

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this final chapter is to summarize the argument, to demonstrate the most important conclusions of this dissertation, as well as to expand their implication for understanding the motif of unbelief in Mark's Gospel.

#### **5.1 SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT**

This thesis began with recognition of the need for a clear understanding of the literary and theological functions of the theme 'unbelief' which is described throughout Mark's Gospel in relation to Jesus' opponents and to his disciples. The main hypothesis for investigating the function of 'unbelief' is that 1) Mark

distinguishes between the opponent's unbelief and the disciples' unbelief. The opponents' unbelief consists in their emphatic and intentional refusal to believe in Jesus, while the disciples' unbelief resides in their failure to understand Jesus' identity; 2) in Mark's Gospel the theme 'unbelief' functions literarily, rhetorically, and theologically to highlight the significance of faith or spiritual perceptiveness as prerequisite for the Christian discipleship. In the present dissertation, an attempt is to be made to show that the unbelief stands in contrast with faith, literally. Thus, this unbelief is very closely related to faith as a prerequisite of discipleship. Through speech acts concerning unbelief, Mark emphasizes that those who are the true disciples must follow Jesus with faith in demanding situations and under difficult circumstance.

Investigation of the literary format of individual passages, which are tied within the wider context of related themes in the narrative, has again demonstrated the value of a feasible and useful method for exploring the 'unbelief' as a theme in Mark's narrative.<sup>1347</sup> In particular, an appreciation of his use of literary devices such as irony, riddles and rhetorical questions, has been crucial for understanding both the dramatic and conceptual aspects of his presentation of this theme.

Kingsbury demonstrates that conflict is a central driving force of Mark's narrative. Jesus is found in conflict with demons, disciples, the crowds, and the Jewish religious leaders, which conflict leads ultimately to his extensive ostracism and rejection.<sup>1348</sup> Behind this conflict, Mark devises a primary contrast between the dawning rule of God and the faithless generation which resists the coming of the kingdom of God. Only Jesus stands in total contrast to the 'faithless generation' (9:19); all other characters are, to greater or lesser degree, vulnerable, partially or totally subject to its power.<sup>1349</sup> Mark therefore establishes the unbelief, not only of the Jewish religious leaders, but also of the disciples, despite the fact that they otherwise belong to the community of faith.

At different points of his narrative Mark applies the same expression of unbelief used to describe Jesus' opponents also to the disciples. Nevertheless, Mark

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<sup>1347</sup> Marshall, *Faith as a Theme*, 224.

<sup>1348</sup> Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 63-82.

<sup>1349</sup> Marshall, *Faith as a Theme*, 224.

retains a distinction between two kinds of unbelief, namely the unbelief of the Jewish religious leaders and the disciples' unbelief.

First of all, the nature of the Jewish religious leaders' unbelief is not primarily a lack of insight, but a refusal to accept the claims and demands of Jesus, which they well perceive, because they fear the existential consequences of doing so. It is a problem of volition more than cognition.<sup>1350</sup>

A remarkably regular portrayal of unbelief has appeared from these four passages (2:1-12; 6:1-6; 11:27-32; 15:27-33) dealing with the unbelief of Jesus' adversaries. Mark describes their unbelief as a mixture of seeing and not seeing, of correctly understanding Jesus' implied claim to a unique status, yet refusing to accept it. They recognize Jesus as one who dares to act on God's behalf (2:7), who (like God) possesses wisdom and remarkable healing powers (6:2; 15:31), who claims authority over the Temple (11:28), and who considers himself to be the messianic king (15:32). They clearly perceived his demand for repentant faith. Indeed, the only characters in Mark's Gospel to use the term 'faith,' apart from Jesus, are his opponents (11:31; 15:32). Where their unbelief becomes apparent is in their refusal to recognize a divine source for what seem to be divine works, preferring instead to charge Jesus with blasphemy (2:7) and demonic allegiance (implied in 6:3; cf. 3:22, 28). The root of this unbelief lies in the prior refusal of the opponents to accept John the Baptist's demand for repentance and his message of the Stronger One to come (11:30), with the result that they exhibit hostility towards Jesus from the very beginning of his mission (cf. 2:6-10).

Their unbelief, which was expressed in their refusal to accept Jesus' prophetic claim in 1:14-15, was in contrast to the centurion's faithful confession (15:39). Due to his humble family and social position (6:1-6) and his public honour and his apparent powerlessness (15:29-32), they were unable to accept Jesus as their divine Messiah, the Son of God, despite his obvious authority over sin (2:5, 10), sickness (2:11; 6:2; 15:31) and even the Temple system (11:28). The king of Israel who merely saves others, but will not save himself is not worthy of faith.

