

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Already for a long time scholars of Mark have been interested in the constituent themes of the Gospel as a tool for understanding Mark's unique theology. The concept 'unbelief' as a theme in Mark's Gospel is particularly important, when considered in relation to the response of the characters pertaining to the teaching and ministry of Jesus, the Christ.

In Mark 1:14-15, Jesus declares a prophetic message (repentance and faith) and encourages the people to accept a certain system of God's Kingdom in response to his message. Jesus' declaration is a truth claim that actually moulds the responses of audiences. The response may be positive, as amongst some minor characters (1:31; 2:1-5; 5:25-34; 10:46-52; 14:3-9), or it may be negative, as amongst the Jewish religious leaders, the disciples and the crowds generally.

Based on the description of the faithful actions of the minor characters, as well as the opposite, we may presume that unbelief could imply that certain concrete actions are expected of those who do not trust the demands of Jesus, but do understand the presence of God's ruling power in Jesus, for example the refusal of the Jewish religious leaders to accept the divine authority of Jesus (2:5-7; 3:5-6); the hostility of the relatives of Jesus (6:1-6); the fear (4:35-41), astonishment (6:45-52), worrying (8:14-21), betrayal (14:43-47), and denial (14:67-71) of the disciples.

Mark particularly takes the *apistia* / *apistoj* group of words, which is already a semi-technical term used in the primitive Christianity,<sup>1</sup> to give the existent unbelief prominence, perhaps for a theological reason, rather than merely noting the first Christians' usage of unbelief. Particularly, Mark 6:6 says that Jesus "marvelled, because of their unbelief." *Apistia* is here the rejection which Jesus experienced when the people of Nazareth refused to understand his claim, in view of his well-known origin (6:3).<sup>2</sup> Mark 6:5 describes that due to the unbelief of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Acts 26:8; Romans 11:20; Hebrew 3:12; Philo *Ebr.* 25; Josephus *Ant.* xiv.31; xviii. 76 etc.

<sup>2</sup> G Barth, "Apistia, Apistoj," eds., Horst Balz & Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical*

the people in the community, Jesus could do no mighty work there. As by faith these mighty works are received as an answer to prayer, so, by corollary, are these mighty works refused through unbelief.

The connection between faith and mighty work is also clearly evident in the cry of the father in Mark 9:24: “I believe; help my unbelief (apistia)!” This paradoxical saying about unbelieving faith reveals that the reflection on faith and doubt is beginning.<sup>3</sup> It seeks to protect faith from the misunderstanding that what matters is an especially great faith, as though faith were an achievement.<sup>4</sup> Faith always exists only in the struggle between unbelief and the accompanying doubt. According to Mark 9:19, Jesus complains about the “faithless generation” (+W genea. apistoj). The faithlessness consists then in mistrust, as well as in insufficient trust, with reference to the mission and authority of Jesus.

It will be argued that unbelief is a major theme in Mark's Gospel, because it serves as an organizing principle whereby Mark structures his Gospel. The aim of this study is to examine the literary-theological perspective of the theme “unbelief” within Mark's Gospel. Exploration of this problem begins with several key questions, which form the basis of this thesis: 1) *What is the nature of unbelief in Mark's Gospel?* 2) *What is Mark's perspective regarding the difference between the unbelief of the opponents of Jesus and the unbelief of his disciples?* 3) *What are the macro and the micro causes, as well as the consequent result of unbelief?* 4) *What is Mark's theological perspective on unbelief?* In an attempt to answer these questions, the literary-theological perspective on the theme of unbelief in Mark's Gospel will be investigated. For this purpose, particular attention will be paid to several passages (2:1-12; 3:1-6; 4:35-41; 6:1-6; 8:14-21; 9:14-29; 10:46-52; 11:27-33; 15:27-32), which are purported as providing a hermeneutical key toward our understanding of the theme ‘unbelief.’ Furthermore, an attempt will be made to investigate the theological perspective on unbelief.

## 1.1 THE NEGLECT OF THE THEME ‘UNBELIEF’ BY THE MARKAN

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*Dictionary of the New Testament I* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 122.

<sup>3</sup> J. F. Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus. Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 140.

<sup>4</sup> C. D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University, 1989).

## SCHOLARSHIP

In the previous three decades many significant books and articles have been published, which attempted to identify the purpose of Mark. Kee comments: “The history of recent research on the Gospel of Mark can be seen as the record of an attempt to discern the aim of the Evangelist and so to discover the perspective, which gives coherence to all the features of the Second Gospel.”<sup>5</sup>

Since the appearance of Marxsen’s *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of Gospel*,<sup>6</sup> Markan scholars have produced numerous important studies on various themes, e.g., Christology,<sup>7</sup> eschatology<sup>8</sup> and discipleship.<sup>9</sup> Recent surveys of Markan studies indicate a proliferation of research on the theology of Mark, especially in the areas of Christology and discipleship. The latter has been studied intensely during the past three decades.

