The Denial of the Good News and the Ending of Mark

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Peter’s denial is a major literary theme in the Gospel of Mark that appears to resonate with Mark himself, helps us posit reasons for the Gospel’s abrupt ending and for the developing climax of the narrative, and explains subtle emphases and omissions.

Key Words: Peter, Mark’s Gospel, denial, ἔκστασις, φοβέωμαι, συνήμι, ἀσύνετος, νοεῖμαι, ἀγνοεῖμαι, ἐπιστάμαι

For hundreds of years, people have been dissatisfied with the closing of the Gospel of Mark. Even though our two most important fourth-century Greek codices, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, and our first and earliest Syriac, Coptic, and Georgian versions from a variety of text families (Alexandrian, Western, and Caesarean) all supported the Gospel’s ending with 16:8, one to two centuries later a change came about. The later Syriac, Coptic, and Georgian versions, as well as all the later Western and Byzantine versions added a longer (vv. 9–20) or shorter ending. An Armenian manuscript in A.D. 989 even described the author of vv. 9–20 as Ariston. Many scholars think the last leaf of the original copy was accidentally lost, torn off, or deliberately omitted, or that Mark was prevented from

1. The Gospel of Mark is attested in the smallest number of known papyri when compared with the other Gospels. It has only three: \( \Psi^{45} \), dated 150–250 (selections that end with 12:28; Caesarean text-type); \( \Psi^{38} \), dated to the fourth century (2:1–26, Alexandrian); \( \Psi^{34} \), sixth century (part of chs. 2, 6, Caesarean). In contrast, Matthew has 19 papyri, Luke has 9 papyri, and John has 22 papyri. The earliest NT fragments date to the first or second century: \( \Psi^{15} \) (John 18:31–33, 37–38, A.D. 90–150), and \( \Psi^{14} \) (before A.D. 70–200, selections of Matthew). Why were so few papyri preserved from Mark’s Gospel? Possibly, having been written in Rome, the seat of the Roman government, many papyri were destroyed during the Roman persecutions. Further, although thousands of Greek manuscripts have been found through the years (from 3,000 in 1916 to 5,487 in 1989; cf. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, The Text of the New Testament [trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 74), why has another ending for Mark never been found? Mark 16:8 appears indeed to be the conclusion that the author intended. See also William R. Farmer, The Last Twelve Verses of Mark (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974). Irenaeus (ca. 175) includes Mark 16:19 as part of “the conclusion” (Haer. 3.10.5).

finishing.\textsuperscript{3} The Pilgrim edition of the King James Version explains the problem well: “It hardly seems likely that the second Gospel would conclude with the words, ‘for they were afraid.’ The glorious Gospel of Christ does not leave His disciples in an attitude of fear.”\textsuperscript{4}

However, if we examine the movement of the book itself, we will discover that 16:8 is a most appropriate way for the Gospel to end. Why? Because Peter’s denial drives the Gospel of Mark. That is why it has to end the way it does. Further, the historical background supplements the literary analysis. Finally, to assess this thesis we will close by comparing the Gospel of Mark with the other Gospels on the topics of denial and understanding in order to see whether 16:8 is a significant way to end the Gospel of Mark (see appendix, pp. 281–283).

**Historical Setting**

Strong and consistent early church traditions support a connection between Peter and Mark in the writing of Mark’s Gospel.\textsuperscript{5} In the second century, Irenaeus explained that Mark, “the disciple and interpreter of Peter,


\textsuperscript{4} Holy Bible, Pilgrim Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 1319. See also Metzger and Ehrman, *Text*, 326. Good reasons are given why 16:8 appears not to be the original ending: fear is an inappropriate conclusion to the Good News, it is unlikely for a sentence and a whole book to end with γὰρ, ἐξεπλήξθησαν can be translated “they were afraid of . . .” implying a missing object, the ending is abrupt, the Gospel lacks a resurrection appearance, and early additions show dissatisfaction with Mark 16:8 as the ending.

\textsuperscript{5} “There is in our opinion no good reason for rejecting the tradition of the connection of Mark’s gospel with Peter.” See Barclay, *First Three Gospels*, 171; Sherman E. Johnson (*A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark* [HNTC; New York: Harper, 1960], 16) also mentions the numerous Latinisms in Mark.
handed on to us in writing the things proclaimed by Peter.”6 Papias quotes the Presbyter who used to say, “Mark became Peter’s interpreter.”7 Clement of Alexandria recounts that “when, by the Spirit, Peter had publicly proclaimed the Gospel in Rome, his many hearers urged Mark, as one who had followed him for years and remembered what was said, to put it all in writing.”8 Tertullian, Origen, and Jerome repeat that Mark wrote the Gospel “following Peter’s directives, whom Peter also acknowledged as his son in his epistle.”9

