In the Gospel of Mark the particle μέν seldom occurs. "Surprisingly rare", Taylor calls it, but does not pursue the matter.¹ There is, however, something noticeable about the five occurrences in Mark (leaving aside one in the Longer Ending): they are all in words spoken by Jesus. This fact must have been noticed before, but as far as I am aware no significance has been attached to it. I wish to suggest, however, that this distribution is not accidental, but is in fact the key to understanding the use of the word in Mark. Furthermore, I shall argue in this paper that we have here only one instance of an important but overlooked phenomenon in New Testament Greek. I begin with μέν, the feature first observed, which also provides a good starting-point here.

It is well known that in post-Classical Greek there is a general decline in the particles.² That is to say, the wide and subtle range of Classical particles is sharply curtailed, leaving a few to do most of the work; at the same time there is a long-term tendency for all post-positives to be eliminated in favour of words that come first in the clause. Though there is room for further study of the details, the general trend is incontestable.

It is clear that μέν (…δὲ) shares in this decline. In the Ptolemaic period there is already a perceptible falling-off in its frequency.³ But

³ E. Mayser, Grammatik der griechischen Papyri aus der Ptolemäerzeit (Berlin, 1923-38) II.3, p. 128; for sample figures see p. 125. An indication of its frequency in Classical Greek is given by the number of occurrences in the following (all figures approx. except for Hdt.): Aristophanes, 630; Herodotus, 2567 (Powell); Plato,
this is not all. There is now a new factor, one which makes all the
difference for our purpose. When μέν (...δέ) does occur, it tends to
be found, Mayser tells us, in educated, official writing rather than
private letters, which are our best evidence for everyday language.
This indicates that we are dealing with one more instance of a
familiar phenomenon in post-Classical Greek, the tendency to look
back to the earlier language as the model of good Greek and to
maintain its idioms after they had become obsolete in the spoken
language. This reaches its peak in the second century A.D., but the
trend is discernible long before. It seems clear, then, that quite
early in the Koine μέν (...δέ) was no longer the living idiom that it
undoubtedly had been in Classical Greek but had become, on the
whole, a sign of an attempt at more educated Greek, a prestige
feature consciously used.

The evidence of the LXX points in the same direction. To begin
with, the total number of occurrences, 215, is not high.4 Then if we
distinguish between the literary books and the rest, following
Thackeray’s classification,5 the former are found to have 181
examples (of which 2-4 Macc. account for no less than 117), while
all the rest together have only 34. In the Pentateuch, which in level
of language is a fair specimen of unpretentious Greek of the third
century B.C., μέν is used very sparingly: there are only 19
examples.6 The contrast with 2-4 Macc. is striking, especially when
one bears in mind that the Pentateuch is more than four times the
length of 2-4 Macc.7

To what extent is the rarity of μέν in the translated books due to
the absence of any Hebrew equivalent? There is no way of knowing
for certain, but I would argue that this is not the main factor. If it
was, we might expect μέν not to occur at all. And the comparison
with δέ is suggestive: δέ is used with great frequency in some of

9000; Demosthenes, 4070; Thucydides, 1750; Xenophon, 1420 (the last two from
4 My figures are based on Hatch-Redpath with Rahlfs’ text. Two examples in
Tobit BA, lacking in S, are included, but not the five in Dan., Sus., Bel Θ.
5 Grammare of the Old Testament in Greek, p. 13.
6 Seven of these are μέν solitarium. A curious detail is that a high proportion
of the examples (12) are alike in that μέν follows τι (τάν), sometimes with, sometimes
without τι (τάν) δέ in the next clause. Perhaps we should think of the obsolescence of
μέν in the living language as proceeding at a different rate for different kinds of use,
the use in τι-clauses being one of the last to go.
7 Pages of Rahlfs’ text: Pentateuch 354, 2-4 Macc. 85.