

Jesus' Travel Route and Its Theological Implications as Reflected in the *Tao* Concept

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Abstract

As an energetic mission traveler, Jesus' movement in the topographical context forms a "topo-theological" pattern of the "way." This article seeks to investigate the ample meanings of the "way" (*to hodos*) concept as reflected in Jesus' travel route. Jesus claimed to *be* the way but historically he was rather *on* the way. The physical way represents the metaphysical virtue that brings God's kingdom to fulfillment. His travel route offers a lens through which one can trace the theological vision. In addition, the *Tao* concept helps better understand what Jesus intended to show with his movements on the missionary route, quite apart from his kerygmatic message. The *Tao* sheds light on Jesus' way as embodied in his travel route. The article concludes with the characteristic way-ness and place-ness of Jesus' topo-theological legacy in the context of theodicy.

I. Introduction: Why Jesus' Travel Route Matters

"Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33). In this passage, time and place are mentioned alongside Jesus' way. This saying is part of Jesus' response to Herod's threat to kill him as reported by some Pharisees who also urge him to flee. In a rather sarcastic tone, Jesus calls King Herod a "fox," suggesting Herod's sly character, while demonstrating his ministry of "casting out demons and performing cures today, and tomorrow, and on the third day." This must be an expression of Jesus' robust confrontation with Herod's political jeopardy which however could not prevent him from completing his ministry.¹ In

¹ Commentators tend to focus on the divine decree or theological necessity so as to explain why, and Jerusalem as the place in which prophets were slain. In contrast, however, no mention is made of the "way" taken in such a consecu-

the above saying, the reference to a particular time unit “today, tomorrow, and the third day” is repeated in a rhetorical pattern, implying that Jesus’ ministry should be fulfilled in perfection, as is the case for his way from death to resurrection. The triadic day of perfection will come true upon Jerusalem, yet only through his way of moving on.

Indeed, Jesus was constantly on his way before he became “the way” for those who followed and eventually worshipped him as the Lord after his resurrection. Since Jesus moving on his way became the way later, it is not ungrounded, albeit paradoxical, that earliest Christians were called those who followed “the way” (Acts 9:2). Of course, the way was not without obstacles as manifest in the following lament “Jerusalem, Jerusalem...” (Luke 11:34ff). Jesus and his followers had to pay their own dues at the expense of making Jesus’ way a new horizon of history. Thus his way enabled his disciples to create a new age out of the places in which he stayed and did his mission. In other words, Jesus’ physical presence on the way came to be incorporated into a new time with dynamic theological implications. It does not merely refer to dogmatic assumptions on Jesus’ transcendental nature but to what I would call ‘*topo*-theological’ connotations which are relevant to the concrete paths he walked on. The concept of the “way” thus involves a physical exercise on the one hand and on the other carries a metaphysical connotation as it conjures up a certain image of an ongoing journey including the traveler’s attitude.

This paper seeks to investigate the ample meanings of the “way” concept as illuminated in Jesus’ travel route. Although John reports that Jesus claimed to be the way, historically he was rather on the way, walking around the Sea of Galilee. For him the way was not simply a geographical concept or a life style, but a metaphysical virtue that brings God’s Kingdom to fulfillment. Though he did not conceptualize it in a sophisticated discourse, his travel route offers a lens through which one can trace the theological vision possibly formulated in the depths of his mind. Widely known, Taoism centers on elaborating what the way (道) is meant to be in a series of proverbial sayings. Thus it would be another endeavor for inter-religious dialogue if the *Tao* concept helps understand better what Jesus intended to show with his body moving on in the missionary route, quite apart from its kerygmatic message. Then it will shed light on Jesus’ way as embodied in his travel route, while reckoning with the similarities and differences in comparison with each other.

tive stream of time. Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1977) 350-51; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 1029.

