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