

A Long Walk just to Turn Around

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCibMB5JyZw>

(Scene: Video of Bend in the Jordan River near Beth-Ananiah)

It's not all that impressive a place really... In fact, it seems rather mundane. This could be almost ANY bend in ANY river... you'd never know that this is near where they said it all happened. And so much is said to have happened right near here. We'd expect it to be... grander. More worthy of the moment.

Would this really be worth a trip to go out to see it?

I must admit, it's on my bucket list... because here... near this very bend in the Jordan river is where so many stories coalesce. I never realized. Almost every story involving the crossing the Jordan river happened in almost the same spot... across from Jericho; between two long-lost campsites: Gilgal on the west bank and Shittim on the east; near a hill that forms a bend in the Jordan; at a place called Beth-Ananiah... right around here.

Of course there are churches and relics, and monasteries scattered about, this is a place of pilgrimage after all. There's a parking lot, a viewing deck, washrooms... because this place is so significant, but all this really does seem to distract from the sheer normalcy of the bend in the river.

Why come here? Why make the trip? Why expend the effort?

I suppose there are numerous motivations. To see it; to appreciate it; perhaps to repent here; perhaps to be baptized here... but at the core, however, it seems that the reason to come is to make this place part of our story and thereby, make it part of our identity.

And, that's what repentance, pilgrimage, and baptism are really all about – returning to our core identity – the identity with which God indwelt us. Sure, repentance is about turning around... it's about turning away from something but it's also about turning towards something... repentance is about changing our heart, changing our mind, changing our soul, changing our identity to be right with our father... back to shalom again.

And THAT'S what this bend in the river Jordan is really all about... repentance and identity.

And no one invites us to consider identity more than Mark! Mark's a mystery writer. Unlike Matthew and Luke who do the digging for us, Mark instead hands us a treasure map and a shovel. And he starts his Gospel with several mysterious identities. Inviting us to figure out who everyone in the story REALLY is. In fact, just about everyone who shows up in the first 8 verses might be someone else - even the authors of the scriptures Mark references.

For instance, Mark writes,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.” That's actually drawn from Malachi 3:1, not Isaiah. But in that verse, the messenger is sent before God... it reads, “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before ME.” The messenger in Malachi proceeds GOD'S arrival. Mark tweaks it.

Who exactly IS the messenger preceding, God himself or Jesus?

Next he alludes to Isaiah 40:3, by saying, “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” Although, here again, Mark gives a slight edit – setting up an unexpected fulfillment. Isaiah 40:3 actually reads, “A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” Did you catch it? In Isaiah, the

path or highway for the Lord is “IN THE WILDERNESS,” and that’s what the voice is crying out. But in Mark, it’s the VOICE that is “In the wilderness,” not necessarily the path.

That slight adjustment to these verses allows Mark to introduce us to the vocal messenger who is in the wilderness, preparing for the arrival of someone greater than himself – John, the baptizer.

John is conducting some kind of repentance, recommitment ministry out in the wilderness... but it’s not happening just anywhere... it’s at the Jordan river.

Mark tells us that people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to John and were Baptized by him in the Jordan river, confessing their sins.

First, a few important details we need to remember. At this time, a single word gets used for both Judeans and Jews in the New Testament – Iudaios. It’d kinda be like if the word “Anglican” referred to inhabitants of “Angleland” (England). It’d be like Mark saying, and “Anglicans” from all over “Angland” went out to John. The two identities overlap.

The pilgrimage is apparently significant. Mark uses hypobole saying everyone from Jerusalem goes out, but it still sounds like a significant number of Iudaios went to the Jordan to be baptized by John... and that’s pretty surprising. It raises a whole new set of identity questions. John is preaching a message that shouldn’t be so popular amongst the Judeans. He’s inviting them to treat themselves as if they are not, in fact, who they are... “Iudaios.” Baptism, especially at the Jordan river, is not an act performed by Iudaios... it’s an act performed by converts.

Typically, if a non-Jew wanted to become Jewish they would be baptized, symbolically washing away their former gentile identity, and then receive circumcision, completing the “immigration” from their previous national/ethnic identity into that of “Iudaios.” When the people of Judea and Jerusalem go out to be baptized by John, they are essentially acknowledging that they HAVEN’T *really been* Iudaios – that their identity was somehow incomplete or not fully realized – that’s quite an identity crisis. They’re saying their forefathers, for various reasons, didn’t complete the full process of becoming Iudaios, and now baptism in the Jordan was required for them to be fully themselves. These Iudaios must “convert” to Judaism.

What must it have felt like to journey out from Jerusalem to the Jordan? They’d have left through the Kidron valley, past numerous tombs of their forefathers... what a powerful symbol to walk to the Jordan away from these tombs to essentially claim that their legacy was incomplete or insufficient.

