

## Julie M. Smith: The Way

Thank you for that generous introduction. Today we'll take a few minutes to talk about one word, the word *hodos* in the New Testament. You can access the slides with the code which I'll put up again at the end or the website if you're interested in them.

So, we see this word about a hundred times in the New Testament, and our usual gloss here would be something like a road or a way or a path. When it comes to the King James Version, we get a pretty consistent translation of the word as *way*, but as you can see, we also do have some outliers there, and so those are the ones we might want to take particular note of since you wouldn't necessarily recognize that if you're just reading in the King James Version.

It's also worth noting that not every time you see the word *way* in the King James Version will it be translating *hodos*. For example, in Matthew 20:4, is the context is a parable, and it contains the line *and they went their way*. But that is not translating our word here, so you would want to consult some study resources if you are interested in tracking down what exactly is coming from our Greek word and what may be translating something else.

So let's begin our look with how this word is used in Acts so we can get a sense of how the early community of followers of Jesus looks at this word. I think these three examples are particularly trenchant. In chapter 9, we have Saul desiring that if he found any of this *way*. It's obviously not a literal reference here to a physical road or a physical path but people who are following a certain way. You get a similar usage twice in chapter 19 in verse 9. We have people who are speaking evil of that way and they're obviously not talking about a bad physical road, they're talking about something more metaphorical as a way. And then the same thing later in the chapter: there's a stir; there's a little bit of a tumult about that way.

There are other examples in Acts that do this as well, but I hope that's enough to give you a sense that this is not just used in a literal sense of a road, although it very much can be, but it seems to be one of the titles given to the early Christian movement to the extent that, if you look at some modern translations, they would actually capitalize the word *Way* in these verses and in some others in Acts, to indicate that it's really functioning like a title for the early Christian church, a name of the church, if you will.

We have even one modern translation that instead of *way* here translates it as *movement* to make clear that we're talking about the community of people who are followers of Jesus Christ in his teaching. So it almost becomes a technical term in Acts, almost a name for the church; it may, in fact, whether casual or formal, be the first name, at least as is recorded, that we have evidence of in the New Testament.

One thing you might also want to pick up from these examples in Acts is that we're seeing both insiders, both followers of the *way*, and outsiders, those who are persecuting those who are following the *way*, using this term. So it's not just a term of art used by insiders or a slur used by outsiders, but it seems to be something that people both on the inside and on the outside are using. So that's how we see it used in Acts.

Now, we're going to shift our attention to the Gospels, keeping in mind that the audience probably have had their thinking about this word *the way* informed by the fact that the word is being used to describe the movement of people who follow Jesus. And so when we encounter this word *hodos* in the Gospels, we need to ask ourselves, is it functioning just literally? Sometimes in the New Testament it is strictly literal. In Acts 8:26, where we have an angel saying *go down unto the way that's going down from Jerusalem*, that strikes me as pretty literal. I can be a creative interpreter, but even I would have a hard time finding a metaphorical meaning in that one; that strikes me as pretty literal.

On the other hand, we can have a reading that's almost purely metaphorical. In Jude when we're talking about *the way of Cain*, I am virtually certain we are not talking about a paved, asphalt road, right? This is almost strictly metaphorical.

So when we come to the usage of this word in the Gospels, we need to decide on our continuum here between literal and metaphorical meanings. Are we far to one end or the other of the continuum? Are we in the middle? Does it have both meanings? Are they literal roads, ways, or paths, as well a metaphorical overlay as well? So those are the kinds of questions we would want to ask when we encounter this word used in the Gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament.

So let's start on that process in Mark. In the very beginning of Mark the word pops up in the third verse. This is quoting Isaiah 40:3 in Mark 1:3 where the voice of one crying in the wilderness says, *prepare ye the way of the Lord*. Now, my suspicion here is that the first audiences of Mark's Gospel in hearing this are not thinking of a literal, physical road, right? They're thinking of something more metaphorical, and particularly with this overlay, this understanding that they probably have based on what we see in Acts that this word refers to the movement of those people who are followers of Jesus Christ and his teaching.

So with that frame, how do you read *prepare the way of the Lord*? First of all, we have the idea that there was a preparation for this movement. Secondly, the idea that it's prophetically foretold coming out of verse 2: as it's written in the prophets. And then, third, that this isn't just any old way or the way a bunch of cousins put together in Galilee, it's the way of the Lord. So those are things that I think our early audiences might have found thinking about this word and the way since they are familiar with how it's used.

