



The Disciples in Mark's Gospel: Beyond the Pastoral/Polemical Debate

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Mark presents Jesus from the opening verses of the Gospel as the Christ, the beloved son of God, whom God has sent in confirmation of God's promises of a redeemer to Israel. But Jesus encounters fierce and sometimes apparently successful opposition from religious leaders, those originally entrusted with tending the vineyard Israel; from demonic forces, in whose death-grip humanity and creation lie; and from his own chosen ones, who utterly fail to grasp the nature of Jesus' messiahship and to conform their lives to it. In fact, from the very opening verses of the Gospel, the theme of opposition to the eschatological redemption the narrative promises is sounded, and it remains a dominant motif as the story moves toward its climax in Jerusalem. In Mark's Gospel, these conflicts interrelate, interpret, and illumine one another. Moreover, they have a common rhetorical goal: to address the conflict between the promises of God and the reality of the seemingly unredeemed world inhabited by the audience. Each line of conflict threatens, in very real ways, to undermine the very promises of God Jesus was sent to confirm. For the audience, the essential conflict lies in embracing Mark's narrative argument that God's promises are confirmed in Jesus in the face of forceful opposition to God's plan from both expected and surprising quarters.

In this article I will attempt to support these observations by looking at how the shape and nature of the conflict between Jesus and the authorities might lead Mark's audience to experience the conflict between Jesus and the disciples in a particular manner. The conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities does not serve simply to move the plot forward or to lead the audience to reject the authorities' point of view on Jesus, but highlights the very real tension that exists between Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God and the values of the present aeon, a tension which the audience will experience. That is, this conflict involves the audience in the clash between God's promises and the reality of a world whose power structures run counter to, and which endanger the reliability of those promises. I will suggest that the way in which the conflict between Jesus and the disciples intersects and overlaps with the conflict between Jesus and the authorities moves the audience to view the former conflict in terms of the latter; the involvement in the disciples' plot-line that the narrative calls for moves the audience to the same point of tension between God's promises and reality. Just as the plot involving Jesus and the authorities

can only be resolved in the audience through reliance on God's capacity to overcome human opposition — as God does by resurrecting Jesus — so, too, the resolution of the conflict between Jesus and the disciples drives the audience to the same point: Either Jesus and the disciples do reconcile, and hence God does have the final word even over human fallibility and obduracy, or God's promises cannot ultimately be trusted. It is in this way, I think, that interpreters of Mark's Gospel might be able to move beyond the impasse in the debate over the rhetorical role played by Mark's disciples, about which I will have more to say below.

First, though, I will discuss briefly the conflict between Jesus and the authorities, and then turn to the question of how it relates to the conflict between Jesus and the disciples.

Jesus and the Authorities: God's Promises and Their Endangerment from Without

The goal of Mark's portrayal of the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities has generally been seen to be the creation of cognitive and emotional distance between the audience and the authorities, leading to the rejection of their point of view on Jesus and their claims to authority.¹ There is without question much truth to this assertion, but the nature and shape of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders serves to engage the audience's own struggle to "think the things of God" (8:33). It does this, I suggest, in at least three ways. First, in this "tragic" component of the story, Mark is acknowledging that the human authorities who oppose God's reign as manifested in Jesus, though ultimately illegitimate, continue to be the center of worldly power — that is, they continue to exercise power in the real world experienced by the audience (cf. chap. 13). The narrative may portray the religious authorities in a nearly unremittingly negative light, but the issues on which they ground their opposition to Jesus and which ultimately lead them to desire his death are precisely the issues with which an audience which makes itself open to Mark's rhetoric also must deal: Is Jesus a blasphemer or the Son of God? Does his freedom vis-à-vis the "traditions of the elders" render him a menace to be disposed of or provide the foundation for a new, life-giving community? Is his power from Satan or from God? Indeed, the questions all boil down to one: Does Jesus possess the authority to speak and act for God? In the world of the narrative, as well as in the real world inhabited by Mark's audience, structures opposed to God are experienced as having real power to adjudicate such matters.

Second, the characterization of the religious authorities attributes their opposition to their "hardness of heart" (3:5; 10:5), and their actions reflect an alliance with Satan.² As the conflict with the disciples reveals, hardness

of heart is a disposition that can be associated with those who consider themselves "insiders" as well (cf. 8:17). Thus the audience cannot completely distance itself from the opponents of Jesus, because they are forced to consider hardness of heart not as a choice but as a condition from which humans need to be liberated — a condition which needs to be exorcised.

Third, the shape of Christian existence presented as the alternative to the way characterized by "thinking in human terms" points to the fact that Mark understands conflict and opposition to continue beyond the time of Jesus and in fact to characterize the life of the church. That is to say, the conflict between Jesus and the authorities serves not only to define Jesus' Messiahship and the nature of God's rule as Mark understands it, but even more importantly, it defines what is at stake for those embraced by Mark's claim that in Jesus, and in this way, God is initiating God's end-time, kingly rule.

In other words, the conflict between Jesus and the authorities reveals Mark's conviction that God's intention to redeem creation takes place over against tremendous forces of opposition. These forces endanger God's promise of eschatological salvation, and the narrative's acknowledgement of them reflects the reality of the world in which Mark's audience lives. Nowhere is this more graphically displayed than in the preliminary resolution to the conflict in Jesus' death. The passion narrative graphically displays the degree of hostility on the part of the world toward a conception of God's reign that involves the shattering of boundaries and an understanding of authority grounded in life-giving service. The only possible response on the part of a world in Satan's grasp is to put to death the bearer of this reign.³ In the end, even Jesus himself seems to recognize the ability of these forces to block God's purposes, and the effectiveness of the boundaries erected to keep God at bay. Jesus' expression of God-forsakenness (15:34) gives pathos-filled voice to the conflict between what God has promised and what the present reality delivers. Jesus himself comes to embody the human need for divine intervention so forcefully presented by those who had come to him in his ministry, hoping that God could provide what all human powers could not — the power to bring life out of death. The course of the resolution of the conflict between Jesus and the authorities, in other words, serves rhetorically to drive the audience to God in just this way. The interpretive gap created by the narrative between Jesus' identity as Son of God and his earthly fate can only be filled by divine power. Only with God's intervention, only with God's power to bring life out of death, can the promise be reaffirmed and be rendered truly "good news." The question is thus: Does God have the power to thwart human intention? Or do "the things of human beings" have finality? Can God be trusted to reaffirm God's promises?

Jesus and the Disciples

I suggest that the same question arises out of the conflict between Jesus and the disciples. The author encourages, indeed compels, the audience to identify with the disciples, and the disciples and audience together are brought into a crisis which parallels Jesus' own, one that can only be resolved through trust in God's promises. Mark presents the conflict with the disciples in the same eschatological/cosmic perspective as the conflict with those "outside." To the degree that it can be shown that Mark leads his audience to experience the obduracy of the disciples as a manifestation of Satan's hold on them, the conflict emerges in its cosmic perspective, and the central interpretive question regarding the disciples — whether and how they will ever prove to be the "good soil" in which the gospel might bear fruit — becomes less a question of their own will or personal shortcomings and more a question of which power operative in their lives will prevail: God's or Satan's. That is, Jesus' conflicts with the disciples issue in essentially the same question as those with the authorities: Can God's promises be trusted? And if so, on what grounds? As in the conflict with the authorities, Mark seeks to strike a balance between the reality of failure and the reality of God's power, a balance that will resonate with his audience's experience of the world. Through the disciples, the narrative sets before the audience in the starkest terms the question of whether God's redemptive goals can overcome human unfaithfulness, and it drives the audience to the conclusion that if there is a future for the disciples — and thus a future for themselves — it rests on trusting the character and power of God, which the narrative seeks to confirm.

The Disciples in Mark: The Pastoral/Polemical Debate

Any student of Mark's Gospel will recognize at this point that these remarks have implications for what has become an interpretive crux, indeed a watershed of sorts, in Markan studies: the question of how to understand the rhetorical function of Mark's harsh portrait of disciples. Interest in the question of Mark's portrayal of the disciples has generated a voluminous bibliography in recent decades,⁴ due, no doubt, to the prominence of the theme of disciples and discipleship in the Gospel, as well as to the strikingly harsh treatment the disciples receive at Mark's hand.⁵ While all of the Gospels record the disciples' difficulties in comprehending their master's mission and their ultimate flight from Jesus' side in the face of his crucifixion, Mark stands out among the four both with respect to the severity of the disciples' lack of insight and to the lack of a narrated post-resurrection reconciliation with Jesus.⁶ On the other hand, Mark does

portray the disciples' faithful and obedient response to Jesus' initial call (e.g., 1:16-20), shows them successfully carrying out a "missionary journey" at Jesus' command (6:6-13, 30), and makes reference to an ostensible future role of the disciples in the post-resurrection church (13:9-23). We will treat each of these aspects of Mark's portrayal in more detail below; here my interest is in how recent interpretation of Mark has responded to this puzzling portrait and what may be at stake in the debate.

