

# Narrative

## DISCIPLESHIP

Portraits of Women  
in the Gospel of Mark

Jeffrey W. Aernie

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JEFFREY W. AERNIE

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For Abigail Jean, Chloe Anne, and Rebekah Grace,  
may you learn to be faithful disciples of Christ



# Markan Discipleship

## INTRODUCTION

MARK'S GOSPEL IS A theological and aretogenic narrative. Mark constructs a creative description of the reality of God's in-breaking kingdom in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to compel his audience toward an embodiment of the kingdom. The Gospel moves toward virtue—toward *discipleship*. This movement develops not through a systematic description of the characteristics and qualifications of discipleship but rather through the progression of the narrative itself. One of the key ways that this narrative progression takes place is through the intentional portrayal of characters. Characters are for the audience a point at which to enter the world of the narrative and to shape an imaginative response. Perhaps unsurprisingly, an important part of Mark's portrait of discipleship stems from the relational intersection between Jesus and the twelve disciples. The extensive narrative presence of the twelve disciples provides a framework for the definition and demands of discipleship. It is within this framework that we can begin to understand the unique contribution that the individual narratives about women make to Mark's characterization of discipleship. Their narrative portrayal enhances and extends the definition of discipleship which develops in the portrait of the twelve disciples and offers an additional avenue along which the audience is moved toward embodied virtue.

My intention within this chapter is to outline Mark's broad portrayal of discipleship to clarify how eight women—as a distinct character group within the Gospel—contribute to this thematic emphasis. To create this outline I will first provide a brief summary and analysis of Mark's characterization of the twelve disciples, the character group most readily associated with the contours of Mark's portrayal of discipleship. We will then explore the relationship between the characterization of the women and this broader portrait of the twelve disciples to understand both the women's correspondence with it and their distinction from it. Finally, I will offer a synthetic definition of the concept of narrative discipleship that develops in Mark's Gospel.

## FALLIBLE DISCIPLESHIP—THE TWELVE DISCIPLES IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

One key way that we can consider the concept of discipleship in Mark's Gospel is to examine the narrative portrait of the twelve disciples. Along with Jesus, the twelve disciples function as a major character in the narrative (in contrast to the minor role of the women). They are present in the Gospel from the initial call of four of the disciples (Mark 1:16–20) to Peter's denial of Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest (Mark 14:66–72). Even after their ignominious

departure from the story the disciples remain essential characters in Mark's narrative discourse, with the young man at the tomb reiterating Jesus's earlier promise to meet them in Galilee (Mark 16:7). We can gain a significant amount of insight into the nature of discipleship and the way in which the audience may embody its central characteristics by understanding the significance of this particular character group within the wider narrative of Mark's Gospel.

On even a cursory reading of the Gospel, however, it is transparent that Mark's portrait of the twelve disciples is immensely complex. The complexity of their narrative portrait stems from the distinct ways in which the disciples relate to Jesus—the ways in which Mark both “shows” and “tells” them in the narrative. Mark's distinctive characterization of the disciples has led to extensive scholarly discussion concerning the significance of their portrayal, their relationship to Christian history, and their potential impact on both the original and the contemporary audience.<sup>51</sup> My intention here is to present a more limited discussion of the disciples' portrait as a means to determine the related significance of the individual narratives of women in the Gospel. To that end, I will outline the basic trajectory of the disciples' characterization and its potential function within the wider narrative of the Gospel.

## The Trajectory of the Twelve Disciples' Characterization

Studies of the twelve disciples in Mark's Gospel frequently highlight the negative trajectory of their portrayal.<sup>52</sup> As part of the consideration of the way in which Mark develops the theme of discipleship and how the narratives of the women relate to the portrait of the disciples, it will be helpful to provide a basic outline of the way in which the disciples' trajectory develops. In broad terms, within Mark's Gospel the portrait of the disciples develops in four basic stages: (1) their initial call and participation in Jesus's ministry, (2) their turn toward fear and misunderstanding about Jesus's identity and mission, (3) their miscomprehension of Jesus's teaching, and (4) their final abandonment of Jesus.