They were aggressively opposing Jesus' new rule, because to accept it would

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<sup>1350</sup> Marshall, *Faith as a Theme*, 224.

imply an end to the kind of rule, which they devised, and from which they benefited. They not only refuse to respond in repentant faith, but they also actively work to prevent the potential they perceive in Jesus from becoming a reality. Scepticism, mockery, and overt hostility are hallmarks to their unbelief.

On the other hand, the disciples are those who have already accepted the declarations and demands of Jesus and who now struggle to follow him with faith and spiritual insight. Their unbelief consists in periodic failure to act in a manner that is consistent with their commitment to radical dependency on the power of Jesus.<sup>1351</sup>

In the first part of the Gospel (1:16-8:21), despite the continuous manifestation of Jesus' messiahship in the presence of the disciples in countless healings,<sup>1352</sup> exorcisms,<sup>1353</sup> and nature miracles,<sup>1354</sup> the disciples remain amazingly obtuse and obdurate in spite of their involvement in the messianic drama.<sup>1355</sup> In 4:35-41, their unbelief is connected with timidity. The disciples and Jesus are in a boat, when a storm arises. The disciples awaken Jesus and implore him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" Jesus asks "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (4:40). Then he calms the sea. The implication is that, if they had enough faith in Jesus' power (faithlessness versus faith), they would not be cowardly but would have confidence in Jesus to care for them. Also, in 6:45-52, the story of Jesus walking on the water is told. When they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost and were terrified. Jesus commands, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid" (6:50). The disciples' timidity, rooted in their faithlessness in Jesus' to protect them from perishing, provides the basis for their inadequate understanding of the significance of feeding miracle (6:52).

In 8:14-21 the inverse reciprocal connection between unbelief and understanding is made explicit. Following the request by the Pharisees for a sign from heaven to substantiate Jesus' activity and authority (8:11), he says "Watch out for the yeast

<sup>1351</sup> Marshall, *Faith as a Theme*, 225.

<sup>1352</sup> Cf. 1:29-32, 32-34, 40-45; 2:1-12; 3:1-5, 9-10; 5:21-43; 6:1-6, 53-56; 7:31-37; 8:22-26.

<sup>1353</sup> Cf. 1:21-28, 32-34, 39; 3:11; 5:1-20; 7:24-30.

<sup>1354</sup> Cf. 4:35-41; 6:35-44, 45-52; 8:1-10.

<sup>1355</sup> T. J. Weeden, *Mark-Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 26-27.

of the Pharisees and that of Herod" (8:15). The disciples, thinking that Jesus is speaking literally, conclude that Jesus is referring to the fact that they neglected to bring bread. Jesus corrects their mistaken interpretation: "Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?" (8:17).

Furthermore, the disciples' responses to the three passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33) indicate that they do not understand Jesus' messianic mission to suffer and die. Peter's rebuke of Jesus (8:32), and the disciples' concern over their ranking in the kingdom (9:34), show them to be at odds with God's perspective (8:33). From Mark 8:32, the disciples have been consistently described as those who, although understanding that Jesus is Messiah, struggle to understand the kind of Messiah that Jesus is showing himself to be (8:32-33).<sup>1356</sup> In 9:32-37 their question, "who is the greatest" (9:34), demonstrates a lack of understanding about the true nature of discipleship which focuses on self-denial and servant-hood (8:34) rather than on striving for status and position within the (Christian) community.

Mark 9:19-29 furthers the negative portrayal of the disciples by showing up their unbelief via their own actions, and Jesus' action. Jesus determines that his disciples are unable to cure the epileptic boy because of their faithlessness (9:19). Their inability to heal and the way Jesus connects their unbelief to that inability show the disciples to be falling short of Jesus' expectations for them.

The nature of the disciples' unbelief is a failure of cognition and a persistent inability to understand Jesus' identity and mission. Misunderstanding and fearful amazement are hallmarks of their unbelief. But their problem is not so much an intentional rejection of the truth as a failure to be committed to a spiritual perceptiveness into Jesus' significance upon which their faith was founded, and which is developed into a fuller understanding of his identity and mission, and of their relation to it.