On the surface, it would appear that interpreters are divided into two opposing camps. On the one hand are those who view Mark's treatment of the disciples as essentially pastoral, and who see Mark's portrayal of the failure and unfaithfulness of the first followers as a means of encouraging his audience in the face of their own failures.⁷ On the other side are the interpreters who see Mark's purpose as essentially polemical, that his goal is to discredit the disciples — and especially their christological ideas — utterly, thus compelling the audience to take the way of the Markan Jesus.⁸ The most interesting and important feature of this divide is the way in which the rhetorical purpose envisioned by the interpreter — the narrative's discourse — generally corresponds with a particular reading (or experience) of the *story* of the disciples.

So those who see Mark's rhetorical purpose as polemical read the story of the disciples as one of abject and irredeemable failure. Weeden's observations are dramatically illustrative of this reading.

I conclude that Mark is assiduously involved in a vendetta against the disciples. He is intent on totally discrediting them. He paints them as obtuse, obdurate, recalcitrant men who at first are unperceptive of Jesus' messiahship, then oppose its style and character, and finally totally reject it. As the coup de grace, Mark closes his Gospel without rehabilitating the disciples.⁹

Weeden's remarks express the two key story-level facets of this reading. First, the negative portrayal of the disciples, which is generally thought to begin with the boat scenes in chapters 4-8¹⁰ and accelerates through the rest of the Gospel, completely overwhelms any positive evaluations of the disciples, either within the plotted story or beyond it. Second, and closely related, is the matter of the ending of the Gospel, which in this view is seen to preclude any possibility of reconciliation, since the women apparently did not report the young man's message to the disciples (16:7-8). The understanding of Mark's purpose in so thoroughly discrediting the disciples differs in detail among those who read the disciples' story in this way.¹¹ They have in common, however, the basic idea that Mark wishes to communicate to his audience the necessity of completely rejecting the disciples — both their "theology" and their behavior — and of embracing

the Markan Jesus' way as the correct one.¹² The story of Jesus' disciples in Mark serves this goal by compelling the audience to distance itself completely from the disciples' theology and behavior. Thus the readers are to understand that the ending of Mark's narrative is the end of the story of the disciples in Mark; they never receive the message of the angel which confirms Jesus' promise to them that he would meet them in Galilee (14:27; 16:6). They remain outsiders — forever.

The same correspondence between rhetorical purpose and interpretation of story is displayed on the pastoral side of the debate as well. Interpreters such as Best, Petersen and Tannehill acknowledge the harsh terms in which the narrative portrays the disciples, but insist that Mark, though he leaves the relationship between Jesus and the disciples unresolved at the end of his story, means his audience to project that a reconciliation between them beyond the end of the narration is at least possible.¹³ These interpreters generally point to two aspects of the narrative which compel such a reading. First, Jesus makes predictions concerning a post-resurrection meeting with the disciples (9:9; 14:25, 27). Mark's narrative serves in every other way to highlight the trustworthiness of Jesus' predictions¹⁴ (indeed, as I will argue below, this is a principal rhetorical goal of the narrative). As the momentum of the promise-fulfillment scheme builds through the narrative, it propels the audience over the final verse of the Gospel, in which the women flee from the tomb and "say nothing to anyone" (16:8). As Lincoln puts it, "[T]he silence of the women was overcome by Jesus' word of promise."¹⁵ Likewise, these interpreters point out that Jesus' Olivet discourse (ch. 13) assumes a significant role for the disciples in the post-resurrection period (cf. 13:9-23).¹⁶ Again, the audience is directed to fill in the gap created by the Gospel's ending in a way that projects the resolution of the conflict between Jesus and the disciples.

As with the polemical group, there are nuances among these readers with respect to the precise nature of Mark's rhetorical goal, but the essential message that, in spite of their failures, the disciples are rehabilitated offers hope and encouragement that human failure is not the last word of the Gospel.¹⁷

What to make of this impasse? On the one hand, of course, it illustrates well the way in which the meaning and force of a narrative emerge out of the interaction between text and audience; what a reader or hearer experiences in an encounter with the narrative will depend on what he or she brings to the text as much as on the "text itself." In this sense, one might say that it is fruitless to contend that one reading is right and the other is wrong. On the other hand, on this interpretive issue there is a tremendous amount at stake. The entire thrust of the Gospel changes drastically depending on whether one comes to the end and concludes,

“Well, it’s up to me now; I’d better prove more faithful than those disciples or I’ll be shut out for good, too,” or is led to conclude that “with God, all things are possible.” And with each respective reaction comes a whole conception of God’s way in the world and a corresponding understanding of the shape of Christian existence.

Robert Fowler has attempted to clear the confusion generated by these opposing readings of the Gospel by suggesting that it emerges from the failure of interpreters to distinguish properly between story and discourse. Fowler points especially to the critics of the polemical view as expressed by Weeden and Kelber. Both sides agree, he says, that the disciples serve to instruct the audience in some way. However, proponents of the pastoral view, Fowler claims, “think that the story must therefore march in step with the discourse, that the characterization of the twelve in the story cannot be so harsh.”¹⁸ And so he suggests that the pastoral interpreters mitigate the severity of the disciples’ treatment. For Fowler, the enigma of Mark as a whole lies in the fact that it is

a narrative whose story and discourse are often at odds with each other. Understanding how a narrative whose story is so full of failure and stupidity could nevertheless be a narrative ‘about’ insight, understanding, and success has been difficult. The key is that the success of the narrative occurs, if it occurs, not in the story but at the level of discourse.¹⁹

To the extent that the projection of a reconciliation between Jesus and the disciples dissolves the tension of Mark’s open-ended and disturbing final scene for the sake of an unambiguous “happy ending,” Fowler is perhaps right.²⁰ I would argue, however, that Fowler takes this feature of Mark’s narrative too far here. It is precisely at this point that story and discourse must cohere. For how can readers of the narrative separate their concern for the fate of disciples, human beings in whom both Jesus and the audience have invested so much, from the Gospel’s “message”? Granted, Mark does not set forth an easily digestible picture of the disciples and their failures. But to suggest, as Fowler does, that Mark “is so eager to secure the reader’s adherence to the Jesus of his story that he is willing to sacrifice the disciples of his story,”²¹ surely undermines the credibility of both the narrator and Jesus — even God himself!²² Such an idea calls to mind the story of Moses imploring God not to destroy the Israelites after their apostasy with the golden calves (Exodus 32), in which Moses points out to God how capricious it makes God look to have chosen a people for his purposes, rescued them from slavery, only to “consume them from the face of the earth” (Exod 32:12). And Fowler’s attempt to assure us that Mark’s narrative is not history, but “only a story,” so we need only be

concerned about what it is trying to do to us, hardly dispels such misgivings. The truth and persuasiveness of the Gospel rests, in some measure, at least, on the correspondence between the story and the world to which it refers.

Thus it seems to me that the purely pastoral side, especially as represented by Best and Malbon, does not take seriously enough the darkness of the disciples' portrayal. On the other hand, those who argue for the utter failure and eternal exclusion of the disciples do not take seriously enough the clear indications that they will be "resurrected." It is precisely in the tension between these two aspects of the portrayal that the rhetorical forces lies. The question of the fate of the disciples should be seen in the same light as the question of Jesus' fate at the hands of his enemies. Both raise the question of whether the "things of human beings" will have finality or whether the "things of God" can overcome them.²³ If the disciples have been forever shut out of the kingdom, God's promises to them become void, and, to invoke the apostle Paul, Mark's proclamation has been in vain and the reader's faith has been in vain (1 Cor. 15:14). Far from removing the tension and ambiguity that arises out of Mark's story of the disciples (as, for example, Fowler asserts), to acknowledge fully both the failure of the disciples and the trustworthiness of God in the face of such failure introduces a very different sort of tension. Precisely because Mark's portrayal of the disciples is so harsh, the posited — and necessary — reconciliation between them and Jesus is all the more radical, perhaps even scandalous. And far from simply providing comfort and encouragement, the post-resurrection reconciliation of the disciples puts the audience on notice that even unfaithfulness and fear cannot keep them safe from being embraced by the boundary-shattering reign of God.