Mark's initial portrayal of the twelve disciples is predominantly positive. In each of the first three chapters of the Gospel Jesus calls people to join in his ministry and they respond without hesitation—Simon, Andrew, James, and John (Mark 1:16–20), Levi (Mark 2:13–14), and then the entirety of the twelve disciples (Mark 3:13–19). In each of these scenes Jesus either calls or appoints followers to proclaim God's kingdom and to exercise his authority in the world.<sup>53</sup> The two brief summary statements about the disciples' activity in Mark 6:12–13 and 30 point to their effectiveness in participating in the ministry of the kingdom. Further, when other characters in the narrative question aspects of the disciples' behavior Jesus responds by defining their activity in conjunction with the unique nature of his own ministry (Mark 2:18–28; 7:1–23). And, when Jesus's family attempts to interrupt his teaching ministry in Mark 3:20–35, Jesus redefines the language of family with reference specifically to the disciples—“those seated around him in a circle” (Mark 3:34). In the first stage of Mark's narrative the disciples participate in the ministry of the kingdom and serve primarily as positive exemplars for Mark's audience.

Within this predominantly positive portrayal there are two pieces of evidence which may foreshadow the negative trajectory of the twelve disciples. The first is Mark's concise note that Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus (Mark 3:19) and the second is the disciples' fearful reaction when Jesus calms the storm on the sea (Mark 4:35–41). Neither of these pieces of evidence, however, clearly demonstrates a negative reading of the disciples in the first instance. The gravity of Judas's betrayal and its connection with the rest of the disciples becomes transparent in Mark 14, but at this earlier stage of the narrative the note of betrayal serves not to tarnish the narrative portrait of the disciples but to distinguish Judas from them. Similarly, the significance of the negative trajectory of Mark's portrayal of the disciples' fearful reaction in the boat only develops as analogous scenes unfold in the narrative. The positive summary of the disciples' ministry in Mark 6 suggests, at least initially, that their dramatic response to Jesus's identity in Mark 4 did not diminish their capacity to participate in the ministry of the kingdom.

As Mark's narrative progresses, however, it becomes clear that the disciples' fearful response to Jesus in Mark 4 functions as a turning point in the trajectory of their narrative portrayal. Mark 4 is the first of three scenes in the narrative which depict an extended interaction between Jesus and the disciples in a boat. Each scene paints an increasingly condemnatory portrait of the disciples' ability to comprehend Jesus's identity and mission. The lack of faith and fear they exhibit in the initial scene (Mark 4:35–41) reverberates in the subsequent boat scenes. In Mark 6:45–52 the disciples experience similar terror as they witness Jesus walk on the water toward them as they struggle to direct their boat against the wind and they mistake him for a ghost (Mark 6:49). Given Mark's emphasis on the unique identity and authority of Jesus in each scene, it may be reasonable to assume that the disciples' fear merely reflects an expected response to an encounter with the divine.<sup>54</sup> In this case, neither scene would require either an immediate rejection of the disciples nor condemnation of their fearful reaction. A more negative evaluation of the disciples in the second scene, however, arises from the narrator's explanation that their fear was the result of the hardened condition of their hearts (Mark 6:52), a note which harks back to Jesus's frustration with the hardened hearts of the religious leaders who oppose him (Mark 3:1–5).

The disciples' subsequent encounter with Jesus in a boat in Mark 8:14–21 eliminates any doubt concerning the negative trajectory of Mark's characterization. Here, after twice witnessing Jesus miraculously provide food for a multitude of people (Mark 6:30–44; 8:1–10), the disciples misunderstand Jesus's metaphorical warning about the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod as a reproach for the fact that they had forgotten to bring an adequate supply of bread. Jesus excoriates them for this train of thought, questioning their capacity to perceive, the condition of their hearts, and whether they have eyes to see or ears to hear (Mark 8:17–18). The language of sense perception is particularly acute. It echoes the language of blindness and deafness that characterizes the way those outside of the kingdom perceive Jesus's parables (Mark 4:12). It also creates a stark contrast with the surrounding narratives: the restoration of hearing and speech to the deaf-mute man in the Decapolis (Mark 7:31–37) and the restoration of sight to the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22–26).<sup>55</sup> In contrast with these



two potential outsiders who can now hear and see, the disciples remain confounded about the nature of Jesus's identity and ministry. The portrait of the disciples that develops in the first major section of Mark's Gospel (Mark 1:1–8:21) is marked by tension. They are neither wholly positive exemplars nor completely negative antagonists.

