while messenger is a more passive concept disciple has a more active connotation.<sup>6</sup> A disciple is someone who has been formed by a teacher who embodies a worldview, an ideology if you please, and sees himself as a follower of that teacher or a subscriber of that ideology. Disciples are hardly ever solitary individuals. Rather, they belong to groups, movements that hope to make an impact in the society of their time. Jesus was part of such a movement. He was not just a heroic person who appeared out of the blue (but see the abrupt way in which Mark describes Jesus' beginning of his ministry in 1:9!) but an individual deeply formed by the social group he belonged to.

To speak of Jesus as disciple implies that there is an element of learning and the question is: if Jesus is a disciple, who, then, is his teacher?<sup>7</sup> We will propose later in the paper the likelihood that it was John the Baptist. At least from a historical perspective this is the only way we can interpret his baptism by John. But also, judging by what the author of Hebrews says in 5:8, it is clear that at a spiritual level God was his teacher: "he learned obedience through what he suffered." So one could say that this element of learning, characteristic of a disciple, stayed with him throughout his life and even when he was regarded as a teacher, he was still a disciple of God, a disciple of the kingdom.

Of course, the main obstacle to seeing Jesus as disciple of the Kingdom is the gospels' description of Jesus as teacher.<sup>8</sup> If he is a teacher—in fact, "the teacher" according to John

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<sup>5</sup> "Unshakable faith and trust in God, the biblical *emunah*, was the hallmark, the ideal of Jesus which he preached and practiced. It was the spiritual engine of his whole life's work..." Geza Vermes, *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002), 220.

<sup>6</sup> I owe this insight to Jerry Moyar, a member of the Koinonia class at the First United Methodist Church in Downers Grove, Illinois, USA.

<sup>7</sup> I owe this idea to my colleague Ken Vaux

<sup>8</sup> This is particularly evident in the gospel of Matthew, where Jesus delivers five sermons which resemble the five books of the Law and teaches the disciples in far more occasions than in the other gospels. Of all the gospels it is Mark the one that gives less importance to Jesus as a teacher.

13:13- then how can he be a disciple? But in antiquity every teacher or philosopher traced his teaching to a source, to a teacher. So, every teacher was a former disciple of someone. My contention is that humanly speaking Jesus' teacher was John the Baptist, but that ultimately God was his Teacher. In that sense disciples and prophets had their ultimate source of authority in the God of Israel who was regarded by all as a teacher (cf. John 6:45; Isa 54:13; Jer 32:33; Hos 11:13; Ps 71:17; 119:102).

To speak of Jesus as disciple of the Kingdom, then, implies that Jesus' ministry is paradigmatic, instrumental, temporary, and not necessarily absolute and final. These are qualities of God's reign and Jesus seems to always subordinate himself to it. The Gospel of John refers to this when it says: "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12). Luke also shares this opinion by writing an entire book, Acts, devoted to the work of the apostles and their followers, thus making it clear that Jesus' ministry was not finished and was now being continued by and in the nascent church. Both in John and in Acts it is the Holy Spirit who drives the mission of the disciples first and the early church later.

The social-science model of patron, client and broker could also be used to explain Jesus' relation to God and the kingdom. In this sense Jesus was a broker of God, the heavenly Patron, and his work of ministry constituted his brokerage on behalf of the Patron. This model allows us to see Jesus always in a relation of dependence and subordination to God, even when as a teacher he was also a sort of patron to the disciples, who therefore were his brokers. But realizing how connected Jesus was with God it is better to see both him and the disciples as brokers of the heavenly Patron, co-disciples in the service of the kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

First century Jewish mysticism adds another layer to our inquiry. Jesus was taught by John to meditate on the vision of God depicted in the first chapter of Ezekiel, the Chariot,

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce J. Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), 149-157.

the moving throne of God. Bruce Chilton describes the Chariot as the “source of God’s energy and intelligence, the origin of his power to create and destroy. By meditating on the Chariot, John and his disciples aspired to become one with God’s Throne.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus, as one of John’s disciples, learned the secrets of this meditation and in turn taught it to his disciples. This heavenly vision became the source of Jesus power and authority. Then, it is possible to affirm that Jesus remained a disciple of that vision, a servant, if you please, of a higher source of authority: God’s throne, God’s heavenly realm. His experience was similar to that of Isaiah, Ezekiel and, later, the apostle Paul (cf. Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1; 2 Cor 12:1-4).

But even though there are historical possibilities for a Jesus who was a disciple, our search for this model is going to be done at the level of the text. We are going to concentrate especially on the gospel of Mark. In the gospels Jesus can not be depicted as a disciple of the kingdom because by the time the gospels were written the Christian church had already become uprooted from its Palestinian context.<sup>11</sup> Jesus had become the message, not the messenger of the kingdom. Nonetheless, there is a residue of traditions that are still perceptible in the highly theologized narrative of the gospels and it is precisely this residue, this deposit that we are interested in. This means that historical insights into the possible sources of Jesus’ career as a disciple of the kingdom or as a mystic will be limited to a general background. Rather, the text will be explored looking for clues that may help us build the proposed model. Inter-textual connections with the OT will be made, particularly when trying to imagine what would have been the possible traditions behind a certain model of discipleship.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus. An Intimate Biography* (New York: Image, Doubleday, 2000), 50.

<sup>11</sup> George V. Pixley, *God’s Kingdom* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 65.