John Mark is a youth raised in the Christian church. His mother, Mary, hosted the Jerusalem church in their home. Mark’s and Peter’s friendship goes back to at least the early 30s, when Peter arrives to celebrate his release from prison (Acts 12:12). Probably even earlier, Mark was a witness of Peter’s attempted military response to Jesus’ arrest (Mark 14:51–52).10 Among experiences Mark and Peter had in common were that even as believers they denied their faith not just once but at least twice. Mark may have been present when Jesus was arrested (the “certain young man”) and, when they tried to arrest him too, he ran away naked (Mark 14:51–52). In addition, Mark joined Paul and Barnabas on their first traveling outreach (Acts 12:25), but he deserted them in Pamphylia, Perga, thereby causing Paul not to want to take him on the second trip (Acts 13:13, 15:37–39). But this vacillation changes. By the time Paul is first imprisoned in Rome (ca. A.D. 59–62), Mark remains steadfastly with Paul as his co-worker (Col 4:10, Phlm 24, 1 Pet 5:13). By his second Roman imprisonment, Paul is asking that Timothy send Mark to him, for Mark is “useful in ministry” (2 Tim 4:11). Mark’s cousin Barnabas had good reason to believe in Mark (Col 4:10, Acts 15:39).

Peter’s early denial of Jesus is quite well known (Mark 14:66–72). But Peter also denied Jesus later in Antioch. He used to eat with the Gentiles, but fearing the circumcision party, he withdrew and separated himself (Gal 2:11–14). The “denial” that Peter and Mark have in common is the refusal to acknowledge in words or action the truths taught by Jesus. In “times of testing,” they fail in discipleship. At some incident they fall away from faith in Christ or Christ’s gospel. “Denial” is described by such words as ἀφίστημι, σκάνδαλος, and ἀπαρνήσομαι (Luke 8:13; Heb 3:12; Mark 14:27, 30; Acts 15:38). The dual denials that Mark and Peter made help us understand the overriding literary purpose of the narrative of the Gospel of Mark. This is why it ends with Mary Magdalene; Mary, the one (wife) of

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6. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.8.3; Irenaeus, Haer. 3.1, as translated by Paul L. Maier, Eusebius: The Church History (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999).
7. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 3.39.15.
9. Ibid., 6.25; Origen, Comm. on Matt.; Tertullian, Marc. 4.5; Jerome, Vir. ill. 8. See for a full list Sean P. Kealy, Mark’s Gospel: A History of Its Interpretation (New York: Paulist, 1982).
James; and Salome caught in ambivalence. After having entered the empty tomb, heard the angelic announcement of a risen Christ, and been commanded to announce this good news to the other disciples, they came out and “fled from the tomb, for they themselves were having trembling and amazement and yet to no one nothing they said for they continued being afraid” (Mark 16:8). The women were confounded in ambivalence.

εξστασία and ἐξίσθημι (“amazement”) are elsewhere in the NT usually positive terms. They are a response, “a throwing of the mind out of its normal state,” to physical healing: the healing of Jairus’s dead daughter (Mark 5:42), the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:12, Luke 5:26), and the healing of the cripple (Acts 3:10).11 They are also something that can happen to the mind during a vision from God (Acts 10:10, 11:5, 22:17). “Εξστασίας and ἐξίσθημι are important words for Mark. They occur more frequently in Mark than in any other Gospel: six times in Mark versus four times in Luke and once in Matthew. Three of the occurrences of this word family occur only in Mark (16:8, 3:21, 6:51) and in these three occurrences, ἐξστασίας and ἐξίσθημι appear to be negative actions. Soon after the choosing of the Twelve, when Jesus returns home followed by the multitudes, his family come to seize him, for people were saying Jesus’ “mind was not in its normal state” (3:21). In addition, although the disciples seemed to be positively “amazed” when the wind ceased when Jesus entered the boat in the Sea of Galilee (6:51), they had become “afraid” (6:50) and “they did not understand (συνίσταμαι) about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (6:52, NRSV). In this incident, as in 16:8, “amazement” is more a disabling occurrence, coupled with fear. Paul describes “trembling” (τρέμω) as the humble and careful state in which he approached the Corinthians (1 Cor 2:3), as the way all Christians are to work out their salvation (Phil 2:12), and as how Christian slaves are to treat masters (Eph 6:5). But the verb τρέμω can be more ambivalent. When Jesus demanded to know who touched him in the midst of a crowd, the healed woman came “fearful (φοβοῦμαι) and trembling (τρέμω).”12 Perhaps she was afraid Jesus would be upset at her for being secretive and for making him ritually unclean with her blood discharge (Luke 8:43, Lev 15:25–27).