The complex nature of Mark's characterization of the twelve disciples continues as the narrative progresses in Mark 8:22–10:52. This section of the Gospel constitutes the most extensive focus on Jesus's teaching in the Markan narrative, with a particular focus on defining the relationship between Jesus's ministry and the nature of discipleship. Jesus's teaching on discipleship develops through three predictions of his death and resurrection (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34). After each prediction the disciples respond in overtly negative ways—with insolence (Mark 8:32–33), fearful silence (Mark 9:32), and misplaced arrogance (Mark 10:35–41). In connection with the portrait of fear and misperception that develops in the earlier boat scenes, the disciples' initial positive portrayal fades extensively as they fail to coordinate their own actions and ideals with those of Jesus. It is crucial to note, however, that each instance of failed comprehension by the disciples is followed by a dramatic description of the obligations of discipleship—cruciformity (Mark 8:34–38), inversion of social hierarchies (Mark 9:35–37), and self-sacrificial service (Mark 10:42–45). Each of the three passion-resurrection predictions, therefore, exhibits a rhetorical pattern that connects Jesus's predictions with an instance of discipleship failure and a subsequent call to a reimagined form of discipleship.<sup>56</sup> Because of this rhetorical pattern, the disciples continue to function as exemplars with respect to the discourse of the narrative even as their portrait within the story of the narrative continues to devolve. Each instance of the disciples' failure provides an opportunity for Jesus to define a form of discipleship ordered around his own identity and mission.

The disciples' negative trajectory reaches its nadir in Mark 14. In the initial stages of the passion narrative Jesus predicts the betrayal of Judas (Mark 14:17–20), the desertion of the disciples (Mark 14:27), and Peter's threefold rejection (Mark 14:30). Despite Peter's emphatic assertion of continued solidarity and the disciples' vigorous protestations against Jesus's prediction, each of the events takes place accordingly in the narrative. Judas leads the commissioned mob to the garden to arrest Jesus (Mark 14:43–45), the disciples flee the scene in dramatic and shameful fashion (Mark 14:50–52), and Peter denies having even known who Jesus was (Mark 14:66–72). Peter's vehement denials evoke Jesus's stark warning to those who reject the cruciform demands of discipleship: "whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them" (Mark 8:38).<sup>57</sup> The net effect is remarkable. Those who had followed Jesus without hesitation and joined him in the ministry of God's in-breaking kingdom now refuse to admit that they may even have known him tangentially.

There are at least two pieces of evidence in Mark 13–16, however, that make the disciples' downward trajectory somewhat less precipitous. First, the eschatological discourse in Mark 13 presumes the disciples' future participation in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus's warnings against false teachers (Mark 13:5–8) and his description of the disciples' future suffering (Mark 13:9–11) are both conditioned on the reality of the disciples' ongoing engagement in kingdom

ministry.<sup>58</sup> Second, the young man's instruction to the women at the tomb to tell the disciples that Jesus would meet them in Galilee (Mark 16:7) anticipates their future reconciliation.<sup>59</sup> The abandonment in Gethsemane is overcome in the return to Galilee.

## The Function of the Twelve Disciples' Characterization

Approaching Mark's Gospel as a theological and aretogenic narrative—an act of communication between author and audience which seeks to transform—requires that we offer an explanation for the complex and predominantly negative characterization of the twelve disciples. In what way does Mark's narrative portrayal of this group move the audience toward the formation of virtue? Elizabeth Struthers Malbon's extensive work on characters and characterization in Mark's Gospel is instructive at this point.<sup>60</sup> In particular, her designation of the disciples as “fallible followers” provides a helpful construct for understanding the narrative complexity of their portrayal, both in terms of their individual characterization and their relationship to other participants in the narrative (e.g., Jesus and the women).<sup>61</sup> Recognizing that the disciples are neither solely positive exemplars nor completely negative antagonists allows for a more flexible description of their narrative function.