Thus, in the next two sections, I will attempt to show, first, how Mark's portrayal of the disciples serves to instill in the audience a keen awareness of the power and influence of those forces opposed to God; and second, how, through the inevitability of the reconciliation which comes at Jesus' initiative, Mark brings the audience to the recognition that God's eschatological salvation will break through any barriers erected to keep it at bay. The first involves an examination of the rhetorical force of Mark's negative portrayal of the disciples; I will focus on the way in which Mark compels the audience to see the disciples' conflict with Jesus in the light of the conflict with the authorities. The second will examine the momentum that leads the audience beyond the negative portrayal and into the disciples' — and audience's — future.

Fish Stories: The Rhetorical Function of the Disciples

As Robert Tannehill has shown in his seminal essay, the narrative role of the disciples in Mark functions as one of Mark's primary means of enveloping his audience in the drama of the Gospel.²⁴ An audience's interest in and experience of a narrative is greatly enhanced when it finds a character or group of characters with whom it can identify in some meaningful way. In the prologue (1:1-15), Mark sets up his narrative in such a way that it encompasses the audience's location in time and space, thus bringing the audience into the story world. Following the prologue, Mark moves immediately to begin the story of Jesus in relation to those whom he calls to follow him (1:16-20). This move signals the significance of the "theme" of following Jesus for Mark's narrative,²⁵ but more important, it draws the audience further into the story by introducing characters with whom it presumably has much in common. As Tannehill puts it, "a reader will identify most easily and immediately with characters who seem to share the reader's situation. Assuming that the majority of the first readers of the Gospel were Christians, they would relate most easily and immediately to characters in the story who respond positively to Jesus." Further, I agree with Tannehill's judgment that "the author of Mark anticipated this response by his readers. He composed his story so as to make use of this initial tendency to identify with the disciples in order to speak indirectly to the reader through the disciples' story."²⁶ If this is the case, then we must, as Fowler suggests, pay close attention to both the story of the disciples and the discourse that underlies it; what will Mark's ideal audience experience and learn through its identification with the disciples' story?

As suggested above, the issue is often framed in terms of which aspect of Mark's dialectical portrait of the disciples will finally prevail in the audience's experience of the narrative: the positive side, signaled both by the disciples' initially faithful response to Jesus' call and then adumbrated by their presumed rehabilitation, or the negative side, revealed by their unperceptiveness, misconception, and final rejection of Jesus and his gospel. If, in both views, the audience experiences initially the positive portrait of the disciples, the key question becomes how it will respond to the dramatic shift in the disciples' relationship to Jesus. Will the audience be forced to "reject the views and actions of the Twelve and [affirm] the words and work of Jesus," thereby "becoming faithful disciples"?²⁷ Or is there another possible response? It seems to me that Mark's audience would take its cue from what it comes to understand about the nature and source of the disciples' obduracy. And I would suggest that Mark invites the audience to see in it not something that a would-be follower of Jesus might

him- or herself, unlike the disciples, overcome through sheer force of will; rather, Mark characterizes the conflict between Jesus and the disciples as a conflict between God and those forces opposed to God over the lives of would-be followers. The fate of the disciples, in other words, rests not in their own capacity to overcome their failures, but in God's capacity to break through their unbelief and rescue them from their darkness.

The narrative encourages this experience of the role of the disciples in at least two ways. First, the initial positive portrayal of the disciples does more than just encourage identification on the part of the audience; it involves an investment (or promise) on God's part concerning the relationship between the disciples and the ultimate fruitfulness of the gospel. That is, Mark makes it clear in the opening chapters that the fate of the disciples is related in an integral way to the fate of (or reliability of) the promises contained in the gospel. Second, the nature of the disciples' malady reveals the ways in which it reflects Satan's grasp on the disciples, a grasp that bears many of the marks of the authorities' opposition to Jesus. Thus the audience is led to view the opposition of the disciples to Jesus' mission as endangering the promise every bit as much as the conflict between Jesus and the authorities: it revolves around many of the same issues (e.g., authority, boundaries, etc.), and climaxes in a crisis that can only be resolved if God's promises prove reliable.

“To You Has Been Given”: The Investment in the Disciples

The introduction of the disciples in the narrative not only encourages identification with them, but sets up the question of their fate as an integral feature of the plot of the Gospel. Jesus' initial call of Simon and Andrew (1:16-20) establishes the two fishermen as sympathetic characters, whose obedient response to the call of Jesus brings them into the circle of those who would respond to the gospel of God (1:14-15).²⁸ Perhaps more important, it also indicates an unambiguous and unqualified intention toward and promise of Jesus to them: “I will make you (ποιήσω) become fishers of human beings” (1:17). This promise carries with it the same force as the promise of the opening verses of the Gospel, where it is said of John the Baptist that he will “make straight the paths” of the Lord (1:3). That is, the establishment of a community faithful to the gospel is the result of God's creative (and redemptive) activity.²⁹ The prologue (1:1-15) prepares the way for the audience's experience of the endangerment of this promise in both John's and Jesus' fates (especially in the allusion to John's death in 1:14). The promise to the first disciples carries with it that same undercurrent of threat; Jesus comes “after John” (ὀπίσω μου, 1:17), that is he follows the deathward path prepared for him by John. Likewise,

the disciples come “after” Jesus (ὀπίσω μου, 1:17, 20; cf. 8:34), which suggests that they, too, will tread the same path. God will make of Simon and Andrew fishers of human beings, but it will be over against forces opposed to God’s redemptive goals. Like the fates of John and Jesus, the fate of the disciples will rest in God’s ability to reaffirm the promises in the face of the cosmic opposition manifested in the historical forces of a hardened world. And Mark continues this association of discipleship with God’s creative activity by using the same term to speak of Jesus’ appointment of the Twelve. Mark alone among the Gospels relates, a little awkwardly, that Jesus “created” (ἐποίησεν) the Twelve.³⁰ This kind of investment ensures that the audience of the Gospel will not easily come to reject the Twelve, for their fate is linked to the broader question of the reliability and power behind God’s promises.

The ensuing scenes in the Gospel display even further God’s investment in the disciples, as well the sense of the likelihood that they will encounter opposition. The key here is the way in which Mark intertwines the emerging conflict between Jesus and the authorities with the storyline of the disciples. The Gospel moves to set out the fact and importance of the authorities’ opposition to Jesus very early in the Gospel (1:22; 2:1-3:6). These stories serve to clarify the shape of Jesus’ boundary-shattering ministry and highlight the consequences of embracing it. The clearly-announced presence of the disciples in the first major controversies between Jesus and the authorities in 2:1-3:6 implicates them in the consequences of his ministry as well.³¹ They are shown engaging in behavior characteristic of Jesus’ ministry — eating with the outcasts, not fasting, reinterpreting the Sabbath. Their presence with Jesus as he (and they) are attacked gives the audience initially some refuge from the threat posed by the religious establishment, who, we are gradually convinced, represent the cosmic opposition to God’s goals displayed in the prologue. Though the challenges and reality-altering consequences of Jesus’ ministry are clearly laid out, the audience will perhaps be encouraged that the group Jesus called to follow him will indeed result in the formation of a community capable of living in light of the gospel.

The narrative then renders explicit the disciples’ role in God’s redemptive plan, which was implied in their presence with Jesus in these controversies. It becomes clear that there is an explicit purpose behind Jesus’ “creation” of them: They are to “to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons” (3:14-15). That is, they are to be extensions of Jesus’ ministry, performing the self-same tasks (proclaiming and casting out demons; cf. 1:14-15, 32-34; 38-39; 3:7-12) with the same authority (ἐξουσία; cf. 1:22, 27; 2:10), and, presumably, with the same goal: to signal the in-breaking of God’s reign to the world.

The identification of the disciples with Jesus' goals, over against the opposition of the religious authorities, is then confirmed in 3:20-35, when they are included in the circle around Jesus, part of the true family of Jesus comprised of those who "do the will of God" (3:31-35).