Thus, generally, “amazement” and “trembling” are positive terms, but in Mark’s Gospel they may be negative from a Christian perspective. In Mark 16:8, the imperfect “having” (ἐπέκειται) suggests that the women’s state of amazement and trembling were ongoing. But at the same time, the women “continued being afraid” (ἐφοβοῦντο also is in the imperfect). In the Gospel of Mark, φοβοῦμαι usually is a negative word. It also is an im-

11. Joseph Henry Thayer, Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Marshallton: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1889), 199. BDAG 309 defines ἐξστασίας as “a state of consternation or profound emotional experience to the point of being beside oneself.” See also how people were “thrown out of position” or “amazed” in Matt 12:23 (blind and dumb man saw and spoke); Luke 2:47 (Jesus’ dialogue at age 12), and 24:22 (women with news about the resurrected Jesus).
12. Mark 5:33; τρέμω is also used in Luke 8:47.
important word for this Gospel, as will be demonstrated in the development of the narrative.

**OVERALL PURPOSE OF THE GOSPEL**

Mark writes Peter’s testimony to the Roman Christians: everyone needs to repent because, even though Jesus the Messiah, God’s Son, came to earth, he was met by hardened hearts that disbelieved and feared. The Gospel of Mark can be divided into eight sections, depending on the response to Jesus’ message:

I. The good news is established (1:1–21)
II. Jesus’ fame spreads (1:21–45)
III. The scribes begin to criticize Jesus (2:1–3: 6)
IV. While the multitudes follow Jesus, fear begins to encroach on others (3:7–6:29)
V. Even the disciples have hardened hearts (6:30–8:26)
VI. The disciples do not understand that the Messiah must suffer (8:27–10:52)
VII. The religious leaders contrast with the crowds, who welcome Jesus (11:1–14:2)
VIII. Even the disciples and crowds will betray Jesus (14:3–16:8)

In contrast to the other Gospels, the Gospel of Mark begins where Peter begins, as eyewitness to John the Baptist’s proclaiming a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4). John’s message becomes Peter’s and Mark’s basic message for the Gospel: all need to repent for the forgiveness of sins. We will learn how even Peter and Mark are examples of those who have sinned against Jesus. Right away Peter proclaims Jesus’ identity: he is God’s beloved Son (1:11). After John is arrested, Jesus proclaims that the time is now fulfilled. God’s reign is now! Repent and believe in the good news (1:15). Then Jesus calls four disciples: Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John (1:16–20).

In the next section of the Gospel, Jesus’ fame spreads throughout Galilee (1:21–45): people are taught with authority, unclean spirits are cast out, the ill are healed (1:21–39). Only the demons are told to be silent (1:25). When a healed leper freely proclaims his healing, Jesus is forced to stay in the countryside (1:40–45).

Now the first level of criticism begins. Scribes begin to criticize Jesus (2:1–3:6). Recognizing that only God can forgive sins, they criticize him for forgiving the sins of the paralyzed man in Capernaum. When Jesus heals him, in contrast, the crowd is amazed (2:1–12). Then the scribes criticize him for eating with sinners and tax collectors (2:13–17). Then they criticize him for not fasting (2:18–22). Then the Pharisees criticize Jesus for allowing work on the Sabbath (2:23–3:6). In response, Jesus is “grieved at their hardness of heart” (3:5). The Pharisees join their enemies, the Herodians, to conspire how to kill Jesus (3:6). Thus, the first set of hard hearts are those
of the pious Pharisees, lay religious leaders. They who study the Scriptures should welcome God’s Son; instead they become his first enemies.

Tension spreads in the next section. While the Pharisees and Herodians seek to kill Jesus, the multitudes follow him (3:7–6:29). Fear begins to encroach on others. In response to crowds of people coming from far away (3:7–12), Jesus calls twelve disciples or “apostles” to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim and to have authority to cast out demons (3:13–19). When these crowds invade Jesus’ hometown, his family seeks to restrain him, and the scribes accuse Jesus of healing by the ruler of demons (3:20–35). Teaching by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus uses parables so his disciples can understand but his enemies cannot (4:1–34). He is sowing the word, but his word is retained differently in different soils (4:14–20). He quotes Isa 6:9–10, God’s word to a persistently disobedient Israel: the time for condemnation has come. It is too late for some to “turn again and be forgiven” (Mark 4:12, NRSV). Jesus is exasperated with the disciples who do not understand (4:13). Crossing the Sea of Galilee in a boat, the disciples learn that even the wind and sea obey Jesus (4:35–41). Here is where a reaction of fear in the disciples is first noted in the Gospel. Jesus challenges them to “have faith” instead of “fear” (δείλοις, 4:40). Then Mark describes how “they were filled with fear, a great fear” (4:41, ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν). Hearing that Jesus is the Son of God is one thing (1:11), but experiencing Jesus as the Son of God mastering the wind and sea, elements governing Peter’s livelihood, is quite another matter. When the people of the area of the Gerasenes see the healed man, they too become filled with fear (φοβεύομαι) and as a result beg Jesus to leave the area (5:15–17). Because the people of this area are already hardened, Jesus commands the healed man to stay (5:19).