One of the constructive dimensions of Malbon's use of the language of fallibility is its compatibility with the paradigm of characterization developed by Cornelis Bennema which seeks to describe characters along a continuum of complexity that accounts for the dynamic functions they may have within a narrative (see ch. 1). To describe the twelve disciples merely as flat or round, major or minor, or positive or negative, would fail to account for the diverse nature of their portrayal and function within Mark's wider narrative world. Malbon's language of fallibility avoids this rhetorical pitfall by providing space for a more nuanced analysis of the disciples' characterization. The disciples' narrative portrait is not conditioned by a single emphasis or a single trajectory. The positive aspects of their portrayal that appear prior to and within their broadly negative trajectory point to their development within the progression of the narrative and, consequently, to the multiplicity of their narrative functions.

The tension in Mark's characterization of the disciples is an essential aspect of the way in which the narrative communicates to the audience not a detriment to it. The rounded complexity of the disciples' characterization creates a framework in which the audience may engage with and respond to their narrative portrait in a number of ways. As Malbon notes:

Hope and critique, identification and judgment, are not direct opposites. “Identification with” characters is not simply equivalent to “admiration of” them, and “judgment of” a character group does not necessarily mean “dissociation from” it. . . . The key issue for the implied audience is *not* identification with positive characters versus dissociation from negative characters . . . but developing sympathy, empathy and community particularly with the paradoxical characters within a range of characters and character

In other words, the complex portrait of the twelve disciples suggests that the audience's response will be equally complex. Audiences of Mark's Gospel can embody the immediate willingness of the disciples to follow Jesus. They can participate as the disciples did in proclaiming the in-breaking of God's kingdom. They can reject the disciples' fear and misunderstanding concerning Jesus's identity and mission. They can take up the radical demands of discipleship which the disciples initially fail to personify. They can remain unashamed of the Son of Man even when facing personal and social rejection.

As we noted in the previous chapter, characters are deployed in Mark's Gospel to support the theological agenda of the narrative. Mark's complex characterization of the disciples is conditioned by his wider aim to describe the good news about Jesus that reshapes the trajectory of human history (including the trajectory of the disciples). The distinct relationship that the disciples have with Jesus—especially as it develops in the key texts that link Jesus's own ministry with the definition of discipleship and examples of the disciples' unmitigated failure (Mark 8:31–38; 9:30–37; 10:32–45)—demonstrates their position as those through whom Mark can characterize the complex nature of discipleship itself. To return again to the insightful analysis of Malbon:

followership is characterized in Mark as involving the lively struggle between faith and doubt, trust and fear, obedience and denial. . . . Mark wishes to show who Jesus is and who Jesus' followers are. To do this he schematizes the characters of his story; he paints extreme cases of enemies and exemplars as the background against which the trials and joys of followers may stand out more boldly. If Mark's Gospel is in any sense a polemic, it is a polemic . . . against a simplistic view of discipleship (or followership) that sees unfailing support or unfailing enmity as the only options, rather than as the background against which the complex relations of Jesus and his followers must be worked out.<sup>63</sup>

To frame this idea in the language of narrative criticism, although the “story” of the disciples moves along a predominantly negative trajectory, the “discourse” of the disciples draws the audience's attention to their role in the narrative as respondents to Jesus—both in their submission to him and in their rejection of him. The intent of Mark's portrayal of the disciples is not to get us to respond directly to the *disciples*. The intent is to encourage us to respond to *Jesus*. Indeed, the primary way that we are able to evaluate the disciples and to discern how to respond to them is by evaluating them in relationship to Jesus and by responding to Jesus. To modify the language Suzanne Watts Henderson uses in the conclusion of her study on the relationship between Christology and discipleship in Mark's Gospel, once the entire narrative is in view it becomes clear that faithful discipleship entails both a correct appraisal of Jesus's christological identity and a collective participation in Jesus's christological mission.<sup>64</sup> Moving the audience along this christological trajectory is

the main function of Mark's complex portrayal of the twelve disciples.

