

Taking Up the Cross and Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark

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I count it a singular privilege to be able to offer a paper intended to give recognition to three professors of New Testament studies whose contributions to Calvin Theological Seminary and the church have been magnificent: Andrew Bandstra, David Holwerda, and Bastiaan VanElderen. The topic of this paper seems particularly well suited to this occasion. These three professors have shown in their teaching and have modeled in their living what it means to follow Jesus and live a life of discipleship—and at times they have borne a cross on behalf of us, their students. For their contributions we thank God and express our appreciation to them.

For my paper, I consider the theme of discipleship in Mark. I choose Mark as the gospel upon which to focus for three reasons.

1. I find the gospel of Mark to be an engaging gospel—the most engaging New Testament gospel, in fact—on account of its early date (I am convinced that a version of Mark was the first canonical gospel composed),¹ its rapid and reckless pace (everything happens immediately as Jesus races through the sixteen chapters on his way to Jerusalem),² and its profound theology of the cross presented in Greek that is oftentimes not so profound.³
2. The theme of discipleship is a particularly poignant one in the gospel of Mark in the light of the strong emphasis upon discipleship combined with the famed fickleness of Mark's male and female disciples and the enigmatic

¹In other words, I affirm a version of the two-source hypothesis, and I date the gospel of Mark to around 70 C.E. The issue of the date of Mark is made more complex, however, by the discovery and interpretation of the Secret Gospel of Mark. See Helmut Koester, "History and Development of Mark's Gospel from Mark to *Secret Mark* and 'Canonical' Mark," in *Colloquy on New Testament Studies: A Time for Reappraisal and Fresh Approaches*, ed. by Bruce Corley (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), 35-57.

²The adverb εὐθύς, "immediately," occurs forty-one times in the gospel of Mark (C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959], calls it a "favourite adverb in Mk" [p. 52]).

³On the Greek of the gospel of Mark, see C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 20-21.

presence, if only for a moment, of the shadowy disciple fleeing naked at the time of Jesus' arrest.⁴

3. The theme of discipleship in Mark is linked to bearing the cross—taking up the cross and following Jesus. Mark's theological perspective, I shall attempt to demonstrate, questions a theology of success and proclaims that the life of discipleship is lived with the reality of the cross. We all know about the popularity of the book entitled *The Prayer of Jabez*, which offers a Judeo-Christian mantra to be recited in order to achieve a blessed life of being healthy, wealthy, and wise.⁵ We also know of Christian churches that preach what may be called a theology of success—from possibility thinking to the “be happy attitudes.”⁶ I hear the gospel of Mark proclaiming the life of discipleship in remarkably different tones.

We consider, then, five passages from Mark's gospel that are germane to the issue of discipleship in the Gospel of Mark.

First, Mark 1:1, the incipit:

Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” Some manuscripts add here υἱοῦ θεοῦ, “son of God”; the textual evidence for the inclusion or exclusion of the phrase leaves little room for certainty.⁷ Whether or not we take this additional phrase to reflect the original reading, certainly Mark means to announce that Jesus is to be understood as the son of God. Just a bit later in chapter 1, at the occasion of the baptism of Jesus, the *bat qol* or heavenly voice says as much.⁸ Exactly what it means, for Mark, that Jesus is to be understood as son of God is another matter altogether. It is the central matter in the gospel of Mark.

As with many an incipit, so also here: If we really understand the incipit, we understand the text as a whole. Here, the incipit claims to introduce Mark as a text of good news, εὐαγγέλιον, with a messianic figure, Jesus, who may be proclaimed, we are told in the incipit or soon thereafter, as Son of God.

Yet, what does that actually mean? What is not stated explicitly in the incipit is what we know all too painfully well (as did some of the first hearers of the gospel), and if they did not know when the incipit was read, they found out soon enough. This text of good news apparently has bad news, not *euangelion*

⁴Mark 14:51-52, discussed below.

⁵Bruce H. Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2000).

⁶Compare Robert H. Schuller, *The Be Happy Attitudes: Eight Positive Attitudes That Can Transform Your Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).

⁷The phrase is absent in the original hand of Codex Sinaiticus and other manuscripts and present in the first correction of Codex Sinaiticus and in Codex Vaticanus, Codex Bezae, and other manuscripts; a few additional manuscripts read υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ or υἱοῦ τοῦ κυρίου.

