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LITERARY APPROACHES TO THE END OF MARK'S GOSPEL

JOEL F. WILLIAMS*

Mark 16:7–8 records the instructions of the young man to the women at the tomb and their surprising response. “But go, say to the disciples and to Peter, ‘He is going before you into Galilee; you will see him there, just as he said to you.’ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment took hold of them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Do these verses make adequate sense as the conclusion to Mark’s Gospel? Some would say “no” and would search for an explanation to the problem of Mark’s ending in the historical circumstances surrounding the writing or preservation of this Gospel. Perhaps Mark was unable to complete his Gospel, and even though he stopped at 16:8, that was not his intended ending. Perhaps the real ending of Mark’s Gospel has been lost.¹ However, those who suggest such solutions to the problem of Mark’s ending must recognize that they are providing an historical explanation for a literary problem. Does the conclusion of Mark’s Gospel at 16:8 make adequate sense? This question presents a literary problem dealing with the meaning and function of the text. At times, historical conjectures are necessary to solve literary problems, but a literary solution should be sought first. Rudolf Pesch makes a similar point when he states, “The commentator of Mark’s Gospel has every reason to conclude from this that the original ending of the Gospel has been given with Mark 16:1–8. The peculiar character of this ending is an impetus to interpretation, not to conjectural reconstruction or speculation.”²

The purpose for this article is to present and evaluate different attempts to explain the meaning and significance of Mark’s abrupt ending. In recent years, several literary critics have sought to show how the conclusion of Mark’s Gospel at 16:8 provides a meaningful closure to the narrative as a

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¹ B. M. Metzger points out three possible solutions to account for the ending of Mark’s Gospel at 16:8: first, that Mark intended to conclude with the fearful response of the women; second, that Mark was prevented, perhaps by death, from finishing his work; and third, that the last leaf of the original copy was accidentally lost before other copies were made (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [2d ed.; Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994] 105; idem, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* [3d ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992] 228).

² R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium: I. Teil* (HTKNT; 2d ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 1984) 47. See also N. B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 98–99.

whole, but these critics have produced a variety of possible explanations.³ This article begins by reviewing briefly the issues related to the major text-critical problem in Mark 16. The conclusion drawn from this review is that the so-called longer and shorter endings are not original to Mark's Gospel and that the first step for interpreters is to attempt to understand Mark 16:8 as the intended ending for the Gospel. Next, the article surveys and evaluates different literary approaches that have been suggested for making sense of Mark's ending. The most satisfying viewpoint is that Mark concludes his Gospel by juxtaposing promise and failure. The prediction of 16:7 implies a promise that a restoration to discipleship is available in spite of failure, while the disobedience of the women in 16:8 serves as a warning that failure is possible even after the resurrection.

I. MARK'S ENDING AS A TEXTUAL PROBLEM

Mark's Gospel ends in different ways in the manuscript tradition.⁴ First, the ending of Mark's Gospel at 16:8 is attested by κ , B, 304, and a number of version manuscripts.⁵ Clement of Alexandria and Origen appear to have no knowledge of any text after 16:8, and both Eusebius and Jerome state that Mark's Gospel ended with 16:8 in almost all of the manuscripts available to them.⁶ Second, one manuscript, the Old Latin manuscript k, simply includes the so-called shorter ending after 16:8. This ending contains the words, "And they promptly reported to Peter and those with him all the things which had been commanded. And after these things also Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen." There is little reason to argue concerning the authenticity of the so-called shorter ending in light of the lack of manuscript evidence. However, the existence of the Old Latin manuscript k is important because it serves as a further witness for the circulation of Mark's

³ For introductions to literary critical approaches to New Testament narrative, see N. R. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); T. Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 3; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); S. D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); M. A. Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

⁴ For a detailed presentation of external and internal evidence surrounding the text of Mark's ending, see J. K. Elliott, "The Text and Language of the Endings to Mark's Gospel," *TZ* 27 (1971) 255–262. See also K. Aland, "Der Schluss des Markusevangeliums," *L'Évangile selon Marc: Tradition et rédaction* (ed. M. Sabbe; 2d ed.; Leuven: University Press, 1988) 436–455; Metzger, *Textual Commentary* 102–106.

⁵ According to Metzger, the ending of Mark at 16:8 is found in "the Sinaitic Syriac manuscript, about one hundred Armenian manuscripts, and the two oldest Georgian manuscripts" (*Textual Commentary* 102). For further information on Armenian manuscripts that omit Mark 16:9–20 and for arguments supporting the contention that Mark 16:9–20 was not part of the original Armenian version, see E. C. Colwell, "Mark 16:9–20 in the Armenian Version," *JBL* 56 (1937) 369–386.

⁶ Metzger, *Textual Commentary* 103. The quotations by Eusebius in *Quaestiones ad Marinum* and by Jerome from his *Epistola* 120 are most easily accessible in W. R. Farmer, *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark* (SNTSMS 25; London: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 4, 23.

Gospel without 16:9–20. Third, the vast majority of manuscripts conclude with the so-called longer ending (16:9–20), although some of the manuscripts also contain scribal notes indicating doubt as to the authenticity of these verses.⁷ Finally, several witnesses, including L, Ψ, 099, 0112, 579 and others, contain the shorter ending followed by the longer ending.⁸

