

## “OUT OF MY SIGHT!”, “GET BEHIND ME!”, OR “FOLLOW AFTER ME!”: THERE IS NO CHOICE IN GOD’S KINGDOM

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Three translational and interpretative traditions dominate research of Matt 16:23-24, which discusses Jesus’ counter-rebuke of Peter in the context of Peter’s confession, Jesus’ commission to his disciples, and the transfiguration. The first position is most severe in tone and demand, commanding that Peter completely remove himself from the presence and sight of Jesus. The second contains what is viewed as a moderate rebuke, one that merely obligates Peter to move into a position somewhere behind Jesus. The third interpretation combines the directive for Peter to place himself behind Jesus with a further understanding that this designates a sign of discipleship: Peter is to place himself behind his Master and in so doing take up the characteristic position of a disciple. Two of these three traditions are reflected in modern Bible versions, while the third is represented by current commentary study. Prominent scholars lead the way in support of each of the divergent positions.

My purpose is twofold: (1) to identify and to understand how, through linguistic and contextual analyses, each of these traditions has come about, and (2) to emphasize that Jesus was concerned with a weightier matter than any of these interpretative traditions reflect: When it comes to discipleship in the kingdom of God, there is no room for compromise. There is no choice in the matter of obedience.

### I. THE THREE TRADITIONS

1. “*Out of my sight!*” The NIV views the rebuke of Jesus to Peter as a command to remove himself from Jesus’ sight because Peter has become a stumbling block for Jesus: “Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’ Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’” (Matt 16:23-24). This tradition is supported by other versions such as that of Williams (“Get out of my way, you Satan!”) and TEV (“Get away from me, Satan!”).

Commentators have explained this translation in various ways but have most commonly understood it to be a severe reprimand by Jesus for

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Peter to remove himself from Jesus' presence. It excludes the idea of discipleship. They often relate the passage to Jesus' command to Satan in the temptation: "Away from me, Satan!" (4:10).<sup>1</sup> Satan had opposed what God intended to do in the life of Jesus, and in turn Jesus commanded Satan to leave. Here, it is perceived, Peter also stood in the way of God's intention for Jesus, and so Jesus similarly demanded that Peter leave his presence. There is verbal and substantival similarity in each account. The verb *hypagō* is employed in each verse as well as the term *satana*. While admitting to parallel texts that support the discipleship theme, Carson argues that the connection between 4:10 and 16:23 is preferred because the concept of discipleship "ill suits the vocative 'Satan.'"<sup>2</sup> He appears to be the sole modern voice to exclude the notion of discipleship on the grounds of vocative prohibition. His conclusion is that Peter should not merely remove himself from Jesus' sight but should also get out of Jesus' way, ceasing to be a stumbling block.

2. "Get behind me!" In the KJV Jesus directs Peter to move to a position somewhere behind him, presumably because Peter is blocking the path of Jesus by being before him: "But he (Jesus) turned and said to Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men." This position is supported by a majority of the modern versions, such as the NASB and NRSV.

Such a translation is somewhat ambiguous. Is "Get behind me!" to be understood figuratively and therefore as synonymous with the command of Jesus to Satan in the temptation (KJV, "Get thee hence"; NIV, "Away from me!"; NASB, "Begone!"; TEV, "Go away!"; NRSV, "Away with you!"), thus supporting the first tradition discussed above? Or is it to be taken literally in the sense that Peter is to physically place himself behind Jesus? The NRSV directs its readers to notes on Mark 8:32 and 33: "The idea that the *Son of Man* (the Messiah) was to suffer was in complete contrast to the Jewish expectation." "Jesus saw in Peter's words a continuation of Satan's temptation." The latter note adds to the ambiguity of the passage because it translates the text in terms of a positional directive ("Get behind me!") but interprets it figuratively as did the first tradition ("Get out of my sight!").<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> So D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), vol. 8. There is a long tradition with which Carson aligns himself; cf. S. E. Johnson, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London, 1960); F. V. Filson, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London, 1960); J. Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Marci* (Berlin, 1909); A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London, 1915).