II. Jesus' Travel Course and Its *Topo*-theological Pattern

Jesus was significantly and constantly on the move for his activities of the Kingdom of God, and this movement reveals a characteristic feature with respect to Jesus' theological orientation.² That is, his travel route, though confined within the boundary of Palestine, shows a circular pattern in which he goes out, comes back, and takes one step further beyond the place where he has once stayed. Summed up in a pattern of gradual expansion, his line of movement starts from Capernaum and then moves around the towns of the lake basin. Repeating the same pattern of movement, Jesus sometimes makes a relatively long journey, reaching as far as Caesarea Philippi to the north, Tyre and Sidon to the northwest, Decapolis to the east, and Samaria and finally Jerusalem to the south.³ In the region of Tyre, although wanting to remain unnoticed in order to rest, Jesus was sought out by a Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cleanse her daughter who was then possessed with a demon (Mark 7:24-30). In the country of Gerasenes (Decapolis), Jesus was confronted with another Gentile man with an unclean spirit (Mark 7:31-37). Especially in the Johannine tradition, Samaria was known to be an important mission field certainly for John the Baptist and Jesus himself as well. Whereas Samaria was a territory ignominious for impure blood, the regions of Tyre and Gerasenes were remote from Jewish territory, implying that Jesus, whether consciously or unconsciously, exposed himself to more Gentiles.

Interestingly enough, as illustrated in the passages above, the remoteness of Jesus' travel, initially an opportunity for rest and leisure, later became a motivation for him to get in contact with heterogeneous people. Considering that it was not customary for a pious Jew to meet a Samaritan or a Gentile, Jesus' travel route must have appeared highly challenging against the normative conventions in his contemporary society. It was not simply a geographical, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural boundary that Jesus was unwittingly challenged to cross over, but more

² In antiquity, geography plays a significant role of spreading a particular ideology in historiography. Likewise, it seems, geographical concerns reflect a peculiar theological orientation. This is what I would call "topographical theology," abbreviated as "topo-theology." For a study on how geographical concerns work in ancient historiography, see the following article, though it deals with the case of the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah. Thomas B. Dozeman, "Geography and History in Herodotus and in Ezra-Nehemiah," *JBL* 122 (2003): 449-66.

³ Concerning the theological significance of this geographical references in relation to Jesus' travel route, see my article, Jung Sik Cha, "Localization and Globalization in Light of Early Christian Missionary Route," *Korea Journal of Christian Studies* 40 (2005): 129-62.

importantly a psychological and spiritual barrier due to Torah regulations. In his encounters, Jesus was not only in the position to instruct but also to restore those who “were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). Sometimes he was surprised to know something unexpected, thus confronted with challenges. This implies that spatial expansion led him to enlighten his way of thinking, thus dismantling his own bias as a Jew. In response to such external impacts, his internal disposition seems to have been also open to the way beyond what he was familiar with, creating an innovative chasm toward a further step. This manner of self-development parallels the long process in which Israelites since patriarchal times have endlessly expanded the dimension of recognizing God from the unit of a single family to the large gamut of the whole globe.

At the end of his way, Jesus completed his travel in a place of rest, whether it was a house or other accommodation. In a short journey, Jesus secured his own place in secret as confirmed in his willingness to retreat to a remote place, that is, mostly a wilderness or mountainous area. While his long distance travels ended with another mission to an unfamiliar world, his temporary retreat in a secluded place became a channel of divine revelation, presumably offering a space for communication with God. The narrow escape into his own place prepares for prayers in secret, thus imitating God who sees in secret (Matt 6:6). These self-reflective moves detected in a rather short distance travel may be called an “internal” motive to recharge his spirit while simultaneously he searches for a new mission route. The nameless places called “wilderness”⁴ or “mountain”⁵ are also significant since they offered a point of contact on which Jesus, being surrounded by the natural environment, got a chance to feel for God’s creation other than human beings. Especially when he woke up early in the morning and went to a remote place for prayer, his retreat is properly characterized by silence in

⁴ From both Old and New Testament perspectives, scholars have noticed the motif of wilderness as conveying an important theological message. One of the common points is that God’s people are led or urged to find in wilderness a new way out of the current predicament and renew their life. See G. I. Davies, “Wilderness Wanderings,” *ABD* 6:912-914; Thomas B. Dozeman, “The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 23-43; J. B. Gibson, “Jesus’ Wilderness Temptation According to Mark,” *JSNT* 53 (1994): 3-34; N. T. Wright, “Paul, Arabia, and Elijah (Galatians 1:17),” *JBL* 115 (1996): 683-692.