But, Mark’s not done... like the Judean and Jerusalemite pilgrims, John the Baptist is an incomplete identity TOO!

Now... John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist.

Some of us who grew up in the Church remember that this wardrobe description links John with Elijah... but imagine for a moment that you’re a Jewish refugee, listening to this story being read for the FIRST time... and you know your Jewish history well.

“That’s Elijah!” you’d say... because you’d know that this is exactly the clothing Elijah wears in 2 Kings 1:8. In fact, you’d know that Elijah is INSTANTLY recognized by this attire by King Ahaziah on a mere description by his guards, “It was a man in hair, with a leather belt around his waist.” “It is Elijah!” the King responds.

So for a knowledgeable Jewish listener, they’d know precisely why John is dressed like Elijah, what it means, and why he’s standing in the Jordan where he is.

After all, the Jordan is a big river... how do people *know* where to find John? Well... if we knew our Hebrew scriptures and histories like they did, we’d know there’s only one place a ministry in the Jordan could happen. We’d know a man

dressed like Elijah would be found in one spot. Right here, near the bend between Gilgal and Shittim... that's where EVERY major story in the Jordan takes place.

Because, as a knowledgeable Iudaios, we'd remember the story from 2 Kings 2.

That's the story of the last time Elijah was here... right here.

Before his first departure, Elijah had sets off on a most peculiar journey. He and his companion Elisha are near Gilgal, near Jericho. Elijah says to Elisha, "stay here, God has called me to Bethel." Elisha says, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you. And so they trek 30km to Bethel in the hills of Israel. Once they arrive, Elijah says, "Stay here, God's called me to Jericho," – almost exactly where they'd come from. Elisha says, "I will not leave you." So they two trek 30km back to Jericho. When they arrive Elijah says, "stay here, God has called me to the Jordan." Elisha says, "I will not leave you." And the two trek another 10km to the Jordan river... right near here. Where even the waters of the Jordan part for them and they walk across on dry ground. It will take something supernatural to separate Elisha from Elijah. ...and that's exactly what happens.

You know the rest of the story, Elijah and Elisha are dramatically separated by a Chariot of Fire, and Elijah is taken into heaven in a whirlwind from atop the hill in the curve of the river that will be renamed Tel-Elias... Elijah's hill. Elisha crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" – which is often why people get confused and think Elijah is taken to heaven in the chariot. He's not. He's taken by the whirlwind. The chariot is what prevents Elisha – who has stuck beside Elijah this whole way. 3 times he's asked to stay behind... 3 times he refuses... over 70km trek through mountains and desert and river. It takes a supernatural chariot of fire to finally separate them – *THAT'S* why Elisha is calling out... he's not awestruck by the Chariots of Israel... he's pleading with Elijah to understand why he's prevented from accompanying him. Then Elisha returns across the Jordan... again on dry ground.

SO... why here? What makes this curve in the Jordan at Beth-Ananiah so important? It's the doorway into the land for the people of Israel. This is the place where Joshua supposedly led the Israelites across the Jordan on their first entry into Canaan all the way back in Joshua 3:14... when the waters of the Jordan parted before the Ark of the Covenant and all Israel crossed on dry ground.

So, of course, Elijah and Elisha went back to where it all started. Just like Israel's crossing with Joshua, the waters parted for both Elijah and Elisha to cross the Jordan on dry ground, at Beth-Ananiah. This is one of the reasons why baptism in the Jordan has a gentile connection more than a Jewish one. Gentiles get wet if they want to enter Israel. Iudaios keep their feet dry. So, baptizing Iudaios in the Jordan is a big deal. It's identity-rocking idea. This is the place where the people entered Israel for the first time and their feet were dry.

John the Baptizer is inviting Iudaios to leave their land and their forefathers behind... it's a powerful moment of repentance! This is about re-identifying oneself.

The fact that John is dressed as Elijah is just as powerful. Like a traveling on a roundtrip to heaven, Elijah would expectantly return to where he departed. Remember – in Mark's version – John the Baptist doesn't get any backstory... all of the sudden he just "appears as a voice, crying out in the wilderness.

And why does it matter? Because the final book in their scriptures is Malachi. The *final* verses, in the *final* chapter, of their *final* book, read like this:

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their sons and the hearts of sons to their fathers, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

That's how the Hebrew scriptures end. That's why Elijah must precede God's arrival... it's literally the last thing their scriptures said to them.

So, we've seen this bend in the Jordan contains identifying significance for the pilgrims who come as descendants of the first Israelites - who crossed on dry ground - but are now wet, baptized like converts. It has identifying significance for John, who looks like Elijah - who crossed on dry ground - but now is pruning-up in the waters of the Jordan. What significance does this place have for the one who John says is coming?

