

Tragedy in the Gospel of Mark

Amelinda Berube

Faculty of Religious Studies

McGill University, Montréal

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	1
INTRODUCTION	3
CHAPTER 1: Definitions and method	5
Previous scholarship	5
Problems with the scholarship to date	11
Defining tragedy	18
Exegesis: applying tragedy and comedy to Mark	33
CHAPTER 2: Plot and fear	35
Plot: the imitation of an action	36
Events	36
Organization	37
Mark's organization of events	40
Conflict in Mark	43
Jesus vs. the demonic	43
Jesus vs. the religious authorities	45
Jesus vs. the disciples	49
Mark as "interwoven"	52
Prophecy and fulfillment	53
Repetition and parallelism	55
Intercalation	58
Conclusion - function of an interwoven text	60
Effects of an interwoven text: irony	60
Defining irony	61
Interwoven plot and irony	62
Effects of irony	64
The threat of tragedy and the plot of Mark	65
Refuting tragedy	66
Conclusion	70
CHAPTER 3: Character and pity	71
What is character?	72
Characters in ancient literature	78
Mark's characters	82
The religious authorities	82
Jesus	87
The political authorities	95
The disciples, especially Peter	96
Minor characters - "little people"	107

Comparing characters	113
Conclusion	115
SUMMARY: Effects of tragedy and comedy in Mark	116
CHAPTER 4: Matthew and others reading Mark	118
The Gospel of Matthew	119
Matthew's plot	119
Matthew's characters	124
Mark, Matthew, and tragedy	127
Papias' Interpretation of the Oracles of the Lord	130
Mark as Peter's interpreter	130
Mark as "οὐ...τᾶξει"	131
Conclusion	134

ABSTRACT

Can we read the Gospel of Mark as tragedy? How so? With what limits? With what results? I depart from previous explorations of these questions by rejecting their definition of tragedy as a work faithful to the dramatic conventions described in Aristotle's *Poetics*. I build instead on Aristotle's essential definition of tragedy as a work that inspires fear and pity in an audience. Using a narrative-critical approach, which allows a focus on the effects generated by Mark's plot and characters, I conclude that Mark, while *more* tragic than Matthew, is not clearly tragic or comic: the gospel maintains a careful balance of tragic and comic possibilities, challenging the reader to appropriate the story in her own world and tip the scales towards the comic. The effect of the text, however, is dependant on audience; Matthew's rewriting of and Papias' comments on Mark demonstrate that contemporary readers probably did not perceive Mark as tragic.

Peut-on interpréter l'Évangile selon Marc comme une tragédie? De quelles façons? Avec quelles limites? Quelles en sont les conséquences? Dans cette thèse, je m'écarte des théories déjà établies et réfute la définition de tragédie comme oeuvre fidèle aux conventions dramatique selon la Poétique d'Aristote. Je considère plutôt la définition essentielle d'Aristote établissant une tragédie comme une oeuvre qui inspire les lecteurs

avec des sentiments de peur et de pitié. En utilisant une méthode d'analyse narrative-critique, laquelle se concentre sur les effets générés par l'histoire et les personnages de Marc, je conclus que son Évangile, tant est-il plus tragique que Mathieu, n'est ni tragique ni comique: L'Évangile retient une balance prudente entre ces deux possibilités, tel un défi au lecteur de s'approprier l'histoire dans ses environs et de le regarder d'une façon plutôt comique. Cependant, l'impact du texte varie selon le lecteur; le remaniement de Mathieu et les commentaires de Papias de l'Évangile selon Marc laissent percevoir que le lecteur contemporain n'a pas perçu Marc comme tragique.

INTRODUCTION

Among the more perplexing puzzles of Mark's gospel is its bleakness. The gospel's ending at 16:8,¹ with the flight of the three women from the empty tomb, has elicited centuries of commentary - both from early Christians, who felt compelled to add longer, happier endings to Mark's original², and from modern scholars, who have pored over the gospel to divine what such an ending might mean if deliberate. This ending, however, is only the conclusion of a text that is startling in its pessimism throughout: Jesus, though the beloved Son of God, faces fear and misunderstanding from every quarter throughout the gospel, even from those who should have been closest to him. He dies alone, mocked and tormented, crying out that even God has "forsaken" him. Even when his predicted resurrection is confirmed by the "young man" at the empty tomb, this good news is apparently abandoned to silence and fear, for the women who hear it say nothing to anyone.

Little wonder, then, that literary analyses of the Gospel of Mark have sometimes used the terms *tragedy* or *tragic* in describing it - we hear of the "human tragedy" of Mark (Tolbert), or of Mark's "tragic" theme of the suffering righteous (Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie). Other scholars have gone further than such casual use of these terms: a

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations refer to the Gospel of Mark.

² I follow the majority of scholarship in assuming that Mark's gospel originally ended at 16:8 and that vv. 9-20 are a later addition.

handful of books and articles have experimented with the idea of Mark *as* tragedy in the formal, generic sense of the word. These attempts, however, can claim only mixed success, and they have met with criticism on several fronts: there is widespread objection to the very idea of biblical tragedy, much less its specific application to Mark, and the majority of the scholarship on Mark in this vein suffers from major methodological flaws. This study will endeavor to build on these initial forays and maneuver around their pitfalls by undertaking a more thorough investigation of their provocative questions: can we read Mark as tragedy? How so? How not? With what effects?

To pursue the question of tragedy in Mark, I will proceed as follows: I will attempt in **Chapter 1** to establish some definitions and theoretical underpinnings for my inquiry, since difficulties with these issues have plagued previous tragic readings of Mark. From this starting point we can move on, as I will in **Chapters 2 and 3**, to trace the dynamic between the threat of tragedy and the promise of comedy in the gospel. Finally, in **Chapter 4**, I will contrast the effect of Matthew to that of Mark and explore the ramifications of such early readings of Mark for the present study.

CHAPTER 1: Definitions and method

In order to explore the possibility of tragedy in the Gospel of Mark, I must first establish the terms of my inquiry. What exactly is meant by tragedy? Where, and how, do we look for it? As a preface to these questions, I will trace the arguments of previous scholarship in this vein. I will point out some of the difficulties with the definitions and methods of previous studies, and attempt to navigate around these problems in formulating my own approach to the Gospel as tragic literature.

Previous scholarship

The earliest direct attempt to read Mark as tragedy was that of Ernest W. Burch, whose 1931 article explored the correspondence between Mark's plot and hero and the plot and hero of tragedy as defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Burch argues that Mark, like Aristotle's ideal tragedy, moves through "complication" or "rising action" (the ministry in Galilee) to a moment of recognition and thence through a reversal of fortune and falling action towards the tragic end. Burch identifies Mark's recognition scene as "dual", introduced with Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah at 8:29 and then "intensified" (Burch 350) by the transfiguration in the next chapter.

Burch notes that Jesus' apparent blamelessness presents a problem for an Aristotelian reading, since Aristotle insists that the downfall of such an individual is not tragic but merely "odious" (*Poetics* 1452b35). Burch dismisses this difficulty, however:

“the claim of sinlessness is not made in the Second Gospel...while [Jesus’] genuine humanity is so stressed by Mark that it may be possible to identify even a tragic error” (Burch 353). Burch does not, however, pursue this possibility of tragic error in Jesus. He refers instead to Antigone as an example of a blameless yet tragic character, suggesting that the protagonist’s strength of will - “the ability to make a decision of high moral quality and to hold it in the face of determined opposition” (Burch 354) - is sufficient to produce “dramatic interest”. The resurrection, Burch argues, does not invalidate a tragic reading because it lies outside of the story; to include it would constitute a violation of the plot’s unity, rendering it anticlimactic: “The ‘end’ of the action in Mark is the death and burial of the hero. Events continue to occur, but they belong to other stories” (Burch 355-6).

Roger L. Cox included a tragic reading of the gospels in his 1969 inquiry into Christian tragedy, *Between Earth and Heaven: Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and the Meaning of Christian Tragedy*. He argued that a work could be both tragic in its form and Christian in its ideology and cultural context, contrary to the widespread view that tragedy and Christianity are irreconcilable. Cox does not seek definitive proof of the presence of Christian tragedy; his intent is to create debate by “[reopening] a question that many people...would have us regard as closed” (Cox 25). He includes the gospels with Shakespeare’s plays and Dostoevsky’s novels as examples of tragic Christian works.