<sup>12</sup> In attempting to portray Jesus as the disciple of the Kingdom *par excellence* I am not denying other portrayals. I am only making my assumptions be known from the very beginning. At the same time I am also acknowledging that there have been –and there are- many conscious as well as unconscious presuppositions scholars bring to their study of Jesus. I want to make mine clear and I want to use them as hermeneutical lenses into the text. I have some historical basis for my affirmations but the bulk of my argument will be literary, that is, it will be based on the text of the gospels, particularly Mark, with an eye toward finding support for my hypothesis. The end-product will be –I hope- a theological construction dictated by my own theological journey.

## **II. Jesus as disciple in the gospel of Mark**

Why was it necessary for Mark to develop an appropriate concept of discipleship and to use Jesus as the supreme example? The situation of his community explains that: faced with the dilemma of supporting the revolt of 66-70 C.E., which propelled the Jewish people to rebel against Rome and which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, the communities of believers needed to have a model of discipleship that would serve as a guide through those difficult years. The issue at stake was if being followers of Jesus the Messiah would preclude or encourage joining the uprising. Mark senses the tension, due especially to the mixed nature of his congregation (Gentiles and Jewish), and so embarks in the task of writing the story of Jesus. In so doing he is presenting Jesus as the model disciple of the kingdom of God, one who resisted evil but shunned violent confrontation, hoping that this would help his congregation to make a decision against armed revolution and at the same time encourage them to fix their hopes in the soon to arrive kingdom of God, which was to be brought about not by human efforts but by the power of God through the risen Christ.

By pointing at Jesus as the model disciple Mark is trying to counteract a tendency in his community to organize into a more structured group where issues of power and gender inequality in the leadership were already at work. Mark, himself an apocalyptic who perhaps had known some of the wandering charismatics of the early Jesus' movement, is attempting to direct his own group into a praxis that resembles that of the early disciples. Jesus is then described as the model disciple, the wandering charismatic par excellence, which serves the purpose of criticizing that authority which is not dependent on the power of the Spirit. His community was showing signs of accommodation to the world and he wants them to engage in a counter-cultural praxis resembling the original Jesus' movement. Besides that, he sees the Jewish revolt as a sign of the impending end so he has no desire to foster stable communities but rather is intent on reclaiming an apocalyptic ethos similar to the one that characterized the wandering charismatics of the Jesus' movement in order to offer an alternative to the nationalistic messianism of the

Zealots. Discipleship and prophetic engagement in society is presented as the true ethos of the group and Jesus is shown as the one who best incarnates this ethos.

#### A. Mark's portrayal of Jesus as disciple of the kingdom

In Mark Jesus refers metaphorically to himself as the bridegroom (2:19-20) and as the sower (4:3). He describes his role in society as one who came to serve (10:45) and as a prophet (6:4) and speaks of his relationship with God as "sent" (9:37), anointed/Christ (9:41) and Son of man (2:10,27; 8:31,38; 9:12; 10:33,45; 13:26; 14:21,62). This last role is so important for Jesus that even when in 14:62 he seems to initially accept the high priest description of Christ and Son of the Blessed he qualifies it right away by mentioning the exaltation of the Son of man.

An idea that could prove fertile for our enquiry is that of Jesus as one being sent by God, for that will have some important implications for seeing Jesus as the ideal or model disciple. But let us start at the most obvious place, the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

#### *1:14-15*

Jesus appears suddenly in the narrative as coming from Nazareth of Galilee and being baptized by John. The narrator has prepared us to see Jesus as one who is mightier than the Baptist and who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:7-8), but even so Jesus' coming to John can only be interpreted in terms of discipleship.<sup>13</sup> When Jesus finally starts his ministry he does so by preaching a message that is very similar to the one John, his teacher, preached (1:14-15). He calls people to repentance in view of the approaching kingdom of God. His role is that of one who announces, a prophet, one who has been sent to preach, an apostle, a disciple if you please. He subordinates himself completely to God the Patron and the kingdom. He preaches the gospel of God

( $\diamond \square \equiv \text{M} \diamond \text{er} \text{e} \text{y} \text{o} \text{y} \text{o} \text{M} \text{er} \bullet \text{H} \square \blacksquare \quad \diamond \square \diamond \text{e} \quad \square \text{M} \square \diamond \text{e} \text{e} \text{D}$ ), not his own gospel. So, whereas for the evangelist Jesus' ministry, passion, death and resurrection constitute "the

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<sup>13</sup> The other gospels try to qualify this obvious subordination of Jesus to John by adding traditions that depict Jesus as voluntarily adopting a subordinate position which is necessary in God's overall plan. See Matt 3:14; John 1:26-27.

gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:1) from the perspective of Jesus’ own self-awareness at the beginning of his ministry the gospel he preaches is all about God and the approaching kingdom. The power he will manifest is God’s power, which will signal and illustrate the reign about to dawn. This power, the narrator tells us, was unleashed from heaven at the baptism and is now residing in him or, as the Greek suggests, “into him”

( $\mu\chi\epsilon\rho\chi$   $\epsilon\delta\epsilon\epsilon\rho\delta\epsilon\sigma\epsilon\sigma\epsilon$ ). Again, we see how Mark makes an effort to depict Jesus as dependent on John for his vision and on God for his power.