With reference to internal evidence, many have noted the awkward transition between 16:8 and 16:9.⁹ The subject of the action in verse 8 is the women, but then there is a rather abrupt shift in verse 9 to Jesus as the unexpressed subject of the main verb. In verse 9, Mary Magdalene is identified with a descriptive phrase, almost as if she were being introduced for the first time, even though she is obviously participating in the immediately preceding narrative (15:47; 16:1). The other women who were with Mary Magdalene inexplicably disappear from the picture. Moreover, the placement of Jesus' resurrection in verse 9 at a time early (*prōi*) in the first day of the week seems unusual after verse 2, which has the women finding the empty tomb exceedingly early (*lian prōi*) on the first day of the week. The initial words of verse 9, *anastas de* "now after he had risen," especially when used in conjunction with *prōton* "first," serve better as the beginning of a narrative concerning a series of resurrection appearances by Jesus than as a continuation of Mark 16:1–8. In addition to this awkward transition, there are a number of words and phrases in 16:9–20 that occur nowhere else in the Gospel of Mark.¹⁰ So, for example, *poreuomai* appears three times in the longer ending (16:10, 12, 15), but nowhere in the preceding portions of Mark's Gospel.¹¹ The longer ending also uses a number of words that are found in earlier portions of Mark's Gospel but in a different way or with a

⁷ Manuscripts where the longer ending is marked with asterisks or obeli or a scribal note include those in ^l as well as 137 138 1110 1210 1215 1216 1217 1221 1241^{vid} 1582. Notice should also be taken of the Greek manuscript W, which includes a number of lines after verse 14 of the longer ending. This addition presents the disciples' excuse for their unbelief and Jesus' rebuke.

⁸ Modern printed Greek texts have added other variations on the end of Mark's Gospel. B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort placed a series of asterisks at the end of 16:8, presumably to indicate that Mark's Gospel was incomplete (*The New Testament in the Original Greek* [reprint; New York: Macmillan, 1928] 112–113). They also concluded the Greek text of Mark with the longer ending followed by the shorter ending, an order not found in any Greek manuscript. The UBS Greek text used this same order of presentation until it was recently changed in the 4th edition, so that the shorter ending now precedes the longer ending.

⁹ See, for example, Metzger, *Textual Commentary* 104–105.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the distinctive vocabulary and unique use of words in 16:9–20, see Elliott, "Text and Language" 258–262.

¹¹ In 1:1–16:8, Mark always uses a compound form of *poreuomai* and not the simple verb. See the use of *eisporeuomai* in 1:21; 4:19; 5:40; 6:56; 7:15, 18, 19; 11:2; *ekporeuomai* in 1:5; 6:11; 7:15, 19, 20, 21, 23; 10:17, 46; 11:19; 13:1; *paraporeuomai* in 2:23; 9:30; 11:20; 15:29. In all these examples of compound forms of *poreuomai*, Mark never uses the aorist tense such as is found with the instances of *poreuomai* in 16:10, 15. Other words that are unique to 16:9–20 when compared with the rest of Mark's Gospel include *pentheō* (v. 10), *theaomai* (vv. 11, 14), *apisteō* (vv. 11, 16), *heteros* (v. 12), *morphē* (v. 12), *hysteron* (v. 14), *hendeka* (v. 14), *parakolouthēō* (v. 17), *ophis* (v. 18), *thanasimos* (v. 18), *blaptō* (v. 18), *analambanō* (v. 19), *synergeō* (v. 20), *bebaioō* (v. 20), *epakolouthēō* (v. 20). Some unique phrases in 16:9–20 include *tois met' autou genomenois* (v. 10) as a description of the disciples, *meta tauta* (v. 12), and *kalōs hexousin* (v. 18).

different meaning. For example, *ekeinos* functions as a pronoun in 16:10, 13, 20, whereas it is always used as an adjective elsewhere in Mark.¹²

Because of the omission of Mark 16:9–20 from important early manuscripts of Mark and the unique linguistic features of this passage, the general consensus among New Testament scholars is that the writing of Mark the evangelist ends with 16:8.¹³ As Metzger states, “Almost all textual studies and critical commentaries on the Gospel according to Mark agree that the last twelve verses cannot be regarded as Marcan.”¹⁴ In general, literary critics have rejected attempts to explain the ending at 16:8 through speculation concerning the historical circumstances at the time of writing or through reconstructions of a supposedly lost ending.¹⁵ Instead, literary critics have argued that Mark purposefully concluded his narrative in 16:8. They are not alone in this position, since, as Kümmel states, “There is an increasingly strong inclination to the view that 16:8 is the intended ending of Mk.”¹⁶

¹² Other words in 16:9–20 that are used with a unique meaning or function when compared with the rest of Mark’s Gospel include *phainō* (v. 9), *para* (v. 9), *phaneroō* (vv. 12, 14), *oneidizō* (v. 14), *ktisis* (v. 15), *sēmeion* (vv. 17, 20), *glōssa* (v. 17), *kan* (v. 18), *kyrios* (vv. 19, 20).

¹³ Transcriptional probability would also support the ending at 16:8, since a shorter reading would normally be preferred to a longer one. On this point, see Metzger, *Text of the New Testament* 209–210.

¹⁴ Metzger, *Text of the New Testament* 228. There have been isolated objections to this general consensus. The two most well-known works that defend the authenticity of the longer ending of Mark’s Gospel include Farmer, *Last Twelve Verses of Mark*, and J. W. Burgon, *The Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel according to St Mark: Vindicated against Recent Critical Objectors and Established* (London: John Murray, 1883). A critique of Farmer’s position may be found in J. N. Birdsall, review of *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark*, by W. R. Farmer, in *JTS* 26 (1975) 151–160, and in Metzger, *Text of the New Testament* 296–297. For a discussion of Burgon’s place in the history of textual criticism and a critique of the theory and methods of Burgon and his successors, see D. B. Wallace, “The Majority-Text Theory: History, Methods and Critique,” *JETS* 37 (1994) 185–215.

¹⁵ For one example of the view that circumstances led to the interruption of Mark’s writing, so that he was unable to complete his work, see T. Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. M. W. Jacobus; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909) 2:479–480. For one example of an attempt to reproduce the alleged lost ending for Mark’s Gospel, see C. F. D. Moule, “St Mark XVI.8 Once More,” *NTS* 2 (1955) 58–59. The proposal of a missing leaf at the end of Mark’s Gospel necessarily assumes that the original manuscript or early copies were produced in a codex form rather than on a scroll. This assumption is by no means certain given the context of the production of books in the first century AD. For a thorough investigation of the origin and early development of the codex in both Christian and non-Christian circles, see C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983).