⁵ Mountain is also a significant motif that serves both as a literary device and a theological symbol. This is particularly so in Matthew’s Gospel. See Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* (JSNTSup 8; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985).

darkness. This contemplative space and time serves as a break to Jesus' onward move.⁶

Focusing on Jesus' mission route in Galilee, one notices that Capernaum became a central place where he began many of his journeys. But the status of centeredness did not last long as he completed his mission in Jerusalem where he paid his final visit, mainly to die on the cross. Contrary to our normal expectation, the gospel author does not mention the most developed city of Sepphoris⁷ as a background of the narrative, not to speak of highlighting it in relation to Jesus' ministry. In this light, Capernaum could be a decentralized center only as long as his line of movement is active within the Galilean boundary, thus missing the Hellenistic center Sepphoris. Jerusalem, the center of Judaism, never served to be a vital place for Jesus since it was a temporary spot on the way for the prophetic demonstration of the disasters on the final day. Rather he chose to stay in a marginal town, Bethany, having a friendly fellowship with his associates. This pattern is applied to the birth place of Jesus according to the gospel report. As a small town away from Jerusalem, Bethlehem appears to be vivid evidence that a marginal place comes into view and serves as a starting point for developing Jesus' salvation story. Looking through all the lines of Jesus' movement, one finds that his physical presence on the way plays the role of bridging two different places, while centralizing one and decentralizing the other. In turn, this can be understood as another criterion to detect the motif of subversion, undercutting the majority viewpoint that such and such cities are of utmost importance. Meanwhile, the fixed centers known to be powerful and so influential in their contemporary standard lose their weight, yielding their supreme positions to other unpopular places, some of which are even nameless.

Yes, Jesus was destined to die in Jerusalem and for this very reason Jerusalem became the main object of Jesus' lament. On the contrary,

⁶ At least for Mark, according Marcus, "wilderness" is a theologically significant motif for recapitulating the new exodus event in the way of the Lord, even before it turns out to be a solitary place for prayer and rest. Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 12-47.

⁷ Concerning the geographical location and historical significance of Sepphoris, Capernaum, and Galilee along with their theological connotations, see James F. Strange, "Sepphoris," *ABD* 5:1090-93; Virgilio C. Corbo, "Capernaum," *ABD* 1:866-69; Peter Richardson, "What has Cana to do with Capernaum," *NTS* 48 (2002): 314-31; Seán Freyne, "Hellenistic/Roman Galilee," *ABD* 2:895-901; idem, "The Geography of Restoration: Galilee-Jerusalem Relations in Early Jewish and Christian Experience," *NTS* 47 (2001): 289-311; Richard A. Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995).

Galilee, including many of its small towns, came to be established as a topo-theological center as a reminder of Jesus' life-giving mission and also for the future hope of the regathering and regrouping of his disciples. Each of the towns was not a meaningless *topos* isolated from the constant move of Jesus' way. The other way around comes close to the reality in which Jesus linked each town by means of his bodily presence along his journey. Even if he did nothing but walk and rest in his free time, the dynamic way in which Jesus embodied his life nurtured the places, towns and villages where people frequented with eagerness to experience the gospel. In terms of the priority of Jesus' gospel ministry, preaching and teaching came along with the activity of healing, only before and after his moving step.

From this *topo*-theological viewpoint, one may argue that Jesus' feet paved the way, not rigidly but with flexibility, to the Kingdom of God. In other words, the way as reflected in Jesus' travel route served as an "association space"⁸ in which various concerns of different others are brought into communication and generate a new set of values. This task could be fulfilled fairly successfully as Jesus' way was not self-enclosed but open forward, flowing like wind with his spirit. The same is true of his sense of place, according to which the central place is marked off from the target of Jesus' mission whereas the marginal place comes into view.

III. Theological Matrix of Jesus' *Hodos* in Comparison with the *Tao*

In the gospels, a number of passages use the Greek word *hodos* in both physical and metaphysical senses. In the physical sense, it simply means a road on which people walk and pass. In the metaphysical sense, it refers to a way of life including one's moral conduct and spiritual disposition. The physical implication of the term turns into a metaphysical realm as it carries a dynamic mobility in the ongoing course of Jesus' mission travel. That is to say, Jesus' movements on the physical way are naturally connected with his metaphysical instructions on the way in both theological and ethical contexts, thus making it identical with the way of the Lord in the Old Testament.⁹ This is how the concept of the "way" operates its function in multiple settings. For example, entering through the narrow gate is paralleled with walking on the hard road as

⁸ I am borrowing this term from the famous Japanese critic Karatani Kojin in his book *Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money* (trans. S. Kohso; Boston: The MIT Press, 1995).