Jesus then heals the woman who has been hemorrhaging twelve years and Jairus’s twelve-year-old daughter (5:21–43). The healed woman comes to Jesus “afraid and trembling” (5:33, φοβηθεῖσα καὶ τρέμουσα). In her case, her faith overcomes her fear (5:34). Jairus is told to believe and not be afraid (5:36, φοβέομαι). When the young girl is raised, all are filled with “amazement” (5:42, ἐκστασις). In contrast, in his hometown, Jesus again finds “unbelief” (6:1–6). The twelve are now sent out two by two, proclaiming all should repent (6:7–13). King Herod had “feared” (6:20, φοβέομαι) John the Baptist, knowing he was righteous. Nevertheless, he kills him under pressure (6:14–29).

Thus, in the fourth section of the Gospel, in the midst of increasing popular support, Jesus also experiences increasing fear and doubt from his family, his disciples, and witnesses of his healing power. In the fifth section, we learn that in the midst of all these miracles, even Jesus’ disciples have hardened hearts (6:30–8:26). After the apostles come back from their mission, after Jesus feeds 5,000 and after he walks on water, Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid (6:50, φοβέομαι). They are amazed (6:51, ἐξίστησιν), but why? They did not understand (σωσίη) about the miracle of the bread. In-
stead, their hearts “were hardened” (6:52). How can this be? These are Jesus’ closest followers!

Jesus then challenges the Pharisees and scribes not to teach human traditions. Their “hearts are far” from him (7:6). But even the disciples fail to understand (7:18, ἀσύνετος vs. νοεῖν) that true evil comes from within a person (7:1–23).

As criticism mounts, secrecy about Jesus’ presence and works also mounts. In Tyre, Jesus tries to keep his presence a secret but nonetheless is discovered by a persevering, faithful Gentile woman (7:24–30). In the Decapolis, in private, Jesus heals a deaf man, whom he orders not to tell anyone (7:31–37). In Bethsaida, a healed blind man is told not to tell anyone (8:22–26). Why did Jesus emphasize silence? When people’s hearts are hardened, the good news about Jesus will not be easily received. Jesus wants to lessen opposition as long as possible so he can extend his ministry before his crucifixion.

In the midst of these miracles, the disciples still do not believe he can feed the crowds (8:4), nor do they understand his criticism of the Pharisees (8:15–16). What Jesus earlier has said to those outside (4:11–12), by quoting Isa 6:9–10, he now addresses to his very own disciples: “Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?” (Mark 8:17–18, nrsv). “Do you not yet understand?” (8:21). They do not understand.

In the sixth section, the distance between the disciples’ comprehension and Jesus’ mission increases (8:27–10:52). While Peter recognizes Jesus is the Messiah, Peter cannot comprehend that the Messiah must suffer (8:27–33). The whole crowd is then challenged to “take up their cross” and follow Jesus (8:34–38). When Jesus allows Peter, James, and John to be present at his transfiguration, where Jesus is declared to be God’s beloved Son, the disciples become afraid (9:6, ἐξευθυμεῖν). They are to keep private what they saw until the resurrection (9:9).

Then the disciples are shown with their limitations: they have not prayed enough to cast out an unclean spirit (9:14–29); they cannot understand (ἀγνοεῖν) why the Messiah must suffer and are too afraid to ask (9:32, φοβέομαι); they want to be the greatest; they see fellow-workers as competitors, not colleagues; and they might cause others to stumble (9:33–50). Again, while the crowds gather, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of hardness of heart for proposing divorce (10:1–12). The disciples wrongly restrict children (10:13–16), are shocked that the rich are disadvantaged (10:17–27), and are afraid (φοβέομαι) when they hear about the suffering of the Messiah (10:32). The section ends with the positive example of the faith of blind Bartimaeus (10:46–52).

The contrast between the crowds who welcome Jesus and the religious leaders who do not is accentuated in the seventh section. Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly (11:1–11). Many people welcome him (11:8). When Jesus allows no one to sell or buy in the temple and tells them the parable
of the wicked tenants, the chief priests and scribes want to kill him but cannot because of their fear (fobevomai) of Jesus’ power over the crowd (11:12–12:12). They question his authority (11:28). The Pharisees and Herodians and Sadducees try to trap him (12:13, 18). One scribe, though, is not far from God’s reign (12:13–34). In the temple, Jesus now challenges the scribes, while delighting the crowds (12:35–44). After the disciples are worried about the future (13:1–37), this section concludes two days before Passover with the chief priests and the scribes seeking to arrest Jesus in order to kill him (14:1–2).