¹⁶ W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. H. C. Kee; Nashville: Abingdon, 1975) 100. In a similar manner, J. C. Thomas states that “a growing number of scholars assert that Mark 16:8 is the point at which the author originally intended to end his gospel” (“A Reconsideration of the Ending of Mark,” *JETS* 26 [1983] 415). According to D. A. Carson, D. J. Moo, and L. Morris, the possibility that Mark intended to conclude at 16:8 “is becoming more popular and is perhaps the most likely” (*An Introduction to the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] 103). P. L. Danove states, “Though most scholars today hold that Mark 16:8 is the last authentic verse of the Gospel of Mark, there is considerable debate whether the evangelist actually intended to end the narrative at this point. A minority of scholars maintain that the original ending has been lost and propose various theories to account for the abridgement of the text. A majority accept the present ending as authentic and offer various explanations to account for the

Two main objections have been made against the view that Mark 16:8 serves as the purposeful conclusion to the narrative. First, some argue that a book cannot end with *gar*.¹⁷ P. W. van der Horst answered this objection by pointing to a treatise by Plotinus, which ends with a *gar*.¹⁸ In addition, he offered the commonsense argument that if a sentence can end with *gar*, then a book can end with such a sentence.¹⁹

A second objection is that a suspended, open ending is a modern invention, not found in ancient literature. An abrupt ending would be completely at odds with the requirements of storytelling in the ancient world, which demanded fully developed endings that leave nothing to the imagination.²⁰ However, this objection cannot be sustained. Ancient literature abounds in open endings, with the book of Jonah and the parable of the prodigal son serving as obvious examples.²¹ In addition, Mark uses abrupt endings in his narration of earlier episodes in the Gospel.²² For example, in 6:45–52, Mark narrates the walking of Jesus on the water and the astonishment of the disciples at this miracle. Then Mark concludes the episode with a *gar* clause. “For they did not understand concerning the loaves, but their heart had been hardened” (6:52). The clause serves to explain the reaction of the disciples, but in the process it raises new questions, leaving the narrative open for further reflection. What should the disciples have understood concerning the

abrupt nature of the ending” (*The End of Mark's Story: A Methodological Study* [Biblical Interpretation Series 3; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993] 1). W. R. Telford states, “While a number of scholars would still adhere to the view that the Gospel originally extended beyond 16:8, more and more are coming to the opinion that it was intended to end at 16:8, and that it does so indeed, in literary terms, with dramatic appositeness” (“Introduction: The Gospel of Mark,” *The Interpretation of Mark* [ed. W. R. Telford; 2d ed.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995] 38). On 16:8 as the original ending of Mark's Gospel, see also Aland, “Schluss” 464–465, 469.

¹⁷ See, for example, V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1966) 609; Metzger, *Text of the New Testament* 228; R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 1011. For a similar argument, see B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, “Appendix,” *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1882) 46–47.

¹⁸ P. W. van der Horst, “Can A Book End with GAR? A Note on Mark XVI. 8,” *JTS* 23 (1972) 121–124.

¹⁹ For examples of sentences which end with *gar*, see BAGD 862; C. H. Kraeling, “A Philological Note on Mark 16:8,” *JBL* 44 (1925) 357–358; R. R. Ottley, “*ephobounto gar* Mark xvi 8,” *JTS* 27 (1926) 407–409; M. S. Enslin, “*ephobounto gar*, Mark 16:8,” *JBL* 46 (1927) 62–64; H. J. Cadbury, “Mark 16:8,” *JBL* 46 (1927) 344–345; R. H. Lightfoot, *Locality and Doctrine in the Gospels* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937) 10–15; idem, *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950) 85–86; F. W. Danker, “Menander and the New Testament,” *NTS* 10 (1963–1964) 366. Perhaps the most striking example comes from the LXX translation of Gen 18:15. There Sarah denies that she laughed, and the reason that is given for her denial is “For she was afraid” (*ephobēthē gar*).

²⁰ For a clear statement of this objection, see W. L. Knox, “The Ending of St. Mark's Gospel,” *HTR* 35 (1942) 13–23.

²¹ J. L. Magness surveys ancient Hebrew, Greek and Roman literature to show that many examples of abrupt endings exist in this literature and to demonstrate that ancient writers and readers were certainly sophisticated enough to produce and understand open endings (*Sense and Absence: Structure and Suspension in the Ending of Mark's Gospel* [SBLSS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986]).

²² This point is made in T. E. Boomershine and G. L. Bartholomew, “The Narrative Technique of Mark 16:8,” *JBL* 100 (1981) 213–223.

loaves? How can the disciples have hard hearts like those of Jesus' opponents

(3:5)? Mark is fully capable of concluding a story with unanswered questions, with an abrupt, open ending. Therefore the ending of Mark's Gospel at 16:8 should be regarded, at least initially, as the intended ending, and some exploration should be undertaken to see if this ending provides a meaningful conclusion to the narrative.

II. MARK'S ENDING AS A LITERARY PROBLEM

The abrupt ending of Mark at 16:8 presents the interpreter with a difficult literary problem, since it is necessary to show how the ending functions as an adequate and meaningful conclusion to the narrative as a whole. In dealing with this puzzle, literary critics have proposed five different solutions.

1. *A positive response to the miraculous.* The first view is that the response of the women in Mark 16:8 is not a failure at all but rather a typical, positive reaction to a miraculous event.²³ Mark presents people responding with amazement (1:27; 2:12; 5:42; 7:37) or even with fear (5:15) after a miraculous action by Jesus. The hemorrhaging woman is seized by fear and trembling after her healing when she is called by Jesus (5:33). The disciples also respond to Jesus' power with astonishment and fear (4:41; 6:49–51), so much so that on one occasion Peter was left with nothing appropriate to say (9:6). Such reactions to the miraculous are not unique to Mark's Gospel, but are part of the typical pattern for miracle stories.