Cox, unlike most inquirers into gospel tragedy, discards Aristotle as a pedantic “moralist” whose conventions are guided by a need to “convince himself that the punishment fits the crime” (Cox 19); the doctrine of ἁμαρτία, for instance, assumes

that “in the real world virtue always produces happiness, and evil conduct or error inevitably leads to suffering...the conception still rests on the idea that the hero somehow blunders in a way that a really virtuous man ought to be able to avoid, and he is therefore ‘to blame’ for the suffering which his action causes” (Cox 12-13). Tragedy, Cox argues, is better understood as the dramatization of necessary suffering that results from the hero’s willing, though reluctant, refusal to abdicate identity. The hero’s responsibility for his fate does not necessarily equate with blame. This is the way Cox understands the gospels, as well. Although Jesus expressed reluctance and distress in Gethsemane and at Golgotha, he “had to suffer as the result of a chain of facts: he was put to death because he would not renounce his claim to being the Messiah; and he could not renounce that claim because he actually was the Messiah” (Cox 17). While he bears responsibility for his fate, Jesus is at the same time *blameless*: “it was people’s reaction to Christ which finally determined the catastrophic conclusion - in different circumstances, his behavior would not have led to his crucifixion” (Cox 16).

One consideration of Marcan tragedy with very different conclusions was in Dan O. Via’s *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament*. In the context of a critique of redaction criticism from a structuralist perspective, Via discusses the genre of Mark as “dramatic history”, which “may be tragic or comic” (Via 97). He notes Burch’s insistence on tragedy as a model for Mark despite the happy ending (Via 98), but argues that the gospel “overflows the genre of tragedy” (Via 99). He proposes the term “tragicomedy” to describe Mark as “both comic and serious” (Via 99), “*simultaneously*... both tragic and comic” (Via 99). Via locates these simultaneous

perspectives in the sustained opposition between Jesus and the religious authorities, which results in a situation where “Jesus is threatened but victorious. The new Christian community is sustaining but persecuted” (Via 99): the time is fulfilled, but the old world and its opposition remain.

Gilbert G. Bilezikian’s monograph, *The Liberated Gospel*, was the next work to take up the possibility of tragedy in the Gospel of Mark. He went beyond previous studies in making the claim that Mark was directly and deliberately based on Greek tragedy, insofar as the evangelist “plunder[ed] the rich traditions of this noble art for elements uniquely suitable for the attainment of his objectives” (Bilezikian 21). Bilezikian discusses first century Roman drama and education as a milieu for the gospel’s composition, arguing that Mark may very well have been familiar with the genre and drawn on elements of it in pursuing his rhetorical ends. He is careful to note, though, that the correspondence is not perfect; Mark did not set out to write or imitate a Greek tragedy, but rather drew on it as one influence in creating a new genre.

Bilezikian, like Burch, uses Aristotle as his yardstick for tragedy. His analysis, following the Poetics’ emphasis on action, focuses on the plot of the gospel. He agrees with Burch’s analysis of Mark’s complication-crisis-denouement plot structure. Although he does not take up Burch’s idea of a “dual” recognition scene, he nonetheless agrees that 8:27-30 constitutes a recognition scene in that it marks the beginning of the disciples’ understanding. Asking whether the “two-step” healing of the blind man at Bethsaida is a metaphorical reference to “a similar illumination...taking place within the disciples”, Bilezikian finds that “the confession of Peter, which follows immediately,

warrants an affirmative answer” (Bilezikian 62); this confession, spoken “with the abruptness of fresh discovery”, indicates that “the disciples have begun, in Marcan terminology, to ‘understand’ the supernatural identity of Jesus and the ultimate nature of his mission” (Bilizekian 78).

Bilezikian’s argument concerning Jesus as a tragic character is also similar to Burch’s; he argues that the ἁμαρτία “need not be reprehensible. It may even consist of a moral bent or quality that is turned into a liability for the hero by an exceptional set of circumstances.... The fact that the hamartia is not necessarily a moral flaw has been widely recognized” (Bilezikian 110). Bilezikian further argues that Jesus, despite his low social status as a poor carpenter from Nazareth, is “noble” enough to achieve tragic isolation. He is “‘better than the ordinary man,’ as required of the tragic hero, not only because of His unique relation to God, not only because of His good, benevolent, and compassionate deeds, not only because of the integrity and incisiveness of His teaching, but especially because of His unshakable determination to meet His dire fate and thus accomplish the will of God” (Bilezikian 109). Like Burch, then, Bilezikian attributes Jesus’ downfall to “a driving determination akin to obsession” (Bilezikian 110) instead of some error or wrongdoing on Jesus’ part.

Jerry H. Stone takes a slightly different approach to Mark and tragedy, choosing to focus his study on a comparison between Mark and Oedipus, “with Aristotle’s *Poetics* as an occasional guide” (Stone 55). Stone is less plot-oriented than previous studies, focusing his inquiry more along the thematic line of recognition and failure of recognition. The characters’ failure to recognize one another, according to Stone, is

“close to Aristotle’s understanding of the tragic hero’s ‘error,’ or ‘mistake,’ which leads to his or her downfall, or misfortune” (Stone 57). Stone, unlike previous scholars, refers to the *Nicomachean Ethics* for a definition of ἄμαρτία as “an act done in ignorance of the particulars, such as the failure to recognize the identity of the injured party” (Stone 57). Stone goes on to explain that the disciples fail to fully recognize Jesus as Messiah, despite the “recognition scene” at 8:27-30, and that Jesus, in Gethsemane, displays his failure to recognize himself: “on one level Jesus knows himself as the Christ who must be crucified, but on another conflicting level he does not fully know himself in this role...he had said all along that he must die, yet when the time comes, he does not entirely believe or accept it” (Stone 60). These failures of recognition inspire pity and fear, generate irony, and unify the plot. Stone recognizes, however, that the Gospel of Mark is not a “perfect tragedy; the several strands of material in the author’s final redaction contain too many non-tragic elements for that” (Stone 63). He believes that the redaction history of the gospel offers a way around this problem in that “the knowledge that borrowed and original materials are interwoven in Mark’s gospel helps us to understand how an interpretation of that gospel can be based on one strand of the material even though other strands seem to contradict the selected one” (Stone 57). Like Burch, Stone argues that the resurrection does not refute the tragic thrust of the gospel; even if one “concede[s], which I do not, [Jesus’] ultimate victory...Aristotle never says that the tragic hero’s misfortune must be terminal, nor is the hero’s misfortune always terminal in Greek tragedies.... The recovery from a tragic experience does not necessarily negate the earlier tragedy” (Stone 63).

Stephen H. Smith, in the most recent work on the subject, draws on all these sources for his 1995 article. Like Bilezikian and Burch he seeks to show that Mark is in general agreement with the Aristotelian canons of tragic theory, but Smith draws a further distinction between plot (complication-crisis-denouement) and structure (prologue-episode-exode-parode-stasimon). Also in the footsteps of Bilezikian, Smith argues for the direct dependence of Mark on Greek tragedy and Roman adaptations of the genre. He too locates a recognition scene at 8:27-30, but argues against Burch's "dual" recognition scene on the grounds that "once he has recognized who Jesus is he does not need to do so again...and even then, Peter...seems unable to grasp it" (Smith 217) and alludes briefly to the differences between Mark's scene and that of the typical Greek tragedy.

He explores affinities between the traditional prologue and the role of John the Baptist, between episode and the structure of Mark into "scenes" or "acts", between exodos and the ending of Mark. Like Burch, Smith does not see a happy ending in Mark: "we can maintain the tragic nature of Mark's Gospel without the need to recognise a happy ending. The plain fact is that the epilogue is *not* happy, but mysterious: the overriding mood is one of fear, in the sense of awe. And this is a response which is entirely appropriate to tragic drama" (Smith 223-224).

Problems with the scholarship to date

These studies are provocative in their sensitivity to the tragic effect of Mark's gospel and their defense of such an effect as a legitimate contribution to the *euangelion* and its communication. They provide at least a point of departure for compelling argument against those who repudiate the very concept of biblical or Christian tragedy.

These studies are also convincing in their presentation of tragic drama as an integral part of Mark's literary milieu and thus a form that may have been known by and accessible to the evangelist in composing his gospel.

There are also, however, a number of serious problems with the scholarship to date. While I agree with the emphasis these studies place on the tragic effect and their insistence on its significance for the gospel's message, I believe they have approached its exegesis from the wrong angle - especially in their definition of tragedy and their hermeneutical assumptions. The few studies that are less hampered by such difficulties are either too preoccupied with other issues to take up the question of Marcan tragedy in detail, or else approach the text from the perspective of other disciplines such as literary criticism, and neglect to lay down a hermeneutical framework.

Most of these studies are highly dependent on Aristotle's *Poetics* for their definition of tragedy, even when they are forced to qualify that dependence in the face of an imperfect fit with the gospel material. All of them attempt to pin down Aristotelian devices in Mark such as *περιπέτεια* (reversal of fortune), *ἄμαρτία* and *ἀνάγνωσις* (recognition). A few of these writers acknowledge the danger of imposing such foreign standards on the gospel material by claiming to keep only a generalized use of the *Poetics* as a guide; Stone, for example, claims to use the *Poetics* as an "occasional guide" (Stone 55), and Smith notes that "some of the subtleties behind Aristotle's assessment of the 'ideal' play might be better ascribed to the subtlety of his own thinking" (Smith 210). What are the outlines of such an "occasional" approach? Which conventions are better ascribed to Aristotle's subtlety of thought? It seems a dangerous approach that allows

one to abandon one's guide arbitrarily whenever it produces results that clash with one's hypothesis.