In the eighth and last section, we learn that even the crowds and the disciples will betray Jesus (14:3–16:8). At Bethany, when a woman anoints Jesus, Judas decides to betray Jesus by cooperating with the chief priests (14:3–11). At the Passover, when the lamb is sacrificed (14:12), the disciples learn that Jesus will be betrayed by Judas and deserted by the eleven, including Peter (14:12–31). Jesus says “all” will desert (14:27). Peter, James, and John cannot even keep awake one night (14:32–42). In fact, Jesus directly challenges Simon Peter to stay awake (14:37–38). Then, in the Garden, all those who had followed Jesus betray or desert him (14:43–52). Mark writes: “all having deserted him, all fled” (14:50). He adds the probable aside on himself: even this writer fled (14:51–52). Peter’s three denials are recorded, while Jesus goes before the high priest, chief priests, elders, and scribes (14:53–72). Jesus agrees he is the Messiah, God’s Son (14:61–62). Finally, the crowd changes its attitude to Jesus as they allow themselves to be affected by the jealous chief priests (15:1–32). However, when darkness comes over the land, the centurion recognizes Jesus was God’s Son (15:39), the Galilean women remain, even if at a distance, and Joseph of Arimathea boldly asks for Jesus’ body (15:33–47).

The Gospel closes with the women disciples amazed yet terrified (fobevomai). They model those dual inclinations. Like the book of Jonah that ends with God’s question to Jonah and the reader (Jonah 4:11), the Gospel of Mark ends with an implied question to the women and the reader(s): will you be another hardened heart, incapacitated by your fear, or will you repent, be forgiven, and proclaim Jesus is the crucified Messiah, God’s Son? If we take early church tradition seriously, Matthew’s Gospel has already been published.13 We are told there that the women had both “fear”

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(φόβος) and “great joy” as they ran to proclaim the good news and thereafter met the resurrected Jesus and worshiped him (Matt 28:8–9). Even then, Jesus had to warn them not to be afraid (φοβεῖσθαι), and instead sent them out to proclaim the good news (Matt 28:10). Mark knew the women had made a positive decision to continue to follow Jesus and proclaim the resurrection they had witnessed. But he closed his Gospel before that decision was fully implemented because he wanted to move hearers to make their own decisions, even in the face of any denials they might have made in the past.

**Comparison of the Gospels**

If, indeed, Mark’s Gospel has this emphasis on denial and hearts hardened against Jesus and his message, we should find some differences in approach from the other Gospels. How does the Gospel of Mark compare with the other Gospels? “Fear” is an important element in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but especially in the latter two Gospels. Mark is about 57% the length of Matthew and Luke. Therefore, adjusting for the differing lengths, Mark’s use of “fear” is about the same as that in Luke (see table 1).

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14. More than half of Mark’s uses of all synonyms for “fear” are unique to his Gospel. See my study on “fear” in the Gospel of Luke, where I looked at additional Greek words for “fear,” “Fear” as a Witness to Jesus in Luke’s Gospel,” BBR 2 (1992): 70, 72–73. In this study, I have examined one word family important to the topic of the thesis.

15. Hardened hearts were found in Mark 3:5, 6:52, 18:17; a distant heart in 10:5. Only Gospel-writer John (12:40) refers also to hardened hearts (citing Isa 6:9–10). A “hardened heart” sees law as more important than grace (Mark 3:5) and cannot perceive that Jesus’ miracles demonstrate God’s incarnate presence (Mark 6:52, 8:17; John 12:40). Ἑπώσις is to “cover with a callus” (Thayer’s Lexicon, 559). According to Isa 6, God then works to form a callus over the wills (hearts) of continually unrepentant people, keeping them at the end from repenting.
Denial

How else does the Gospel of Mark compare with the other Gospels? All four Gospels mention in some detail Peter’s denial of Jesus. However, in Mark some slight differences highlight Peter’s limitations and the innocence of Jesus. In Mark’s Gospel the contrast between Peter’s affirmation of Jesus and subsequent denial of Jesus is highlighted. Both Matthew and Mark mention “Peter said”; however, in Mark, Peter “emphatically speaks” (ὁ δὲ ἔκπειρας ἔλαλη, 14:31), whereas in Matthew, Peter simply “says” (λέγει οὗτός ὁ Πέτρος, 26:35). Thus, Mark highlights Peter’s initial strong affirmation of Jesus. Both Matthew and Luke mention that Peter followed Jesus from a distance. But Mark emphasizes “from a distance” (ἀπὸ μακρῶθεν, 14:54) by placing the prepositional phrase before the verb ἀκολούθησα, whereas Matthew (26:58) and Luke (22:54) place it after the verb.16 John omits the detail (18:15). Already Mark is noting Peter’s hesitancy.