In Mark's Gospel, the language 'hardness of heart' is used as a polemic against the unbelievers (3:5; 10:5; 6:52; 8:17-18). Thus, when the language is used to

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<sup>1356</sup> T. J. Weeden, "The Heresy that Necessitated Mark's Gospel," *ZNW* 59 (1968): 145-68.

attack the Jewish religious leaders who refuse to accept Jesus' claims and demands, it criticises their obdurate, faithless behaviour and warns of the imminent divine punishment (cf. Pharaoh's hardness of heart in Ex 4-14). In contrast, when the language is used with regard to the disciples who have already accepted his claims and demands, it functions to prevent them from mimicking the unbelieving behaviour. Although Jesus proclaims the arrival of the Kingdom in his authoritative teachings and miracles, the Jewish religious leaders respond to his message negatively. Due to their hardness of heart (3:5), they refuse to accept his authority (1:22; 2:10; 11:28) and accuse him of blasphemy (2:7; 14:64), as Pharaoh whose heart is hardened refused to release the Israelites from Egypt. Thus, when regarding the Jewish religious leaders, the language 'hardness of heart' identifies their intentional, volitional hostility.

Mark also applies the same word *pwrow*, which is used to attack the Jewish religious leaders' hostile behaviour, to the disciples in order to rebuke their incomprehension. The cycle of boat scenes demonstrates dramatically the disciples' hardness of heart. When the disciples see Jesus' power to still the wind and waves, they do not recognize Jesus' divine identity; when they see Jesus walking on the sea, they do not acknowledge his identity, and instead think he is a ghost, because of their hardness of heart. (6:52). Also, when Jesus warns of the yeast of the Pharisees and Herodians, they had neglected to bring bread and fail to understand his capacity to provide daily bread because their hearts are hardened (8:17-18). These narratives present the danger of seeing and not perceiving. Little by little, in their life stance the disciples are duplicating the opponents' faithlessness.

Although Jesus continually reveals his divine identity through teachings and miracles, his opponents intentionally refuse to accept Jesus' claims and demands. The disciples however may be confused and blind, but they are not hostile to Jesus. Thus Jesus is patient, and explains his parabolic words and deeds to them. Furthermore, he warns them to avoid the danger of falling into the same unbelieving attitudes as that of the opponents. Therefore, if the disciples stop the obdurate unbelieving attitudes and repent of their sins, they can be assured of a restored spiritual insight after his resurrection (cf. 14:28; 16:7). However, if like Judas they persist in obdurate faithlessness, they will be rejected by God (14:21).

The portrayal of the disciples' unbelief functions as a teaching tool for the reader regarding discipleship. The role of the reader is to be fully obedient to Jesus in the ways in which the disciples have failed. In Mark's narrative, the reader begins to dissociate somewhat from the disciples, because they show a persistent lack of faith and understanding. In contrast, the reader identifies with certain individuals who respond to him with faith and spiritual perceptiveness (like the haemorrhaging woman, Jairus, the Syrophenician woman, and Bartimaeus). Both Jairus (5:22-24, 35-43) and the haemorrhaging woman (5:25-34) stand in contrast to the disciples, who fear and fail in their faith. Although the Syrophenician woman is initially treated as an outsider by Jesus, she displays the insight of an insider through her understanding of Jesus' parable concerning bread (7:27). The woman accepts the position of the household dog, recognising that she can make no demand on the mercy of Jesus. She points out that the dogs under table are able to eat the children's crumbs. The woman's answer shows her understanding, boldness, persistence, humility and faith. In contrast, although the disciples are insiders, and have been given the mystery of the kingdom of God (4:11), they comprehend neither the loaves (6:52) nor the parables (7:17-18). In this way, the minor characters challenge the reader to overcome fear, and respond to Jesus' claims and expectations with faith.

Although the disciples follow Jesus on the 'way' to Jerusalem (10:32), they do so hesitantly because they are either unable to or unwilling to understand and believe his passion predictions. The spiritual blindness consists of a failure to accept the implication of the mystery of Jesus' death. At this point, the healing of the blind man of Bethsaida (8:22-26) raised the expectation and hope that the Markan disciples or readers might respond to Jesus, not just with partial insight, but with complete understanding.

The healing of Bartimaeus (10:46-52) not only typifies the fruitfulness of faith but also the faithfulness of the ideal follower of Jesus. In the example of the Bartimaeus, Mark demands that the reader keep away from the spiritual ignorance caused by spiritual blindness, and follow him with spiritual perceptiveness and faith, like Bartimaeus.

The paralytic, Jairus and the haemorrhaging woman exemplify true faith, while the Syrophenician woman typifies true understanding. Also the deaf man and the blind man emphasise the significance of spiritual perceptiveness. But Bartimaeus exemplifies true faith, as well as spiritual perceptiveness. He hears that Jesus is passing by and cries out for mercy. With persistence and courage, he continues to cry out even when he is pressured to be silent. Jesus recognises a fervent faith within this persistent plea for help. Also Bartimaeus shows insight into messianic identity of Jesus: he regards Jesus as Son of David. Thus Bartimaeus challenges the reader to follow Jesus with persistent faith and spiritual insight.