At this point in the audience's experience of the narrative, then, it would seem that the lines marking insiders and outsiders have been clearly drawn. Jesus has made an investment in followers who will stand with him over against the powers opposed to God. And indeed, the first part of chapter 4, the parable discourse, seems to confirm the disciples' insider status and expresses powerfully the nature and degree of God's investment in them. The parable of the sower serves a crucial rhetorical function in the Gospel. It clarifies for the audience the nature of Jesus' activity: he is the sower of the word, whose work will yield a tremendous harvest in spite of the unfruitful soil on which much of the seed is sown,³² and it focuses attention on the reception of the word: though much ground will prove barren, there will be good soil which brings forth grain and bears fruit "thirty and sixty and a hundred-fold" (4:20).

With respect to the audience response to the disciples, I would suggest that this chapter accomplishes two principal rhetorical goals. On the one hand, it reveals the disciples' inextricable relationship with the promise of the gospel. 4:10-12, the infamous "parable theory," makes this especially clear. These verses have received a tremendous amount of scrutiny, of course; a complete examination of the various interpretative possibilities is beyond the scope of this study.³³ As Juel notes, there have been endless attempts to get around the scandal that arises out of what Jesus seems to be saying in these verses. The words are troubling on at least two counts. When asked by the disciples and "those around him"³⁴ about the parables, Jesus tells them, first, that this insider group has been given the "secret" (μυστήριον) of the reign of God. The scandal here, of course, is that which always attends the notion of God's free election of individuals and groups, a feature of God's activity since the election of Israel.³⁵ Yet the verse does create a relationship between this insider group and God's purpose; just as God's purposes for the world depended upon God's revelation to Israel and its faithful response, so, too, God's redemptive purposes as expressed eschatologically in Jesus depend upon the creation of a faithful, fruitful community. Interpreters have often tried to soften the scandalous aspect of this freedom by suggesting that the parables simply serve to reveal the separation between insiders and outsiders that has already been manifested through people's response to Jesus.³⁶ But the next verse precludes such a reading, for the citation from Isaiah 6 reveals the purpose of Jesus' teaching in parables; it is precisely "in order that (ἵνα) 'they [the outsiders] may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that (μήποτε) they may not turn again and be forgiven'" (4:12). So the

scandal is actually deepened; Jesus' parabolic speech is designed to prevent outsiders from becoming insiders. The gift of the mystery of the reign of God and his explanations to the insiders in private (cf. 3:34) are meant to secure a relationship with a group of faithful insiders who will have a crucial role to play in the harvest; they will — indeed, they must — form the good soil.³⁷

Yet if, on the one hand, the parable chapter serves to underscore the need for good soil in order for the word to produce a harvest and seems to identify this insider group in such a way that the disciples are included, it also contains hints that things are not quite this simple. The chapter serves as a bridge from the positive portrayal of the disciples up to this point to the negative portrayal which comes to predominate in the rest of the narrative.³⁸ The first hint of trouble comes immediately following the explanation of Jesus' parabolic discourse, when he turns to the very ones to whom the gift of the secret of the reign of God had been given, and chides them for their lack of understanding: "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?" (4:13). The juxtaposition of this revelation of their lack of insight with the pronouncement of their insider status introduces the tension that will now become the focus of the narrative. Jesus' parables have made it clear that the harvest depends on good soil, and have promised that such good soil will be found. But as the disciples begin to reveal characteristics of the other types of soil, the prospects for the eschatological harvest grow correspondingly grim. We will now turn our attention to the way in which the narrative develops this tension between the necessity and apparent impossibility of creating good soil out of the disciples, and the way it brings this conflict to the point of crisis for both the story and the discourse.

"Get behind me, Satan": The Disciples in Satan's Grasp

I will focus my remarks on the central section of the Gospel, 8:27-10:52, for it is in this section that the relationship between Jesus and the disciples is most clearly at the center of the narrative's and the audience's concern. From chapter 4 on, the tension between Jesus and the disciples over their inability to grasp his identity and mission escalates, until it reaches a climax in 8:14-21. Jesus here describes the disciples in terms that echo unmistakably his words in 4:11-12; this time, however, the disciples are those who "have eyes, and fail to see . . . ears, and fail to hear." The narrative has brought the audience to a point where the investment in the disciples seems to have been futile; God's promise seems to have little hope of bearing fruit. They have become outsiders, and confidence in the promise is shaken to the core.

It is at this point in the narrative — the climax of the disciples' lack of perception in 8:14-21 — that many commentators, especially those of the polemical ilk, see the narrative's goal to be to manipulate the audience to begin to distance itself from the disciples and search for another model.³⁹ As I have tried to suggest, however, I do not see the rhetoric moving in this way. The intense investment in the disciples on the part of Jesus (and God) has intertwined their fate with the fate of the promise of the gospel, making the question of their fate a matter of utmost — and existential — concern for the audience. The next section contains crucial support for this argument, in that it portrays the principal clue to the nature and cause of the disciples' obduracy.

The narrative takes a dramatic and thematic shift in the scene in which Jesus takes his disciples up to the region of Caesarea Philippi, and poses to them the question that has been brewing on the story level since the beginning of Jesus' public ministry:⁴⁰ Who do people say that I am? In classical terms, it is the central recognition scene, one which brings about "a complete swing in the action" of the plot.⁴¹ It involves a dramatic shift in that it resolves, for a moment, and not unambiguously, the tension created by the disciples' obduracy; the focus shifts to the question of whether the disciples will understand the significance of their recognition of Jesus' identity. It is a thematic shift because Jesus introduces a new and urgent motif into his teaching: the inevitability of his own suffering and death, and the necessity that anyone who embraces his identity must also embrace his cross.

Our interest in this section is two-fold: first, how this section reflects the newly introduced frame for the disciples' blindness, which strongly implies a particular view of the cause and nature of their unwillingness — or inability — to embrace Jesus' destiny, to see it as the work of God; and second, the overall rhetorical goals of this piece of the disciples' portrait. The section brings to further and fuller expression both the degree of investment Jesus is making in the disciples and the source and depth of their continued failure. Thus the section continues to develop the tension we have seen thus far between the necessity of the disciples' "success" and the dimming prospects they offer for it.

The structural features of this section of the narrative are, in a broad sense, remarkably clear, and function rhetorically to prepare the audience for both the divine inevitability of the events in Jerusalem as well as the inevitability of the disciples' utter failure. First, it is marked by the three-fold recurrence of Jesus' private revelations of his impending passion to his disciples (8:31; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). Each passion prediction is the first component of a three-part unit which focuses on the disciples' complete misunderstanding of Jesus.⁴² After each announcement of the passion and

resurrection, the narrator relates an incident in which the disciples painfully display their misunderstanding. In the first unit, which will occupy most of our attention below, Peter is shown rebuking Jesus for his attempt to link his messiahship with suffering (8:32-33); Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter. The second passion prediction (9:33-34) is followed immediately by an argument among the disciples over who is the greatest. And, in the final unit, James and John ask for a share in Jesus' messianic "glory," hoping that he will grant them a place at his right and left hand (10:35-40). The third piece of each unit involves Jesus' calling" (8:34; 9:35; 10:42) of the disciples around him to set them straight, in the most straightforward sayings about the paradoxical character of the gospel:⁴³ "Those who want to save their life will lose it" (8:35); "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35); "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (10:44).

This section of the narrative also develops the disciples' misunderstanding outside of these passion prediction units. The transfiguration (9:2-8) and the ensuing discussion between Jesus and the disciples who are privy to it (Peter, James, and John; 9:9-13) further confirms their confusion; Peter's response to the appearance of Moses and Elijah suggests how taken he is with such a glorious manifestation of Jesus' identity, in sharp contrast to his previous response to Jesus' talk of suffering.⁴⁴ And down in the valley, a demon in possession of a young boy is getting the best of the disciples, who apparently now lack the power over unclean spirits which they once possessed (6:13). Further, they seek to exclude a successful exorcist who was working in Jesus' name, because he was not "following" them (9:38); they apparently desire exclusive rights to Jesus' authority and have failed to comprehend that Jesus' ministry is to have no such boundaries. Their "this-worldly," hierarchical view of authority manifests itself as well in their attempt to prevent children from coming to Jesus (10:13-16), and they are concerned about the reward they will receive for having left everything and followed Jesus (10:28-31). Again, in each case Jesus attempts to correct their faulty vision, but to no avail. As the narrative moves on from this section into the passion narrative, despite all hopes to the contrary, the audience cannot be surprised when the disciples ultimately desert him and flee (14:50).