⁹ For this understanding in Mark's Gospel, see Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, 37-41.

an allegory of pursuing the higher goal of life (Matt 7:13-14). In other words, those who follow Jesus' way should be ready to do a better righteousness than that of Pharisees and scribes.¹⁰

The "betterness" of the righteousness reminds us of the characteristic points which Jesus' way represented through his ministry. In order to do a better righteousness, first of all he tried to reinterpret a series of rigid truth claims traced back to the literal understanding of the Torah and the formalistic application of ritual codes. It is historically true that Jesus was a legitimate son of Judaism (i.e., Rabbi) but he deliberately encroached on its exclusive boundary, venturing to make a chasm into the current religious system of the temple and synagogue. By doing so, he attempted to build a creative order of discourse by reclaiming the truth in such a way that breaks through the self-enclosed literalism of the Torah and enriches the freedom of life in a variety of Kingdom settings. For this purpose, he had to trespass his contemporary religious conventions specially relating to Sabbath and food laws.¹¹

Secondly, Jesus' way of doing a better righteousness becomes manifest in his effort to reconstruct the hierarchical human relations. Thus the radical gap between the pure and the impure, the noble and the lowly, and the self-claimed righteous and the condemned sinners was radically challenged and in the circle of the Kingdom movement tumbled down while seeking to establish an alternative relationship in which one serves the other. No brokerage was allowed to intervene in such an egalitarian system, as J. D. Crossan argues,¹² and even Jesus himself never claimed to be the king of the Kingdom. Rather he humbled himself to serve his disciples and the wandering crowd by means of such activities as teaching, feeding, healing, and so on. This subversive nature of his ministry was earlier foreshadowed in terms of messianic mission as the Isaianic prophecy was proclaimed before and after his inauguration.

Thirdly, Jesus' activities pertaining to the better righteousness amounts to the dismantling of the exclusive Jewish soteriology based on the national ideology. Quite apart from the legal justice at that time, Jesus' way of doing righteousness was aimed at different kinds of mar-

¹⁰ For the historical Jesus, no doubt "righteousness" (*dikaiōsynē*) is that of the Torah, but it can be further applied, for instance in Matthew, in both soteriological and ethical contexts. See Hung-Sik Choi, "A Study of δικαιοσύνη in Matthew," *Korea Journal of Christian Studies* 39 (2005): 47-64.

¹¹ On the conflictual situation between Jesus' group and the Pharisaic group as reflected in Mark's story and Galatians, see James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990).

¹² See John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

ginalized individuals and groups, ultimately being inclusive of all outsiders. Notably his adventurous move beyond the boundary of Judaism and Jewishness paved the way prematurely for the future mission to the Gentiles. Seen from this vantage point, Jesus' travel route sheds light on the inclusive nature of his missiology and soteriology in such an adventurous motion. Sharpening rather than dropping out the particularities of his personal ethnic and religious background, Jesus developed a frontier way beyond the given way so as to make God's salvific Kingdom widespread on the earth.

As a metaphysical principle, the oriental concept of the *Tao* (道) serves to integrate the subordinate principles of Being (有) and Non-being (無) which generate all creatures in the interaction of *Yin* (陰) and *Yang* (陽). The *Tao* is a formless, yet everlasting cosmic spirit as declared at the heading of the *Tao Teh King*—"The *Tao* that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging *Tao*."¹³ According to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus, being the way itself, is identified with truth and life. In other words, the Johannine Jesus was not *a priori* the way to truth and life, but *ipso facto* became truth and life in every step of his journey. This suggests that Jesus did something significant to become the Way. In my interpretation, that "something" was embedded in Jesus' travel route through which he expanded his missionary ideal beyond the self-enclosed boundary, simultaneously enriching his historical vision of the Kingdom of God.