⁸Mark 1:11: σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα.

but *dysangelion*—painful news, deadly news. Mark is, as it has been put aptly, a passion narrative with a long introduction.⁹ The good news is the bad news, and the bad news is the good news: the news of the cross, the suffering Messiah and Son of God, and the suffering followers of the Messiah and Son of God.

Second, Mark 8:22-33:

At Bethsaida a blind man is brought to Jesus for the healing touch. Jesus spits and touches, and the man then can see but with poor focus. “I see people, but they look like trees walking about,” he says. So Jesus touches the man again, and now the man sees everything clearly.

This miracle story is used in Mark to contextualize the story of the discussion among Jesus and his disciples on the road to Caesarea Philippi about who Jesus is. Like the blind man at Bethsaida, the disciples, too, need to be restored in their vision. They need to be transformed from a lack of clarity to a sharper focus on who Jesus is. Is he John the Baptizer, Elijah, a prophet? Peter offers the correct answer, at least in a general way: σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστός, “You are the Christ.” Yet, at the end of both the miracle story and the scene placed on the road to the north of Galilee, Mark adds variations upon the command used to emphasize the messianic secret: Tell no one who I am.¹⁰

I take my place as a traveler on the Wredestraße when I suggest that Mark’s messianic secret is part of Mark’s theology and has nothing to do with the historical Jesus.¹¹ Mark employs a goodly number of miracle stories in his gospel but comparatively few sayings. Mark’s Jesus is a strong, quiet figure who is potent in his deeds but does not say much. We need not fault Mark for this. Mark did not use Q materials in his gospel in the manner of Matthew and Luke.¹² Mark most likely did use a small collection of miracle stories in the compilation of his gospel, after the fashion of John the evangelist and his Signs Source.¹³ Yet, Mark typically concludes his miracle stories with a command of silence from Jesus: Tell no one who I am.

⁹Martin Kähler, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1956), 60.

¹⁰On the messianic secret, see especially William Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901).

¹¹On the Wredestraße and the Schweitzerstraße, (and the Autobahn), see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

¹²On Q, see especially John S. Kloppenborg, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000); James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg, *The Critical Edition of Q* (Hermeneia; Minn.: Fortress Press/Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2000).

¹³On the Signs Source, see especially Robert T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), and *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 11 (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

Such a command to secrecy flies in the face of the usual form and function of miracle stories in early Christian and Greco-Roman sources.¹⁴ Miracle stories typically mean to elicit a response, belief, applause. Mark seems self-consciously to manipulate the form, or “bend the genre,”¹⁵ of his miracle stories by stifling the applause through the messianic secret.

For Mark the applause—and the belief—that come from the spectacular deeds of the miracle stories are insufficient for true discipleship. To confess Jesus as just another Greco-Roman divine man and Son of God, remarkable from birth and outstanding in deeds of power, is not enough for Mark. To applaud Jesus for healings, exorcisms, and the like is easy—too easy. To follow Jesus through health, wealth, and success is also easy—too easy. To follow Jesus to the cross is much more difficult.

This very point is underscored in Mark 8:31-33, where Mark has Jesus announce that the son of man, the child of humankind—ὁ υἱός τοῦ ἀνθρώπου—will suffer, die, and rise.¹⁶ This Jesus says, at last, with no thought of a messianic secret: παρρησίᾳ τὸν λόγον ἐλάλει, “he said this clearly”. Jesus finally speaks clearly and openly when he discusses suffering. Peter, who put it correctly before, now gets it quite wrong because he refuses to accept the suffering, and for his response he needs, as it were, to be exorcised: ὕπαγε ὀπίσω μου, σατανᾶ, “Get behind me, Satan.”

The point being made becomes crucial because Mark presents the theme of suffering linked not only to Jesus, the suffering Christ and son of God as son of man, but also to discipleship and the suffering followers of Jesus. “If any people would come after me,” Jesus says, “let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. For those who would save their lives will lose them, and those who would lose their lives for my sake and the gospel’s will save them.”¹⁷ Mark’s theology and Christology are no abstractions. Mark’s theology and Christology are closely connected to following Jesus and living the life of discipleship—suffering discipleship.