A question that needs to be asked is whether John the Baptist is preparing the way for Jesus’ ministry or if he is issuing a call to people to get ready for God’s kingdom, for the coming of the Lord God. If this is so, then, Jesus is accepting a call to join forces with all those who heard John’s call to get ready for God’s kingdom. John is not preparing the way for Jesus but for God and Jesus is joining him, as another disciple, in this task of preparation. This may have been the original intention of the tradition, especially if we preserve the sense of the quote from Malachi 3:1 in its original Hebrew. Nevertheless, when made to form part of the Marcan narrative and when the text is quoted from the LXX the reference to Lord is, naturally, associated with Jesus. But, interestingly enough, only once is Jesus called Lord in Mark (11:3)!

#### 4: 1-20

All the parables in chapter four of Mark are kingdom parables. The first one, the parable of the sower, is important for it seems to portray Jesus as the proclaimer of God’s kingdom. What does the sower do? Sows the word ( $\bullet\sigma\epsilon\iota\sigma\epsilon$ ). And what is this word? Judging by what has transpired so far in the narrative the word is the preaching of the good news by Jesus (1:14-15, 38; 2:2), which sometimes takes the form of teaching (1:21-28; 4:1). The clearest correspondence between the sower and Jesus is found in 4:3 where it says that the sower “went out to sow.” The verb is  $\mu\chi\epsilon\rho\chi\sigma\epsilon\sigma\epsilon$ , an aorist of  $\mu\chi\epsilon\rho\chi\sigma\epsilon\sigma\epsilon$ . The same verb is used in 1:38 where Jesus says that he “came out,”  $\mu\chi\epsilon\rho\chi\sigma\epsilon\sigma\epsilon$ , in order that he might preach also in the surrounding towns. So, the sower going out to sow is a metaphorical way of referring to Jesus’ public activity of proclamation.

As the sower Jesus handles the seed (the good news) and scatters (proclaims) it over different types of terrain (people). God makes the seed grow depending on people's response to the good news. But Jesus, as the sower, is impotent, unable to guarantee growth in the same way he was unable to guarantee healing in his hometown of Nazareth (6:5-6). Healing was God's prerogative together with the individual's faith. As a disciple of the kingdom Jesus' responsibility was only to do the will of the one who sent him, namely, to proclaim the word, to sow the seed of the kingdom. He does it in an exemplary way and thus becomes a model for all disciples, ancient and modern.

The third parable is that of the growing grain (4:26-29). Here again the seed represents the word, the message. Its growth is independent of the person who sowed it. Who is this person? It is someone who was given the task of sowing the seed. It is the sower/Jesus and eventually the disciples. Jesus is presented as being in the service of the kingdom. Jesus believed that he was facilitating it as a broker of God's power. He became a model broker, a model disciple, and as the Son of man the representative of God's people (see discussion below).

8:27-30

People saw Jesus as a prophet (Elijah or one of the prophets) or even as someone who resembled very much John the Baptist. Peter thinks he is the Messiah. This affirmation does not elicit much enthusiasm on Jesus' part, but rather a prohibition to talk about him. For some reason Jesus does not want people to know him as the Messiah.<sup>14</sup> Is that because it is still too early and such a revelation could hamper his ministry? Or is it because he is not satisfied with the popular understanding of the Messiah and is going to re-define it radically? I believe this last possibility is closer to the spirit of Mark. I would go further and say that Jesus is not even thinking in messianic terms but more in discipleship terms. He sees himself as a messenger, a disciple of the kingdom of God. As

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<sup>14</sup> In traditional scholarship this is known as the "messianic secret," first proposed by Wrede in 1901. But my intention here is to find out how it functions in the narrative, in the story. Whether Jesus or the early church said this is beyond the point for my endeavors in the present work. For a narrative understanding of the messianic secret see David Barr, *New Testament Story. An Introduction* (3d. ed.; Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002), 277-278.



the kingdom, and this includes Jesus himself (v.27). So in vv.29-31 Jesus explains to the disciples the way discipleship works.

- Discipleship is leaving everything for Jesus' sake and the gospel, that is, the message of God's-soon-to-arrive-dominion. Jesus makes it clear that the following is not merely "for his sake" but also for the sake of God's reign. In other words, Jesus sees himself as one who is calling people to follow him as he goes about proclaiming the gospel. Probably Jesus sees his own ministry as a journey that will end when God brings about the kingdom (Cf. "on his journey," v.17, and "on the road, going up to Jerusalem," v.32). This is especially clear in the gospel of Luke, where the trip of Jesus to Jerusalem is depicted as a travel narrative, added by the evangelist to Mark's outline (cf. Luke 9:51-18:14).
- Discipleship is not based on keeping the letter of the law but rather its spirit (love of God and neighbor), since the mere keeping of the commandments did not qualify the man to obtain the life of the age to come. Actually, sometimes the law has to be transgressed in order to be truly upheld (cf. 2:23-28; 3:1-6).<sup>16</sup> Following Jesus would have implied transgressing the law in more than one way. For example, Jesus asks a potential follower to disregard his obligations to bury his dead father (Mat 8:22), something expected according to tradition (cf. Tob 4:3-4). But the paradox resides in that by transgressing the law one is actually fulfilling it, or bringing it to a fuller realization.
- Discipleship entails entering into a community of disciples who share everything, becoming a surrogate family with a new authority figure, Jesus. Notice that there is no mention of fathers in the new community (10:29-30).
- Discipleship implies the willingness to undergo persecution for the sake of the gospel. This was the fate of Jesus and the fate of the Marcan community. But it

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<sup>16</sup> This is argued by Franz J. Hinkelammert in his book *El Grito del Sujeto. Del teatro-mundo del evangelio de Juan al perro-mundo de la globalizacion* (San Jose, Costa Rica: DEI, 1998), 37.

is important to note that persecutions are a consequence and not a prerequisite of faithful discipleship. Otherwise persecutions could become another “commandment” that upon fulfillment people could use as a self-righteous way of earning their entrance into the kingdom. What is required of the disciple is not victimization for the sake of the gospel but non-violent resistance to evil for the sake of the gospel.