<sup>2</sup> Carson, "Matthew" 377.

<sup>3</sup> European commentators particularly favor this understanding; cf. W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Berlin, 1959); M.-J. Lagrange, *L'Évangile selon saint Marc* (Paris, 1929). That it reflects a view of the primitive Church is established by B. A. E. Osborne, "Peter: Stumbling Block and Satan," *NovT* 15 (1973) 187-190, esp. 187 n. 3, where reference is made to Origen *Comm. in Matt.* 12.21-22.

3. "Follow after me!" No Bible version represents the third alternative. But exegetical studies, such as those by Robert Gundry,<sup>4</sup> support it. The literal understanding of "Get behind me!" is here combined with the concept of discipleship. A true disciple is one who places himself literally behind and in a position of obedience to follow the master. In comparing the Matthean text with its Marcan counterpart, Gundry observes that "the omission of 'and seeing his disciples' again relieves the severity in Mark's portrayal of Peter; for in Mark the phrase distinguishes Peter from the disciples, i.e., makes him a nondisciple at this point (he had left the position of a disciple behind Jesus in order to take Jesus aside and rebuke him)."<sup>5</sup> The last phrase is important in that it reveals the understanding that to go behind another may connote that one is placing oneself in a position of obedience to or discipleship with another. Gundry understands that for Peter to oppose Jesus he would have had to physically move away from such a submissive stance.

4. *Evaluation.* The Talmud affirms the literal sense in which disciples "follow" their masters. One account describes Gamaliel as preceded by his slave but followed by his disciple, Rabbi Elai, en route from Akko to Kesib.<sup>6</sup> Midrashic examples abound with support of the same principle.<sup>7</sup> In the OT, Elisha became the disciple of Elijah through "following" him.<sup>8</sup> Jesus himself submitted to John's baptism, following John in order "that all righteousness might be fulfilled."<sup>9</sup> It has long ago been established that "the fixed terminology (in the OT) for this custom (i.e. discipleship) is *hlk ʔhry*, whose double meaning, 'walk behind' and 'be a pupil of,' would in strictly non-semitizing language require a double translation: 'walk behind as a pupil.'<sup>10</sup> The LXX has taken this terminology and translated *hlk ʔhry* as *opisō* with a verb of coming (e.g. *poreuomai*, *erchomai*, *hypagō*), as in 1 Kgs 19:21. In the particular context of Matt 16:21–28, the expression *opisō mou* with a verb of coming occurs twice. It first appears when Jesus addresses Peter (v. 23), and it is accompanied by the verb *hypagō*. It occurs a second time when Jesus turns to his other disciples and repeats the appeal: "If any want to become my followers (*opisō mou* with *erchomai*), let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow

<sup>4</sup> R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 338.

<sup>6</sup> *t. Pesah.* 1.27.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. *Midr. Deut.* 31:14 tells that the followers of Jochanan ben Zakkai "came after him," indicating that a number of disciples followed Jochanan as he rode along the wayside on his donkey.

<sup>8</sup> See 1 Kgs 19:20–21. This is evidenced both in the MT and the LXX.

<sup>9</sup> See W. B. Badke ("Was Jesus a Disciple of John?", *EvQ* 62 [July 1990] 195–204), where the author argues that Jesus "did indeed become John's disciple, but that the common conventions of that discipleship were broken by the Baptist himself in order that Jesus might carry out his messianic ministry" (p. 195).

<sup>10</sup> K. Grobel, "He that cometh after me," *JBL* 60 (1941) 397–401, esp. p. 397.

me" (NRSV). Apart from strengthening the verb of coming (from *hypagō* to *erchomai*), Jesus has repeated the Petrine charge to his other disciples.