Most of these writers treat *ἁμαρτία*, for example, in a manner that is strikingly cavalier. Aristotle's sense of "flaw" or "error", difficult to attribute to Jesus, is generally adapted so that it can mean simple strong will in the face of opposition and not imply wrongdoing. After all, the argument goes, Aristotle insists that the hero's downfall cannot be because of wickedness, since this would constitute justice and not tragedy (Poetics 1453a15-16). Many modern theorists also take up this line of thought, and as I will explain later, it is one I find compelling in other contexts. Here, however, it seems arbitrary; these scholars do not give full weight to Aristotle's insistence that the hero *not* be morally blameless: the Aristotelian hero's misfortune is far greater than any of his actions deserve, but he does bring about his own downfall through some error or mistake, specifically "the misidentification of a person" (Lattimore 19). Stone is the only one to refer to the *Nicomachean Ethics*' definition for *ἁμαρτία*, but he follows this to the dubious conclusion that Jesus fails to recognize himself. I would argue that dread and suffering are better explanations for Jesus' anguish at Gethsemane and Golgotha than ignorance. Jesus is portrayed as near-infallible by the gospel; he is second in knowledge only to the narrator, and then not by a great margin. It is precisely *because* he recognizes himself as the suffering Messiah, because he knows precisely what lies in store for him, that he experiences such agony in these scenes.

The pursuit of the "recognition scene" is another place where scholars have arbitrarily ignored evidence in order to make a perfect fit with Aristotle. All point to 8:29

as the moment both of recognition and reversal of fortune: Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah, and scholars see the mood progressively darkening from this point and the plot gathering momentum towards the cross. The problem, as surprisingly few point out and as none actually consider, is that Peter's recognition is partial and flawed. He does not understand what Jesus' Messiahship means, as 8:31-33 vividly demonstrates. If anything, this is an ironic *non*-recognition scene. I agree that it constitutes a turning point in Jesus' relationship with the disciples, as I will argue in Chapter 3, but whether it operates in the way Aristotle sets out is a question that has not been adequately explored.

The reliance of these scholars upon Aristotle is thus inconsistent, and it is also somewhat anachronistic. While Mark and his audience may well have been familiar with the *mythoi* of tragedy and had an intuitive sense of what constituted tragedy, it seems much less likely that they would have been familiar with Aristotle's theoretical discussion of the topic. Smith brings up the argument that many, if not most, of the earliest Christians would not have had access to a rigorous Classical education³: "It may be objected that since many members of the Marcan community would have been slaves, there is some doubt as to how well-educated they would have been" (Smith 231n.) He argues that "even the uneducated Christian, who may not have understood the hermeneutic subtleties behind a proper oral presentation of Mark, would surely have perceived its narrative immediacy" (Smith 231n.), but this is precisely my point. If the

³ Indeed, education in late antiquity may not have even been sufficient to supply a pupil with intimate knowledge of the *mythoi* of the Greek tradition, much less finer nuances of specific narratives or composition (Morgan 109). Mark and his readers may have encountered tragedy in performance, but their literate encounters with the texts would have been restricted to "a number of names and tags" (Morgan 118).

hermeneutical framework was not accessible to Mark's audience, why use it as a lens through which to read Mark? This question is particularly troubling given that the *Poetics* does not appear to have been widely read or used in Mark's time: "only a handful of cursory references or allusions to the *Poetics* can be found in the works of late antiquity, and even some of these can hardly be relied upon; certainly few need imply first-hand familiarity" (Halliwell 290). Even if the evangelist was intimately familiar with Greek and Latin drama, it still seems a stretch to assume that he would have deduced the same principles of composition and dramatic devices as a philosopher who preceded him by some five hundred years. In any case, each author is careful to note that Mark is not a "perfect" tragedy (Stone 63), that Mark did not intend to write a Greek tragedy (Bilezikian 21). Given all these considerations, an Aristotelian lens seems inappropriate for a study of Marcan tragedy.

The insistence on an Aristotelian perspective leads these authors to give inadequate weight to some significant - and sometimes non-tragic - aspects of the gospel. Chief among these are the resurrection and the promise of Jesus' reunion with the disciples. While it is true that these events are projected beyond the end of Mark's plot, predictions and foreshadowings of them are prominent throughout the gospel. Even when one of these studies does acknowledge that there are non-tragic elements in Mark that contradict a tragic reading, the study's focus on the tragic elements precludes any discussion of how tragic and non-tragic elements coexist and interact. Even when there is an exclusive focus on the tragic aspects of Mark, important elements of the gospel are chronically under emphasized - partly, I suspect, because they cannot easily be discussed

under the heading of a specific Aristotelian category. The disciples' relationship with Jesus and their spectacular failure to live up to their calling after a promising start, Mark's famous figures of irony, and the role of minor characters are all underplayed in the work to date, mentioned either in passing or not at all. Bilezikian, for instance, lumps irony, foreshadowing, and characterization together in a last chapter that discusses features that do not precisely fit the Aristotelian mould.

This overemphasis on Aristotelian features of the text is also bound up in the other serious problem with these studies, namely the lack of a clearly defined hermeneutical framework. Bilezikian, Stone, and Burch all make passing references to a general hermeneutical context - Burch puts his argument forward as evidence that the gospel is "not intended as a biography of Jesus, but as a portrayal of the meaning and the power of his self-sacrificing ministry" (Burch 358); Bilezikian operates within the context of redaction criticism, and hopes to provide fresh insight for that discipline by arguing that Mark's sources could include ancient tragedy (Bilezikian 139-141); Stone suggests, as we have seen above, that the insights of redaction criticism provide a basis for his literary observations. There is, however, no discussion of where tragedy - especially as defined by Aristotle - fits into this context. Many of these authors seem most concerned to prove that Mark, the real, historical evangelist, could have drawn on Greek or Latin tragedy in composing the gospel. This is certainly an important consideration, but I wonder whether the literary evidence truly bears the weight of such a claim; why do these scholars feel compelled to argue for Mark's direct dependence on the tragedy current in his day? Without more specific and obvious parallels between Mark and extant Greek

and Latin tragedies, such a strong conclusion hardly seems warranted. In addition, even if Mark's historical dependence on the tragedy of his day was proven, it is another question entirely whether Aristotle's *Poetics* was influential in the composition and reception of first century drama. The historical plausibility of Mark as tragedy seems overemphasized; we hear too little of *why* Mark might have chosen such a grim model and what its impact is on the meaning of the gospel, particularly when the arguments all declare that Mark used the model of tragedy as part of his rhetorical strategy for the gospel.

Cox and Via, who do not rely on Aristotle, seem most immune to these complaints, but suffer from inadequacies of their own. Cox takes the same loose approach to ἁμαρτία as other studies, but since he does not claim to rely on Aristotle, his redefinition of the term is less problematic. He does not, however, consider the difficulties involved in applying such a modern theory of tragedy to an ancient text. He also collapses the four gospels into one "gospel story", which distorts the very great differences between the tragic and comic implications of the different gospels; he does not, for example, consider the implications of Mark's startling ending. His tragic reading of the gospels is made briefly, in the context of a larger argument, and is subservient to his analyses of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky. Via, meanwhile, is the only scholar to truly consider that tragic and comic might coexist in the gospel; the purpose of his overarching argument, however, precludes a thorough discussion of these possibilities. He also makes the assumption, rather abruptly, that a text may be classified as either comic or tragic. This assumption is introduced without any clear definition of what is meant by "comedy"

and “tragedy” or any discussion of the hermeneutical issues involved; Via is too busy carving out a place for his argument against the background of redaction criticism to be truly engaged with such questions. Mark is simply an example of the method he wishes to justify.

All in all, I find that if we are to proceed with a focus on a tragic reading, we must find a more consistent, less anachronistic definition of tragedy,⁴ and a hermeneutic that will allow us to avoid the problematic claim of historical dependence on Greek and Latin drama and explore the meaning of the gospel text more fully.

Defining tragedy

I will follow the lead of previous studies and begin with a reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. A careful reading of the *Poetics* will in fact suggest where previous studies have gone astray and point the current inquiry in a more fruitful direction.