In a seminal study, Wilhelm Wrede identified the so-called messianic secret and importance it plays in the revelation of Jesus’ identity in Mark.<sup>10</sup> Quesnell finds the eucharistic concept of Mark 6:52 to be the important factor in understanding the Gospel of Mark.<sup>11</sup> Martin understands Mark as complementary to Paul’s theology.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Luz finds Mark to be written by way of correction of false messianic concepts.<sup>13</sup> Weeden considers Mark to be a force against a false Christology.<sup>14</sup> These studies contributed tremendously towards the proper understanding of Mark.

The centrality of the passion in the Gospel of Mark has been noted by a number

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<sup>5</sup> H. C. Kee, “Mark’s Gospel in Recent Research,” *Interpretation* 32 (1978): 353.

<sup>6</sup> W Marxsen, *Mark The Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> Norman Perrin, “The Christology of Mark A Study in Methodology,” *JR* 51(1971).

<sup>8</sup> Rudolph Pesch. *Naherwartungen: Tradition und Redaktion in Mk 13* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> Robert R. Meye, *Jesus and the Twelve: Discipleship and Revelation in Mark’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> Eng. Trans., by J.C.G. Greig, Wilhelm Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (London: James Clark, 1971).

<sup>11</sup> Quentin Quesnell, *The Mind of Mark* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical institute, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> R. Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> Ulrich Luz, “The Secrecy Motif and the Marcan Christology,” *ZNW* 56 (1965).

<sup>14</sup> Theodore J. Weeden, “The Heresy that Necessitated Mark’s Gospel,” *ZNW* 59 (1968): 145-58.

of scholars. Achtemeier asserts that: “The hermeneutical key Mark chose, was the passion of Jesus, his death and resurrection.”<sup>15</sup> Kazmierski argues that although ‘Son of Man’ fulfils an important function in the Gospel, Mark’s preferred title for Jesus is ‘Son of God’.

Whenever the title ‘Son of God’ is described, some would hypothesize a Jewish background as vital for its interpretation. For example, according to Lührmann, it indicates that Jesus stands in the tradition of the Jewish sage as a suffering righteous man, God’s royal servant, as depicted in Isaiah and the Wisdom Literature (Isa. 42:1; 52:7; 53; Wisd. 2:12-20).<sup>16</sup> Others consider the term to be a Jewish messianic title, a synonym for the royal Messiah or eschatological king (Kee, Donahue, Kingsbury).<sup>17</sup>

Many scholars have dealt with the incomprehension of the disciples when they were faced with the question of Jesus’ identity and destiny, as well as the nature of true discipleship. Nevertheless, Markan scholars still disagree about the literary-theological function of the theme ‘incomprehension’ in Mark’s Gospel. Tyson,<sup>18</sup> Weeden,<sup>19</sup> and Kelber<sup>20</sup> understand the theme to be part of Mark’s polemic against the original disciples who were the founders of a Jerusalem-based Christianity that displayed hostility to Mark’s Galilean gentile church. Others (Peterson,<sup>21</sup> Best,<sup>22</sup> and Tannehill<sup>23</sup>) perceive it as a literary device used by Mark for the pastoral purpose of creating an awareness in his readers the

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<sup>15</sup> P. Achtemeier, “Mark as Interpreter of the Jesus Tradition,” in J. L. Mays, ed., *Interpreting the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 115-29.

<sup>16</sup> D. Lührmann, “Biographie des Gerechten als Evangelium. Vorstellungen zu einem Markus-Kommentar,” *Wort und Dienst* 14 (1977): 25-50.

<sup>17</sup> H. C. Kee, *Understanding the Sacred Text*, ed., J. Reumann (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1972); J. R. Donahue, *Are You the Christ? The Trial Narrative in the Gospel of Mark* (Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973); J. D. Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Tyson, “The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark,” *JBL* 80 (1961): 261-68.

<sup>19</sup> Theodor J. Weeden, *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> Werner H. Kelber, *Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> Norman, R. Peterson, “The Composition of Mark 4:1-8:26,” *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980): 185-217.

<sup>22</sup> E. Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield: JOST Press, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, “The Disciples in Mark: The Function of Narrative Role,” *JR* 57 (1977): 392-33.

difficulties involved in discipleship.