NT writers choose *opisō mou* for various contexts and in combination with a variety of verbs of coming. All told, the phrase occurs five times in Matthew (3:11; 4:19; 10:38; 16:23, 24), four times in Mark (1:7, 17; 8:33, 34), twice in Luke (9:23; 14:27), three times in John (1:15, 27, 30), and once in Revelation (1:10). Of these fifteen references eight may be considered as repetitions of parallel passages or contexts, though in certain instances one author has related either a variant of the same verb or an entirely different verb of coming in combination with *opisō mou*. Further, the preposition *opisō* combines with personal pronouns other than *mou* twelve times in the NT, allowing a study of the "root" idea of the term *opisō* from other NT contexts.<sup>11</sup> This analysis reveals that twelve of the thirteen uses of *opisō mou* (not including Matt 16:23; Mark 8:33) speak of discipleship. The thirteenth reference (Rev 1:10) combines *opisō mou* with a verb of perception (*ēkousa*) rather than with a verb of coming. Of the twelve uses of *opisō* without *mou*, seven are in combination with a verb of coming: Five deal with discipleship, and the other two deal with the concept of obedience to a master—that is, the flesh (2 Pet 2:10; Jude 7). The five references that do not address the topic of discipleship do not employ *opisō* with a verb of coming.

A general rule may be stated: In every case in the NT where *opisō mou* occurs in combination with a verb of coming, the focus is on discipleship and the twofold idea of position behind and intention to follow obtains. As a corollary, where *opisō* stands without *mou* and is combined with a verb of coming, discipleship is the concern of the speaker. Evidence favors that Jesus gave a twofold command to Peter: (1) for Peter to get into a position behind him, and (2) for Peter to be a follower of Jesus (i.e. a disciple).

There remains the difficulty arising from the alleged unsuitability of the charge to discipleship with a vocative "Satan." It is unclear as to which grammatical rule, if any, Carson is referring to in making his statement. *Satana* occurs in a majority of instances in the OT with reference to an opponent or adversary and, according to Sailhamer,<sup>12</sup> refers to Satan only when accompanied by the definite article.<sup>13</sup>

If Sailhamer's analysis is correct, the term *satan*, whether vocative or not, needs to find accompaniment with the definite article before it can refer to the person Satan. When the word is anarthrous the thought of adversary or opponent is all that may be implied.<sup>14</sup> That Peter placed

<sup>11</sup> Cf. O. Cullmann, "Ho opisō mou erchomenos—CELUI QUI VIENT APRES MOI," *Études de théologie biblique* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1968) 47–52.

<sup>12</sup> J. H. Sailhamer, "1 Chr 21:1—A Study in Inter-Biblical Interpretation," *Trinity Journal* (Spring 1989) 33–48.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 42 n. 42.

<sup>14</sup> But cf. Osborne, "Peter" 188, where the author identifies two possible views for the expression "stumbling block": (1) "Peter 'for the moment acts Satan's part'" (cited from H. B. Swete, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* [London, 1902] 181); (2) "Peter (comes) temporarily under the control of Satan and therefore (is) identified with him" (with reference to A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* [London, 1915] 41).

himself before Jesus in the role of adversary is clear. That Jesus demanded Peter's return to the position and perspective of disciple seems certain. Similarly, in the LXX of 1 Kgs (3 Kgs) 11:14 the term *satan* occurs in anarthrous form twice: Once it identifies Adre the Idumean (not Hadad the Edomite as in the MT) as an adversary to Solomon, and in the same context it identifies Adre, Esrom son of Eliadae, and Adadezer king of Saba as adversaries to the Israelites.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after this account (v. 23) another adversary arises against Solomon (Rezon son of Eliada). Here the MT and the LXX agree, the latter employing the anarthrous term *satan*.<sup>16</sup> Other references in the LXX that reflect the Hebrew term appear only as variants, but each reflects the MT reading in translating *štn* as the anarthrous term "satan, adversary."<sup>17</sup>