What is tragedy according to Aristotle? Tragic readings of Mark have so far relied on his analysis of the six elements of tragedy and the features of the tragic plot. Aristotle’s basic definition of tragedy, however, is “the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its

⁴ Keeping in mind, of course, that our definition must not become tautological. I do not reject Aristotle’s categories because they do not fit with the text of the gospel, nor will I formulate a new definition of tragedy based on the features of the gospel.

catharsis of such emotions” (*Poetics* 1449b24-28).⁵ I would like to draw particular attention to the requirement of “incidents arousing pity and fear”, for it is here, I believe, that we find the true essence of Aristotelian tragedy. Aristotle makes several other references to the “tragic effect” elsewhere, implying that it is truly what makes a tragedy. The tragic effect is the grounds for Aristotle’s preference for plot over and above the other elements: “one may string together a series of characteristic speeches of the utmost finish as regards Diction and Thought, and yet fail to produce *the true tragic effect*; but one will have much better success with a tragedy which, however inferior in these respects, has a Plot, a combination of incidents, in it” (*Poetics* 1450a28-32, *my emphasis*). It is also the grounds for his preference for certain plot devices - he describes them as the best ways of arousing pity and fear. A “complex” plot involving both ἀνάγνωσις and περιπέτεια, for example, is preferable to Aristotle over a “simple” plot containing neither because these devices “will arouse either pity or fear - actions of that nature being what tragedy is assumed to represent” (*Poetics* 1452b1-2). The various moral qualifications of the hero are likewise judged in terms of their ability to provoke

⁵ It may be asked here whether Mark is an action “that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude” (*Poetics* 1450b24-25). A whole, according to Aristotle’s definition, consists of a beginning, middle, and an end, which are all governed by necessity (*Poetics* 1450b26-32). It has been argued that Mark is thoroughly episodic in its design, full of episodes “which [make] no perceptible difference by [their] presence or absence” (*Poetics* 1451a34-35). As I will argue, however, there is a strong sense of necessity in Mark’s plot, and those episodes which do not directly contribute to it are, to use Chatman’s term, “satellites”, whose absence may not “disjoin and dislocate the whole” (*Poetics* 1451a33-34) but which are nonetheless significant *thematically*. Another point where Mark’s “completeness” may be contested is in his abrupt ending, but as Roberts and Magness point out, several Classical tragedies end short of the full “necessary” chain of events.

such a response - Aristotle dismisses a number of possibilities on the grounds that they are “not fear-inspiring or piteous” (*Poetics* 1452b35), that they “[do] not appeal either to the human feeling in us, or to our pity, or to our fears” (*Poetics* 1452b36-1453a1).

I would argue that, while Aristotle may have isolated some conventions that were common to the plays available to him, the vital tragic effect - in that it is an effect *upon an audience* - is not necessarily isolated to these devices, or to Classical Greek literature. Tragedy becomes a matter not of ἀμαρτία and ἀνάγνωσις, but a matter instead of pity and fear - a particular kind of audience response.

If the tragic effect is fear and pity, what is the content of tragedy that it provokes such an effect? Aristotle declares that pity is provoked by the hero’s undeserved misfortune, and that fear is the fear that the reader or spectator might share his fate (*Poetics* 1453a5-6). Modern scholars, in considering the tragic effect, have gone beyond these basic requirements to discuss the kind of story world that such events imply. What does undeserved suffering suggest about the world of tragedy? And what does the tragic world have to do with ours, that we should fear such a fate? What kind of fear does the imitation of such events actually provoke?

Exum believes the heart of tragedy to lie in the sense of the hostility or indifference of a cosmos in which misfortune is inflicted arbitrarily and excessively, without regard for morality or justice. Its main preoccupation is with the relationships between guilt, innocence, and suffering; it is haunted by the question of whether the relationship is just, or if it even exists. Such questions suggest “a vision of fundamental disorder and cosmic unintelligibility” (Exum 6); it is a “showing of the absence of

meaning” (Exum 5) in the events that befall a human being and by extension in the cosmos at large.

The question of the hero’s guilt - what he has done to bring about his misfortune - has been one of the central features of tragedy since Aristotle. Aristotle requires that the hero be responsible for his fate, for the downfall of an innocent man is “not fear-inspiring or piteous but simply odious” (Poetics 1452b35); at the same time, the hero must be innocent to some degree (1453a15-16), or his downfall is not tragedy but justice. Aristotle’s ἀμαρτία - an act done in ignorance of the particulars - is indeed one way of creating such ambiguous guilt. Oedipus bears responsibility for killing his father and marrying his mother - he could have avoided the predicted acts by never marrying, as Exum points out (Exum 10) - but he performed both acts in ignorance, and thus “is not to blame” (Exum 11) for them. Cox accuses Aristotle of moralism and pedantry, arguing that such theory does not even accurately represent the extant Greek tragedies (Cox 13). He and other scholars have gone on to elaborate on the interplay of guilt and innocence that prompts tragic pity and fear, attempting to demonstrate that the hero’s guilt is not necessarily *moral*.

Cox, for example, agrees with Aristotle that tragedy requires the hero to be partly responsible for his own fate, but argues that this responsibility does not necessarily equate with *blame*. Cox describes the tragic situation as the struggle to maintain one’s identity when one faces suffering as the direct and inevitable result of doing so. The hero is thus responsible for his suffering in that he refuses to avoid it, but he has not done anything which would “deserve” such punishment; he actively chooses to take the course of

suffering. It is not, as Jaspers claims, that there is no way to avoid suffering (Jaspers 30-31); the problem is that there is no way to avoid it without the abdication of identity and integrity.⁶ Antigone cannot, for example, allow her brother to go unburied without denying her identity as his sister; Oedipus cannot give up his inquiry without denying his responsibility as king. Such a forced choice - between suffering or surrendering meaningful identity - is the consequence of inhabiting a world where innocence is not a guarantee of immunity to suffering. The individual is hopelessly isolated within such a world, forced to struggle against a hostile or indifferent God and society for his or her own meaning and identity.

Northrop Frye, too, declares that the tragic hero's fate does not depend on his moral status:

If [the tragedy] is causally related to something [the hero] has done, as it generally is, the tragedy is in the inevitability of the consequences of the act, not in its moral significance as an act. ... Aristotle's hamartia or 'flaw,' therefore, is not necessarily wrongdoing, much less moral weakness: it may be simply a matter of being a strong character in an exposed position....usually the place of leadership, in which a character is exceptional and isolated at the same time. (Frye 38)

Frye further suggests that the tragic hero is in the position of the "*pharmakos* or scapegoat.... The *pharmakos* is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes, like the

⁶ This identity need not be recognized by others; it is only important that the character know it and refuse to abdicate it. In later, more individualistic tragedy, of course, this identity need not even be objectively real, so long as the character clings to it - thus King Lear, for example, refuses to give up his identity as king, even though it proves illusory.

mountaineer whose shout brings down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence” (Frye 41). Guilt and innocence, suffering and redemption, and the relationships between all of these are called into unresolved question by tragic events. What kind of a world do we live in, tragedy asks, if such things can happen?

The full emotional force of the “tragic theology”, as Ricoeur calls it, is “inexpressible, unintelligible, and inexplicable” (Exum 5) - how, after all, is one to articulate the threat of meaninglessness? It is “more or less formulated, more or less conscious” (Unamuno 17), and must be *shown*: “Because the tragic work *shows* it to us, we know the impossibility of knowing, the limits of meaning and order” (Exum 5). A tragedy is structured such that the experience of the individual Oedipus or Lear becomes symbolic, showing the irruption of meaninglessness into life as it is experienced. While even the representation of tragedy “is an act that gives meaning, that brings the tragic within our perceptual grasp” (Exum 5), the resolution is only “aesthetic” (Exum 6), for the larger implications of the aesthetic ordering of tragic experience remain. The audience pities the characters, and looks in fear beyond their particular experience to the terrible cosmic hostility that such an experience implies. To contemplate that such a thing could happen - and indeed, could happen to anyone⁷ - is to peer for oneself into the chaos opened up by the problem of undeserved suffering.

⁷ This is not to say that the common man would identify with Oedipus as a peer or think himself in danger of unwittingly killing his father or marrying his mother. The common man would see, however, that Oedipus’ world is his own, and that Oedipus’ world is one in which inevitable misfortune can far outweigh anything one might do to provoke it.

The non-tragic, then, may either take the form of the banal - that which does not carry implications for the world at large - or the comic. Comedy becomes tragedy's opposite: a similarly inarticulate and symbolically represented sense of joy and celebration at the final harmony, justice, and unity of the cosmos and the divinity that governs it. The principal difference between a story that communicates the comic vision and one that expresses the tragic vision is not that comedy does not portray suffering - the heroes of comedy must still undergo any number of trials, many of them perilous or life-threatening - but that comedy ameliorates such suffering in the end. What is lost is restored or compensated for; the just are redeemed; the wicked are punished. Any damage suffered over the course of the hero's trials is not permanent, and leaves no lingering questions or doubts. Comedy ends with an affirmation and celebration of justice, order, and harmony in the cosmos - all is as it should be.