One further noteworthy rhetorical feature of this section is the frame provided by two healings of blind people: the strange and unique two-stage healing in Bethsaida (8:22-26), and the healing of Bartimaeus at Jericho, just before the entrance into Jerusalem (10:46-52). This is a generally recognized feature of Mark's structure,⁴⁵ but interpreters dispute how an audience will respond to it. Clearly, Mark wishes the audience to draw some crucial connections between the frame and the framed

material. Is it, however, a tragic irony, one based on the fact that “Jesus can give sight to the physically blind who come to him in faith, but he cannot give insight to his fearful disciples?”⁴⁶ Or does it reflect a crucial parallel between the disciples’ spiritual blindness and the physical blindness of those healed, suggesting, in other words, the disciples’ need for an act of divine power?⁴⁷ The latter does far more justice to the rhetorical intent of this section, for the severity and seeming hopelessness of the disciples’ blindness is brought out to the same degree as the narrative’s investment in them as the fruitful soil on which the gospel is to bear fruit. The crisis that results from this tension can only be resolved when the audience has reason to trust that God’s promise to them can overcome their spiritual malady. Clearly, as Tolbert has noted, this section of Mark’s narrative drives the audience to search, with some sense of urgency, for the cause and nature of the disciples’ blindness.⁴⁸ However, the narrative does not easily allow the conclusion that Mark is here simply recommending that such concerns as the disciples manifest — desire for greatness, glory, and reward, exclusive claims on Jesus’ power, etc. — are to be avoided by Christians.⁴⁹

Peter’s “confession” of Jesus in 8:27-33, however, suggests another possibility.⁵⁰ For here the conclusion seems unavoidable that the behavior the disciples manifested both in this section and in the Jerusalem section is not the root cause of their blindness to the nature of Jesus’ messiahship, but is, rather, symptomatic of a much deeper problem, viz., the hardening of their hearts and their captivity to Satan’s power. That is to say, they require treatment of the problem, not just relief of their symptoms.⁵¹

We move to Peter’s confession from the narrative’s revelation in the previous section that the disciples share the “hardness of heart” of those opposed to Jesus, a condition which, as we saw in the previous chapter, represents the historicizing of the cosmic opposition of Satan to God’s redemptive goals. The suddenness and inexplicable nature of Peter’s apparent flash of insight has often been noted; nothing in the narrative up to this point has prepared the audience for it, and in fact Jesus’ harshest condemnation of the disciples’ blindness and deafness immediately precedes it (8:14-21). As Matthew recognized, some inspiration for Peter’s statement seems to underlie it (cf. Matt. 16:17-19); for Matthew, it comes from the “Father in heaven.” In Mark, such an indication is lacking; in fact, as Juel has suggested, the inspiration Mark has in mind may derive from the opposite source.⁵² The scene immediately takes on the aura of an exorcism, with “rebuking” (ἐπιτιμῶν) going on all over the place (8:30, 32, 33).⁵³ It climaxes with Jesus’ identification of Peter with Satan himself. In light of the way the preceding section has moved the disciples closer to Jesus’ enemies, who act out of their Satanic inspiration, the audience will understand Peter’s confession, like those of the demon-possessed (1:24; 3:11; 5:7), as stemming from Satan.

The development of the controversy between Jesus and the disciples in the ensuing narrative bears out this suggestion. The “debates” between Jesus and his disciples in 8:27-10:45 allow the audience to view the way in which the characters’ beliefs about messiahship and divine power come to be expressed in their actions. That is, both Jesus and the disciples display a unity between their theology or ideological point of view and their behavior.⁵⁴ Jesus’ teachings about the nature of divine power, the necessity of suffering, and the attitude toward the “least” — all stemming from his “possession” by the Holy Spirit (1:10) — are expressed in both the general shape and the particulars of his ministry. 10:45 is perhaps the clearest statement of this unity. Jesus’ teaching that “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant” is grounded (ῥᾶπ) in the shape of his own messianic charge: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”⁵⁵ Likewise, the disciples’ understanding of Jesus’ messiahship, one which rejects or is unable to comprehend any notion of suffering (8:32, 9:32), but is based rather on the hope of messianic glory and the avoidance of suffering,⁵⁶ issues in action commensurate with this understanding: arguing over who is the greatest (9:33-34), wanting to prevent anyone outside the “power center” from performing God’s work (9:38), concern for their reward (10:28), and wanting to sit at Jesus’ side in his glory (10:35-37). This relationship between ideology and ethics suggests that it is not the concern for glory itself that blocks the disciples’ capacity to “think the things of God,”⁵⁷ but the other way around: Satan’s grasp on their minds leads to their misconstrual and failure. As Robinson puts it, Mark leads the audience to see “that the confusion of men’s minds is a power over man requiring divine action to be overcome.”⁵⁸

Thus the narrative does not serve to portray a catalogue of vices in the hopes that the audience will adjust its behavior accordingly, but presents God engaged through Jesus in a battle over the human condition brought about by Satan’s confusion of minds and hardening of hearts. The narrative brings to painful expression the necessity of following Jesus in order to “save one’s life,” and the impossibility of doing so without divine action. This is especially clear at two rhetorically strategic points in this section, where human impotence with respect to Satan’s grasp is poignantly voiced. The disciples’ failure to cast out the demon from the epileptic boy requires Jesus’ intervention, which leads to an exchange between Jesus and the father of the boy. “All things can be done for the one who believes,” Jesus proclaims, whereupon the father of the boy replies — some manuscripts say “with tears” — “I believe; help my unbelief!” It is a prayer, precisely that which, according to Jesus, must be employed to cast out “this kind” of demon (9:29). The location of this scene — the only exorcism in

this half of the Gospel — between scenes displaying the disciples' obduracy gives the narrative a contrapuntal structure, moving the audience back and forth between human failure and divine promise.

The same rhetorical goal seems to underlie the disciples' equally urgent question in 10:26; Jesus' statements about the rich man highlight the apparent impossibility of faithful response to God on the part of humans (10:23-25). The disciples become "greatly astounded" (περισσῶς ἐξεπλήσσαντο) and ask, "Then who is able to be saved?" (10:26). Jesus' reply, like the question, goes beyond the context of the immediate discussion and addresses in a fundamental way the predicament of humans as expressed by the narrative, a predicament which drives the characters and the audience to the promise of God: "Jesus looked at them and said, 'For humans it is not possible, but not for God: for all things are possible for God'" (10:27). Once again, this promise comes in the midst of the portrayal of the disciples' confusion, fear, and ensnarement by the structures of the world. Lest this seem an easy "out" of the dilemma, the immediately ensuing discussion both confirms that God will create new community for those embraced by the promise, but it also suggests that that new reality will be characterized by conflict between it and the hardened world. That is to say, the promise of God is not a simple solution to the problem of faithful response, but in many ways creates the problem.

"Just as he told you": Promise and Failure in the Passion Narrative (11:1-16:8)

It is with this sense of crisis and hope that we move toward the climax of the story in Jerusalem. Here the juxtaposition of failure and promise comes to a climax, as Mark portrays the disciples' eventual rejection of Jesus; at the same time, this section builds an unmistakable momentum of promises made and promises kept.

A few features of the final (narrated) chapter in the disciples' story require comment. What has to strike the audience at this point is the seeming incongruity between the increasing inevitability of the disciples' utter failure, which now comes as no surprise to Jesus, and which, in fact, he predicts (14:18, 27, 30), and Jesus' continued, even intensified, investment in them, expressed perhaps most poignantly by his desire to spend his last hours with the very ones who would betray, deny, and "fall away" from him. It is this continued investment, I would suggest, which speaks most strongly against a polemical reading of the disciples' rhetorical role in the Gospel. The disciples' imperceptive participation in the events leading to Jesus' death expresses most powerfully the apparent impossibility that they will ever become the good soil in which the gospel will yield a

harvest. Yet in the same way that Jesus' death itself brings to the surface the depth and breadth of the world's opposition to God's goals, which can only be overcome when God acts to vindicate Jesus in the resurrection, the disciples' utter failure represents the impossibility of a faithful response to God in the present age, apart from God's acting on the behalf of humans.