The association with the term *satan* and the concept of stumbling block has been previously studied,<sup>18</sup> but all that has been concluded from the study is that "there is a causal link at a deeper level" due to parallels drawn from rabbinic literature.<sup>19</sup> The words of Jesus (Matt 16:23/Mark 8:33), "For you think not the thoughts of God, but of men," are surmised to have as their source "the evil *yēšer* (who) is at the same time 'Satan,' 'the stumbling-block,' and 'the rock'" over which one stumbles<sup>20</sup> because of a connection made by Rabbi Simai (ca. AD 200) of "the evil *yēšer* to a rock (*šwr*) protruding at a cross-road and causing men to stumble (*nkšlyn*),"<sup>21</sup> which also may imply a pun on Peter's name in the Matthean text.<sup>22</sup> Any further association between Peter and Satan, however, has not been established.

## II. MATTER

When Jesus addressed Peter to get behind him, he followed up his exhortation with an equal command to the other disciples: "If anyone would follow me, he must first deny himself, then take up his cross, and follow me." He uses the same terminology in this injunction as he had to Peter, employing *opisō mou* with a verb of coming (*erchomai*).<sup>23</sup> There is no

<sup>15</sup> This verse provides conjecture at variance with the shorter MT account. The LXX reads: "And the Lord raised up an adversary to Solomon, Adre the Idumean, and Esrom son of Eliadae who lived in Raama, and Adadezer king of Saba his master (and men gathered to him, and he was the head of the conspiracy, and he seized on Damasec); and they were adversaries to Israel all the days of Solomon; and Ader the Idumean was of the royal seed of Idumea."

<sup>16</sup> The text of the LXX is disputed and is most often relegated to the critical apparatus.

<sup>17</sup> From Aquila, Num 22:22; 1 Sam (1 Kgs) 29:4; from Symmachus and Theodotion, 1 Sam (1 Kgs) 29:4. Conversely, and in support of Sailhamer's hypothesis, in the case of Job 3:1; Zech 3:1, where *štn* is articular in the MT and in the LXX (Aquila), both terms refer to the person Satan.

<sup>18</sup> Osborne, "Peter" 187–190.

<sup>19</sup> *Sukk.* 52a, cited in Osborne, "Peter" 189.

<sup>20</sup> Osborne, "Peter" 190.

<sup>21</sup> *Pesiq.* 165a (cf. W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* [London, 1948] 22 n. 4), cited in Osborne, "Peter" 189.

<sup>22</sup> Lagrange, *L'Évangile*.

<sup>23</sup> The term "verbs of coming" is herein used to represent words of action that involve movement toward someone or something. Examples in the Greek NT include *erchomai* (and its cognates), *poreuomai*, *hypagō* and *akolouthēō*.

doubt that in this latter address Jesus concerns himself and his disciples with the matter of discipleship. But a greater concern becomes evident. The kingdom of heaven, whose keys had just been commissioned to Peter (Matt 16:19), is about to be witnessed by the disciples with whom Jesus spoke. Some in fact "will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (16:28). In light of such imminent glory, Jesus required unconditional obedience of his followers. No opposition would be tolerated. If one were to be called a disciple, there was only one position for that person: behind Jesus and in a position of submission to him as Lord. Compromised discipleship was intolerable and worthy of the Master's rebuke. Discipleship requires above all a denial of self. The taking up of the cross could only come as a result of imitating Jesus' own model in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Not my will but thine be done."

### III. CONCLUSION

It does not matter how one interprets the rebuke to Peter. Jesus' main point is one that demands a response from his audience. Whether he said, "Get out of my sight!", "Get behind me!", or "Follow after me!", he intended to focus his attention on the necessity of unconditional obedience in discipleship. In Luke's account (9:21-27) Jesus' rebuke of Peter is entirely omitted. Luke narrates what is essential to Jesus (also contained in Matthew and Mark)—namely, that which was stated above and which this brief study has affirmed: When it comes to discipleship in the kingdom of God, there is no room for compromise. There is no choice in the matter of obedience.