¹⁴On the form of miracle stories, see Rudolph Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. by John Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 209-44.

¹⁵This phrase was used by Harold W. Attridge in his Society of Biblical Literature presidential address, “Genre Bending in the Fourth Gospel,” presented November 2001 in Denver, Colorado, and published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121 (2002): 3-21.

¹⁶On the range of meanings for son of man, or child of humankind, see Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 8.400-77.

¹⁷Mark 8:34-35. Here I translate the third-person singular masculine pronouns of the Greek text with third-person plural English pronouns for the sake of inclusivity.

Third, Mark 14:51-52, the passage about the νεανίσκος, or young man:

καὶ νεανίσκος τις συνηκολούθει αὐτῷ περιβεβλημένος σινδόνα ἐπὶ γυμνοῦ, καὶ κρατοῦσιν αὐτόν· ὁ δὲ καταλιπὼν τὴν σινδόνα γυμνὸς ἔφυγεν, “And a young man followed him with nothing but a linen shroud on his body. They seized him, but he left the linen shroud behind and ran away naked.” These two verses have proved to be an interpretive conundrum to scholars. Some have even suggested that the figure of the streaker is the figure of the evangelist who introduces himself, à la Alfred Hitchcock in his films, into the story line as a minor character.¹⁸

I propose that the resolution of this problem of Mark 14:51-52 may well rest with the text of the letter of Clement to Theodore and the extracts of the so-called Secret or Mystical Gospel of Mark contained therein.¹⁹

During his life, Morton Smith embraced the secrets of the Secret Gospel that he found at the Mar Saba monastic library in the Judean desert, and he took secrets with him to his grave. All things considered, I conclude that the two fragments of Secret Mark in the letter of Clement are probably authentic and very early fragments from the Markan tradition and that they help present a subplot on the vicissitudes of the life of discipleship in the gospel of Mark.²⁰

The two fragments of Secret Mark read as follows.²¹ The first fragment is to be located after Mark 10:34:

And they were coming into Bethany. This woman whose brother had died was there. She came and kneeled before Jesus and was saying to him, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” But the disciples rebuked her. Then Jesus became angry and went with her into the garden where the tomb was. At once a loud voice was heard from the tomb, and Jesus went up and rolled the stone away from the door of the tomb. At once he went in where the young man²² was. He reached out his hand, took him by the hand, and raised him up. The young man looked at Jesus and loved him, and he began to beg him to be with him. Then they left the tomb and went into the young man’s house, for he was rich. Six days later Jesus told him what to do, and in the evening the young man was coming to him wearing a linen shroud over

¹⁸See Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 562.

¹⁹On the Secret Gospel of Mark, see Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), and *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

²⁰See Marvin Meyer, “The Youth in the *Secret Gospel of Mark*,” in *Semeia 49: The Apocryphal Jesus and Christian Beginnings*, ed. by Ron Cameron (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 129-53.

²¹For the Greek text, see Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, 445-54; good photographs are now available in Charles W. Hedrick, with Nikolaos Olympiou, “Secret Mark: New Photographs, New Witnesses,” *The Fourth R* 13 (2000): 3-11, 14-16.

²²The Greek word used for “young man,” here and elsewhere in the text, is νεανίσκος.

his naked body. He stayed with him that night, for Jesus was teaching him the mystery of the kingdom of God. And from there he got up and returned to the other side of the Jordan.

The second fragment is to be located after Mark 10:46a: “The sister of the young man whom Jesus loved was there, along with his mother and Salome, but Jesus did not receive them.”²³

When the fragments of Secret Mark are returned to their appropriate places in the text, a story about the *νεανίσκος*—a disciple, any disciple, you or me—emerges. That *νεανίσκος*, like us, will eventually face the tomb of Jesus with the decision placed before him or her: Will you still follow Jesus?