In this context, Jesus' Way is seemingly warm as compared with the *Tao* which is rather cool since his bodily movement somehow required personal energy with which one sheds sweat. In contrast, the *Tao* seems to be detached from every bit of human reality, moving around the world in the manner of *adiaphora* and *apatheia*. Though one may claim that the *Tao* is also involved in it by means of its incarnation, it does so only in an invisible, cool way. In this sense, Jesus' Way and the oriental *Tao* are both similar and dissimilar. They share in common some basic conceptualities in terms of free lifestyle, and yet vary in embodying their intrinsic value in time and space.¹⁴ Jesus' Way prefers to work in history

¹³ *The Texts of Taoism*, Part I: *The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu; The Writings of Chuang Tzu* (Books I-XVII) (trans. James Legge; New York: Dover Publications, 1962), 47.

¹⁴ At this point, it has to be noticed that the *Tao* is not simply the pivotal principle of Taoism only. In fact, the *Tao* existed even before Taoism. For this perspective, see Martin Palmer, *The Elements of Taoism* (Rockport: Element Books, 1991); Max Kaltenmark, *Lao Tzu and Taoism* (trans. Roger Greaves; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965). In addition, the *Tao* was permeated also in other Oriental philosophies and religions, including Confucianism and Buddhism. For example, Heup Young Kim identifies the *Tao* with Jesus Christ in

whereas the *Tao* gets along with cosmos. Although Jesus' Way involves temporal spaces in his activities, nevertheless he turns it into a particular place, thus featuring it as a dramatic, or historically memorable event. All Jesus' activities presented in the name of God's Kingdom somehow reflect the way in which he transforms many anonymous spaces into meaningful places. In short, his Way caused his ministry to be fruitful with vital events in a particular place. In my speculation, the way-ness and the place-ness of Jesus' Kingdom ministry seem to be an overarching imagery that constantly incarnates and historicizes the *Tao*. In this way, their conceptualities are possible to come into dialogue insofar as both of them contribute to pacifying the living creatures struggling in the entangled relationship of various sorts. Which of the two, personal and impersonal, historical and a-historical, goes to a better configuration of our theology remains moot, yet they are ready to cooperate in nurturing a better vision of what we call forth in the name of God.

IV. Conclusion: Place-ness and Way-ness in Doing Theology

The problem of theodicy does not seem to be easily compromised between God's absolute righteousness and the total depravity of humanity. Time and again, such a dichotomized view has made the related issues more complex rather than solving them. Accordingly, contemporary theological speculations on theodicy come back and forth, centering around the western frame of reference to the Platonic and further Augustinian metaphysics. What is missing and therefore needs to be supplemented is another dimension of theological sense focused on place and way.

The metaphor of place-ness and way-ness conjured up from what the historical Jesus embodied in his travel course triggers our endeavor to recapitulate our way of doing theology. As the pivotal principle, the way of Judaism before the historical Jesus should be tackled and eventually disintegrated in his venture to go beyond their conventional boundaries. Their detailed and narrow way of religious conventions was to be overcome by means of Jesus' other rough and narrow way (Matt 7:13-14). This collision so ironically came to bear a universal way as a new *topos* of theology to the extent that his disciples opened up a cosmic vision of salvation with a cosmopolitan spirit of receptivity and hospitality.

Thus, in imitation of Jesus who imitated God, one can be motivated to move like the *Tao*, just as the one born from above flows like

the context of Confucian-Christian dialogue. Heup Young Kim, *Christ & the Tao* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2002), esp. 76ff.

the spirit, while questioning and embracing the all-puzzling abyss of human reality. For instance, one's sense of a new place can discover an independent forum in which one feels absolutely free to lament like Jesus in Gethsemane and on the Cross. Furthermore, one may dare to challenge God not to lead us into temptation, thus even suspecting that his allegedly good intention of the old-fashioned patriarchal god could be ill grounded or poorly disposed. What becomes significant in the thoroughgoing process of dialogue is not a single answer with clarity but reconfirmation of mutual trust. That is why and how the so-called "Promethean element" of the prophetic tradition makes an appeal to those who keep walking forward and backward never giving up the pilgrimage of adventure for what is hidden in God's *mystērion*. In short, such a *mystērion* for which Jesus was bold to search enables us to set forth a rationale to envision an extraordinary feature of the ordinary way and place in the setting of our daily routine life.