- Discipleship contains the promise of eternal life but this comes as a second step, as the consequence of faithful discipleship. The man wanted to avoid the commitment of discipleship and obtain eternal life without it. In his mind the keeping of the commandments already ensured him God’s approval. After all, wasn’t that the promise of God in the Torah? (cf. Exodus 20:6). That’s not the way it works, says Jesus. First one has to live out the commandments in such a way that one is willing to sacrifice everything, even one’s position in society, and to risk one’s life for the sake of God’s kingdom. Then eternal life is a possibility (cf. 8:34-35). And this, more than something that can be measured quantitatively, is measured qualitatively. It is the life of the new age that is possible here and now when we follow Jesus in building God’s kingdom. Therefore, the Marcan Jesus reinterprets the commandments as love of God and love of neighbor that is implemented in the following of Jesus. What the rich young ruler was lacking was not the conceptual framing of the commandment but the specificity of the Jesuanic praxis.

#### *14:22-25*

In the institution of the Last Supper/Eucharist Jesus relativizes again his role while at the same time absolutizing God and the kingdom. His blood is poured out for many but nothing is said about being “for the forgiveness of sins,” as is the case in Matthew 26:28. Nor is the kingdom the “kingdom of my Father,” as in Matthew 26:29, but “the kingdom of God.” A number of things are interesting in this passage.

- First, there is the idea of a new covenant. The figure being used here is that of God’s covenant with Israel in the OT (cf. Jeremiah). Jesus becomes, through this



kingdom, the Son of man of 13:24-27, or if he was just hoping to see that day come true, as any other disciple of the kingdom would, the hope of seeing the day of God's deliverance. We do know that Jesus hoped to participate in God's new creation but perhaps without having any position of privilege. It is the kingdom of God, after all, not the kingdom of my Father!

#### *14:32-42*

Jesus is not ready to face his destiny but he is willing to obey the will of God. This, in a nutshell, describes Mark's notion of an ideal disciple: knowing how high the price for being faithful to God's kingdom is, the disciple, personified supremely in Jesus, is willing to pay it. This may point at the situation of the Marcan community which was probably undergoing strenuous times as the Jewish revolt was forcing people to take sides. Which side was the community going to be on, that of the revolutionaries or that of the priests and aristocrats who favored submission to Rome? Not wanting to go through that which seemed unavoidable but submitting to the will of God made Jesus the perfect example of how a disciple needed to behave when confronted with the choice between violent revolt and passive submission. Jesus will endorse neither of the two but rather will propose a third option: non-violent resistance, thus setting an example that the members of the Marcan community could follow, as they imitate Jesus, the ideal disciple, in their own discipleship.

#### B. Jesus calls others to a joint discipleship

#### *3:13-19*

Jesus is symbolically constituting a new Israel (Twelve disciples). But Jesus calls them intentionally into discipleship, into a following. The purpose was threefold: to be with him, to be sent out to preach and to have authority to cast out demons. To be with him may imply some kind of training both by example and by teaching. The disciples would then do as their teacher, the one who sent them, did. In this regard Jesus presents himself as a model. He was also sent (9:37) with a mission, which included preaching and casting out demons. What is not so clear, in the case of Jesus, is when this time of preparation

happened. The most logic answer is that this happened during the time he spent with John the Baptist, his mentor and teacher, from whom he absorbed the passion for God's kingdom. But perhaps this happened when he was growing up studying the Galilean version of the traditions of Israel. The text of Mark allows only for the time previous to his encounter with John and the time he obviously was one of his disciples as the only time Jesus had to gain any awareness of what his public activity in Israel was to be. We have to also allow for a developing awareness, that is, an ever-changing sense of mission as he encountered people and their reactions to his message. It is now usually accepted by scholars that Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman in 7:24-30 marks an important stage in Jesus' own consciousness as prophet/disciple of the kingdom. Here he is being forced by a foreign woman to realize that his ministry should not be limited to the "children" but that it should also include others, those whom up to this point he had considered "dogs" but who from now on he will see in a new and different light, namely, as people worthy of God's liberating activity through his ministry (cf. 7:31-37 and 8:1-10. These are all Gentiles). In order for Jesus to do this he needed to have considered Gentiles as part of God's covenantal people. This required an effort beyond anything else Jesus had done to the present; it required a change in his symbolic universe, which included first and utmost a change in the way he perceived the God of Israel. All this constitutes part of Jesus learning what it meant to be a disciple of the kingdom.