In his book, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, Dennis MacDonald discusses the *νεανίσκος* in Mark in the light of his theories regarding Mark.²⁴ MacDonald argues that Mark imitates or emulates Homer by adopting and adapting Homeric motifs. His assemblage of data is prodigious. With regard to the concerns of this paper, MacDonald hypothesizes that Homer’s story of Elpenor, recounted in books 10 and 12 of the *Odyssey* becomes the basis for the story of the young man, the *νεανίσκος*, in canonical and Secret Mark. According to Homer’s story, Elpenor, a young man in Odysseus’ crew, drank too much, dozed off, took a fall, and died and went to Hades where he was, of course, stripped of his body. Later, after Odysseus visited him in Hades, he was given a proper burial. (The similarities to the story of Eutychus in the Acts of the Apostles are also clear and are not missed by MacDonald.²⁵)

MacDonald’s thesis is interesting and provocative, but I do not agree with him on some of his most significant points. The similarities between the portrayals of the Markan youth and Homeric Elpenor—along with other figures; for example, the young male initiate depicted in the triclinium of the Villa of the Mysteries near Pompeii²⁶—most likely stem from their roles as initiates, or disciples, of one sort or another, in their respective religious traditions.

²³On “the young man whom Jesus loved” and the beloved disciple—and Lazarus—in the Gospel of John, see Marvin Meyer, “The Youth in Secret Mark and the Beloved Disciple in John,” in *Gospel Origins and Christian Beginnings*, ed. by Jack T. Sanders, Charles W. Hedrick, and James E. Goehring (Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1990), 94-105.

²⁴Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 124-30, 162-68.

²⁵Compare Acts 20:7-12.

²⁶The young male initiate from Pompeii is the only mortal male depicted in the triclinium of the Villa of the Mysteries. See the recent discussions in Elaine K. Gazda, ed., *The Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii: Ancient Ritual, Modern Muse* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology and The University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2000).

Fourth, Mark 15:39, the culmination of the crucifixion account in the passion narrative:

“And when the centurion who stood facing him—Jesus—saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, ἀληθῶς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν, ‘In truth this man was Son of God.’” After Mark, Matthew redacts the passage to say that the centurion was awestruck and offered his confession when he saw the earthquake and other apocalyptic events that Matthew imports into the account. Who would not call Jesus Son of God in the middle of an apocalypse?²⁷ Luke redacts the passage to indicate that the centurion praised God—a good Christian should offer a hymn of praise on such an occasion, according to Luke—and pronounced Jesus innocent. Luke thus has the centurion, a representative of Rome, declare Jesus to be a blameless martyr, much like the other victims in the early church such as Stephen and the apostles. In Luke, Jesus is the first in a long line of innocent Christian martyrs of God.²⁸

Among the synoptic authors, only Mark retains a truly creative tension in the confession of the centurion. Mark has discouraged the confession that Jesus is Son of God both in the miracles that have been performed and by means of his application of the messianic secret. Here, when Jesus is suffering and dying, the centurion, a Gentile like so many early Christians, confesses what is hard to confess, what is a paradox of confession. Jesus is Son of God in his suffering, he is powerful in his weakness, and he is God with us in his death. In Mark, the centurion says so clearly and openly, just as Jesus had said so on the road to Caesarea Philippi when he was discussing his own suffering as son of man. Peter did not like it then, and we may not like it now. There is nothing easy about this confession. There is nothing cheap about this grace, nor about this life.

Fifth, Mark 16:8:

At the time of the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples progressively defect. They rarely seemed to understand Jesus during his life, and now they are not up to the challenge of following Jesus. Judas betrays Jesus, Peter denies Jesus, the male disciples run for their lives, and even the youth dashes away. The women disciples are somewhat more courageous; they at least linger at the cross and come to the tomb.²⁹

Here, at Mark 16:8, in an awkward Greek sentence, the gospel concludes with a description that is both syntactically and theologically hard. This is what comes after the confrontation of the women with the youth—the νεανίσκος in

²⁷Matthew 27:54: ‘Ο δὲ ἑκατόνταρχος καὶ οἱ μετ’ αὐτοῦ τηροῦντες τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἰδόντες τὸν σεισμόν καὶ τὰ γινόμενα ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα, λέγοντες· ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς ἦν οὗτος.

Luke 23:47: Ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ ἑκατοντάρχη τὸ γινόμενον ἐδόξαζεν τὸν θεὸν λέγων· ὄντως ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος δίκαιος ἦν.