Only Mark records that Peter absolutely denied having been with Jesus. Both Matthew and Mark mention that Peter told the servant girl, “I do not know what you say” (Matt 26:70), but Mark adds Peter’s “nor understand” (14:68). Peter, therefore, uses two synonyms (οἴδα and ἐπιστάμαι) in pleonasm, repeating how totally he denies having been with Jesus. After Peter denies Jesus three times, Matthew and Luke conclude that Peter “wept bitterly” (ἐκλάωσεν πικρῶς, Matt 26:75, Luke 22:62). They use the strong adverb “bitterly” but with the aorist verb “he wept.” Mark instead concludes, “having fallen down, he kept on crying” (ἐπιβαλὼν ἐκλάει, 14:72). He uses the imperfect, which indicates Peter’s ongoing crying.

Neither Mark, Matthew, nor Luke mentions, as John does (18:10–11), the one who drew a sword (Peter) and struck the ear of the high priest’s slave. Mark also does not mention that Jesus wants Peter to feed his lambs (Luke 22:31–34, John 21:15–19). After Peter strikes the ear, Mark omits Jesus’ saying that he could have appealed to the Father (Matt 26:52–54), that no more violence should be done (Luke 22:51), and that his suffering is necessary (John 18:11). Thereby Mark 14:48–49 emphasizes how innocent Jesus was: “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me” (also mentioned in Matt 26:55, Luke 22:52–53).

And, of course, only Mark mentions the young man who had followed Jesus but ran away naked rather than be seized (14:51–52).

Not Understanding

Why was Peter limited? He did not fully understand. Not “understanding” is an important concept that Peter wants to communicate through Mark to the reader. Tracing the use of synonyms for “knowledge” or lack

16. Matthew omits this phrase in some mss.
of it (ἐπίσταμαι, συνίστη, νοεῖ, ἀγνοεῖ, ἀσυνέτης) helps to reinforce Mark’s focus.  

Ἐπίσταμαι, συνίστη, νοεῖ, ἀγνοεῖ, ἀσυνέτης occur at several significant places in the Gospel of Mark. Mark, Luke, and Matthew quote Jesus’ citation of Isa 6:9–10 (God did not want the Israelites to understand [συνίστη] because it was time for punishment, Mark 4:12 quoting Isa 6:11–13). Mark, though, includes Jesus’ exasperation that even those on the “inside,” the disciples, cannot “understand” (οἶδα) the parable (4:13). Neither Luke (8:10) nor Matthew (13:11, 16–17) includes this comment. Matthew (14:33), John (6:21), and Mark record Jesus’ multiplication of loaves and the calming of the winds. However, only Mark notes that the disciples did not “understand” (συνίστη) because “their hearts were hardened” (6:52). Συνίστη (to “set or bring together”) is the “soul’s capacity of itself not only to lay hold of the phenomena of the outer world through the senses, but by combination to arrive at their underlying laws.”  

It is to “gain an insight.” This aspect of συνίστη comes into play in this passage because the disciples did not allow the miracles that Jesus did to move them to the underlying principle: Jesus is God. The same happens in 7:14–15. The crowd needs to “understand” (συνίστη) or make the appropriate application with its corresponding principle that only the inside defiles (Mark 7:14, Matt 15:10). Then Jesus again directs his exasperation toward the disciples who are “without understanding” (ἀσυνέτης) and do not “perceive” (νοεῖ, Mark 7:18). Both words are also recorded in Matt 15:16–17.

Both Mark and Matthew note Jesus’ frustration with the disciples’ not understanding the metaphorical use of “leaven.” However, only Mark records Jesus’ pleonasm: “Do you not yet perceive (νοεῖ) or understand?” (συνίστη, Mark 8:17). Matthew records only the first part: “Do you not yet perceive?” (νοεῖ, 16:9). Jesus repeats at the end of his discussion in Mark:

17. The two synonyms for “knowing,” γνῶσις and οἶδα, do not particularly add to the unique focus of Mark’s Gospel. Γνῶσις has to do with “a knowledge grounded on personal experience” (Thayer’s Lexicon, 118). Rudolf Bultmann says: it “denotes close acquaintance with something” (“ἐπιγνῶσις, ἐπιγνώσκω, ἐπιγνώσθη,” TDNT 1:690). E. Schütz explains, “gínosko and its cognates included from the very first the idea of grasping and understanding the object perceived by the mind” (“Knowledge, Experience, Ignorance,” NIDNTT 3:130, 131, 132).

18. Thayer’s Lexicon, 118, 605. J. Goetzmann explains that συνίστη signifies “first, perception, then, taking note of, and finally, grasping, in the sense of understanding.” He adds that, in contrast to Mark, “the failure of the disciples to understand the parables is not for Matt. paramount,” and “in Luke many of the passages under discussion are missing, or have been greatly shortened” (“συνίστης,” NIDNTT 3:130, 131, 132).