There are a few objections to these definitions to which I would like to respond before continuing. The first of these is that tragedy and comedy are needlessly "loaded" terms, and that they could "easily be replaced by the terms 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic'" (Zakovitch 113-114). It is true that tragedy and comedy bear a substantial amount of literary baggage from their use in Western literature since Aristotle, and we must clearly define which connotations of these terms we take up and which we reject in order to avoid confusion. I believe, however, that enough particularity remains in our definitions to continue to employ the traditional terms. They evoke a certain grandeur of scale - a magnitude - that is absent from simple optimism and pessimism; since what is at stake in tragedy and comedy is nothing less than the moral order of the cosmos, this grand scale

seems appropriate. Tragedy and comedy represent pessimism and optimism about specific large questions about divinity, the world, and the individual's relationship with both.⁸

Another source of opposition, perhaps the most frequently voiced, is dogmatic: there are those who maintain that tragedy in particular is alien not only to the Bible but to the entire Christian world view. To this way of thinking, there can be no Christian tragedy, much less a tragic reading of a gospel; tragedy and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible. Christianity, as the argument goes, solves the tragic problem of evil: sin and guilt are justified by Christ's atoning sacrifice; God has made us worthy of Him, and we are no longer doomed to guilt (Michel 225). The suffering we experience in the meantime is only that, "in the meantime", while we await the parousia and God's final wiping away of all tears.

Cox argues vehemently against this position, accusing it of imposing a rigid and dogmatic theory upon texts and thereby distorting them (Cox xiii-xiv). He also finds it objectionable on theological grounds, arguing that a denial of the tragic force of the gospel story eviscerates Christian faith: it becomes a "facile and unrealistic view of the world" (Cox 3) in which the Christian need not be "disquieted by the words, 'Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple'.... The command 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are

⁸ The problem arises here of whether one can call all comedy optimistic - a work may be bitter and even grim while still evoking laughter. As Whedbee points out, if we are speaking in terms of the tragic or comic "vision", one must question "whether [such a work] still remains in the domain of comedy" (Whedbee 9).

God's'...holds no terror for him, because he somehow assumes that Caesar and God will never make contradictory demands upon him as...political authority and religious imperative did upon Jesus himself" (Cox 3-4). Such a non-tragic reading, Cox declares, "concludes, with smug self-satisfaction, that Christ's sacrifice guarantees the salvation of all 'true believers' without any real suffering on their part" (Cox 4).

For myself, I have two main objections to a dogmatic insistence of the non-tragic nature of Mark's gospel. First, although such insistence resolves the problem of evil theoretically, experientially the problem still remains; the Christian is not immune to doubt, especially in the "limit" situations that ask the difficult questions unresolved in tragedy. Jesus demands that his followers take up his cross, and teaches that "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (9:35); as Cox points out, "no one can surrender his life in this way and remain serenely confident that all is well" (Cox 25). Second, while such a theological position may certainly inform one's interpretation of Mark and render the gospel non-tragic, this position is not necessarily inherent in the gospel, particularly given the conspicuous lack of a definite victory at the end of the plot. Comedy is not necessarily the way all readers - even all Christian readers - must read the text; they may bring different convictions and different experiences to their reading of the text.

The most important question that arises about our definitions is: can we apply these categories to biblical texts without gross anachronism? The authors who advocate such "eclectic and expansive" (Whedbee 6) definitions of tragedy and comedy are sensitive to the potential problem that their definitions, as distinctively modern schema,

may represent alien impositions upon biblical texts. They believe, however, that tragedy is an expression of a fundamental and universal aspect of the human condition. While Greek drama “gave us a rich and nuanced terminology” (Exum 2) with which to express the tragic situation, it was not the only body of literature to articulate such a situation, even if other cultures and other times may not have preserved the same literary conventions or any theoretical analysis of tragedy. It would be anachronistic to seek *ἁμαρτία* in biblical literature, but to seek a “tragic sense of life” is perhaps more legitimate.

I believe that the hermeneutics of narrative criticism are also helpful in approaching this difficulty, for narrative criticism acknowledges that it is in interacting with new audiences and taking on new meaning, not in “repeating significations fixed forever” (Ricoeur 1981, 145), that any text stays alive to the human imagination. Narrative criticism seeks to avoid the pitfalls of pure “source-oriented” and pure “discourse-oriented” approaches to the Bible. The first “addresses itself to the biblical world as it really was...interest focuses on some object behind the text - on a state of affairs or development which operated at the time as a source (material, antecedent, enabling condition) of biblical writing and which biblical writing now reflects in turn” (Sternberg 15). This historical approach fell prey to a number of complaints which have become familiar over the last thirty years as literary criticism gained ascendancy. As summarized by James Barr, these complaints were that

1. Explaining the past of a thing does not explain the thing as it now is;

2. Explaining the past of a thing brings us in no way forward towards the question of truth about that thing;
3. Historical analysis is not an objective science but produces only hypothetical reconstructions of what might have been the case;
4. Far from being scientifically objective, historical analysis may be heavily indebted to ideological factors. (Barr, *Allegory and Historicism*, 106)

Discourse-oriented or “literary” criticism, meanwhile, “sets out to understand not the realities behind the text but the text itself as a pattern of meaning and effect” (Sternberg 15). This approach, too, has come under attack, for if the text is disconnected entirely from historical context, it is set loose from all controls on interpretation - there is no way to distinguish “good” readings of the text from “bad” readings. In addition, the text’s capacity for meaning - much less the transformative religious significance of scripture - is left unaccounted for, and indeed paradoxical; if the text is completely autonomous from historical contexts, how can it be comprehensible at all to historical and contingent human beings?

The problem, as Ricoeur puts it, is

to understand how language keeps mediating between humankind and the world, among human beings themselves, and between the individual human being and her- or himself...this threefold *mediation* of referentiality (humankind and world), of communicability (human being and human being), and of self-understanding (human being and her- or himself) constitutes the major problem of a hermeneutics of poetic texts. (Ricoeur 1983, 241)

Narrative criticism proposes to solve this problem by treating the text above all as a means of communication, which “presupposes a speaker who resorts to certain linguistic and structural tools in order to produce certain effects in the addressee” (Sternberg 9).

The author encodes a message in shared structures of meaning - language, literary structure, and literary convention - and it is by recognizing and interpreting according to this “network of clues” (Sternberg 9) that the reader deciphers the communication of the text.

The meaning of the signs used by the text’s author, however, may change radically across temporal and cultural distances. Narrative criticism acknowledges not only the “rule-governed invention” of the author, but also a similar process on the part of the reader, who must use “a creative operation...in decontextualizing [the meaning of the text] and recontextualizing it in today’s *Sitz-im-Leben*” (Ricoeur 1981, 145). A reading of the text “is never without presuppositions; that is to say, it is always directed by a prior understanding of the thing about which it interrogates the text” (Bultmann, quoted in Ricoeur 1969, 351). Through narrative criticism these presuppositions are affirmed as a legitimate source of meaning instead of a stumbling block to objective science. Meaning is, in the end, an *effect*, an effect upon a real, historical audience; the effect varies with the background and assumptions the audience brings to the text.

I will acknowledge, then, that mine is a twenty-first century reading of Mark - I am a twenty-first century reader, and the modernity of my interpretation is inevitable. I will strive to be limited by literary and historical context in my reading, so as not to wrench the text entirely from its original milieu, but this enterprise is itself a profoundly modern endeavor. We are “in every way children of criticism” (Ricoeur 1969, 350) - it is part of *our* historical context, and we may not be able to think outside its boundaries and approach the text as first century readers did. I will, however, use the generalized,

heuristic nature of my definitions to take a “text-up” approach, as opposed to the “model-down” approach taken by previous studies. My emphasis will be on Mark’s text, the effects it generates, and the meaning it communicates, rather than on the structures and conventions of tragedy as they appear in the surface of Mark’s text. As a control measure, I will also take up the question of actual, contemporary readings of Mark - such as that of Matthew - to show how and why these readers were affected differently. Such a comparison, however, will also make it clear that whether or not Matthew read Mark as tragic, Mark’s gospel is certainly *more* tragic in its effect than Matthew’s.

I will pause here to consider some complaints about narrative criticism. Petri Merenlahti, for one, is alarmed by what she perceives as narrative criticism’s reading of biblical texts as fiction, as art for art’s sake, when these texts in fact make aggressive historical and ideological truth claims. She also follows Räisänen in accusing narrative criticism of an “uncritical admiration” (Räisänen, quoted in Merenlahti 3) of the holy texts that leads them to gloss over imperfections, seams, and conflicting voices in the text in order to see the text as a unified literary masterpiece.