According to this view, the silence of the women is not negative, since it was probably only a temporary response. So, for example, according to Magness, "their immediate awe-struck silence may not have been permanent; they may have said 'nothing to anyone' only until, passing soldiers changing the guard and merchants opening their stalls and shoppers heading for the market, they reached the disciples."²⁴ In other words, the women kept silent

²³ For literary critics who take this position, see E. S. Malbon, "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 28 (1983) 43–46; Magness, *Sense and Absence* 87–105; T. Dwyer, "The Motif of Wonder in the Gospel of Mark," *JSN'T* 57 (1995) 56–58. Perhaps the best defense of this view is in D. Catchpole, "The Fearful Silence of the Women at the Tomb: A Study in Markan Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 18 (1977) 3–10. For an early presentation of this view, see Lightfoot, *Locality and Doctrine* 24–48; idem, *Gospel Message* 80–97. See also Stonehouse, *Witness* 104–109. This view is also found in a few commentaries on Mark, including W. L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 591–592; R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium: II. Teil* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1977) 535–536; J. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (EKKNT; Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1978–79) 2:344–345.

in the midst of inappropriate audiences in order to rush to the disciples and give a full report. In Mark 1:44, Jesus commands the healed leper to say nothing to anyone (*mēdeni mēden eipēs*) but instead to show himself to the priest and offer the proper sacrifice. The purpose of this command of Jesus is not to demand absolute, indefinite silence but to encourage the healed man to report quickly his healing to a specified individual. In the same way, Mark's statement in 16:8 that the women said nothing to anyone (*oudenī ouden eipan*) is not an indication of failure to report the message but rather an indication of quick obedience on the part of the women. Indeed, the logic of the narrative seems to confirm that the women passed on the message concerning the resurrected Jesus to the disciples. If the message was not delivered, it would be difficult to explain how Mark's narrative could possibly have been written at all.

The primary stumbling-block for this viewpoint is that it is nearly impossible to interpret the actions and responses of the women in 16:8 as entirely positive.²⁵ Undoubtedly, amazement is a typical and appropriate response to the miraculous. However, the women's trembling and astonishment in 16:8 takes place after the young man at the tomb commanded them not to be amazed.²⁶ Instead of setting aside their amazement, the women increase their level of emotion to trembling and astonishment. The flight (*ephygon*) of the women from the tomb recalls the cowardly desertion of the disciples after the arrest of Jesus in the garden (*ephygon*, 14:50). It is true that the silence of the women may not have been absolute or unending, but, since it comes immediately after the young man's command to go and tell, this silence reads more naturally as an act of fearful disobedience than as an attempt at hurried obedience. Therefore, the silence of the women stands in contrast to the widespread proclamation of the healed leper and others in Mark's Gospel concerning the miraculous power of Jesus.²⁷ In addition, the failure of the women to speak should also be viewed as negative because it arises out of fear. In Mark's Gospel, fear is a negative reaction that often comes from a lack of trust and understanding or an unwillingness to suffer. This ignorant unbelief and resistance to self-denial is especially evident in the fear of the

²⁴ Magness, *Sense and Absence* 100.

²⁵ T. E. Boomershine, "Mark 16:8 and the Apostolic Commission," *JBL* 100 (1981) 227–230; A. T. Lincoln, "The Promise and the Failure: Mark 16:7, 8," *JBL* 108 (1989) 285–287.

²⁶ In the narrative, the young man at the tomb serves as a reliable character and a spokesman for God, since his message to the women confirms the teaching and promises of Jesus. The young man's announcement of the resurrection establishes the reality of an event that Jesus predicted. The young man also restates Jesus' promise in Mark 14:28 that he will meet with the disciples in Galilee after the resurrection. Therefore, the women ought to obey the command of the young man. In addition, Mark seems to use this mention of a young man as a reference to an angelic being or heavenly messenger. Mark may have described an angel as a young man in order to narrate the scene from the perspective of the women. See Pesch, *Markusevangelium: II. Teil* 532. Taylor gives a number of parallels in Jewish and Christian literature in which angels are described in similar terms (*Mark* 606–607).

²⁷ On the relationship between Mark's portrayal of the women at the tomb and his treatment of minor characters in the preceding narrative, see J. F. Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark's Gospel* (JSNTSup 102; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 192–203.

disciples (4:41; 6:50; 9:6, 32; 10:32). So, for example, the fear that the disciples express when Jesus calms the storm is tied to their lack of faith (4:40–41). The religious leaders fear Jesus and want to destroy him (11:18), but their fear of the crowd's response prevents them from acting (11:32; 12:12). The fear of the townspeople at the healing of the Gerasene demoniac is negative because it causes them to beg Jesus to leave their region (5:15–17). The fear and trembling of the hemorrhaging woman (5:33) arises not so much from her miraculous healing but from her need to approach Jesus openly, and she must overcome this fear to obey Jesus. A few verses later, Jesus commands Jairus not to fear but to believe (5:36). Fear stands in contrast to faith. The fearful flight and silence of the women does not seem to be simply a typical reaction to a miraculous event but rather appears to be a surprisingly negative response which stands in need of an explanation.

