Hapless Disciples and Exemplary Minor Characters in the Gospel of Mark

The Exhortation to Cross-Bearing as Both Encouragement and Warning

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εἴ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν, ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι.

Mark 8:34b

Professor J.K. Elliott has made numerous distinguished contributions to the study of the Gospel of Mark. It is an honor to contribute this essay on Markan characterization and exhortation to Keith's Festschrift. In this essay, I argue that a readiness to suffer is an expression of faithfulness that offers the Markan audience a confirmation of their standing as legitimate followers of Jesus, in contrast to those who may have not yet fully embraced the cost of discipleship. Mark maintains that authentic discipleship entails not only recognition of Jesus as God's suffering Messiah (for example, Mark 8:31) but also a readiness to suffer as Jesus did (8:34).

The main part of this essay examines ten passages in Mark that highlight this theme (4:17; 8:34–9:1; 9:38–41; 10:28–31, 35–40; 13:9–13; 14:3–9, 26–50, 15:20b–24, 39), as well as Mark's concluding pericope about the silent women fleeing from the empty tomb (16:1–8). Prior to this, we discuss briefly Mark's terms for Jesus' followers, as well as offer an overview of the aforementioned passages in Mark. One interpretive question this essay will engage concerns how the negative depictions of the twelve disciples play a role in Mark's construal of readiness to suffer as an indication of standing as Christ's follower. It will be argued that in Mark the appraisal of suffering's value works both positively and negatively à propos definitions of legitimacy. It works positively, confirming the standing of (often unnamed) minor characters in Mark, as well as of other believers who follow their example(s). It also works negatively, calling into question the standing of not only the Twelve in the latter half of Mark's narrative but also anyone else who would emulate their perfidious behavior. It will be further argued that Mark's depictions of the Twelve offer both encouragement and warning about the necessity of committed discipleship and readiness to suffer as Jesus (and before him John the Baptist; cf. 6:14–29) did.
A Introduction

The present section concerns Mark’s references to Jesus’ followers and an overview of the passages to be examined in this essay.¹

1 The Twelve, “the Disciples” and Other Followers of Jesus in Mark

At times, Mark refers unambiguously to the twelve disciples whom Jesus designated as apostles.² At numerous other points Mark refers simply to “the disciples” without specifying whether this term designates the Twelve specifically or perhaps a larger group of Jesus’ followers, including the Twelve.³ K. Stock attempted to demonstrate from Markan terminology (οἱ δώδεκα and οἱ μαθηταί) two different groups of followers—the Twelve and a larger circle of “disciples.”⁴ Stock’s thesis is problematic because in quite a number of this Gospel’s references to “the disciples” it is implausible that Mark refers to anyone except the Twelve.⁵ In particular, at Mark 8:10 (cf. 3:7) when Jesus gets “into the boat with his disciples” (εἰς τὸ πλοῖον μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ), there is simply not room in a single boat for a particularly large group of followers.

The problem of identifying Jesus’ followers becomes even more complex when one considers Mark’s revelation toward the end of his work that “many” women (ἄλλαι πολλαί, 15:41b) had followed Jesus, served as his benefactors in Galilee, and witnessed the crucifixion. In parts of Mark’s preceding narrative,

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¹ As mentioned above, the question of how to interpret Mark’s negative depictions of the Twelve in relation to this Gospel’s calls to discipleship confirmed by suffering will be addressed toward the end of this essay. A fuller discussion may be found in my book, Persecution, Persuasion and Power: Readiness to Withstand Hardship as a Corroboration of Legitimacy in the New Testament (WUNT 270; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 183–222.


⁵ Stock acknowledges this point but does not sufficiently account for it. At Mark 2:15–17 (the dinner in Levi’s house, with “many tax collectors and sinners” present), for example, no other followers have been introduced into the narrative except the four disciples whom Jesus had called in 1:16–20. Moreover, Jesus departure “with his disciples to the sea” (3:7) suggests a single boat holding Jesus and his (then still four) disciples rather than a large naval expedition transporting a considerably larger number of disciples. See further on this point the critical review of Stock, Boten aus dem Mit-Ihm-Sein by S. Freyne in: CBQ 39 (1977): 295–297 at 296–297.