This study’s approach to narrative criticism, at least, does not treat the text as “art for art’s sake” - I agree with Merenlahti that the gospels were meant to communicate the evangelist’s ideology with the utmost urgency, and that the evangelists were less concerned with the aesthetic perfection of the literary surface of their texts than with the rhetorical communication of those texts. I disagree, however, with the assertion that fiction is therefore a category alien to the gospels and their authors; there is more to fiction than “art for art’s sake” or an aesthetic game of “make believe” (Merenlahti 10). I

strongly disagree with the statement that “readers know that they are not supposed to believe that [a literary-fictional] world is true in any ontological sense” (Merenlahti and Hakola 36). Stories certainly *can* exist purely for the sake of telling the story and perhaps entertaining an audience, but I submit that fiction can also be crafted in the interest of communicating ideological messages, and that aesthetic features can be employed *in the service* of communication - the difference between communicative perfection and aesthetic perfection is not as wide as Merenlahti supposes it to be. With respect to the supposed historical truth claims of the gospels, it is difficult to reconcile four very different versions of the historical events, a troubling problem for which many explanations have been offered since the patristic era. Either the evangelists were “rather free in their dependence on historical fact” (Barr 1981, 17), or else they wrote to refute and correct each other’s representation of history based on the different traditions they believed to be referentially true. In the latter case, the problem still emerges in the canon’s inclusion of all four conflicting accounts. Regardless of what the evangelists might have thought about the literal referentiality of the traditions they inherited, the point of representing the events of Jesus’ ministry was not to create a transparently referential record of what “really happened”, but rather to communicate the ideological *significance* of those events; as Ricoeur puts it, “the most striking feature of the Gospels’ narrative lies in the indissociable union of the kerygmatic and the narrative aspects” (Ricoeur 1990, 183). Fictionalized kerygma is by no means a modern concept - midrashic literature makes similarly creative use of historical persons and events, telling sometimes fantastical anecdotes to make a point, and Jesus himself crafts such ideologically

communicative fictions within the gospels - the parables, obviously, are not “literally” true. Even when such creative license is not self-conscious, it is inevitable. Even a narrative committed to detailing literal historical fact must *re-present* its subject in words; it cannot convey events transparently, without the interpretive mediation of the narrative form. As Ricoeur puts it, “narratives offer a remarkable example of the conjunction between fiction and redescription. Narratives, in virtue of their form, are all fictions” (Ricoeur 1981, 145).

The unity of the text, meanwhile, is an important assumption for narrative criticism, for it is this unity that allows “license to seek meaning or reason for any aspect of the story first inside the story itself” (Merenlahti 24). Merenlahti, however, calls this assumption into serious question, alleging that narrative criticism begs the question by both *assuming* the unity of the text *a priori*, and *arguing for* or *discovering* the unity of the text as a result of analysis. She suggests that such a fervent defense of the text’s unity is motivated not by an objective reading of the inherent features of the text, but rather from ideological motivations - namely, from conservative faith, which would prefer to ignore historical-critical insights about seams and imperfections in the text. Narrative criticism, Merenlahti argues, allows the ideologically interested understanding of the text as a perfect literary masterpiece, when indeed standards and criteria for such aesthetic values have changed greatly since the gospels were composed.

I agree that it is fallacious to assume the text’s unity and then claim that one’s findings are “proof” of the text’s composition from “remarkably whole cloth” (Rhoads, quoted in Merenlahti 24). I believe, however, that this circularity may be avoided. To

this end, I will avoid evaluating the gospel of Mark as a work of literature. I do assume the text's unity and artistry, but this is a hermeneutic that Merenlahti does not object to when evaluative claims are absent: "let us...acknowledge the point here. The assumption of unity...opens up new possibilities to argue for interpretations that reveal previously unrecognized patterns of unity in the text" (Merenlahti 24). I will leave the proof of such features, and an evaluation of the gospel's literary merits, to others.

Exegesis: applying tragedy and comedy to Mark

I have said that tragedy and comedy, by structuring specific events that happen to specific people, effect in their audiences either doubt or affirmation of the justice and order governing the cosmos. I have also argued that the gospels are similarly fictive narratives which seek to communicate meaning, but that this meaning is located not only in the author's historically determined composition but also in the audience's historically determined interpretation. Based on these arguments, I will now ask: what do Mark's specific events and specific people communicate? Do they effect fear and pity in their audience or joy and celebration?

In order to investigate this question, I will explore the effect of Mark's plot and characters in the following two chapters. Each of these chapters will begin with some remarks about how each aspect of the narrative functions to generate meaning, and then go on to the features of Mark's text. The final chapter will bring forward some readings of Mark that were more contemporary with the evangelist, and show how these contemporary readers were affected differently. This comparison is central to my

argument as an acknowledgment that the tragic or comic effect of a text is relative in that it depends on audience.

CHAPTER 2: Plot and fear

Mark's is perhaps the most "action-packed" gospel, favouring Jesus' acts over his teachings, declaring that event follows "immediately" upon event. Jesus speaks in parables, but the disciples are also repeatedly called to understand his *actions*: his healings, exorcisms, and miracles. Not only must the disciples have ears to hear, they must also have eyes to see.

Just as individual actions communicate meaning between characters in Mark, so too does the "action" as a whole communicate to the reader, revealing its meaning indirectly and symbolically. What kind of significance does the evangelist lend the action by arranging it the way he does? Are we invited to see discordance, *pathos*, and tragedy, or harmony, laughter, and comedy in the events surrounding the ministry, passion, and death of Jesus Christ, Son of God?

In order to explore this question, I will turn first to the mechanics of plot. What is plot? How is it constructed, and how does it reveal meaning? And given the structure of plot in general, how is the Marcan plot constructed? While there are many theories about the principles behind Mark's organization of events, I will explore two that I think are particularly helpful: the presence and escalation of conflict, and the model of Mark's plot as an "interwoven tapestry" instead of a straight line. I will argue that these two features

of the plot, when combined, generate *phobos* in the audience by impressing upon them that the outcome of the story is at once inevitable and terribly, perversely contrary to all expectation. We will also see, however, that the same devices that create inevitability and irony work to create room for hope, faith, and affirmation that stand in tension with the tragic effect of fear.

Plot: the imitation of an action

Plot seems a simple enough concept, but exploring it will yield some important insights about the meaning and communication of narrative in general, insights that have some ramifications for my approach. Aristotle defines plot as “a combination of incidents” (*Poetics* 1450a32); Ricoeur, likewise, identifies plot as “the organization of the events” (Ricoeur 1984, ix). What are the implications of such organization, and what is the nature of the events being manipulated?

Events

What exactly is the object of plot? Funk labels the “chain of events, real, legendary or fictive” (Funk 44) to which plot refers as its source as the *story*. Thus all four gospels, for instance, tell the “story” of Jesus Christ crucified and risen, despite the often dramatic differences between their plots.

About this story, to explain its relationship to plot, we may say that:

1. It is fundamentally temporal, involving a succession of events in a chronological order. The experience of events, in both immediacy and memory, is not formless “white noise”; it is at least structured by time into an “incipient narrative” (Crites), with a clear

sense of before and after. Story moves through time. Jesus, for instance, must have died before being resurrected.

2. It is continuous, its events linked by a continuity of participants and settings. As Funk points out, there may well be a story in E.M. Forster's statements "the king died. The queen died" but only if the king and queen knew each other, or if their lives were somehow related.

3. Story is in a sense ineffable, inchoate, "mute" (Ricoeur 1984, xi) in that it is impossible to convey transparently or exhaustively. The details to illuminate and events to dramatize are infinite, whether the story is remembered from life or imagined. One could speak or write forever and not have told everything there is to tell. Even if one could exhaustively describe one moment, the flow of events extends into the past and the future, "a ceaseless stream that rises in some primeval mountain and flows into a mythic sea" (Funk 48). To take Jesus' story as our example once again, his story reaches back into the history of Israel and forward into the history of the Church. Even if we could narrate his life in exhaustive detail, more of the story would remain. Thus one story - such as that of Jesus - may inspire "an unlimited number of sets of narrative statements...each set of which might differ slightly or greatly from all the other versions" (Funk 43).

Organization

Plot, then, *imitates* a story - it is both like and unlike its referent: like in that it suggests a temporal sequence of events by virtue of its (necessarily linear) narrative

form,⁹ and unlike in that those events must be selected and arranged by the author in such a way as to stand for the whole, including what is left untold. For instance, what is the narrative to do with events which occur simultaneously? They cannot be represented simultaneously; the narrative form forces the story into a before-and-after sequence, even on the level of the sentence. There are, however, several ways of *organizing* these simultaneous events into a narrative that, while linear, *imitates* simultaneity by such tricks of discourse as cutting back and forth between two scenes or events. It may also present events out of their chronological sequence while still *imitating* sequence - the “flashback”, for example, distorts the sequence of events while still suggesting the proper chronological order to the reader.

Plot is thus both like and unlike story/action. Ricoeur clarifies the implications of this relationship by noting that emplotment approaches metaphor. Ricoeur describes emplotment as a process of “rule-governed...invention” (Ricoeur 1981, 144) which “‘grasps together’ and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole” (Ricoeur 1984, x). Metaphor, meanwhile, brings an incongruous or “odd” predication to new appropriateness, “to inaugurate...similarity by bringing together terms that at first seem ‘distant’, then suddenly ‘close’” (ibid.) Like metaphor, plot assembles disparate elements to allow new meaning to arise from a

⁹ Although the linear form of Mark’s narrative suggests a before and after relationship between pericopes, since the reader reads of one event *after* another, this linear temporal relationship is not always necessary - the arrangement sometimes seems arbitrary, with no particular necessity governing the order of events (as I will discuss below). This does not, however, change the narrative *effect* of before-and-after.

particular organization of events, “redescrib[ing] a reality inaccessible to direct description” (Ricoeur 1984, xi).