### *6:7-13*

Here the actual sending of the disciples, pre-announced in 3:13-19, takes place. They are sent with authority over unclean spirits, to preach repentance and to heal the sick (the anointing of the sick is probably a practice of the early church read back into this story). Again, Jesus is the model for the disciples. He is not sending them to do anything he hasn't already done (with the exception perhaps of the anointing with oil) and he tells them no to expect a different treatment from what he received (cf.6:1-6a). They should expect neither more nor less of what he himself was willing to do in obedience to the one who had sent him, God. In so doing, Jesus is modeling true discipleship which, based on Mark's description of Jesus' life in the service of God's kingdom, may be seen as containing the following elements:

1. *Call* (Jesus, 1:9; disciples, 1:16; 2:13-17)
2. *Reception of power/authority* (Jesus, 1:10-11; disciples, 3:13-19)
3. *Period of instruction* (Jesus, before and during his relationship to John; disciples, during his travels with Jesus).
4. *An official beginning of the ministry* (Jesus, 1:14; disciples, 6:12-13, 30-31)
5. *The unfolding paradox of discipleship*
  - a. *Mixed success and realization of shortcomings* (Jesus, 6:1-6a; 7: 24-30; disciples, 9:18, 28-29; 8:32-33)
  - b. *Life lost is life won*  
(8:34-37)
6. *The ultimate goal of discipleship: total allegiance to the teacher/God.*<sup>19</sup> (Jesus, 14:32-42; disciples, unrealized in the gospel narrative, as all of them fail to fully obey Jesus' teachings).

### III. Jesus as the Son of man in Mark

The Marcan Jesus, the one produced by the text, refers always to himself with the "title", or role, of "Son of man."<sup>20</sup> Can this expression be reread through the hermeneutical key of "discipleship"? Can we find justification in the text itself?<sup>21</sup>

8:31-38

I have argued some place else<sup>22</sup> that the rhetorical and theological center of the gospel could be found at 8:34-38, where the call to discipleship seems to be defined in terms of a

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<sup>19</sup> This obedience has to be understood in the context of the covenantal relationship between God and the people. The God Jesus is a disciple of is the God of Israel, the God of the covenant. The reign Jesus is announcing is the fulfillment of God's promises to God's people.

<sup>20</sup> Again, I will by-pass the already too familiar debate among scholars if Jesus saw himself as the apocalyptic Son of man or if this is something added by the evangelist. At the level of the narrative it is clear that Jesus is the Son of man, both the earthly and the heavenly one.

<sup>21</sup> In this section I am going to be using Theissen's *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*. But whereas his work concentrates on discovering the sociological realities of the community behind the text, I will attempt to find a model of discipleship that uses the text as its basis. My presupposition is that Mark, as an author, is rereading the traditions concerning the Son of man and is offering this new model to his community for a specific reason.

*imitatio Jesu*. Self-denial and the taking up of the cross is something that characterizes Jesus' ministry so, in reality, Jesus is calling people to imitate him.<sup>23</sup> And since Jesus is identified in the context as the Son of man, then the disciples are called to participate in the public activity and fate of this figure: to imitate Jesus is to imitate the Son of man. Based on 1:14-15, where Jesus starts off his ministry announcing the gospel of the kingdom of God, one could say that to follow Jesus is an invitation to participate in his mission. That means an invitation to be a co-disciple. Discipleship, then, is modeled after the earthly Son of man, Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>24</sup>

This is the third time that the expression Son of man has appeared in Mark so far. The other two were 2:10 and 2:28. But here we encounter a new element: this Son of man (or Human One) will suffer, die and be raised on the third day. All of this provides the backdrop against which one has to read the call to discipleship of 8:34-38. The disciple is someone who renounces to life as understood in the society of the time and is willing to die, if necessary, for the sake of the gospel and for following Jesus. And the paradox is that when one is willing to risk and even lose one's life, one saves it, the idea here being one of eternal reward and vindication. Therefore the disciple shares in the fate of the Son of man, both in his sufferings and death but also in his vindication through resurrection<sup>25</sup>.

But there is something else here. Mark 8:38 says that the Son of man will come in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. Why this change, from suffering to victorious,

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<sup>22</sup> O. Vena, "Rhetorical and Theological Center," 344.

<sup>23</sup> Since the individuals' personality was embedded in the family to which they belonged to, to deny oneself was equivalent to denying their close of kin, that is, their parents, relatives, their households, their villages (cf. 6:4). The structure is chiasmic:

- A. If any one would come after me
- B. Let him deny himself
- B'. And take up his cross
- A'. And follow me

<sup>24</sup> "[the] figure of the Son of man was central for the Jesus movement. His situation corresponded to their situation. Here belief and practice formed an indissoluble whole. The unity of this whole was deliberate. It formed the focal point of the idea of discipleship." Theissen, *Sociology*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Gerd Theissen reminds us that the disciples participate also in the more positive aspects of the Son of man's role, namely those of forgiving sins (Mk 2:11; cf. Mt. 16:19; 18:18), and having authority over the Sabbath day (Mk. 2.23-28) and the regulations of fasting (Mt. 11:18-19; cf. Mk.2:18-19). *Sociology*, 26.

from despised to glorified? This passage is based on Daniel 7:13-14 where the prophet sees one like a son of man, or a human being, coming to the Ancient of Days and receiving from him power, honor and the kingdom. In the context of this book it is clear that this angelic figure is acting on behalf of the people of God, Israel, who suffers under the tyrannical power of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The son of man is really a corporate figure, a collective symbol<sup>26</sup>. He represents the suffering people of God who will soon be vindicated. Wouldn't it be logical, then, to see Jesus here in the same way, that is, as the representative of his co-disciples, those that were not afraid of giving their own lives for the gospel? But there is a problem. We know that the interpretation of this passage in the first century was done through the lenses of the book of 1 Enoch,<sup>27</sup> especially the section called the Parables of Enoch (37-71), where there appears a heavenly figure that executes judgment over the evildoers and vindicates the righteous. The corporative dimension found in Daniel is missing in this book, for the Son of man is an individual figure, an agent of God's activity. But what if Mark intentionally ignores this interpretation and goes back to reading the Son of man as a corporative figure? What would preclude him from doing so? We will try to demonstrate that the evangelist, prompted by his specific context and that of his audience, may be doing precisely that.