Over against the graphic portrayal of the disciples' failure, then, the narrative builds a momentum through the rhetoric of prediction and fulfillment.⁵⁹ As the audience experiences the confirmation of many and various predictions of Jesus in the narrative itself, it gains confidence that those predictions of Jesus that reach beyond the plotted narrative are reliable as well. This works to ensure, first, that the audience will see the endangerment to the promise posed by Jesus' move toward the cross as something Jesus fully expects, and as an inevitable component of God's redemptive purposes. The passion predictions in 8:27-10:52 are the most obvious indications of this. Events unfold exactly as Mark's Jesus has predicted they would: Jesus is "handed over to the chief priests and scribes" (10:33; 14:42), who "condemn him to death" (10:33; 14:64), spit on him (10:34; 14:64), and mock him (10:34; 15:31). They, in turn, "hand Jesus over to the Gentiles" (10:33; 15:1), who flog him (10:34; 15:15), mock him (10:34; 15:17-20), and kill him (10:34; 15:24). This is not to say that Jesus' death is "necessary" in some abstract theological sense, but rather that it is inevitable given the clash between "the things of God" and "the things of human beings." Jesus' death is integrally linked to the boundary-shattering ministry he exercised, which the present power structures — neither "Jewish" nor gentile — could not countenance.⁶⁰

The same holds true for the predictions concerning the disciples' abandonment of Jesus. Their failure is not predestined in the sense that it represents God's moving them around like chess pieces, but rather it is inevitable given the reality that God's reign overlaps the present age in its Satan-induced opposition to God. The tremendous irony here is that it is precisely in the "promise" of the disciples' failure that the reliability of the promise of their resurrection lies. It is the narrative's way of displaying how God works in the world in a way that acknowledges the reality of human existence in a world opposed to God, but precisely through that acknowledgment, God's promise of life achieves credibility such that it can serve as the ground for a future for human existence.

The promises which deserve special note in terms of our concern here — the fate of the disciples — are those that extend beyond the plotted narrative, those in chapter 13 (especially 13:5-23), that promise the disciples a role in the post-resurrection period, and those suggesting a post-resurrection "reconciliation" between Jesus and the failed disciples (14:28, 16:7). Given the establishment of the reliability of Jesus' word, it

seems inescapable that Jesus' words concerning the future of the disciples ought to carry significant weight. The question is not whether the disciples have a future; the assurance that they do marks a principal rhetorical goal of their portrayal. The question is rather, first, in what sense they do, that is, how their future is created, and, second, what Mark accomplishes rhetorically by choosing not to narrate it.

First, the rhetorical force of Mark's ending makes it a fitting conclusion to a story in which divine promise and human failure have been relentlessly juxtaposed.⁶¹ The much-discussed question of whether the women actually kept their silence or not (16:8) is misguided. The reliability of Jesus' promise that "after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (14:28) is actually confirmed by the promise which precedes it: "You will all become deserters" (14:27). The point is precisely that God overcomes human failure through the power of God's promise. Should the women's fear and silence prove capable of thwarting God's intention to reconcile the disciples to Jesus, every other promise in the Gospel becomes suspect, as well, as does God's power and God's character.⁶²

Rather, the inevitability of the disciples' own "resurrection" in the face of their utter failure (and I would include the women at the tomb) represents the Gospel's rhetorical goal. The disciples cannot escape Jesus so easily, and neither can the audience. The reconciliation takes place because God wills it. It happens not because of any change in the disciples' point of view or behavior, but in spite of it. The Gospel does not call on readers to fill in the gap left by the rejection of the disciples by God by being more faithful disciples themselves; given the way Mark has portrayed the world in his narrative, that would hardly be good news. Mark's narrative puts the audience on notice that no such evasatory tactics will keep them safe from God's redemptive purposes. It graphically portrays the lack of a future for the world without God's intervention, but it puts no one in a position to lay exclusive claim to it. It is God's action that creates a future for the disciples and a future for the world. Austin Farrer has put it eloquently and poignantly:

St. Mark offers small comfort or support to believers in natural wisdom or virtue. Nothing earthly, not even Jesus in the flesh, not the healing touch of those blessed hands, or the divine persuasions of his tongue, not the spectacle of his passion or the angelic tidings of his resurrection, nothing but the Godhead of Jesus apparent in his risen being could lift men up to take hold of the life of God. Not until Peter and the rest were apprehended by the Lord of Glory in Galilee would they be made to stand, for the Godhead itself would have come upon them, from which we can no more run than we can from the dawn.⁶³

Conclusion

Thus in rhetorically significant ways, the conflict between Jesus and the disciples and that between Jesus and the authorities interweave, interpret, and illumine each other. The first has to do with issues over which the controversies come to evolve. Like the religious leaders, the disciples fail to grasp the essential nature of God's boundary-shattering reign, which expresses itself in a conception of messianic authority oriented not to power over others, but power exercised to spread holiness and life to a world locked in Satan's grasp. Both the disciples and the authorities stand to lose much in such a kingdom; both fail to grasp the paradoxical truth driven home time and again by the Markan Jesus through his teaching, healing, and suffering, that only by losing one's life to the powers of the world which stand opposed to God can one save it.

The disciples' story line is further linked to that of the authorities by the way in which the narrative presents the source of their opposition to Jesus. For both, it is their relation to a world in Satan's grasp that issues in their blindness, unfaithfulness, and opposition. Like the authorities, the disciples' opposition requires God's radical intervention.

Thus, most important, both conflicts lead to a crisis concerning the promises of God. When all is said and done, only the reality of God's power to bring life out of death can render meaningful the suffering that results from living in the light of God's reign in the world opposed to God. Jesus' death at the hands of those powers results precisely from his willingness to live in this way. It is God who vindicates Jesus' untraditional and boundary-shattering messiahship, who reaffirms the promise of redemption in the face of its endangerment by the authorities. Without a sense of confidence that God has, in fact, reaffirmed God's promises by raising Jesus, the death-dealing forces of this world have the final say and God is proven either unwilling or unable to make good on what has been promised.

Mark has shaped his narrative in such a way as to elicit a similar response to the conflict between Jesus and the disciples. The disciples' malady goes beyond what human effort can overcome and is due to their existence in a world in Satan's grasp. Mark portrays their obduracy in such a way that the audience cannot but recognize and experience their helplessness, and so far from rejecting them, the audience is led to exclaim with them, "Who then can be saved?" The narrative has so interwoven the fate of the disciples with the fate of the gospel that if, in the end, God is not able to create of them "fishers of human beings," as God promised, once again, human beings have the final word and God's character and power is called radically into question. Without a future for the disciples, there is no good news, only failure and darkness; if the disciples' future is closed, there can be no future for the audience either.

For Mark, the reality of God's promise, character, and capacity to bring life out of death must be proclaimed over against the reality of the world in which he and his audience exist. As Dan Via has put it, "The kingdom overlaps a segment in the history of hardness of heart Since faith is given by the uncompleted eschatological salvation event, the disciple both has faith and does not."⁶⁴ The resurrection of Jesus and the rehabilitation of the disciples does not provide any ultimate closure to the story, nor would it even if it were narrated. It does not solve the problem of the conflict but rather brings it to its clearest expression, for it makes both sides of the conflict equally undeniable. Present Christian existence is based on radical trust in God's promises, not on a false sense of victory. God's past actions reveal that God is faithful to those promises, but do not resolve the tension between them and the reality of a world as yet incompletely redeemed. They serve to create a future for those embraced by the promises, a future in which human opposition and failure do not have the last word. For Mark, Christian existence is characterized by the tension between Good Friday and Easter, between the reality of an unredeemed world and a hope in God's promises firmly grounded in that reality. It is a gap that can only be filled by radical trust in God's promises.

NOTES

¹ See, e.g., Jack Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 14-21; idem, "The Religious Authorities in the Gospel of Mark," *NTS* 36 (1990) 42-65; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "The Jewish Leaders in the Gospel of Mark: A Literary Study of Marcan Characterization," *JBL* 108 (1989) 259-281; Rhoads and Mitchie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 117-122.

² See, e.g., Mark 1:13; 8:11; 10:2; 12:15 — texts that speak of both Satan's and the authorities' oppositions as "testing."

³ Cf. Donald Juel, *Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 41.