²⁹See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 321-23.

the tomb: Καὶ ἔξελθοῦσαι ἔφυγον ἀπὸ τοῦ μνημείου, εἶχεν γὰρ αὐτὰς τρόμος καὶ ἔκστασις· καὶ οὐδενὶ οὐδὲν εἶπαν· ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ, "And they left and fled from the tomb, for they were trembling and beside themselves. And they said nothing to no one [sic], for they were afraid." The Greek negation in the final sentence could not be more strongly put. The gospel of Mark also ends with a dangling conjunction, γάρ, and with the fear of the disciples—here the female disciples. The γάρ is left hanging at the end of Mark, and so are we.

The copyists of Mark and the other synoptic evangelists tried to deal with the awkwardness of the conclusion of Mark's gospel in a couple of ways. Over the years, several longer endings were appended to the gospel of Mark—a long ending, a shorter ending, the Freer logion with variations—and while these later endings might resolve some of the uneasiness of readers of the gospel of Mark, they are clearly secondary in character and derived from the other gospel accounts. The codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus know nothing of these longer accounts.³⁰

Further, in his gospel, Matthew makes the youth in the tomb into an apocalyptic angel, and the disciples do meet Jesus in Galilee and are commissioned by him there: "Go then and make disciples of all nations, baptizing . . . teaching . . . I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20). In his gospel, Luke transforms the νεανίσκος into two angels, and after the disciples remark about what Jesus said while he was still in Galilee, they stay around Jerusalem until they are sent, spirit-filled, from Jerusalem and Judea to the ends of the earth—or at least to Rome, with Paul, at the end of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke's second scroll.³¹

At the end of the gospel of Mark as it was composed (at Mark 16:8), there is no easy resolution to the tension created. On the one hand, most of the male and female disciples have fled in fear and dismay in the face of the scandal of the cross and the demands of the cross on their lives. On the other hand, the voice of the youth, who now is in the tomb of Jesus, continues to cry out. I suggest that in Mark this youth is the same youth who earlier was raised to life by Jesus, was taught by Jesus, and yet ran away from Jesus when Jesus was arrested. In Mark 16, the youth has come back to Jesus in his death; he identifies with Jesus in the tomb, and he even looks and sounds rather like Jesus: "Do not be

³⁰See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 226-29, along with page 57. Additional issues on the longer endings to the gospel of Mark are discussed in the literature, included the debated issue of blank space left after Mark 16:8 in the manuscript tradition and the possible implications for the ending of the gospel. See, for example, Paul Mirecki, "Mark 16:9-20: Composition, Tradition and Redaction" (Th.D. diss, Harvard Divinity School, 1986).

³¹Like the Gospel of Mark, the Acts of the Apostles also has an open-ended conclusion: Ἐνέμενεν δὲ διετίαν ὅλην ἐν ἰδίῳ μισθώματι καὶ ἀπεδίχετο πάντας τοὺς εἰσπορευομένους πρὸς αὐτόν, κηρύσσων τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διδάσκων τὰ περὶ τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ πάσης παρρησίας ἀκωλύτως (28:30-31).

alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here. Look at the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter [who may yet get his understanding of Jesus correct in the gospel of Mark] that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, as he told you."³²

Only the hearer, the implied hearer or reader, can resolve the tension so deliberately and ingeniously created at the conclusion of the gospel. It is perhaps too much to propose that an altar call is needed at the end of Mark, but something similar is implied.³³

Only the hearer and reader—finally that is you and I—can resolve the tension at the end of Mark. How shall we respond to the cross of Christ? Shall we, like so many disciples, flee from the cross and the tomb, or shall we, like the youth, be counted with Jesus in the tomb? Are we ready to take up the cross and follow Jesus into the Galilee of our lives, into a world that is suffering, into a life of discipleship that entails dying and living with Christ? Today, in the world after September 11, 2001, the Galilee of our lives may be New York City, Washington D.C., Israel, Palestine, Afghanistan, our neighborhoods—wherever the suffering and living Jesus is to be found. Are we ready to affirm—and to live out of our affirmation—that in following Jesus there is strength in weakness and life in death? The call to discipleship is given in Mark; it is up to you and me to hear it, respond to it, and live it.

³²Mark 16:6-7. The particular mention made of Peter here recalls his forthright role as the disciple who is initially right and then wrong in his assessment of Jesus in Mark 8:27-33. Note the further amplification of the role of Peter in Matthew 16:13-20.

³³Compare Marvin Meyer, "The Youth in the *Secret Gospel of Mark*," 148.