It is in this *meaning* that plot is referential; as I have discussed, narrative is written not simply to report events as they happened or were imagined, but in order to communicate the *significance* of those events. It is this meaning, in the end, that is the principle for the organization of events, determining what is represented and what is left unsaid. There is much in Auerbach’s passing comment that the author of the *aqedah* illuminates only what is necessary “for the *purpose of the narrative*” (Auerbach 11, *my emphasis*); the meaning of the story serves as a filter for what is important in the stream of events. It is this same selective representation that creates the illusion of the Aristotelian *mythos*, the “complete action”: “It is only in virtue of poetic composition that something counts as a beginning, middle, or end. What defines the beginning is not the absence of some antecedent but the absence of necessity in the succession” (Ricoeur 1984, 38). The “complete” plot is “not [a feature] of some real action but the *effects* of the ordering of the poem” (Ricoeur 1984, 39, *my emphasis*).

According to Ricoeur, this forging of meaning from disparate elements occurs on three levels. Action/story is first *pre-figured*, in that the author interprets experienced events or fabricates imaginary events through the filter of a certain cultural conceptual network, which structures experience into relationships - event, cause, goal. Second, events are *configured* or encoded in the plot, which holds its disparate elements in “concordant disconcordance” with each other and with the plot as a whole. Finally, events are *re-figured* in the reader’s encounter with the plot, for the reader must employ

the same rule-governed invention to decipher and apply the plot, to recognize it as imitative of experience and to hear the new congruence between the events as organized. As Ricoeur notes, a written work is riddled with “holes, lacunae, zones of indetermination” (Ricoeur 1984, 77) which the *reader* must bridge with inference and interpretation. The relationships between events - beginning and end, necessity, causality, and finally *meaning* - are *effects*, perhaps suggested by the text but in the end located in the audience.

Mark's organization of events

I will thus treat Mark's *plot* as an inevitably fictive and creative structuring and editing of the more abstract *story* of Jesus, an arrangement of events that was made in the interest of communicating their meaning. How, then, does the evangelist organize the story of Jesus Christ? To what effect?

It has been remarked several times that while scholarly outlines of Mark abound, and there are many attempts to divide Mark into “acts” or thematically significant segments, there is little consensus between them on how many of these boundaries should be drawn and where (Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher*, 19). Likening Mark's structure to a “figure in a carpet”, Fowler remarks that “many have sought the figure of Mark's carpet, and no one has ever failed to find it. That no two versions of the figure are ever identical simply makes critics try harder” (Fowler 149-150). Beck and Malbon both present similar assessments of the endeavor to find a Marcan outline: Beck states that “the only undisputed segments in the Gospel are the individual episodes” (Beck 41), while Malbon argues that “no one overall ‘outline’ of Mark can do justice to its overlapping narrative

patterns” (Malbon 1993, 214n.). Dewey, surveying outlines of Mark, finds “some agreement” on where distinct sections can be demarcated - she finds broad consensus among seventeen outlines on the presence of a beginning or prologue, a middle section, and the passion narrative (Dewey 1991, 221) - but concludes that “overall, the degree of consensus is not impressive” (Dewey 1991, 222) and that “the fact that scholars cannot agree on Mark’s outline is itself a strong argument against such a structure. We can agree on the five speeches in Matthew or the geographic spread of Christianity in Acts, but not on Mark” (Dewey 1991, 224).

Fowler, Beck, Malbon, and Dewey all express doubt that an “outline” of Mark is appropriate. They do, however, take up a number of common insights into Mark’s plot as elements of or presuppositions for an alternate structure:

* *The episodic nature of Mark’s plot.* Mark’s gospel consists of pericopes which are not always obvious in their relationship to one another. The plot seems to progress simply by means of “and then...and then...” with little or no obvious causal necessity driving it from one event to the next (Beck 40-41). Such additive structure (parataxis) does not, however, preclude dramatic development or even an overarching direction to the plot. An episodic plot simply has wider “zones of indetermination” (Ricoeur 1984, 77) than usual; it is a difference of degree, not of kind. The reader of an episodic narrative must take a more active role in following the plot, inferring causal relationships from the juxtaposition of events:

In episodic narrative the discrete episodes...receive their coherence only in the act of reading. The narrative invites us to tie together its disparate pieces ourselves.... Although the story may be

episodic and disjointed, in our experience of the narrator's discourse we organize the episodic story by construing associations between its discrete pieces. (Fowler 150)

* *A tendency for repetitive or parallel events to occur in groups of two or three.* Frans Neiryneck's influential study of "duality" in Mark pointed out that Mark's repetitions of verbs, phrases, and episodes was not a case of redundancy but rather of thematic elaboration. Vernon Robbins adds to this that there are also groups of three in Mark - groups of parallel events or progressions of events.

* *That Mark often uses intercalations, inserting one episode into the middle of another.* Scholars do not entirely agree on the extent of this phenomenon, but its existence has been widely recognized "for more than sixty years" (Shepherd 522). Intercalations occur when the evangelist interrupts one episode to narrate another, continuing with the interrupted episode afterwards.

* *That Mark did originally end at 16:8, but that this ending is startling, abrupt, and enigmatic.* The significance of the ending has been debated for centuries, and interpretations of it abound; the ongoing debate attests to the puzzling depths of this problem and its demand for explanation (Magness 4-14).

I will argue that the principal effects of these features of Mark's plot are (1) the heightening of conflicts between the characters and (2) as Fowler, Malbon, and Dewey contest, the creation of a structure of foreshadowing and echo, "an interwoven tapestry or fugue made up of multiple overlapping structures and sequences" (Dewey 1991, 224). These in turn create a sense of the inevitability of the disciples' desertion, the crucifixion, and the women's flight from the empty tomb. That the plot marches so relentlessly

toward so perverse and terrible an ending is, as I will show, strongly suggestive of a tragic perspective as I have defined it.

Conflict in Mark

Conflict in narrative occurs when there is active opposition between characters, groups, or forces within the story. At least one party acts to impede the progress of another towards their goal, and it is the struggle between protagonist and antagonist that structures the plot into rising action, crisis, and falling action or denouement (Beck 43-44). Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie identify several conflicts at work in Mark's narrative: "Jesus...battles the unclean spirits [conflict with the supernatural]; overcomes threatening forces of nature; confronts the Judean and Gentile authorities [conflict with society]; struggles with the disciples [conflict with other individuals]; and agonizes within himself about his death" (Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie 77).¹⁰ They then narrow their analysis to three main strands of conflict: Jesus vs. demons, illness, and nature; Jesus vs. authorities; Jesus vs. disciples (ibid.).

Jesus vs. the demonic

Rhoads and Michie dismiss the first of these conflicts as already decided at the beginning of the Gospel, with Jesus' triumph over Satan's temptations in the wilderness. This victory is not narrated, but we are told that he was tempted (1:13), and Rhoads,

¹⁰ Although Jesus' internal struggle is made clear in his prayers at Gethsemane (14:35-36) and perhaps, more obliquely, in his cry of dereliction on the cross (15:34), this conflict is not apparent anywhere else; even in these two instances, Jesus' struggle is left largely unarticulated - we hear only enough to know that it is taking place. I disagree with Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie's classification of this as a "primary conflict" (77) - it is startling and important, but nowhere near as pervasive as conflicts occurring between the characters.

Dewey, and Michie argue that he has bound Satan, the “strong man” of the parable at 3:25-27, and is engaged in a mission to plunder his house. While I find Rhoads’, Dewey’s, and Michie’s interpretation of the parable intriguing, I cannot agree with them that this is a minor conflict. Jesus’ conflict with the demonic is subtle compared to those involving the authorities and the disciples, but it in fact undergirds and encompasses them: all opposition to Jesus is indirectly demonic.

The repeated exorcisms of “unclean spirits” are one indication of this ongoing conflict. Jesus has enough authority to triumph over these opponents easily, it is true, but the world nonetheless seems to suffer from a plague of demons, sometimes in “legion” (5:9). Even if we accept Rhoads’, Dewey’s, and Michie’s interpretation of the strong man parable, their dismissal of this conflict ignores the fact that the mission represented by the plundering of the strong man’s house ends in disaster and apparent defeat. The forces that seem to overwhelm Jesus in the end are themselves characterized as demonic: the religious authorities, according to Tolbert’s convincing interpretation of Jesus’ parable, oppose Jesus because they have the word “taken away” from them by Satan (4:15); the demonic nature of the political authorities is hinted at by the demon that names itself with a Roman military term (5:9); Jesus calls Peter “Satan” in a stern rebuke (8:33), characterizing the opposition of the disciples as demonic. While the demonic is not as clearly implicated in the Passion as it could be - we are not told, for instance, that Judas betrayed Jesus because he was possessed - it is subtly and suggestively present throughout the gospel. The world appears to be in the grip of demonic power (it is, after

all, characterized metaphorically as Satan's house), and it is the demonic, in fact, which Jesus struggles against in other conflicts, however indirectly.