#### *10:35-40*

If the Son of man in Daniel 7 represents the suffering people of Israel during the time of the Maccabees, and Mark is reading this text Christologically, then Jesus represents the new people of God, the new Israel. If this is so, then, the exaltation of the Son of man in Daniel and of Jesus/Son of man in Mark is something in which the disciples, as members of the new people of God, will participate also. But in this passage James and John seem to hold onto the traditional apocalyptic belief that Jesus, as the eschatological Son of man, is an individual figure that will come at the end of time to judge the sinners and reward the faithful. So they ask for privileges in the coming kingdom. But Jesus tells them that their only privilege is to share in his suffering and death. In the same way that

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Kazen, "Son of Man as kingdom imagery: Jesus between corporate symbol and individual redeemer figure," in Tom Holmen, ed., *Jesus from Judaism to Christianity* (LNTS; London, UK: T&T Clark, 2007), 94.

<sup>27</sup> George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins. Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 110.

in 8:35 to lose one's life on behalf of Jesus and the gospel meant to save it, so also here the disciples have to be ready to make the supreme sacrifice for the kingdom if they want to be part of that people whom the Son of man represents. To ask for especial privileges is to misunderstand the nature of the eschatological kingdom, where there are no positions of privilege but only the sharing of power among God's redeemed humanity.

But some may argue that Jesus, by admitting that he will be seated in glory, is subscribing to the traditional understanding of a triumphant Messiah, Son of God or Son of man. Now, let us remember that exaltation to heaven was also the hope of the righteous man of the Psalms or the martyrs of the Maccabean period, which became the basis for the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. At the resurrection, all the faithful will be vindicated. That is why Jesus tells James and John that they would suffer and die, as he was also going to, but that after that they would be vindicated with heaven's glory. And he also tells them that because he too is a disciple of the kingdom, and as such subordinated to God, he could not make a decision concerning their *post mortem* status more than he could, at that point, make a decision concerning his. Rather, the only thing they can aspire to is sharing in the sufferings of Jesus, the ideal disciple, and being willing to serve and give their lives, as the Son of man would do (10:45).

In vv.33-34 Jesus had announced for the third time his sufferings, death and resurrection. He did this by utilizing again the Son of man imagery. In Jesus' lips this apocalyptic figure has been transformed into a symbol for his own ministry and that of his disciples. Consequently, the reader is beginning to read this symbol in discipleship key in such a way that any time that the expression Son of man appears the readers suspect that it has something to do with their own praxis.<sup>28</sup> In the case of the Marcan community, these sufferings would come for their faithfulness to a non-violent understanding of the kingdom in the midst of alternative visions that called the faithful to an armed revolution against Rome. But their suffering would give way, as in Daniel 7, to their vindication, which was anticipated in Jesus' resurrection. As Paul would put it, Jesus is the

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<sup>28</sup> Again, Theissen says: "Above all in the figure of the Son of man, early Christian wandering charismatics were able to interpret and come to terms with their own social situation." *Sociology*, 27.



establishes God's reign, doing justice to those who suffered for their obedience to Jesus and the gospel? Could Jesus then be seen as the precursor to the kingdom, as the Elijah of Malachi? The fact that the text of Mark makes an effort to affirm that, contrary to popular opinion (cf. 8:28), it was John the Baptist and not Jesus who was really the Elijah who was to come (9:13), seems to suggest that there was an intentional apologetic agenda on the part of the early church to make sure that Jesus was understood as the Messiah, not as Elijah. This could only have happened if Jesus had been ambivalent about his role, which seems to be the case at least in Mark. Those passages where he apparently assumes the role of God's anointed may have been produced by a proto-orthodox group inside the primitive church that wanted to make sure that Jesus was seen as superior to John since in their view Jesus was God's instrument for the final establishment of the kingdom and also the judge of the world at the end of time.

In Mark, Jesus' prediction that the one who loses his life will save it, and that suffering, when it happens for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, will be rewarded with eternal life, connects, theologically, with the Antiochian persecution of the 2nd Century B.C.E. Add to this the use of Son of man imagery and we have a clear re-appropriation, or rereading of Daniel 7 done from a similar political context: Antioch IV Epiphanes equals the Roman Caesar (cf. 13:14 where the desolating sacrilege, which in Daniel seems to refer to Antiochus' profanation of the Jerusalem temple, may point at the Roman presence in the temple ); the saints of the Most High find their parallel in the faithful followers of Jesus, in this case the Marcan community; and the Son of man becomes, likewise, a corporative figure who represents God's suffering people. Jesus' resurrection as the Son of man anticipates the vindication of God's people, since he is their representative. His resurrection means that the righteous has been vindicated; God has been faithful to God's promises. The disciples now know that by meeting the risen one in the Galilean mission front they would continue a project of liberation that was set in motion by Jesus' resurrection and which would culminate with their own glorification and the actualization on earth of the kingdom of God. They are co-disciples with Jesus who now, having been raised, is going ahead of them to Galilee. Given the fact that there is no ascension narrative in the short ending of Mark, which we take as the original one, the only

possibility of such a meeting is that Mark thinks that God is about to bring the kingdom and therefore the moment of the vindication of the suffering people of God is about to happen.