2. *A disaster for the disciples.* A second viewpoint holds that the disobedient silence of the women in 16:8 actually or, at least, potentially destroys all hope for the restoration of the disciples. Mark's portrayal of the disciples is unusually harsh. According to some interpreters, Mark used the disciples as representatives of his own theological opponents, so that by discrediting the disciples he was also able to argue against the views of his opponents. In this approach, Mark employed his negative presentation of the disciples as a polemic against false teachers. The abrupt ending of Mark's Gospel finalizes the failure of the disciples and, by implication, the opponents of Mark.²⁸ The young man at the tomb gives instructions to the women to go and tell the disciples and Peter about a meeting with Jesus in Galilee. However, the women flee and remain silent. The implication is that this silence is absolute and that the disciples fail to receive the message. Therefore, the disciples never meet with Jesus in Galilee, and Jesus never restores them to a place of faithful service. According to this view, the narrative concludes not with a happy ending for the disciples but with a tragic ending. The silence of the women seals the fate of the disobedient, faithless disciples, and they are never rehabilitated.

The main difficulty with this position is that it conflicts with the promises of Jesus concerning the disciples.²⁹ Many of Jesus' predictions come true in the course of Mark's narrative,³⁰ so that there is no reason to doubt that

²⁸ The view that Mark's ending seals the fate of the disciples is expressed in literary terms in W. H. Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 83–87; idem, "Apostolic Tradition and the Form of the Gospel," *Discipleship in the New Testament* (ed. F. F. Segovia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 39–42. See also W. H. Kelber's earlier treatment of the disciples in his redaction critical study of Mark's eschatology (*The Kingdom in Mark: A New Place and a New Time* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974] 144–147). For other redaction-critical studies that take this position, see especially T. J. Weeden, *Mark—Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 44–51, 117, and also J. Schreiber, "Die Christologie des Markusevangeliums," *ZTK* 58 (1961) 175–179; J. D. Crossan, "Mark and the Relatives of Jesus," *NovT* 15 (1973) 109–110; idem, "Empty Tomb and Absent Lord (Mark 16:1–8)," *The Passion in Mark: Studies on Mark 14–16* (ed. W. H. Kelber; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 149. For a similar view that the end of Mark's Gospel serves as a polemic against the disciples, see J. B. Tyson, "The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark," *JBL* 80 (1961) 268.

Jesus' other predictions will continue to be fulfilled beyond the end of the narrative. Jesus' promises always come true even when others oppose or fail him. Toward the end of an extended passage in which he teaches about the future, about a time of great opposition to the ways and messengers of God, Jesus insists that heaven and earth may pass away, but his words will never pass away (13:31).

Jesus looks ahead to a place of ministry for the disciples in the time after his resurrection. From the beginning of the narrative, his intention for the disciples is that they might serve as his authoritative messengers. He calls disciples, such as Simon and Andrew, to follow him in order that he might make them fishers of men (1:16–18). He appoints twelve followers to serve as his apostles in order that, after they have been with him, he might send them out to preach and to have authority (3:13–19; 6:6–13). Jesus expects the disciples to respond with self-denial (8:34–38) and with lowly service (9:33–35; 10:42–45) for his sake and for the sake of the gospel. During Jesus' ministry, the disciples reflect an incredible blindness toward Jesus' identity and message, but Jesus sees a better response on their part in the future. Jesus predicts that James and John will follow him in the pattern of his death (10:35–40) and that at a future time the disciples will serve as his witnesses and will be persecuted on account of him (13:9–13).

The young man's announcement in Mark 16:7 that Jesus is going before the disciples into Galilee where they will see him points back to a promise made by Jesus earlier in the narrative (14:27–28). The young man himself clarifies that he is referring back to Jesus' words by including in his announcement the phrase "just as he said to you" (16:7). In Mark 14:27–28, Jesus predicts a meeting with his disciples in Galilee after his resurrection, a meeting that stands in contrast to the failure and scattering of the disciples. Therefore, the meeting appears to be a time for the shepherd to gather together his scattered sheep, a time for Jesus to restore his failed disciples. Galilee has been the primary location for the ministry of Jesus and for the mission of the disciples (6:6–13). At this meeting in Galilee, Jesus will regroup and restore his disciples, so that they might fulfill their mission as his apostles. The message of the young man in 16:7 to the disciples and to Peter implies a promise, a promise based on the words of Jesus, that there will be a restoration for the disciples so that they might fulfill their responsibilities as Jesus' messengers between the time of the resurrection and the parousia.³¹ Does the silence of the women at the tomb negate this promise? No, the promise still holds true because it is based on Jesus' words. Mark does not

²⁹ On the idea that the response of the women does not negate the promises of Jesus for the dis-

Mark's Narrative Strategy (1986) (531–59; 311n; 161–21); the desertion of the disciples (12:7), *The Gospel of Peter* (1983) (Philadelphina: Frontiers, 1983) 133–36; leaders *God/like* (10:33), *The Shocking of His Disciples* (1984); *Jesus' Resurrection* (1988) 312; his rebirth (3:11–16); 3F; 292–293; *The Sabbath* (1984) 101–104; interpreting the Disciples in Mark," *Semeia* 62 (1993) 91–92.

³⁰ Jesus predicts the presence of a colt for his entry into Jerusalem (11:2), the rejection by the religious leaders in Jerusalem (8:31), the availability of a room for his celebration of the Passover

narrate how the meeting predicted in 14:28 and 16:7 takes place, but the fact

that it will take place is certain.³² The silence of the women does not destroy all hope for the disciples.³³

The certainty of the disciples' restoration also stands as a difficulty for those who propose that the silence of the women renders the fate of the disciples ambiguous.³⁴ For some interpreters, Mark's abrupt ending leaves the story of the disciples open-ended. The announcement of the young man holds open the possibility of restoration for the disciples, but the silence of the women gives an ambiguous quality to the ending, since the women may have failed to pass on the message of hope to the disciples. According to this view, the narrative ends with both positive and negative possibilities suggested for the disciples. However, the situation of the disciples cannot be viewed as completely open-ended, since Jesus' predictions hold true. There is hope for the disciples. In addition, it would be difficult to imagine a first-century audience for whom the restoration of the disciples following the resurrection would be merely a possibility to be considered.³⁵

3. *An irony to provoke reflection.* The third literary approach argues that the silence of the women in 16:8 is intended to be ironic and thus not to be taken literally by the reader.³⁶ Proponents of this view emphasize the certainty of Jesus' restoration of the disciples as it is hinted at in 16:7, but they tend to overlook or discount the negative response of the women in 16:8. The confusing aspect of Mark's ending derives from the juxtaposition of 16:7 and

³¹ For the contention that the meeting mentioned in 14:28 and 16:7 refers to a resurrection appearance and not to the parousia, see R. H. Stein, "A Short Note on Mark XIV.28 and XVI.7," *NTS* 20 (1974) 445–452.