Jesus is the central character around which Mark's narrative revolves and the only true paradigm from which discipleship develops.<sup>65</sup> Both the concord and the contradiction that develop in the interaction between Jesus and the twelve disciples provides the narrative space in which Mark portrays the nature and obligations of discipleship. This narrative space is then extended in Mark's portrayal of the way in which other characters engage with and respond to Jesus. The Jewish leaders, the crowds, and the minor characters all provide insight into Mark's portrait of discipleship. Mark's creative, diverse, and intentional use of characters compels the audience to reflect deeply on the nuanced portrait of discipleship that develops in the progression of the narrative. The intent of Mark's varied use of characterization is not merely to force a rejection of certain sets of characters and an acceptance of others, but rather an identification—whether positively or negatively, approvingly or disapprovingly—with the complex spectrum of characters and the traits they embody.<sup>66</sup> It is within this wider spectrum of characterization that the characteristics of discipleship necessitated by God's in-breaking kingdom in Jesus unfold.

## FAITHFUL DISCIPLESHIP—WOMEN AS DISCIPLES IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

One of the key segments of this characterization spectrum is Mark's portrayal of women.<sup>67</sup> Mark narrates key engagements between Jesus and women to emphasize particular qualities of discipleship. In spite of the fact that the narrative space in which the women reside is significantly smaller than that of the twelve disciples, Mark uses their concise narratives to identify specific characteristics of discipleship more sharply. Although there are some who argue that Mark intentionally suppresses the role of women, the general consensus among Markan scholars is that certain women are portrayed as exemplary figures in the narrative.<sup>68</sup> The bleeding woman (Mark 5:25–34), the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24–30), the poor widow (Mark 12:41–44), and the woman who anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3–9) are often held up alongside other minor characters such as Jairus (Mark 5:21–24; 35–43) and Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52) as those who embody key aspects of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus.<sup>69</sup> At the very least the individual narratives of these women contribute to Mark's presentation of Jesus.

There is also a general consensus, however, that Mark's broadly positive portrayal of the women eventually follows the same negative trajectory along which the portrait of the twelve disciples declines. Whereas certain anonymous women in Mark 1–14 embody key characteristics of Jesus's ministry, the named women who enter the narrative in Mark 15–16 abandon Jesus, fleeing the tomb in fearful silence and failing to fulfill their commission to proclaim to the disciples that the crucified one is risen (Mark 16:6–8).<sup>70</sup> Further, as with the portrayal of the twelve disciples, Mark's characterization of female characters does not follow a single trajectory from positive to negative. Prior to the introduction of the named women in Mark 15–16, there are other scenes which shift the trajectory in different ways.

Herodias and her daughter are ostensibly negative characters in their conspiracy against John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29). Jesus’s mother and sisters are portrayed at best as neutral toward him when they attempt to take charge of him in Galilee (Mark 3:31–35; 6:3).<sup>71</sup> And the servant girl plays a contrarian role in the narrative in her interrogation of Peter in the courtyard of the high priest during Jesus’s trial (Mark 14:66–72).<sup>72</sup> The trajectory of Mark’s portrayal of the women reflects the same type of complexity as that of the twelve disciples.

Given the diversity of their portraits it may be most constructive to follow Malbon in describing Mark’s characterization of the women with the more nuanced language of fallibility. Mark does not create a strict contrast with respect to the gender of the two character groups—the men as failures and the women as exemplars of the characteristics of Jesus’s identity and mission. As with the twelve disciples, the overall portrait of the women highlights characteristics both amenable and antagonistic to Mark’s narrative presentation of Jesus.<sup>73</sup> Because of this, Mark’s characterization of the women is not intended to stand in conflict with the characterization of the twelve disciples. Any narrative tension that exists between the groups stems not from direct conflict between them or in the distinction in their genders but from the distinct ways in which their narrative portraits relate to Jesus.<sup>74</sup> Both the negative and the exemplary characteristics that Mark emphasizes in the narratives of certain women may also be gleaned from the narratives of the twelve disciples and other minor characters. Mark’s wider presentation of Jesus develops both in the way in which he “shows” and “tells” Jesus and in the way in which he “shows” and “tells” Jesus in relation to other characters, the women included.