⁴ For a concise and very helpful review of the question, see Frank Matera, *What Are They Saying About Mark?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) 38-55; also William Telford, "Introduction: The Gospel of Mark," in *The Interpretation of Mark* (ed. William Telford; Issues in Religion and Theology 7; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 23-28. Studies of the disciples include Ernest Best, "Discipleship in Mark: 8:22-10:52," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970) 323-37; idem, "The Role of the Disciples in Mark," *NTS* 23 (1976-7) 377-401; idem, *Following Jesus. Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981); Eduard Schweizer, "The Portrayal of the Life of Faith in the Gospel of Mark," in *Interpreting the Gospels* (ed. James Luther Mays; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981); J. B. Tyson, "The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark," *JBL* 80 (1961) 261-268; Theodore J. Weeden, "The Heresy that Necessitated Mark's Gospel," *ZNW* 59 (1968) 145-158 (reprinted in *The Interpretation of Mark*, 64-77); idem, *Mark-*

Traditions in Conflict (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971); Karl-Georg Reploh, *Markus-Lehrer der Gemeinde: eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Studie zu den Jungerperikopen des Markus-Evangeliums* (Stuttgarter Biblische Monographien 9; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969); David J. Hawkin, "The Incomprehension of the Disciples in the Marcan Redaction," *JBL* 91 (1972) 491-500; John R. Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1983); Werner Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); idem, "Apostolic Tradition and the Form of the Gospel," in *Discipleship in the New Testament* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 24-46; Robert Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," *JR* 57 (1977) 386-405, reprinted in *The Interpretation of Mark*, 134-57; Vernon Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Joanna Dewey, "Point of View and the Disciples in Mark," *Society of Biblical Literature 1982 Seminar Papers* (ed. K. H. Richards; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982) 97-106; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 28 (1983) 29-48; idem, "Disciples/Crowds/Whoever: Markan Characters and Readers," *NovT* 28 (1986) 104-30; C. Clifton Black, *The Disciples according to Mark: Markan Redaction in Current Debate* (JSNTSS 27; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989); Jack Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Promise and the Failure — Mark 16:7,8," *JBL* 108 (1989) 283-300; Donald Juel, *A Master of Surprise*: 65-76.

⁵ I limit my examination to the disciples in Mark's Gospel, that is, the group whom he calls to himself and teaches in private; the centerpiece of this group is the Twelve, but it is not limited to it. I recognize that the question of "discipleship" in Mark goes beyond the role of the disciples; the women, the exceptional characters who respond to Jesus and then disappear, as well as some of the exceptional Jewish leaders, give the question of discipleship in Mark a much wider context (see Malbon, "Fallible Followers," 29-32; Donahue, "A Neglected Factor," 583; Schweizer, "The Portrayal of the Life of Faith," 172-73). But I am not concerned with the question of "discipleship" in general, but the implications of particular readings of the fate of the disciples for understanding conflict in Mark's Gospel. Though Mark certainly views followers of Jesus to be comprised by a circle much larger than his immediate disciples, it is this smaller circle upon which the narrative line of conflict focuses. To this group Jesus grants special privileges (4:10-12), and with this group Jesus has a sustained, conflict-laden relationship. And it is the fate of this group which impinges directly on the question of the confirmation of God's promises as Mark understands them.

⁶ A comparison with Matthew is especially revealing: for example, Mark 6:52 records the disciples' unbelieving response to the appearance of Jesus walking on the sea, making reference to their "hardness of heart," a trait previously ascribed to the religious authorities (3:5; cf. 10:5); Matthew, on the other hand, has Jesus chide them for being "of little faith" (14:31), but then relates that "those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (14:33). The obduracy of the disciples in Mark in the first half of the Gospel comes to a climax in the third scene in the boat (8:14-21), in which Jesus describes them in the same (seemingly hopeless!) terms as he had described those "outside" in 4:10-12; Matthew resolves the tension here by concluding the scene on a positive note: "Then the disciples understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (16:12). The inspiration for Peter's confession of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-33) is explicitly said to be divine in Matthew's account (16:17-19), and Peter is blessed as the rock of

the church; in Mark, as we will see below, Peter's inspiration is highly suspect, and he is "rebuked" immediately by Jesus. A final example (my favorite): In Mark, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, request to sit at Jesus' right and left hand in his glory (10:35-40), revealing how utterly clueless they are about the nature of following Jesus, but in Matthew, it is the mother of James and John who requests this of Jesus for her sons (20:2-23)!

⁷ E.g., Best, *Following Jesus*, "The Role of the Disciples"; Malbon, "Fallible Followers"; Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark"; Reploh, *Markus—Lehrer der Gemeinde*; Norman Petersen, "When is the End not an End? Literary Reflections on the Ending of Mark's Gospel," *Interpretation* 34 (1980) 15-66; Lincoln, "The Promise and the Failure"; Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*.

⁸ The classic statements of Mark's polemical thrust are Tyson, "The Blindness of the Disciples," and Weeden, *Mark: Traditions in Conflict*; they have been followed, but with some different nuances, by Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus*; Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*; and, to some extent, Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*.

⁹ Weeden, *Traditions in Conflict*, 50-51. Others are equally dramatic. Tolbert, in her discussion of the Gethsemane scene, in which the disciples fail to watch and pray with Jesus, and finally abandon him (14:32-50), interprets the enigmatic v. 41 to mean that the disciples' "last chance has passed . . . Jesus, the sower, has taught, cajoled, threatened, exhorted, warned, admonished, and repeatedly explained to them what is necessary for entering the kingdom of God. Now in this climactic hour he has given them three final opportunities to watch and pray that they 'may not enter into temptation.' All has failed; their bill is paid in full; the account book on them is now closed; their fate is sealed. 'The hour has come'" (*Sowing the Gospel*, 217). Kelber concludes his analysis of Mark's story in a similar way: "By retracing the journey of Jesus and his disciples, the readers are thus gradually and methodically prepared for a final parting of the ways. In reading the gospel one hopes that eventually the disciples will repent and believe in the gospel of the Kingdom. Yet the further we read the story the more Mark discourages our hopes. After the dismal failure of the disciples at Jesus' passion, all remaining hopes focus on the final outcome of the story. But Mark, instead of reversing the disciples' course, brings it to its logical conclusion. He has reserved the ending of the gospel to deliver the mortal blow to the fate of the disciples. At the moment, having read Mark's story from beginning to end, it must dawn on the reader that the disciples missed the way into the Kingdom" (*Mark's Story of Jesus*, 93).

¹⁰ In 4:35-41, the disciples respond to Jesus' power over the storm with confusion over Jesus' identity (4:41); in 6:47-52, the narrator reports that their stupefied reaction to Jesus' stroll on the water was due to their hardened hearts (6:52); and in 8:14-21, the theme culminates with Jesus' harsh condemnation of their blindness, deafness, and hardened hearts (8:17-18); see Weeden, 26-32.

¹¹ Weeden's interest is christological and historical: the disciples must be discredited because they represent a group in Mark's community which espouses a "divine man" christology which Mark considers a "heresy" (cf. p. 51). Kelber agrees, but is more focused on the question of eschatology: Mark's portrayal results from his desire to explain the demise of the Jerusalem church in the war with Rome; the disciples represent the Jerusalem, apostolic church, who thought that the kingdom would come in Jerusalem, and that the war was a sign of its coming. Through his story, Mark discredits this idea, setting up a new time (after the war) and a new place (Galilee) for the Kingdom's arrival (*Mark's Story of Jesus*, 88-96). Tolbert's interest is narrative-rhetorical; she views the purpose of Mark's story of the

disciples' ultimate failure to be to create in the reader a perfect disciple (*Sowing the Gospel*, 295-299).

¹² Tolbert's comments illustrate this view well: "Portraying the disciples as failing foils to Jesus manipulates the reader to respond by becoming a better disciple. In rejecting the views and actions of the Twelve and affirming the words and work of Jesus, the reader herself or himself becomes a faithful disciple" (*Sowing the Gospel*, 224; cf. 295-299).

¹³ Tannehill, it should be noted, is the most equivocal; in his view, Mark holds out the possibility of reconciliation, but notes that "there are indications that this renewal is not a simple and automatic affair. A positive development is indicated but negative possibilities are also suggested" ("The Disciples in Mark," 152). This places Tannehill somewhat in the middle of the debate, for this ambiguity strikes the audience not simply as pastoral comfort but as challenge: "the outcome of the story depends on decisions which the Church, including the reader, must still make" (152). More on this below.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Juel, *Master of Surprise*, 114-15.; Petersen, "When is the End," 154-55; Lincoln, "The Promise and the Failure," 291-92; Kingsbury, 113. I will explore this aspect of the disciples' story in more detail below.

¹⁵ "The Promise and the Failure," 292.