Well it should. After all, this is the place where the King of Israel would be expected to enter the land. It may be the most beautiful of the stories to take place right near here. It's a story that starts in rebellion.

In 2nd Samuel, David's eldest living son, Absalom, has overthrown David in a coup. He's chased David out of Israel, across the Jordan. In the coming battle for the throne, David pleads with his generals to preserve his son Absalom, but Absalom is killed by overzealous soldier. When a herald comes with news of David's victory, his first question is whether Absalom survived. When he's told Absalom is slain, King David goes into his chambers and screams:

"O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

The victorious king is distraught, weeping and mourning. 2nd Samuel tells us the victory that day turned to mourning for all the troops as the king grieved. The victorious troops returned to the king that day as soldiers who return after defeat. The king covered his face, and continued to cry. Then Joab, David's general says, "Today you've shamed those who have saved your life all for the love of those who hate you."

And later, it came to pass... a grieving, deposed, King David returns to the Jordan river, to re-enter Israel and reclaim his usurped Kingdom, usurped by the very son he's grieving. His subjects gather to greet him as he crosses into Israel again. At the same place the first Israelites did with Joshua... at Beth-ananiah, on the Jordan. Among them is a man named Shimei.

Shimei was from Saul's family, when David had first fled the coup he'd escaped past Shimei's house. Shimei had come out cursing David and throwing stones at him. He shouted, "Out! Out! Murderer! Scoundrel! The Lord has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned. See disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood." One of David's soldiers asked him for permission to kill Shimei. David refuses, "No. My own son seeks my life, how much more now may Shimei? It may be that the LORD will look on my distress, and the LORD will repay me with good for this cursing of me today." So Shimei chased David all the way to the Jordan... inseparably, like Elisha... but throwing stones and flinging dust. In fact, Shimei was the last of David's rebelling subjects to see him as he fled across the Jordan.

And now... here comes the victorious King, crossing an unparted Jordan. His feet wet. Shimei runs to the bank... stopping David before he crosses the river. Samuel relates the encounter like this:

Shimei fell prostrate before the king, as he was about to cross the Jordan and said, "May my lord not hold me guilty or remember how I wronged you the day you left. I was wrong."

The same soldier as before suggested David put Shimei to death because he didn't acknowledge that David was the true King over Israel. And, in a true illustration of how this place, Beth-Ananiah, at this curve in the Jordan, is all about identity... David says,

"Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day!? ***I know*** I am King over Israel!" ...and he turns to Shimei and promises, "you will live" ...as he steps into the land of Israel.

It's a story about identities. David knows who he is. And he is able to deal mercifully, out of love for the people, even in grief. He knows who he is, whether the people acknowledge it or not.

This is a place of repentance, of identity, of remembering and re-centering who we are. It's worth the trip.

I wonder... I wonder if on their long journey whether any of the we pilgrims from Jerusalem were thinking of Absalom and King David. It's the longest story of a crossing of the Jordan in the Hebrew scriptures. It's the only time a hero of the Idaios gets his feet wet. Were they going to be like the first Israelites? or were they going to meet their King like Shemei?

I don't know, but they would've begun their journey by walking right past the tomb of Absalom.

Absalom... whose name means, "My father is Peace" – "Aba-Shalom"

And LO... Here come the pilgrims, marching through the craggy canyons, through the wilderness... 3 days to the mundane and memorable waters near the curve at Beth-Ananiah... all to turn around and re-enter the land of Israel ... baptized... as if they were converts to rather than sons of Israel. Do we know who they REALLY are? We just have to wait... perhaps they'll show us.

And LO... here John waits in the waters of the Jordan. Here he soaks... A pruning messenger... a voice crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way for THE LORD. In the same spot we'd expect Elijah to return to as foretold in the Hebrew scriptures, dressed in camel hair and wearing a leather belt, a stone's throw from the hill where Elijah departed. Do we know who he REALLY is? We just have to wait... perhaps he'll show us.

Echoing in the moment are the final words of the Hebrew scriptures:

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their sons and the hearts of sons to their fathers...

And what kind of father will we find there? Perhaps a father like Absalom's. Grieving, forgiving, merciful... preserving... promising.

Who's really coming?/.

And LO... the fragile frame of another pilgrim, stepping to the banks of the Jordan, about to get he's feet wet, with John or whoever he was... and whoever they were... and whoever we are...

And LO... John smiles.

Text:

I know... You will live

"Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!"

O my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you!

He will turn the hearts of fathers to their sons and the hearts of sons to their fathers...