19. BDAG, 972.
“Do you not yet understand?” (συνήπτη, Mark 8:21). When Jesus explains he will suffer, Mark explains they did not “understand” (ἀγνοεῖ, Mark 9:32; as does Luke 9:45, but not Matt 17:23). Finally, Peter tells the maid that he neither “knows” (οἴδα) nor “understands” (ἐπιστήμω) that he was with Jesus (Mark 14:68). As we saw, ἐπιστήμω occurs only here in the Gospels. If, indeed, Mark’s Gospel is highlighting the limitation Peter had in understanding the underlying principle that indeed Jesus is God, we should expect some difference between the way Mark records Peter’s confession versus its handling in the other Gospels. And, indeed, we do find a significant difference. Mark records only a minimal part of Peter’s confession about Jesus: “You are the Messiah” (8:29). Peter apparently also said “the Son of the living God,” as Matthew records, but Peter knew that he did not fully grasp the significance of the second half of the confession. He wants to drive home the point that his comprehension was limited at the time. He certainly did not want to elevate himself because his focus is on his forthcoming denial.

Considering that Mark is about 57% the length of Matthew and Luke, it has a significant number of occurrences of these synonyms, and they appear at significant places in the narrative. They occur 11 times in Mark, as opposed to 14 times in Matthew, 5 times in Luke, and once in John (see table 2).

**Conclusion**

What have we learned? The historical background reminds us of the close connection between Peter and Mark and how both of them denied Jesus and his good news. The narrative of the Gospel of Mark begins and ends with the need for repentance and action. While Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, God’s Son, is clearly presented (such as at Jesus’ baptism, transfiguration, and trial; and by the response of demons, the centurion, and angels), and his message and works are well received by the multitudes, in the end all deny him: the religious leaders, Jesus’ family, the crowds, the disciples, and even the women disciples. All have difficulty understanding. Those who attack and those who affirm Jesus’ self-revelations, including Peter, do not perceive that Jesus indeed is God’s Son, the Messiah, who must suffer. Not only do the Pharisees have hard hearts, so do the disciples. Fear disables the Pharisees, the crowds, and the disciples. Closing the Gospel with the ambivalence of the women is a synecdoche of the whole Gospel. The women model the dual inclinations of amazement and fear. The reader, too, is asked, by implication: will you be another hard-

20. E. Schütz confirms that ἀγνοεῖ in contrast to γνῶσις “never means merely a lack of intellectual knowledge which can be removed by a neutral statement of facts. . . . This lack of knowledge can be removed only by knowledge intimately linked with an existential recognition and acceptance” (“ἀγνοεῖ,” NIDNTT 2:407).


22. In contrast to Matt 16:17–19, Mark excludes Jesus’ comment about Peter as a “rock.”
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Eden heart, incapacitated by fear, or will you repent, be forgiven, and proclaim Jesus, the crucified Messiah, God’s Son, resurrected from the dead?

Appendix


Susan Miller (Women in Mark’s Gospel [JSNTSup 259; New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004], 108, 197) writes, “In Mark, the hardening of the disciples’ hearts reflects their inability to understand the mystery of Jesus’ identity.” At the end, the women disciples “also fail in discipleship.” In The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 349–50, Francis J.