In addition to Mark's description of the disciples, Malbon<sup>24</sup> and Williams<sup>25</sup> included a number of the so-called 'minor characters,' who followed Jesus and lived according to the principles of his teaching. They particularly argue that Mark presents the minor characters as suppliants, examples and negative examples. Furthermore, both Meye and Robbins have indicated the importance in Mark of the theme of Jesus as teacher.<sup>26</sup> And Marshall is interested in faith as an important theme in Mark's Gospel.<sup>27</sup>

However, the diversity of opinion concerning the purpose of Mark seems to justify the comment of Kümmel that "a clear explanation of the aim of the evangelist has not yet been elicited from the text."<sup>28</sup> This remark does not, of course, stop scholarly research in pursuit of clarity regarding the purpose of Mark. On the contrary, it has stimulated further research towards achievement of this goal.

Although several studies have paid attention to a variety of themes in Mark's Gospel, the theme 'unbelief' in Mark's Gospel has generally been neglected. In this section only a selection of those thematic titles will be addressed. The more significant contribution of this review involves furthering a clear understanding of the neglect of the theme 'unbelief' by scholars.

## 1.2 A STATEMENT REGARDING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

A number of scholars over a long period of time have investigated the themes of Mark's Gospel in order to attempt an understanding of Mark's unique theology. Numerous studies have been devoted to themes, such as the general concern of Mark regarding the Messianic Secret, Christology, Discipleship, Faith, Minor

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<sup>24</sup> E.S. Malbon, "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 29-48.

<sup>25</sup> Joel F. Williams, "Discipleship and Minor Characters in Mark's Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* July-September (1996): 332-343.

<sup>26</sup> Robert P. Meye, *Jesus and the Twelve: Discipleship and Revelation in Mark's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1968); Vernon K. Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

<sup>27</sup> C. D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> Werner G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans., H. C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 92.

Characters, and many others besides. During the last three decades, several studies have paid special attention to the role of the disciples in Mark's Gospel. Nevertheless, Markan scholars have largely neglected the theme 'unbelief,' which is fundamental towards a proper understanding of Mark's theological work, with the result that it has, up to this stage, attracted comparatively little attention.

The reason for engaging in the study on the theme 'unbelief,' is due to the fact that relatively little material has been written on the theme of unbelief. It seems clear that the theme of unbelief has not yet received sufficient attention. In view of the consequent apparent lack of research in this field, a study exploring the theme of unbelief will provide a valuable contribution.

If indeed the theme of unbelief serves as organizing principle in both the narrative and the theology of Mark's Gospel, then this theme should be worked out systematically. As already indicated, the fact that it is a major theme also adds to the overall theological picture presented in this Gospel.

### **1.3 MAIN HYPOTHESIS AND INVESTIGATIVE PROCEDURE**

#### 1.3.1 Main Hypothesis

The principal hypothesis of this study is that Mark distinguishes between two kinds of unbelief, namely the unbelief of the Jewish religious leaders, and the unbelief of the disciples. Mark applies the same unbelieving characteristics used to describe opponents, to the disciples as well. Nevertheless Mark retains a distinction between the unbelief of both groups. This applies also to his description of the unbelief of both groups. The unbelief of the Jewish religious leaders is not primarily a lack of insight; it is rather a definite refusal to accept of Jesus' claims and demands, which they well recognize, because they fear the existential consequences of so doing. It is a problem of volition, rather than cognition.

The disciples, on the other hand, are those who have already accepted the claims and demands of Jesus and who now struggle to follow him in faith. Their unbelief is caused by a failure of recognition, a persistent inability to understand who Jesus is, as well as what his life is all about. Misunderstanding and fearful amazement are the hallmarks of their unbelief.

Unbelief literally functions as the shadow of faith that is a prerequisite towards discipleship. Through speech-acts concerning unbelief, Mark emphasizes the fact that those who are the true disciples must follow Jesus with faith, even under difficult circumstances.

### 1.3.2 Investigative Procedure

In chapter 1, the introductory matters of this dissertation will be outlined including a historical survey of research, a statement of the research problem and questions, consideration of the particular aim of this study, as well as the main hypothesis, together with the methodological argument.

The purpose of chapter 2 is to consider and clarify the development of the unbelief of the opponents of Jesus as a theme in Mark's Gospel. More specifically, interest in the following matters is explored: the nature of the opponents' unbelief, the major cause of the unbelief, the relationship between the language 'hardness of heart' and the motif of unbelief, as well as the predicted result of the unbelief. The answers to these issues provide a foundation for understanding the Markan Gospel's theological perspective on unbelief. Within the broad scope of this study, I intend to particularly examine the following passages (2:1-12; 3:1-6; 6:1-6; 11:27-33; 15:27-32), in which the unbelief of the opponents is prominent.