Bartimaeus also gives the readers hope that Jesus, who removes physical blindness can enable to them to have the sight to see the 'way' they must follow if they are to be true disciples. True disciples must follow Jesus with the faith and spiritual perceptiveness of the true nature of Jesus. The danger maintaining a failure to understand Jesus' identity is thus linked closely to a false discipleship. The key issue Mark is emphasizing is the true disciples' appropriate understanding of Jesus as suffering Messiah, not politically triumphal Messiah, and persistent faith.

## **5.2 SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER MARKAN STUDY**

A theological perspective is one of the interesting elements in Mark's presentation. In Mark's Gospel, the concept 'unbelief' is not simply the opponents' volitional rejection, but God's will to procure salvation. In Jesus' predictions about his suffering and death (8:31; 8:14; 10:33; cf. 10:45; 14:21, 27), the reality of the opponents' unbelieving rejection fits into God's will (14:36, 49). Jesus' predictions are exactly fulfilled in 14:61-55. Furthermore, in his death the Scriptures are being fulfilled (9:12; 14:21, 49). This no doubt refers to the fulfilment of the OT prediction of the death of the Son of Man.<sup>1357</sup> In other words, it seems to be in accordance with God's plan that Jesus was rejected and killed. Although the faithlessness is used to indicate people's rejection of, and hostile action towards Jesus, the reality of the faithlessness fits into God's purposes.

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<sup>1357</sup> This death is indicated in a variety of passage such as Isa. 53:3 and Ps. 41:9-13.



Just as in Exodus Pharaoh's unbelieving rejection and hostility is as much an instrument for the revelation of God himself in his redemptive process (Ex. 9:16; cf. Rom 9:17-18), in Mark's Gospel the unbelievers' hostile rejection is an instrument for the self-disclosure of Jesus as the Son of God (cf. 15:39). Because of their hardened hearts, the unbelievers do not perceive Jesus' divine identity. Thus, they reject him and kill him. But Jesus' death discloses his identity as the Son of God (15:37-39; cf. 1:1). The secret of Jesus' identity leads to his death (cf. 4:11-12), which, in turn, results in the open manifestation of his identity (cf. 4:22).

The faithlessness is not without its redemptive elements because it meaningfully advances the Markan Christology. God, through the parabolic statements, hardens their hearts so that they do not understand the secret of the Kingdom (4:11-12). As a result, they refuse to believe in Jesus' teachings and deeds, and hand him over to death. That Mark seems to be saying that it was God's will that few believe in Jesus, because of hardened hearts, seems to be unavoidable.<sup>1358</sup>

It seems to be God's redemptive plan that Jesus is rejected and handed over to death by the opponents whose hearts are hardened. "Without the hardened heart, Jesus would not have been rejected and put to death; and had he not been put to death, there could have been no resurrection and no Christian gospel"<sup>1359</sup> If all people accepted Jesus, there would have been no rejection and no death of the Messiah. If Jesus had not been rejected and handed over to death, there would have been no resurrection and no salvation for the many people (10:45).

The unbeliever's role is an implement for the fulfilment of God's redemptive promise. Where and how we deal with the issue of the function of the unbelievers in God's redemptive process, is a theological question beyond the scope of this dissertation, which focuses on a study of the theme of 'unbelief' in Mark's Gospel. A further study could, for example, investigate the function of the unbelievers in God's redemptive history in relation to Paul's theological perspective.

### 5.3 FINAL REMARK

The aim of this dissertation has been to clarify a comparatively neglected factor in Markan theology. This dissertation has sought to combine an understanding of Mark's theological conception about unbelief, with an appreciation of how this is

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<sup>1358</sup> Evans, "Obduracy and the Lord's Servant," 228.

<sup>1359</sup> Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 103.

conveyed to his reader through literary devices. We have found that Mark is an author of considerable literary and theological competence, who has definite perception on the meaning and function of 'unbelief.' This perspective invites comparison with other the Evangelists, especially Matthew and Luke, because Mark, unlike the other, uniquely ends his narrative with a striking expression of unbelief (16:1-8). The most recent research on Mark's Gospel has been various attempts to understand the aim of the author, and so to clarify his theological perspective, which gives coherence to all the features of the Gospel. Not least, elucidation of the theme 'unbelief' should be of value in showing Mark's theological goal, viz to highlight the significance of faith and spiritual insight as prerequisites of Christian discipleship.