Table 2. Occurrences of synonyms for “understanding”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greek Phrase</th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Matthew</th>
<th>Luke</th>
<th>John</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>συνίημι “to understand underlying laws”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>νοέω “to perceive with the mind”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἀσύνετος “unintelligent”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἄγνοια “not to know”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἐπίσταμαι “to know by being near”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>γνῶσκω “to know by personal experience”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>οἶδα “to see with the mind’s eye”</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
<td><strong>45</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
<td><strong>141</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Length of Gospel by Number of Greek Lines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Matthew</th>
<th>Luke</th>
<th>John</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1,362</td>
<td>1,362</td>
<td>2,373</td>
<td>2,398</td>
<td>1,858</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moloney adds that the disciples have abandoned, betrayed, and denied Jesus. The beginning (1:1–13) and the ending (16:1–8) of Mark “address the reader.” Timothy J. Geddert (Mark [Believers Church Bible Commentary; Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2001], 399) says: “As readers, we are tempted to stand in judgment over the women. How could they? How could they hear the glorious message of the resurrected Jesus, and remain silent? But as soon as we pass judgment on the women, we sense Mark turning to us. . . . How can we keep silent?” Mark’s narrative ends “with a provocative resurrection message offering second chances to disciples who have failed to follow and who are afraid to proclaim the good news” (p. 24). Eugene La Verdiere (The Beginning of the Gospel: Introducing the Gospel according to Mark 2 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999], 2:329–32) notes, “The reaction of the women, their fear and silence, is very consistent with the gospel as a whole. . . . Mark challenged the community with the fear and silence of the women. . . . Why did they not fulfill their mission to proclaim the gospel of the passion and resurrection?” A. J. M. Wedderburn, Beyond Resurrection (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 139, observes: “Time and again the male disciples’ lack of understanding has been castigated by the Markan Jesus.” Rikki E. Watts (Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997], 367) notes that, even if the audience “have been tempted to be silent, they need to recognize that Jesus has still conquered.” Joel E. Williams (“Literary Approaches to the End of Mark’s Gospel,” JETS 42 [1999]: 34–35) argues, “Mark emphasizes throughout his Gospel the failure of Jesus’ followers.” There is hope for “fallible followers of Jesus,” but “the path is never easy and the dangers are real.” Timothy Dwyer (The Motif of Wonder in the Gospel of Mark [JSNTSup 128; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], 192,195) notes, “The silence is a function of the wonder, subordinate to it. . . . The climax of the gospel is 16:1–8.” Michael Trainor (“The Women, the Empty Tomb, and That Final Verse,” TBT 34 [1996]: 182) observes, “The final verse is an invitation to look back over the whole Gospel and to examine whether or not they have been subjected to the same obstacles that have plagued the disciples.” The impact of the ending is “encouragement to persevere despite failure and disobedience” according to Andrew T. Lincoln, “The Promise and the Failure: Mark 16:7, 8 (1989),” in The Interpretation of Mark (ed. William R. Telford; 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 242. “The closing irony of Mark is a reminder that the risen Christ is yet at work, and that he has summoned his followers back to their original discipleship,” writes Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, Irony in Mark’s Gospel (SNTSMS 72; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 12. James A. Brooks agrees that Mark “wanted his readers/hearers to continue the story in their own lives . . . he challenged his readers/hearers to assume the responsibility of telling the good news to everyone,” in Mark (NAC 23; Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 274–75. Morna D. Hooker (The Gospel according to Saint Mark [BNTC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991], 391–94) explains that, throughout the Gospel, Mark leaves his readers “to make the crucial step of faith for themselves.” The angel’s “Go and you will
see him... demands response.” Though the disciples “have denied Jesus and been ashamed of him, they are nevertheless offered a second chance of learning, once again, what it means to be disciples... This is the end of Mark’s story, because it is the beginning of discipleship.” For Ched Myers (“The Last Days of Jesus,” Sojourners 16/11 [December 1987]: 36), the “ambiguous ending” leaves us with “a terrible ultimatum: We can see the risen Jesus only on the way of discipleship.” “The suspended ending causes the reader to act on the ending,” according to J. Lee Magness, Sense and Absence: Structure and Suspension in the Ending of Mark’s Gospel (SBL Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 123. Thomas E. Boomershine (“Mark 16:8 and the Apostolic Commission,” JBL 100 [1981]: 238, 229, 235) states that the ending appeals “for repentance from silence in response to the commission to announce Jesus’ messiahship after his resurrection.” He adds that Jesus’ followers respond negatively when the disciples flee (Mark 14:50–52), Peter denies Jesus (14:66–72), and the women are silent (16:8). For William L. Lane (The Gospel according to Mark [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 591–92, 601–5), “The present ending of Mark is thoroughly consistent with the motifs of astonishment and fear developed throughout the Gospel.” Papias’s comment about taxis could refer to the Gospel’s not appearing to end in the right place. See William Barclay, The First Three Gospels (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 168–69. For Austin Farrer (The Glass of Vision [Bampton Lectures; Glasgow: Glasgow University Press, 1948], 139, 143), “A theme which stands out as clearly as any other in his passion narrative is that no man knows what to do with the divine when it falls into his hands... The phrase about silence is therefore no weak addition or apologetic device: it keeps up the theme of human perversity to the last, and gives it its final expression.” Ending the book at 16:8 recalls “men and women to the truth that the dread as well as the love of God is an essential note of our religion,” according to R. H. Lightfoot, The Gospel Message of St. Mark (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950), 97. Ned Bernard Stonehouse (The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ [Philadelphia: Presbyterian Guardian, 1944], 105) writes, “Amazement, astonishment and trembling often serve to express an attitude of awe, of godly fear, of obedience in the presence of a manifestation of divine power or of a disclosure of divine authority.”

Scholars note that γάρ can end a sentence or narrative as in Gen 18:15, 45:3; Plotinus, Enn. 5.5. See P. W. van der Horst, “Can a Book End with ΓΑΡ? A Note on Mark XVI.8,” JTS 23 (1972): 121–29. The word φοβήσαμεν (“they were afraid”) does not need an object as in Mark 10:32, John 13:13, and Dial. 32.1. The resurrection appearance of Jesus is already mentioned in Mark 16:6.

Other scholars are undecided. Mark’s Gospel may have ended at 16:8, or the ending may be lost according to A. T. Robertson, Studies in Mark’s Gospel (ed. Heber F. Peacock; Nashville: Broadman, 1958), 128–34.