Although I find the language of fallibility to be constructive as a general description of the nuanced portrait of disciples and discipleship in Mark’s narrative, I want to propose that Mark’s characterization of certain women in the narrative creates a distinct portrait of faithfulness. More specifically, by employing the concept of narrative analogy I want to argue that Mark creates an intentional pattern of faithful discipleship through the connection of the narratives of eight women in the Gospel. Mark’s characterization of Simon’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31), the bleeding woman (Mark 5:25–34), the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24–30), the poor widow (Mark 12:41–44), the woman who anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3–9), and the three named women in the passion narrative (Mark 15:40–41, 47; 16:1–8) deliberately integrates them into a character group whose narratives can be interpreted in light of one another. The inclusion of Simon’s mother-in-law and the named women is crucial for the development of this pattern. The individual narratives of these women establish the continuity of the pattern throughout the entire progression of the Gospel. Further, that the women in Mark 15–16 function as the culmination of this narrative pattern constitutes a distinct reading of Mark’s Gospel.<sup>75</sup> I will argue in chapter 6 that the women’s departure from the tomb is not an act of abandonment (fallibility) but a fulfillment of their specific commission and a narrative representation of discipleship (faithfulness). The outcome of the integration of the narratives of these women is a unique portrait that contributes to Mark’s narrative development of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus and an embodied participant in God’s kingdom.

In different ways these eight women function as narrative embodiments of essential



aspects of God's in-breaking kingdom—restored life, kingdom speech, sacrificial action, and cruciformity. These characteristics are essential because they are rooted in Mark's wider narrative about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That the narratives of these women are related to Jesus is essential in light of the reality that the only adequate paradigm for discipleship in Mark's Gospel is Jesus himself. The theological impact of the women's narratives is defined by their relationship to Jesus.<sup>76</sup> The women's demonstration of these specific characteristics of discipleship is an example of what Malbon refers to as "reflected" Christology. The women are small but polished mirrors that reflect crucial aspects of Mark's portrayal of Jesus.<sup>77</sup>

In his seminal essay on Mark's Christology, Robert Tannehill argues that the narrative shape of the Gospel needs to condition the way we think about Mark's presentation of the identity and mission of Jesus. For Tannehill, Mark's Gospel itself is an act of "narrative Christology."<sup>78</sup> Importantly, Tannehill asserts that:

Our understanding of these matters is enriched by study of the role relationships among Jesus and others in the story, which sometimes involve reiterative enrichment and sometimes unexpected development. The author guides his readers' response to the story by narrative patterns which control emphasis and the evaluation of events and characters.<sup>79</sup>

The rhetorical connection of the individual narratives of these women is, I believe, an example of the type of narrative pattern that Tannehill identifies. Through the use of narrative analogy Mark draws the attention of the audience to a character group that exhibits a form of faithfulness that shapes their position with respect to Jesus and to the rest of his followers. The narrative shape of the Gospel, therefore, must also condition the way we think about Mark's presentation of the identity and mission of Jesus's followers. The integrated narratives of the women are an example of the way in which the Gospel is also an act of narrative discipleship.

## **NARRATIVE DISCIPLESHIP IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**

The theological and aretegenic emphases of Mark's Gospel develop not systematically, but narratively. Mark's emphasis on the way in which God's kingdom breaks into the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus develops through the plot of his story—its settings, events, and characters. The impact of God's in-breaking kingdom is neither enumerated in a list of specific characteristics nor relayed through a distinct summary of its components. The theological impact of the narrative stems from the progression of the narrative itself and so has to be discerned from an engagement with the narrative itself. One of the key ways in which this engagement arises is through Mark's intentional portrayal of characters and the relational intersections between them. Through the development of these portraits the audience gains a distinct entry point into the narrative and can learn to follow the direction of its theological trajectory.

Without question Jesus is the central character in the Gospel. The entire narrative revolves around the good news that originates from Jesus and extends out from him in his ministry and passion. This good news is defined by the reality that God's kingdom is now emphatically present in Jesus (Mark 1:14–15). The way in which Mark portrays Jesus provides insight into what the nature of this kingdom is. Jesus's acts of restoration, his proclamation of the kingdom, his holistic sacrifice on the cross, and God's vindication of him in his death and resurrection all give shape to this new kingdom reality. This distinctly christological focus of Mark's narrative not only provides information about the historical and theological realities of Jesus, it also creates the paradigm that Mark's audience is called to embody. As an act of communication the narrative of the Gospel intends to both inform and transform. Mark's intentionally crafted narrative is a dynamic entity with theological intent. Through the way Mark presents his narrative Christology he creates narrative discipleship.