As in the text of Daniel, the Son of man does not come down to earth but goes to God and receives the kingdom. And when does such a thing happen in Mark? Well, it doesn't. Jesus never goes to God in a visible way as he does in Luke-Acts. But in 9:1-8 we have a glimpse of it in visionary fashion. Here, at the transfiguration, the disciples have a preview of the Son of man's future glory to which he will have access through the resurrection. And the whole scene is preceded by the affirmation that this is a vision of the kingdom of God coming with power. Notice the words in the Greek: see (ἐκφανέρωσις), power (ἐξουσία), kingdom (ἐπισημασία), God (θεός), Son of man (υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου), glory (δόξα), cloud (νεφέλη). Compare that with the LXX of Daniel 7:13-14: I saw (ὤρασα), clouds (νεφέλαι), son of man (υἱοῦ ἀνθρώπου), kingdom (ἐπισημασία). Like Daniel in the past Peter, James and John have a vision of the future triumph of the Son of man. As in Daniel 7:13, here Jesus is presented to God for it is God's voice that testifies to his special status as beloved son. The voice utters from God's throne in heaven and Jesus is standing in front of it. Elijah and Moses, two prophets of the past who were transposed to heaven without tasting death, are with him. The setting is a high mountain, traditional place for epiphanies, but the idea here is that the disciples are giving a glimpse of heaven at the moment when the Son of man receives the kingdom from God

Therefore, even though the coming of the kingdom with power, the giving of dominion and authority to the Son of man, does not happen in the narrative it is announced as something that will happen in the near future. The resurrection will enable this glory to be bestowed on Jesus, the Son of man, and the kingdom is to follow shortly, in Galilee, according to the evangelist's belief. Furthermore, the lack of an ascension narrative in Mark would point to the fact that he is expecting the coming of the kingdom to occur in

the Galilean mission front, when the people represented by the Son of man will receive it from God.

But I know what the reader may be thinking: what about Mark 13:24-27? Isn't this a clear description of the coming of the Son of man, Jesus Christ, to earth at the end of times? And the answer is yes and no. The tradition preserved by Mark is based on Daniel 7: 13-14 but it is already re-interpreted through the lenses of the book of Enoch, where the Son of man becomes an individual who comes to earth to establish the messianic kingdom. Mark, or the tradition he is utilizing, changes the Danielic quote to make it read as if the Son of man comes down to earth "in clouds" (Ⲙ ⚡■) instead of "with" (ⲐⲘ ⚡☉) clouds as is the case in Daniel.<sup>31</sup> So Mark does include a tradition that seems to speak clearly about the coming of the Son of man to earth. But the problem is that Mark's narrative strategy deconstructs this reading because what is missing is that moment that makes it possible for Jesus to return to earth, namely, the ascension. So the coming of the Son of man is announced but this coming does not necessarily mean to earth, but as in Daniel, to God (this is described in visionary fashion at the transfiguration), to receive the kingdom. I am suggesting that it is at least plausible that Mark understood this as happening in Galilee, after the resurrection.

Following this line of thought let's turn to 14:62. In this passage Jesus answers the high priest's question: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" with "You said that I am."<sup>32</sup> And he adds right away: "And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." This is the same quote from Daniel 7:13-14 that had been used in 13:26 except that this time the Son of man is seated at the right hand of God (cf. Ps 110:1) and comes "with" (ⲐⲘ ⚡☉) the clouds of heaven! From this use of OT passages by Mark, who is not only trying to preserve some authentic oral traditions about Jesus but also to construct a Christology suitable to his audience, we can surmise the following: Jesus is affirming his role as Son of man, the

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<sup>31</sup> See my discussion of Norman Perrin's treatment of this idea in Osvaldo D. Vena, *The Parousia and its Rereadings. The Development of the Eschatological Consciousness in the Writings of the New Testament* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001) 180-181.

<sup>32</sup> The MSS evidence for this reading is as follows: Θf13 565. 700

Human one, the representative of God's suffering people. He anticipates his own vindication as well as the disciples', his followers. This is described as seating at the right hand of the Power to whom he has come with the clouds, i.e. through his glorification at the resurrection.

The historical moment that his congregation is living would point at this understanding of the kingdom. The Marcan community should disregard the messianic claims of the revolutionaries, who were trying to establish God's reign by force, and look forward to the day, which may be coming soon, when Jesus, the Son of man, the disciple of the kingdom, would receive from God power to rule and would share it with his co-disciples. This is the moment when the disciples who lost their lives for the sake of Jesus and the gospel (the message of the kingdom), will save it. At that moment their vindication will take place. To say more than this would be to import insights from other gospels or from other authors, like Paul. We contend that Mark especially warrants this reading, though there are elements for a similar reading in the other gospels.

The fact that Mark does not preserve an ascension tradition may point at this being the first gospel. Paul, who wrote about the same time, from 49/50 to 66 C.E., speaks about the resurrection of Christ but not much about the ascension. He speaks of Jesus as being raised in 1 Corinthians 15 and calls him the man of heaven as opposed to Adam, the man of dust. This, plus Paul's own experiences with the risen Christ, presupposes that Jesus is presently in heaven from where he will return at the end of time (cf. Phil 2:3-11; 1 Thess 1:10; 4:16). But there is no systematic development of the idea of the ascension as in Luke. Paul just does not preserve any tradition that talks about Jesus going up to heaven. As a matter of fact, when he quotes traditional material, as in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, he mentions Jesus' atoning death, his resurrection and his post-resurrection appearances but says nothing about the ascension. We suggest the possibility that this tradition developed when the church felt that the giving of power and dominion to God's people had become a non-event and therefore began to rationalize it. We see this developed especially in Luke-Acts (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:6-11).