Next, let's look at Mark 22:23. This one's a little interesting because you don't get *way* in the King James Version, we get *hodos* translated as *as they went* as you can see in the underlining here, and the context is that Jesus is traveling with some of his disciples. So the early audiences here, I think, are thinking that there's obviously a literal aspect to this; they are going through a cornfield--they are literally traveling--but my suspicion is that they can't help but also hear a more metaphorical turn to it as well. In other words, this is what it looks like when you are part of the movement of those who follow Jesus. You are on *the way* of discipleship, not just literally, although there is that element here, but also figuratively or metaphorically as well.

In other words, this isn't a thing that happened once to some people a long time ago; rather, this is the kind of thing that happens to you as you are part of the group of people who follow Jesus on *the way*. That fits the context here in Mark really nicely where in Mark from 2:1 to 3:6 we have a series of five controversy stories, called *controversies* because people approached Jesus with hostile questions, and through those stories we have not just discussions of specific issues about the law and fasting and Sabbath observance, but an over-arching issue of what it means to say Jesus has authority and what that authority enabled him to do, and that's all wrapped up into this idea of being *on the way*.

Next, let's look at Mark 8. Our context here is a feeding miracle, and so Jesus worries that if he sends them home without food, they will faint *by the way*. This, I think, is particularly problematic in English because the way that we use the expression *by the way*, when we are going to offer an aside, right? *By the way, this might happen*, is clearly not the meaning here. They might faint *by the way* not as a parenthetical, but this is the focus of Jesus' concern here, that they will try to be following *the path* of discipleship, try to be among those who follow him, but that they will not be physically sustained in doing that. In other words, following Jesus is tough; it's physically demanding. But at the same time, we know how the story turns out, and the way it turns out is that Jesus provisions those who follow him.

So I think this is a good instance where something is lost if we take just a surface meaning of the word, or if we take it as strictly literal, even though there obviously is a literal element that these people would have followed some sort of path if they were to have left. But I think the early audiences would have heard something else here about what it means to follow Jesus and the provision that he provides to those who are *on the way*.

Next, this is one of the key themes in Mark when in chapter 8, Jesus, for the first time, in verse 31, begins to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer and die. And as you can see in verse 27, this is prefaced by the note that they were *on the way*. Again, they're literally traveling but the audience is hearing an overlay. And there's this scene with Peter. You can see what I've done here is I have highlighted what might strike you at first as sort of stage directions. In other words, these phrases give you a sense of who was physically where. But I think they do a little bit more

than that; they're not just helping you visualize the story, although they do that, but remember our context here is that we're on *the way*. We're on this metaphorical path of following Jesus and so in verse 32 when Peter takes him, the implication is that Peter is trying to take Jesus off the way or the path by telling him *oh no, you can't suffer and die*. But when Jesus turns around, he's resisting Peter's efforts to be taken off the path. When he says *get behind me Satan*, of course that sounds kind of harsh, and it is harsh, but it's also saying, *Peter, get back on the path behind me; my job, as Jesus would be saying here, is to lead this path; your job is to be behind me on the path; your job is not to take me off the path because you don't like what I'm teaching*. So verse 33 is certainly a rebuke as the language clearly states, but I think it's tempered very much by this indication in verse 34 to *follow him*.

Jesus does not do what Peter did, which is to try to get him off the path say, *well you don't understand that, you're done here*, no, no, Jesus does rebuke him strongly but also invites him to follow him on the path. And I think these would, again, not have been interpreted by the early audience as stage directions so much as a reflection on what it means to be on the path, what it means to allow Jesus to lead on the path, to follow on the path or to be off the path. And the over-arching message I take is that Jesus is very harsh when Peter wants him off the path, but immediately pairs that with an invitation to follow on the path.

We have a similar situation in Mark 9, but notice the unnecessary wording here. I often feel in Mark that unnecessary words are a hint that the words are doing something else for which they are necessary. And here when Jesus says, *why are you disputing on the way?* Well everyone knows they are *on the literal way* so those words help us to remember that this is also on a metaphorical way, part of the movement of those following Jesus. And then the redundancy is really striking in verse 34 because we just had an unnecessary reference to *the way* in verse 33, so a second unnecessary reference to *the way* in verse 34 really is striking to the audience. And it makes clear that this is a dispute about who is greatest, which is our topic here. It's really not the kind of thing that should be happening when you are following on Jesus' path.