Narrative discipleship refers to the composite set of actions and attributes associated with the identity of Jesus and derived from the cruciform shape of his life and ministry which Mark portrays in the Gospel as essential for those who desire to participate in the reality of God's in-breaking kingdom. Both Mark's specific presentation of Jesus and his portrayal of the way in which other characters interact with him creates the narrative framework in which this composite set of actions and attributes develops. As we have seen, the complex portrait of the twelve disciples and their engagement with Jesus provides extensive insight into the shape of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The disciples' characterization emphasizes the need for unconditional obedience (Mark 1:16–20), proclamation of the kingdom (Mark 3:14), cruciformity (Mark 8:34–38), the inversion of social hierarchies (Mark 9:35–37), self-sacrificial service (Mark 10:42–45), and prayerful watchfulness (Mark 13:5).<sup>80</sup> But even these essential characteristics are not the sum total of Mark's definition of discipleship. The portrait of the disciples is not the only aspect of the narrative which offers insight into the shape of the kingdom and the nature of discipleship.

As Joel Williams so aptly notes, "Mark's portrayal of the disciples may be the logical place to start an investigation of discipleship in Mark's Gospel, but it would be an improper place to end such a study."<sup>81</sup> Mark's development of the theme of discipleship is enhanced through Jesus's engagement with other narrative figures. The aim of the present volume is to detail how Mark intentionally uses a specific set of eight women to provide further substance to the theme of discipleship and to construct another mirror in which the audience is able to see ways in which it might reflect the identity and ministry of Jesus. As a character group these women serve as narrative representations of four essential components of Markan discipleship—restored life (Mark 1:29–31; 5:25–34), kingdom speech (Mark 7:24–30), sacrificial action (Mark 12:41–44; 14:3–9), and cruciformity (Mark 15–16). The exegetical chapters in part two aim to describe more fully how the individual narratives of these women extend the portrait of narrative discipleship in which the audience of the Gospel is drawn to participate.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an introduction to the theme of Markan discipleship. I began by examining Mark's characterization of the twelve disciples. The complex trajectory of the narrative of the disciples provides a broad foundation for Mark's wider portrayal of discipleship. This foundation stems not directly from the disciples themselves, but from their interaction—both positive and negative, expected and unexpected—with Jesus. It is the disciples' reflection of the christological trajectory of Mark's Gospel that gives their characterization significance for it is only in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that the paradigm of discipleship is created. I then offered a concise introduction to Mark's portrayal of the women. Although the narrative presence of the women is more constricted than that of the disciples, their narratives serve to emphasize elements of the wider narrative more sharply. Like the twelve disciples, Mark's characterization of the women is complex. Certain women are antagonistic toward Jesus. Others extend the boundaries of Mark's portrait of discipleship. In particular, I argued that Mark crafts the narratives of eight women to broaden his portrait of discipleship. Mark's intentional integration of the narratives of these women in the Gospel contributes to what I refer to as narrative discipleship—the composite set of actions and attributes associated with the identity of Jesus and derived from the cruciform shape of his life and ministry which Mark portrays in the Gospel as essential for those who desire to participate in the reality of God's in-breaking kingdom.

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[51.](#) For an overview of scholarship on the twelve disciples in Mark's Gospel, see esp. Black, *The Disciples according to Mark*; and Skinner, "Study of Character(s)," 3–34.

[52.](#) For similar analyses of the negative trajectory of the twelve disciples in Mark's Gospel, see, e.g., Danove, *Rhetoric of Characterization*, 90–126; Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 389–433; Hurtado, "Following Jesus," 9–29; Stein, *Mark*, 26–31; Tannehill, "Disciples in Mark," 386–405.

[53.](#) On the call narratives, see esp. Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship*, 31–94; and Moloney, "Vocation of the Disciples," esp. 63–83.

[54.](#) Cf. Judg 6:22–23; Dan 8:17; 10:7, 12; Luke 2:9–10; Rev 1:17.

[55.](#) Tannehill, "Disciples in Mark," 399–400; cf. Strauss, *Mark*, 745.

[56.](#) On Mark's development of this pattern, see, e.g., Gorman, *Death of the Messiah*, 87; Hays, *Moral Vision*, 80–85; Hurtado, "Following Jesus," 11–15; Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 317; Tannehill, "Disciples in Mark," 400–401.