³² Lincoln, "Mark 16:7, 8" 292.

³³ Also, it is difficult to maintain that Mark sought to completely and finally discredit the disciples, since Mark includes in his narrative positive as well as negative descriptions of the disciples. On this point, see R. C. Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," *JR* 57 (1977) 393–394; idem, "The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," *Semeia* 16 (1979) 82–83, 90; E. S. Malbon, "Disciples/Crowds/Whoever: Markan Characters and Readers," *NovT* 28 (1986) 104–105; idem, "Texts and Contexts" 92–95. For a similar point, see J. Dewey, "Point of View and the Disciples in Mark," *SBLSP* (ed. K. H. Richards; Chico: Scholars Press, 1982) 97–106.

³⁴ Tannehill, "Disciples in Mark" 403–404; idem, "Narrative Christology" 83–84; D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 96–100, 129; M. A. Powell, "Toward a Narrative Critical Understanding of Mark," *Int* 47 (1993) 344–345. R. M. Fowler also emphasizes the opacity and open-ended nature of the final episode in Mark's Gospel (*Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991] 219, 258–259). S. D. Moore notes that the ending of Mark in 16:8 leaves the fate of the disciples ambiguous (*Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992] 24). However, for Moore, the abrupt ending makes the entire narrative indeterminate. The narrative ending undercuts the possibility of the narrative beginning, and the logic of the whole story collapses. The narrative of Mark, like every other narrative, deconstructs itself. See Moore, *Mark and Luke* 4–8.

³⁵ For a similar point, see Lincoln, "Mark 16:7, 8" 291–292.

16:8. Mark creates the expectation of the meeting between the disciples and Jesus through the young man's words in 16:7 and then cancels this expecta-

tion with the silence of the women in 16:8. Those who take this view insist that Mark 16:8 must be interpreted in light of the entire preceding narrative which encourages the reader to anticipate a restoration of the disciples after the resurrection. The meeting predicted in 16:7 will take place, and therefore the narrator cannot mean what he says in 16:8. The reader should not interpret the silence of the women literally but rather should recognize that Mark's final statement is intended to be understood as ironic. The irony of 16:8 forces the reader to stop and reflect again on the meeting predicted by the young man in 16:7, so that the story is completed by projecting what will take place at the meeting between Jesus and his disciples in Galilee.³⁷

There is no doubt that the response of the women in Mark 16:8 is ironic and unexpected. Up until 16:8, Mark has presented the women at the tomb in sympathetic terms, creating an expectation of obedience on the part of the women. These women followed Jesus all the way from Galilee and were in the practice of ministering to him (15:40–41). They were sufficiently loyal to Jesus to follow him all the way to the cross (15:40), to watch where he was buried (15:47), and to seek to anoint him even after his burial (16:1). They responded to the miraculous events at the tomb with understandable amazement (16:5).³⁸ The disobedient silence of the women in 16:8 is unexpected in light of this preceding positive treatment. The women are unlikely failures who fail in an unlikely manner. In the preceding narrative, a number of characters have refused to remain quiet concerning the miraculous power of Jesus, even when they are commanded to be silent (the leper, 1:43–45; onlookers at the healing of the deaf man, 7:36–37; Bartimaeus, 10:48).³⁹ People who have encountered the miraculous events surrounding Jesus' ministry have not been shy about giving a report to others.⁴⁰ In contrast, the women unexpectedly respond with silence and fear even though they are commanded

³⁶ See especially Petersen's article, "When is the End Not the End? Literary Reflections on the Ending of Mark's Narrative." See also N. R. Petersen, "The Reader in the Gospel," *Neot* 18 (1984) 49; idem, *Literary Criticism* 77–78. Kingsbury builds on Petersen's work and presents a similar view (*Christology* 135–137; idem, *Conflict in Mark* 112–115). The emphasis of Danove's study supports a different viewpoint than Petersen's approach, although it is similar in that he refers to the silence of the women in 16:8 as fictional. See Danove, *End of Mark's Story* 191–193, 203.

³⁷ Kingsbury argues that the reader will imagine a reconciliation between Jesus and his disciples, a comprehension on the part of the disciples of the identity of Jesus, and an understanding by the disciples of the nature of true discipleship (*Christology* 136–137; idem, *Conflict in Mark* 113–115).

³⁸ On the initially positive portrayal of these women, see Boomershine, "Apostolic Commission" 231–232; Lincoln, "Mark 16:7, 8" 288. Malbon also points out that the women should not be faulted for their desire to anoint Jesus or for their amazement at his resurrection ("Fallible Followers" 43–44). After all, Jesus predicted his coming resurrection only to the disciples (8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:34; 14:28).