Next, let's look in Mark 10, and we have here the story of Bartimaeus. In verse 46, this is one we may miss in English because we have *hodos* as highway side, but it is still our word we're focusing on, and then we get it again in verse 52 as *the way*. We have different prepositions before the phrase, which I've highlighted, so that in verse 46, Bartimaeus is not *on the way*; he is *by the way*. The implication is that his blindness is preventing him from following. Of course, after the miracle, what happens immediately after he receives his sight in verse 52, is that he follows Jesus *in the way*. So the implication here is that blindness can stop one from being able to follow Jesus. You can get close, but you can't quite follow. But Jesus' power is enough to overcome any sort of blindness--physical, spiritual, otherwise--that might prevent someone from following him. So that by the end of the story, Bartimaeus is able to follow Jesus *in the way*. That adds quite a bit, I think, to our reading of this story.

And it's also important in Mark to recognize that we have here a text divided into three parts that is not necessarily chronological, but rather geographical, so that the first third of the Gospel is in Galilee, the final third in Jerusalem, but the middle is organized *on the way*. It is a physical path they are traveling from north to south, but it is also the metaphorical path of *the way*. That the section begins and ends with healings of the blind does not strike me as accidental. We have Jesus offering three predictions of his suffering and death in that section--not accidentally to those who are willing to follow him *on the way*--so this is not just a physical journey to Jerusalem--although it is a physical journey--but it is also what the metaphorical journey of discipleship looks like in Mark's Gospel.

Now let's turn to Matthew and Luke a bit. I think it adds a bit to Matthew 5:25 to be told to *agree with your adversary while you are in the way with him* as a reminder that, on the one hand, yes, they may be your adversary, there may be adversaries in the movement with you, but also that they are *on the way* with you. So that adds a little bit to how I interpret this verse with this sort of double-edged message that, yes, someone can be an adversary, but they are ultimately *on the way* of discipleship with you.

Similarly, in Matthew 7, where Jesus is talking about wide and narrow gates, and strait and narrow, he references the way twice. I think the early audiences of Matthew would have heard an allusion to the movement of those who followed Jesus there. And I think that would have been important to them.

Let's also look at Matthew 8:28. We have here the story where the demons are cast into the swine. And as the story is being set up, notice the way the devils are described coming out of the tombs; they are exceedingly fierce, and how is that described? So that no one might pass *by that way*. In other words, for our audience who sees this as at least in part a reference to those who follow Jesus, they are hearing that this evil power is blocking the path of discipleship. And so that, I think, would prompt some thinking and soul-searching on their part. But, again, we know how this story ends. We know it ends with Jesus in effect clearing the path by removing the threat that these devils posed to the audience, and I think the audience very much would have picked up on yet another instance where obstacles *in the path* are removed by Jesus if people are willing to follow him. So I think there very much is a literal element to the word *way* here, but I think there is a metaphorical one as well.

Okay, now, let's look at an instance in Luke. So here we are in Luke 24:32 with our road to Emmaus experience. And so we have some reflection here. Reflection is always a good thing: *did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?* So, again, I think the function this has to the audience who sees a metaphorical edge, again, there's also a physical meaning, but the metaphorical reference to those who follow

Jesus is that this is not something that happens to two people once; it is the kind of thing that happens to those who choose to follow Jesus. I think that's particularly significant in this context because this verse focuses our attention on scripture study. We may not be able to reproduce the experience of having Jesus speak to us on the road of Emmaus, but we can certainly reproduce the experience of scripture study. And I believe this verse points us in that direction by encouraging us to think of ourselves as people who have the option of choosing to be on the metaphorical way, and then in interpreting this as a situation where when we are *on that way*, if we are pondering, the scriptures might be opened to us as well. So again, I think we might get a little bit more out of it if we think of it in that context.

I think I have illustrated through studying these verses the idea of *the way* as a metaphor for the Church over there to the right [on the slide] as a journey. So let's stop and sit with that for a moment. I will point out that the use of *the way* is less common in John than in the synoptics, so it's kind of interesting. Perhaps this metaphor isn't quite as transient to the author of the fourth Gospel as it is for our synoptic writers. I would also note that *the way* is extremely rare in Paul's letters; it seems never to refer to the early church as an entity, so I find that interesting because we have about a half dozen references in Acts that point us in that direction, but you'd be hard-pressed to find that in Paul. So it's always possible that perhaps this is just language Paul or other writers of Pauline Epistles and scribes are not as familiar with; it may also not have been a title or a metaphor that particularly resonated in those communities. It can be hard to separate those two different ideas out from this distance. Is it something they weren't as familiar with, wasn't important to their community, or didn't resonate with them as much?