[57.](#) Cf. Tannehill, "Disciples in Mark," 402.

[58.](#) Hurtado, "Following Jesus," 22; Malbon, "Text and Contexts," 91.

[59.](#) Malbon, "Text and Contexts," 91.

[60.](#) See esp. the collected essays in Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus*.

[61.](#) Malbon, "Fallible Followers," 29–48; cf. Hurtado, "Following Jesus," 21–23.

[62.](#) Malbon, "Minor Characters," 63 (emphasis original). See also Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 406: "Mark does not intend for readers to be merely observers who look disdainfully at the disciples' ineptitude but to identify with them and recognize their own inadequacies as disciples and be moved to correct them."

[63.](#) Malbon, "Jewish Leaders," 279 (emphasis original).

[64.](#) Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship*, 241.

65. So Best, *Following Jesus*; Hurtado, "Following Jesus," 25–27. On Mark's intentional presentation of Jesus, see esp. Boring, "Markan Christology," 451–71; Broadhead, *Naming Jesus*; Danove, *Rhetoric of Characterization*; Davidsen, *Narrative Jesus*; Kingsbury, *Christology of Mark's Gospel*; Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*; Morrison, *Turning Point in the Gospel of Mark*; Naluparayil, *Identity of Jesus in Mark*; Tannehill, "Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," 57–95.

66. Malbon, "Minor Characters," 63.

67. For book-length treatments of the women in Mark's Gospel, see Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium*; Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*; Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*; Mitchell, *Beyond Fear and Silence*.

68. For the argument that Mark intentionally suppresses the women, see Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 225–41. On the question of why the Gospel authors never explicitly refer to women as disciples, see Meier, *Companions and Competitors*, 73–80.

69. See, e.g., Beavis, "Women as Models of Faith," 3–9; Edwards, *Mark*, 417; Malbon, "Fallible Followers," 36–40; Miller, "Women Characters," 174–93; Swartley, "Role of Women," 16–22; Tetlow, *Women and Ministry*, 94–98; Williams, *Other Followers*, 112–21, 176–82.

70. See esp. Lincoln, "Promise and the Failure," 283–300; cf. Boring, *Mark*, 448–49; Hooker, *Mark*, 387; Moloney, *Gospel of Mark*, 348–54.

71. For a more negative assessment of Jesus's mother and sisters, see Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, 33–38.

72. Mark's characterization of two further women, the daughters of Jairus and the Syrophenician woman, is not extensive, though both are recipients of dramatic acts of restoration. On the place of daughters in Mark's narrative, see Betsworth, *Reign of God*.

73. Malbon, "Fallible Followers," 33, 46.

74. Within Mark's narrative the only direct interactions between the women and the twelve disciples are Simon's mother-in-law's act of service to them (Mark 1:29–31) and the young woman's interrogation of Peter during Jesus's trial (Mark 14:66–72). While the young woman's interrogation is significant for the progression of Mark's portrayal of Peter, it does not provide any specific insight into her own response to Jesus. In contrast to Matthew's portrait of the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21–28), Mark does not portray any comment by the disciples in the narrative of the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24–30). Additionally, Mark does not identify those who complain about the woman's waste of resources in anointing Jesus (Mark 14:4), whereas Matthew identifies them as the disciples (Matt 26:8–9) and John specifically names Judas (John 12:4–5). Mark narrates the final instruction given to the women to speak to the disciples without any description of the nature of the interaction (Mark 16:7–8), whereas Luke portrays the general disbelief of the disciples (Luke 24:11–12).

75. For a positive interpretation of the women in Mark 15–16, see Aernie, "Cruciform Discipleship," 779–97; Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 286–95; Hurtado, "Women, the Tomb," 427–50.

76. Malbon, "Fallible Followers," 46; cf. Hurtado, "Following Jesus," 25.

77. Malbon, "Reflected Christology," 127–45; cf. Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, 219–30.

78. Tannehill, "Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," 89.

79. *Ibid.*, 88–89.

80. For itemized lists of the characteristics of discipleship in Mark's Gospel, see Bayer, *Theology of Mark*, 99–124; and Garland, *Theology of Mark's Gospel*, 439–54.

81. Williams, *Other Followers*, 205.