³⁹ The similarity in language between Jesus' command to the leper (*hora mēdeni mēden eipēs*, 1:44) and Mark's description of the women's silence (*oudenī ouden eipan*, 16:8) serves to heighten the irony of the women's disobedience. Some have argued from the similarity in language between 1:44 and 16:8 that the women remained silent in order to produce a swifter obedience, but such a view overlooks the ironic contrasts between the leper's response to Jesus' command and the women's reaction to the young man's command.

to speak. In addition, the women fail at an unlikely time. Nothing is hidden that will not be revealed, and nothing is secret that will not come into the open (4:22). While Jesus maintains a degree of hiddenness about his ministry and identity, he points to a time after the resurrection when the secrecy will be lifted (9:9). The women respond with silence in the period after the resurrection, a time when secrecy is no longer appropriate. The irony of Mark's ending is that the right people, with the right means, at the right time, act in the wrong way.⁴¹

Nevertheless, why would the irony of Mark 16:8 suggest that the narrator does not mean what he says? It is true that the silence of the women in 16:8 does not negate the restoration of the disciples as it seems to be predicted in 16:7. However, to argue that the certainty of the disciples' restoration sets aside the possibility of the women's silence overlooks other potential ways for the narrative to be resolved outside of the immediate obedience of the women. Mark included the disobedient silence of the women, and since he did, it should be accepted and some attempt should be made to account for the function of their failure in the message of the narrative. Mark's purpose for including the silence of the women in 16:8 could not have been only to provoke the reader into reflecting on the predicted meeting between Jesus and his disciples. Otherwise, why would he not simply stop the narrative at 16:7? There must be some function for the inclusion of the disobedience of the women in 16:8 that could not be accomplished more easily just by stopping at 16:7. Some purpose for Mark's ending must be found that does not neglect or negate the failure of the women.

4. *An unstated apostolic commission.* A fourth view treats the ending of Mark as an attempt at reverse psychology by the narrator. Mark uses the failure of the women to shock the reader into realizing that silence is wrong and that the proclamation of the resurrection must go on.⁴² This approach recognizes that the response of the women in 16:8 is negative. In the preceding narrative, Mark portrays these women followers in a positive manner, with perhaps one troubling feature. The women follow Jesus all the way to the cross, but they watch the crucifixion scene at a distance (*makrothen*, 15:40). Shortly before, Peter followed Jesus at a distance (*makrothen*, 14:54) and then denied Jesus three times. Nevertheless, Mark's presentation of the women is favorable overall, and it leads to an anticipation of obedience on their part. This expectation is frustrated by the disobedient silence of the women in 16:8. According to this literary approach, Mark uses the negative response of the women as an implicit appeal for others to succeed where the

⁴⁰ Perhaps the Gerasene demoniac should be added as an example, since Jesus appears to command him to speak only to his household concerning his miraculous deliverance, but the man proclaims his message throughout the Decapolis (5:19–20).

⁴¹ On the irony of 16:8, see Lincoln, "Mark 16:7, 8" 290–291.

⁴² For literary critics who take this view, see Boomershine, "Apostolic Commission" 225–239; Rhoads and Michie, *Mark as Story* 61–62, 140; M. A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 288–299; Danove, *End of Mark's Story* 1, 220–228. A similar view may be found in J. D. Hester, "Dramatic Inconclusion: Irony and the Narrative Rhetoric of the Ending of Mark," *JSNT* 57 (1995) 61–86.

women failed. The disobedience of the women forces the reader to realize that silence is wrong and calls on the reader to respond differently by proclaiming the good news about Jesus and his resurrection in spite of fear. Those who read or hear Mark's Gospel now have the opportunity to take on the role of the perfect disciple. The twelve disciples failed, the women disobeyed, but those who belong to Mark's audience may press on and proclaim the gospel of Jesus. Therefore, in this view, Mark ends his narrative in a similar manner to the other Gospel writers, with the theme of the apostolic commission (Matt 28:18–20; Luke 24:46–49; John 21:15–23). Instead of an explicit command to the apostles by Christ, Mark gives a negative example as a call for a more appropriate response to the command to go and tell.

A significant obstacle for this viewpoint is that it does not account for the specific details of the young man's words in 16:7.⁴³ The instruction of the young man to the women is not a general command to proclaim the resurrection or the gospel, which, if disobeyed by the women, could then be obeyed by the reader. The young man directs the women to talk specifically to the disciples and Peter and to report a message concerning a post-resurrection meeting in Galilee. Given the specifics of Mark 16:7, the reader is logically not in a position to succeed where the women failed. How would the audience of Mark's narrative be able to speak to Peter and the other disciples concerning a meeting which presumably is already a past event?⁴⁴ Another question to ask concerning this viewpoint is "What assurance is there that the reader is better able to succeed where others have failed?" The women at the tomb proved to be failures like the disciples before them. In light of this pattern of defeat, it is difficult to see how the reader would be any less fallible. By emphasizing the negative response of the women in 16:8, those who take this approach tend to neglect the hope of restoration for the disciples implied in the young man's words in 16:7. In this view, the shock that moves the reader to go and tell the gospel is that the message will never get out otherwise because of the silence of the women. This jarring surprise to the reader will only work when there is no continuing expectation for the disciples' restoration, even in the face of the women's failure. However, without the possibility of restoration, there is little hope for any of Jesus' followers, whether they are the disciples, the women at the tomb, or the reader, since all of them have the potential to fail. Without any foundation on which to build or any assurance of forgiveness and restoration, the reader is ill-prepared to be the last and only hope for the proclamation of the gospel to the whole world.

5. *A balance between promise and failure.* The final, and most satisfying, view is that Mark ends his Gospel by juxtaposing a promise for restoration in 16:7 with an example of failure in 16:8. Both themes, those of promise

⁴³ For a similar point, see Lincoln, "Mark 16:7, 8" 297.