¹⁶ Juel, *Master of Surprise*, 115; Petersen, "When is the End," 64-66; Lincoln, "The Promise and the Failure," 292; Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark," 150.

¹⁷ Best argues, for example, that "the failure of the historical disciples followed by their eventual forgiveness and known success as missionaries [would be] a source of great encouragement" (*Following Jesus*, 12); Lincoln illustrates this view as well: "If, as disciples, the readers fail to stand up to the rigors of the way of the cross set out in the story, all is not necessarily lost. Christ's powerful word of promise will still prevail . . . Mark's story allows for human failure even after the resurrection yet holds out the triumph of God's purposes despite this" ("The Promise and the Failure," 297).

¹⁸ *Let the Reader Understand*, 257-58. As I noted above, I would say that both sides seek to achieve this unity between story and discourse.

¹⁹ *Let the Reader Understand*, 258. Fowler attributes the desire to project a "Happy ending" for the disciples to the power of the "reading grid" provided by Matthew (259). I do not think this is fair or accurate, as I will argue below.

²⁰ Such a flat reading is illustrated by Kingsbury, who simply states that "Mark invites the reader to think of the disciples as reconciled to Jesus following Easter . . . To be sure, Mark does not narrate a scene describing this fulfillment. Nevertheless, he obligates the reader to project it. As the reader projects the fulfillment of Jesus' promise, the reader in effect projects the resolution of Jesus' conflict with the disciples" (*Conflict in Mark*, 113). Moreover, the reader is to project that the disciples come to understand everything Jesus had taught them about his identity and purpose, and that the essence of discipleship is servanthood (113-14). I would argue that such a reading is far too simplistic and destroys the artful and difficult ambiguity of Mark's story and his discourse. As I will suggest below, Mark ends the way it does precisely because Mark recognizes that discipleship remains a difficult thing for the audience; the tension and ambiguity does not magically disap-

pear with Jesus' resurrection.

²¹ *Let the Reader Understand*, 80.

²² As Petersen aptly puts it, if this is the case, "God made a really big mistake" ("When is the End not the End," 162); cf. also Juel, who points out how "cruel" it would be "to open the prospect of insight for insiders only to demonstrate that no way is available for the blind and deaf to heal themselves, no means by which those whose hearts have been hardened can engineer their escape" (*Master of Surprise*, 59; cf. 63).

²³ Best's suggestion that the slowness of the disciples serves to give further occasions for instruction by Jesus for the sake of the audience, while it holds much truth and is a common literary device (cf. Aristotle), cannot account for the harshness of the portrayal; this idea accords much more with Matthew's treatment.

²⁴ Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark," 139-40.

²⁵ As most commentators recognize; see, e.g., Leander Keck ("The Introduction to Mark's Gospel," *NTS* 12 [1965] 352-370, 362-364), who supports his claim that the prologue encompasses 1:1-15 by noting that 1:16-20 provides an appropriate introduction to Jesus' public ministry in its principal aim: "namely the steady emphasis on the disciples' participation in the work of Jesus. What makes the story of Jesus εὐαγγέλιον for Mark is not . . . who Jesus is *in se* but who his is *pro nobis*" (364).

²⁶ "The Disciples in Mark," 140.

²⁷ Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 224. On this point, Tannehill's stance between the pastoral and polemical sides becomes evident; he, too, suggests that "as the inadequacies of the disciples' response to Jesus become increasingly clear, the reader must distance himself from the disciples and begin to seek another way" ("The Disciples in Mark," 142).

²⁸ Cf. Schweizer, "The Portrayal of the Life of Faith," 172.

²⁹ In this light, perhaps Tannehill's suggestion that the disciples represent a "commissioned" group is not quite accurate ("The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," *Semeia* 16 [1979] 57-95). The focus is perhaps not so much on the disciples' execution of their charge, but on God's promise to them that they will function this way.

³⁰ Cf. Matt. 10:1, where Jesus "summons" the Twelve, and Luke 6:13, where he simply "chooses" them. The NRSV's rendering of Mark 3:14 ("he appointed the twelve") fails to bring Mark's intended connotation across.

³¹ See Joanna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1-3:6* (SBLDS 48; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980) 87, 126-28.

³² As Juel notes, the parables in chapter 4 deal with implied objections to the nature of Jesus' messiahship: "What evidence is there that his efforts have anything to do with the glorious days to come?" (*Master of Surprise*, 56).

³³ See Juel, *Master of Surprise* (50-54), for a helpful review of recent proposals; see also Joel Marcus, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* (SBLDS 90; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

³⁴ A reference back to 3:34, where "those around him" constitute his family, those who do the will of God (3:35).

³⁵ E.g., God's words to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Exod 33:19).

³⁶ Consider, e.g., Tolbert's statement that "outsiders will not understand, because they are outsiders, and insiders will understand because they are insiders. The parables . . . do not force people outside or pull people inside; they simply reveal the type of ground already present" (*Sowing the Gospel*, 160-61).

³⁷ Once again, I must reject the idea here that Mark's story and discourse are at odds (see above), that, in other words, this whole scene takes place for the sake of making insiders out of the readers without respect to the fate of the disciples' status as insiders (cf. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 169-70). Granted, the strong hint in 4:13 that the disciples may prove to be outsiders is borne out in the ensuing narrative; but if the reader's insider status is purchased at the expense of keeping the disciples out forever, the reader's insider status reveals itself as a Pyrrhic victory, for it suggests that human opposition and blindness can have the final word.

³⁸ Cf. Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark," 146; Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 198. Of course, one should note that the very first hint of trouble comes in the initial creation of the Twelve, in the relative clause appended to the last named disciple, "Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him" (3:19).

³⁹ E.g., Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark," 145-49; Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 223-226.

⁴⁰ Cf., e.g., 1:27; 2:7; 3:22; 4:41; 6:2-3; 6:14-16.

⁴¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics* 10-11 (Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* [Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987] 42-43).

⁴² On this, see, e.g., Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969) 40-43; idem (with Dennis C. Duling), *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1982) 248-251; Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 104-111; Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 187-189; Tannehill, "The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," *Semeia* 16 (1979) 57-95, 74; Petersen, *Literary Criticism*, 60-68; Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 177-179.

⁴³ Cf. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 187.

⁴⁴ Tolbert's observation is to the point: "In contrast to his utter rejection of Jesus the Messiah's words about the inevitability of suffering (8:31-33), this glorified Jesus in company with Elijah and Moses wins his approval ('it is well that we are here') and his esteem" (*Sowing the Gospel*, 205).

⁴⁵ E.g., Best, *Following Jesus*, 134-145; Juel, *Mark*, 116-17; Tolbert, 178-79.

⁴⁶ Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 200.

⁴⁷ Cf. Juel, 115-17.

⁴⁸ Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 200.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See Kelber's suggestion that characterizing Peter's statement as a confession is a misconstrual of the scene; he suggests it be termed Peter's "confrontation" (*Mark's Story of Jesus*, 48).

⁵¹ Moreover, as we have suggested above, Mark views "hardness of heart" as a condition of the world in general, something from which human beings need to be rescued.

⁵² Juel, *Master of Surprise*, 74.

⁵³ The word is used almost exclusively to refer to Jesus' exorcizing activity: 1:25; 3:12; 4:39 (the wind and the waves); 9:25.

⁵⁴ See Robinson, *The Problem of History*, 99-100.

⁵⁵ Of course, the predictions of his passion express this view as well (8:31; 9:30-31; 10:32-34).

⁵⁶ Cf. Peter's attitude toward Jesus' words about his suffering (8:32) to his reaction to Jesus' glory as revealed in the transfiguration (9:5) (Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 205).

⁵⁷ Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 209.

⁵⁸ *The Problem of History*, 98-100.

⁵⁹ Cf. Juel, *Master of Surprise*, 114-15; Lincoln, 197-98.

⁶⁰ Other predictions that help build this momentum include Jesus' instructions for his entrance into Jerusalem (11:1-6) and for the preparations for the passion (14:16); in both cases, the disciples find "everything just as Jesus had told them" (14:17).

⁶¹ Cf. Lincoln, 195-99.

⁶² Cf. Petersen, "When is the End?"; this does not, however, necessitate the conclusion that "Mark did not mean what he said" in 16:8. That resolves the tension in the other direction.

⁶³ Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (London: Dacre Press, 1958) 143.

⁶⁴ Via, *The Ethics of Mark's Gospel*, 186.