## **The advantage of this model**

This reading of the text recognizes that the Son of man was interpreted as an individual redeemer figure in the early church but attempts to find support for a different interpretation of this tradition in the gospel of Mark. We are aware that such movement is only possible at a hypothetical level and as such it will be a construct, our own hermeneutical construct.<sup>33</sup> But so are all the other interpretations of this tradition, namely, re-readings that utilize specific socio-historical lenses.

The advantage of this hermeneutical strategy is that while maintaining the eschatological nature of God's kingdom, it does not necessitate of a coming of Jesus at the *parousia* to gather the elect, understood as those who believed in Christ. But if Jesus is the representative of God's suffering people on earth, that is, all those who suffer under the oppressive forces that oppose God's kingdom, and if his resurrection announces beforehand the final vindication of the faithful, this last event will happen when God brings the kingdom and the new age starts. Mark may have thought that this was about to happen and so in his writing he does not include the ascension of Jesus. Jesus is still around, as the risen one who symbolizes the vindication of all who suffer for the sake of the gospel. His presence in Galilee (by the way, this is another meaning for *parousia*), points at a moment of truth that is about to unfold. But he is still on earth as a presence (*parousia*) that testifies to God's final liberating act. Given the suffering that the community is probably facing this constitutes a true theodicy.

## **Conclusion:**

Mark is telling his community who is the Jesus they believe in. He is constructing a Christology. To them, says Mark, Jesus is not the Son of God, for this is how the demons relate to him.<sup>34</sup> He is not the Christ either, that is, the Messiah, for this is the way some people saw him during his ministry and Jesus discouraged them (and now this is the way

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<sup>33</sup> Fernando Segovia argues for this idea in "Reading Readers of the Fourth Gospel and Their Readings: An Exercise in Cultural Criticism," in "What is John?" Volume 1: *Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (ed. F.F. Segovia; Symposium Series 3; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 237-42.

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly enough, in 15:39 the centurion at the foot of the cross more than representing the gentiles' belief in Jesus as savior is expressing the demons' opinion of Jesus as enemy!

some people inside the community would like to see him, and Mark is discouraging them also). For Mark Jesus was and is the Son of man, the Human one. In developing this role he is using a corporative idea similar to the one found in Daniel 7: Jesus is the representative of the community. Whatever he did the community is to do. Whatever happened to him will also happen to the community. And the reason for this is that as the Son of man Jesus best exemplifies discipleship in the kingdom. His fellow disciples will not only follow him while he is still on earth but they will also share his sufferings, death, resurrection and vindication at the moment when he, as the Human one, receives the kingdom from God.

Because Jesus, in the gospel of Mark, never ascends to heaven this can only mean that he is still around, spiritually alive in the midst of the community. Sure enough, the risen Christ in Mark 16 issued a command to his disciples through the angel saying: “Meet me in Galilee.” He did not tell them: “Wait for me.” He told them: “Come and see me in Galilee.” The difference between these two ideas is enormous and it creates two very different types of communities: one that waits Jesus from heaven while consolidating itself socially and theologically; the other that follows and commits itself to ministry to the world. I am suggesting here that Mark’s Christology produces the latest type of community. This Christology is especially granted by the gospel’s ending, which, in Myers’s words is “the hardest ending of all: not tragedy, not victory, but an unending challenge to follow anew. Because that means we must respond.”<sup>35</sup>

I contend that to many people this understanding of Jesus as disciple of the kingdom is more congenial, and more practical. Perhaps the word is not practical but realistic. “This speaks to my reality”, I heard a believer say. “I can’t intellectually manage the Trinity,” she continued, “but I can manage this idea of Jesus as the model for discipleship, which we try to implement, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in order to build God’s kingdom.” It also does away with gender, class, ethnic and cultural distinctions for discipleship is an egalitarian, non-hierarchical endeavor into which we all are called. The Human one, as a

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<sup>35</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man. A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 401.

collective symbol for all of God's people, sets the bar high: he rejected the titles his contemporaries wanted to ascribe to him (Messiah, Son of God, Son of David, King of the Jews) and chose to identify himself as the son of humanity. He rejected nationalistic and metaphysical titles in favor of a more corporative, popular self-designation. He chose to be a disciple of God and the kingdom, not God's representative on earth. He represented God's people, not the Godhead. He was fully human. He showed this in many ways: he made mistakes, he knew fear, he had physical needs, etc. We made him fully divine by saying that if in the incarnation God had become fully human then it is possible for a human being, Jesus, to become fully immersed in the divine. But he never said that. He only pointed at God and the kingdom and called us to follow him as co-disciples into the Galilees of our world. It is a fairly simple call but the church has obscured it and complicated it by superimposing on it aspirations of power and selfish and exclusive interpretations of what it means to be the people of God. Jesus as disciple of the kingdom and our representative reminds us that the only responsibility we have is to be faithful to our call and to follow him as co-disciples in the construction of God's reign on earth. I believe that when we do that we will rediscover what it means to be *ecclesia*.