⁴⁴ Tolbert attempts to deal with this problem by treating the specifics of 16:7 as metaphors for more general ideas. The reference to Galilee serves as a reminder that the present is a time for the sowing of the good news, an activity which must take place among difficult people like the disciples and Peter and which must continue until the faithful followers see the coming Son of Man (*Sowing the Gospel* 298).

and failure, are important to Mark, and both should receive a balanced treatment by interpreters.⁴⁵ In this view, the words of the young man in 16:7 serve as a promise that failure is not the end for the disciples. Jesus is on his way to Galilee where he will regroup his disciples and prepare them again to serve as his apostles. The command to report this message of hope to the disciples and Peter then leads to the fearful response of the women, a response which, according to this approach, is an act of disobedience. The young man, God's messenger, commanded them to go and tell, but instead they fled and spoke to no one. Nevertheless, the disobedient silence of the women does not set aside the promise implied in the preceding verse. The promise of restoration for the disciples holds true because it is based on the words of Jesus (14:27–28) and because it is necessary in order to account for the post-resurrection ministry of the disciples (10:35–40; 13:9–13). Mark never explains how the silence of the women is overcome, but the fact of the promise's fulfillment is certain. Once again, however, a balance in interpretation is necessary. The certainty of the promise does not diminish the disobedience of the women, which is both real and significant. Fear and disobedience were not simply part of the disciples' condition prior to the resurrection; they are potential hazards during the present time, the time between the resurrection and the parousia. Christian experience according to Mark involves an interplay between divine promise and human failure, and so he appropriately ends his narrative with both an encouragement and a warning.

One problem for this final literary approach is that it sees the narrative as ending on a note of failure. Mark's Gospel, clearly identified as a message of good news (1:1), concludes with something less than a happy ending.⁴⁶ However, such an objection seems to overlook the extent to which Mark emphasizes throughout his Gospel the failure of Jesus' followers, a theme that is especially prominent in Mark's presentation of the disciples. The first hint at a problem comes with the inability of the disciples to understand Jesus' parable of the sower, even though they had received the mystery of the kingdom (4:10–13).⁴⁷ In a series of boat scenes (4:35–41; 6:45–52; 8:14–21), the disciples show a remarkable lack of trust and understanding, so much so that Jesus questions them about their lack of perception and the hardness of their hearts (8:17–18). When Jesus predicts his coming death and resurrection, Peter views the announcement from a human perspective rather than from God's viewpoint (8:32–33). Then after Jesus repeats his prediction, the disciples clamor for places of honor and prestige (9:33–34; 10:35–41). The disciples prepare for their great hour of testing by sleeping in Gethse-

⁴⁵ See especially Lincoln, "Mark 16:7, 8" 283–300. See also D. H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 107–121, although Juel prefers the terms "hope" and "disappointment" to Lincoln's terms "promise" and "failure." The work of J. M. Creed serves as a precursor to Lincoln's view, since it highlights the juxtaposition between the young man's message in 16:7 and the women's silence in 16:8 and seeks to maintain a balance between the two ("The Conclusion of the Gospel according to Saint Mark," *JTS* 31 [1930] 175–180).

⁴⁶ On this point, see Metzger, *Text of the New Testament* 228; Stonehouse, *Witness* 104.

⁴⁷ G. Fay shows that the literary structure of Mark 4:1–34 highlights the failure of the disciples ("Introduction to Incomprehension: The Literary Structure of Mark 4:1–34," *CBQ* 51 [1989] 65–81).

mane (14:32–41). Completely unprepared, they desert their master at his arrest (14:50), and although Peter follows on, he denies that he ever knew Jesus (14:66–72). The last glimpse of the disciples in Mark's Gospel appears in the scene of Peter weeping after his faithlessness (14:72). Given the pervasive narration of the disciples' problems, it is not improbable that Mark would end his Gospel with yet another example of failure on the part of Jesus' followers.

The manner in which interpreters deal with the end of Mark's Gospel is often a reflection of their understanding of the Gospel as a whole. The best approach holds that Mark's Gospel was written to encourage and challenge "fallible followers" of Jesus.⁴⁸ Mark's narrative calls on Jesus' followers to go the way of the cross (8:34), a path of self-denial and humble service (8:34–38; 9:35; 10:42–45). Jesus moves through suffering and death to resurrection, and this movement functions as a paradigm for his followers. Those who are devoted to Jesus must lose their lives for his sake, since only in this way do they gain true life (8:35–37). Mark refuses to gloss over the difficulty of this path, and he repeatedly presents Jesus' followers as looking for an easier way which would bring an easier life with more immediate rewards. However, the refusal to go the way of the cross leads to failure, so that the disciples desert (14:50) and deny Jesus (14:66–72). Mark presents true followers who fail, but he also offers hope, because he shows that Jesus does not give up on them. Jesus is able to restore his disciples, or any of his own who stumble, and to make them fishers of men. Mark ends his Gospel with a fitting message to the fallible followers of Jesus who read his story. There is hope for those who fail, but the path is never easy and the dangers are real.

III. CONCLUSION

Is it necessary to resort to historical conjectures in order to account for the ending of Mark's Gospel? The answer to this question depends on how one evaluates the possible literary options and the suggested historical reconstructions concerning the writing or early circulation of Mark's Gospel. The contention of this article is that the final literary solution is more likely to account for the ending of Mark than speculative suggestions concerning a lost ending or Mark's inability to complete his work. In fact, even the first literary approach that views the response of the women as an appropriate and typical reaction to the miraculous is more acceptable than proposed historical conjectures. The difference between the first and the remaining lit-

⁴⁸ The terminology used here comes from Malbon, "Fallible Followers" 29–48, although it should be noted that Malbon views the fearful silence of the women at the tomb as a positive response. On fallible followers in Mark, see also Malbon, "Disciples/Crowds/Whoever" 123–124.

erary proposals turns on whether the response of the women in 16:8 should be interpreted positively or negatively. A negative understanding, however, fits better with the overall emphasis in Mark's Gospel on the repeated failure of Jesus' followers. Thus, the best solution to the problem of Mark's ending is that Mark concluded his Gospel with a realistic balance between Jesus' ability to restore (16:7) and his followers' potential to fail (16:8).⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I am grateful for the helpful suggestions that I received on this paper from Bryan E. Beyer of Columbia International University, John D. Harvey of Columbia Biblical Seminary, John Christopher Thomas of Church of God School of Theology, and Daniel B. Wallace of Dallas Theological Seminary.