So the first point that I would like to make here is we may have some multi-vocality with our early church where for some people the title *the way* is really, really important and central and gets used a lot, and for other people in other communities, this isn't a title that resonates with them as much. It doesn't get used; they're turning to other metaphors, other images, other symbols and similes to explain what the church is like; that's a possibility. In my experience, we want to iron out multi-vocality. We want to minimize differences. I don't know that this is always a good thing. I hope to show through this graphic that there's one church in the middle, but there are a lot of different ways you might think about it, a lot of different things to which you might analogize it, a lot of different metaphors for it that may or may not be meaningful to you.

I know, tangentially, lots of people find the title *Elder Brother* really useful for Jesus Christ. I don't have an older brother; that one leaves me with a blank. I don't dislike it; I don't think it's wrong, I just don't know what to do with it. Whereas I'm sure those of you who have awesome older brothers think it's a great title. Those of you who were tormented by your older brothers may be on my side of the fence on that one, so that's why we need multi-vocality, right? It's that some metaphors are going to work for some people based on their life circumstances and not for

others, and that's fine. That's why there is more than one Gospel, and that's why there is more than one speaker in General Conference.

So as much as I like, and I think it's good to focus on this metaphor of *the way* as a metaphor that perceives the church as a journey that I think very much would have been in the minds of perhaps particularly Mark's audience, it is not the only game in town. And we might think of the church as a relationship; we certainly get that with the marriage imagery that comes out of the Old Testament, right? And that's very powerful for a lot of people. But if you experience a messy divorce, that one may not work for you so well.

We, of course, could also metaphorize the church as a location. We might think of it as Zion, we might think of it as Zion's parking lot. Location can work. We might think of it as a time, and, of course, there are probably a nearly infinite collection of other metaphors – a symphony, a buffet, that we might use for the church. So I don't want to crowd out any of those other metaphors by highlighting the one of *the way*, even though I think it does exist in our New Testament texts.

I do think it matters how you think of the church, particularly in the diversity you look at in Matthew 7:14, as Jesus is preparing them to see the movement of those who follow him as a narrow way and not a broad way. It does impact how you think about the church. It also impacts how we think of the early followers of Jesus. In academic circles, we usually refer to them as early Christians; I don't know that many of them would have liked that title; they all thought they were late Christians because many of them thought that Jesus would be back soon. So that's an instance where the academic usage would be extremely unfamiliar to the people who were living through it, although, of course, it makes sense to us today.

If I think of early followers of Jesus as people who are on *the way* with a capitalized T and W, I admit I think about them a touch differently with a different bit of nuance than if I think about them as early Christians. If I think about them as Christians, if I think about them as a sect of Judaism, again it shapes how I view them. Names matter. They shape our thought. And so I think it's at least good to pause and to ask ourselves: What is this metaphor or name bringing to our understanding? But also: what may it be taking away? No metaphor, analogy or parable is perfect; they are, of course, imperfect. If they were perfect, they would not be an analogy or metaphor; you would be comparing something to itself, right? By definition, every metaphor, analogy, and parable fail on some points, and so we would also do well to ask ourselves: At what point does the analogy of *the way*--or any other metaphors to the church you want to look at--at what point does it fail? Because it will conceal perhaps as much as it reveals. I think these are great questions that we should be pondering.

I think, though, that *the way* can be a powerful metaphor for us; it's not exactly unique in all Christian traditions, I think people have thought about the idea of a journey of discipleship, a

path of discipleship, so it's not exactly unfamiliar terrain. So that particularly if we approach these New Testament texts, we may get a little bit more of what initially can look just like stage directions or physical notations if we think about them as functioning as a metaphor for the church. And if we take that additional layer to say *how does this match my journey of discipleship, in what ways am I on the path of discipleship today? In what ways am I perhaps not as on the path as I should be, or am I having trouble moving forward on the path?* I think those to be very helpful, and I end on this note, that particularly with the texts that we look at today, what we often saw were first obstacles on the path, and, secondly, we saw Jesus removing those obstacles for his followers.

I can't think of a better note to end on, so that is where I will end. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

And I don't have my schedule; I think we may have one or two minutes for questions? We could even take a hand or two. I'm the one that's monitoring the questions from Facebook.

Okay, *the way*, this is a question from the audience: that sounds a lot like *the path* or even the *covenant path*, a suddenly popular LDS term.

Yes, that is an excellent insight, and it may be useful as we think and discuss about the covenant path to look again at these references to the way. Thank you very much for that insight.

Yes. (*inaudible question from floor*) I didn't discuss that, that would be another excellent text to look at. Thank you. Oh, the reference to Jesus as *the way* was not one that I had discussed, but another excellent one to look at.

Yes. (*inaudible question*) That's not something I look at but that would also be very powerful, of course, as we think about people in the context of temple worship moving through, right, as they go through that process that would be really interesting to look at.

Okay, thank you.