In chapter 3, the nature and cause of the disciples' unbelief will be examined, together with the dissimilarity between their unbelief and the opponents' unbelief. For this purpose, I intend to first of all, analyse the passages in Mark's Gospel, where unbelief applies to the disciples (4:35-41; 6:45-52; 8:14-21; 9:14-29). Secondly, the question of unbelief of the disciples is the same as that of the opponents is discussed. Thirdly, the question of how the expression 'hardness of heart' functions with reference to the unbelief of the disciples is investigated.

In the next chapter (Chapter 4), I will attempt to integrate the exegetical materials of chapter two and three and draw together the main conceptual trends of Mark's understanding of unbelief. Ultimately this will indicate that unbelief functions as a shadow of faith, in the same way that spiritual perceptiveness acts as a prerequisite of discipleship.

The final chapter (Chapter 5) will summarize the result of each chapter in order to demonstrate that the research questions have been answered and the principal hypothesis has been confirmed.

#### 1.4. THE METHOD FOLLOWED THROUGHOUT THE DISSERTATION

In order to obtain a clear understanding of the literary and theological dimensions of the unbelief statements in Mark's Gospel, the available exegetical materials,<sup>29</sup> which posit utilised an explanation of modern techniques and methods. In a wide variety of methods, the literary, social-scientific and theological perspectives will be prominent. Whilst there can be no claim to the use of these methods in totality, the endeavour is to follow the insights towards satisfactory answers to the research questions, which are stated in 'the aim of this study,' and to appreciate both the dramatic and conceptual aspects of Mark's presentation of unbelief.

#### PROCONDITION FOR THE THEMATIC STUDY

The starting point for any thematic study is actually arbitrary: in this stance it seems reasonable to begin with the assumption that Mark uses the *apistia/apistoj* group words as the primary lexical signal for material relevant to the notion of unbelief. However, it would be unjustified to assume that the *apistia/apistoj* material represents the sum-total of what Mark wants to describe about unbelief. It is a basic semantic fallacy to think there is a one-to-one

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<sup>29</sup> W. Egger, *How to Read the New Testament. An Introduction to Linguistic and Historical-Critical Methodology* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996); I. H. Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997); D. A. Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995); G. D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); J. R. McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Hermeneutics. Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983); S. D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); J. J. Pilch, ed., *Social Scientific Models for Interpreting the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); N. R. Peterson, *Literary Criticism for New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); B. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Moisés. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994).



correspondence between words and concepts.<sup>30</sup>

Mark's stylistic preference is to overwork a limited range of important words rather than employ a variety of equivalents. Nevertheless, it is possible to extend our appreciation of Mark's concept of unbelief by attending to the narrative context, and by finding the wider usage of the more significant words that are associated with unbelief. For example, since Mark 11:23 identifies the heart as the seat of faith, the hardened heart is potentially brought within the semantic range of unbelief (3:5; 6:52; 8:17). Once again, the association between unawareness and unbelief in passages such as 4:13; 6:52; 8:19, would imply that a lack of understanding could become a significant metaphor for unbelief and may well function this way in passages that do not employ the *apistia/ apistoj* terminology.

It may also be the case that the unbelief is implied in the way Mark portrays certain stories. Most commentators think that Mark uses the story of the rich man (10:17-21) as an example of unbelief. The word itself is not used, but the man's concern betrays his faithfulness.

Although I will follow a verbal motif through the Gospel, I am engaged in a literary or thematic study, even although not a lexical perspective as such. Biblical lexicography is a specifically linguistic task concerned with determining the meaning of the words and their translation equivalents in different contexts. Obviously lexical and literary perspectives are interdependent, while each has a distinctive emphasis.

## 1.5. SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is the investigation of the literary-theological function of unbelief in Mark's Gospel. Traditionally, scholars have paid attention to the role of the disciples and various christological issues. Although Marshall dealt with the theme 'unbelief,' he overlooked its use in part as a supplementary measure to emphasize faith. There has been no literature published on the theme of unbelief.

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<sup>30</sup> J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 21-37; Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*, 19, 26.

This indicates that the theme has not yet received sufficient attention by scholars. Since there is a lack of research in this field, this study of the theme 'unbelief' in Mark's Gospel will offer a significant contribution.

The main hypothesis for this study is that although Mark applies the same battery of unbelieving terms used to describe Jesus' opponents to the disciples, he retains a distinction between two kinds or two groups creating different nuances of meaning. In this dissertation, an attempt will be made to show that the literary meaning of 'unbelief' in Mark's Gospel is related to, indeed an extension of Mark's emphasis on faith as a prerequisite of discipleship.

The present dissertation is not focused as a methodological study, but departs frankly as an exegetical thematic study of the theme 'unbelief' in Mark's Gospel. Thus, in the interests of a clear understanding regarding the literary and theological function of 'unbelief' in Mark's Gospel, the currently available exegetical materials are employed, which set out the generally accented standard of modern literary methods.