*Jesus vs. the religious authorities*¹¹

Beck explains conflict as an *agon*, a contest between equals, a "dialogue of actions" consisting of challenge and response. The pattern of the *agon* demands that one side or the other must prevail once the challenge is issued: "the game cannot simply be refused. According to the rules, that response would be counted as losing" (Beck 7). The volleys of challenges and responses continue, the stakes escalate, and the conflict heightens until one side either admits defeat or is crushed into silence.

Several narrative critics - Smith, Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, and Kingsbury, for example - see a clear intensification of the conflict between Jesus and the authorities. It begins with scribes "questioning in their hearts" (2:6) and develops into indirect questions - the pharisees ask Jesus why his disciples do not fast (2:18) - and eventually into open, direct challenges to Jesus' authority ("By what authority are you doing these things?" (11:28)). Jesus' responses, correspondingly, develop from apparently straightforward

¹¹ The political authorities - Herod and Pilate - make only brief appearances, and do not establish sustained exchanges of action and response. They are, however, an important source of opposition to Jesus' mission. Herod's identification of Jesus as John the Baptist resurrected (6:16) and the story of Herod's execution of John (6:17-29) make it clear that Jesus may well be threatened by political authority, just as John was. Even before such a threat becomes apparent, Jesus makes it clear that he is in radical opposition with the political authorities by characterizing them as "tyrants" who "lord it over" (10:42) their subjects and stand in stark contrast with his own ideal of servanthood: "but it is not to be so among you" (10:43). Pilate, although he recognizes that the religious authorities persecute Jesus out of "jealousy" (15:10), hands Jesus over to be crucified (15:15). I will further discuss the nature of this opposition in my discussion of the political authorities as characters, which will follow in chapter 3.

answers (“I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (2:17)) to scathing condemnation (“Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites” (7:6); “you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God” (12: 24)).

Chapters 2-3 and chapters 10-12 contain particularly intense volleys of challenge and response between Jesus and the authorities. As noted above, the scribes initially only question in their hearts at 2:6, but Jesus, perceiving it, challenges them (“why do you question thus in your hearts?”) and responds with a spectacular healing. The scribes then ask his disciples why he eats with tax collectors and sinners (2:16). Their next questions are addressed to Jesus directly, but concern the behavior of the disciples (why they do not fast (2:18) and why they do “what is not lawful on the sabbath” (2:24)). By 3:2 they are angry enough that they are actively looking for an opportunity to “accuse” Jesus, and correspondingly, Jesus is now angry as well: “he looked around at them in anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart” (3:5) In the next confrontation, the scribes have an open accusation to bring against Jesus - that he has Beelzebul (3:22) - and Jesus in turn suggests that they have committed an unforgivable sin (3:28).

There are other confrontations between Jesus and the authorities between chapters 7 and 10; Jesus’ vehement denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites is particularly striking. Chapter 10, however, marks the beginning of another more extended exchange between Jesus and his opponents, beginning with the Pharisees again “testing” him with questions at 10:2. Jesus overturns tables and drives out “those who were selling and those who were buying” in the temple (11:15-16) - an action which, as

Beck notes, is deliberate and premeditated act of provocation rather than a case of Jesus spontaneously losing his temper:

...the text portrays [Jesus'] actions as very deliberate. Having entered the temple on his arrival (11:10), he retires to the house in Bethany where he would stay during his time in Jerusalem, and he returns to the city on the next day (11:11) to carry out his action. It is presented as a carefully conceived act of disruption. (Beck 58)

The chief priests, once again, want to kill him (11:18). They also now challenge Jesus' authority directly: "by what authority do you do these things?" (11:27). Jesus responds to this question with a question of his own: "did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" (11:30). Jesus thus undermines the authority of the opponents, who are trapped into admitting they do not know (11:32-33). Jesus then proceeds to tell a parable "against them", suggesting that it is them who will be destroyed: "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others" (12:9-10). The authorities are only prevented from arresting him by their fear of the crowd (12:12).

It is also very clear that this conflict culminates directly in Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Responsibility for Jesus' fate is placed squarely with the Judean authorities, who are conspiring to "destroy" Jesus as early as 3:6 as a direct result of Jesus' confrontational healings and teachings. They continue to seek ways to trap and accuse him throughout the narrative. Mark makes their antagonistic influence especially clear in the Passion narrative, when "a crowd with swords and clubs" arrives "from the chief priests, the scribes and the elders" (14:43) to arrest Jesus. These same authorities seek witnesses against him (14:55), accuse him before Pilate (15:3), and finally stir up the

crowd against him (15:11). From the *agon* between Jesus and the authorities, then, it appears that the authorities emerge victorious.

I will not follow these critics in attempting to pin down a specific “crisis” or point of no return, after which events follow in “numb inevitability” (Beck 44) - this strikes me as another elusive figure in Mark’s carpet. I am also unsure that Beck’s “rising and falling action” paradigm describes Mark very accurately - the conflict does intensify, but in an episodic and cumulative manner as opposed to one of smoothly progressive causality. One confrontation does not lead straightforwardly into the next; even the incidents in chapters 10-12 are interspersed with other brief episodes, not presented in a continuous arc. The continuity of the participants, however, and thematic elements such as authority or destruction, suggest that we may connect these incidents into one narrative thread, albeit one that is woven together with others.

Mark has created a certain inevitability in creating an agonistic conflict between Jesus and the authorities. After the authorities conspire to “destroy” Jesus, the reader understands that even when apparently left speechless and defeated at the end of a $\chi\rho\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$ -like exchange, these enemies will not admit to a humiliating defeat at the hands of a clever miracle-worker. They will be back, more determined to win, for another round. As Jesus continues to confront and provoke the authorities, the reader also comes to understand that he, too, is determined to pursue the conflict to the bitter end. That a grim outcome threatens, however, does not translate into the inevitability of that grim outcome. In a different text, such a conflict might have been an unthreatening opportunity for the protagonist to “score” repeatedly on his hapless opponents, or else the

setup for a dramatic victory at the climax of the story.¹² Combined with other conflicts and plot devices, however, the conflict between Jesus and the authorities does take on the inevitability it lacks on its own.

Jesus vs. the disciples

This conflict does not follow the same overtly agonistic pattern as the conflict between Jesus and the authorities. Beck, for one, identifies it as a subplot. Despite Jesus' identification of Peter with demonic opposition at 8:33, the disciples, for the most part, *want* to help Jesus; they do not abandon him by premeditated design. Nonetheless, they misunderstand him repeatedly, and Jesus' exasperated responses make it evident that they are at odds with his objectives. Because this subplot intersects with the primary conflict described above, the disciples' thickheadedness is implicated as a contributor to Jesus' fate.

While it is not directly agonistic, this conflict does escalate - the error of the disciples becomes more grievous as they *continue*, again and again, to misunderstand even as the stakes are raised to life-and-death. They do not understand the parables (4:13); they do not understand the import of Jesus' calming the sea, and ask "who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (4:41); they respond with similar amazement to Jesus' walking on the sea, "for they did not understand about the loaves, for their hearts were hardened" (4:51); they do not understand Jesus' teaching about purity and defilement any more than the Pharisees and the scribes ("do you also fail to

¹² Of course, Jesus' resurrection is considered by some to be just such a spectacular final victory. I will discuss this issue further below, but I think other conflicts in the story prevent this from being the case.

understand?” (7:18)). When they misunderstand Jesus’ parable about the “yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod” (8:15) as referring to their lack of bread (8:16), they also show that they have misunderstood not only the first but also the second miraculous feeding of multitudes, prompting an exasperated outburst from Jesus: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?” (8:17-18).

We can imagine that the disciples might learn from their many mistakes and eventually come to understand. Peter’s confession at 8:29 would have made a perfect hinge for such a development. Instead, when Jesus predicts the Passion for the first time, Peter immediately slips back into misunderstanding, earning the sharpest rebuke yet from Jesus: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (8:33). This episode, then, does in fact constitute a turning point in this conflict, as previous tragic readings of Mark have maintained, for it becomes clear to the reader after this point that the disciples will continue to misunderstand: even after God himself tells the disciples to listen to Jesus at 9:7, the next two Passion predictions fall on similarly deaf ears - the disciples “did not understand what [Jesus] was saying and were afraid to ask him” (9:32), and act after both occasions as if they haven’t even heard, obsessing instead over their own stature and glory (9:34, 10:37). These misunderstandings persist even as Jesus makes it clear what is at stake, warning them that one must “take up his cross” (8:34) in order to follow him, and that one must lose one’s life in order to save it (8:35).

The disciples' obtuseness and lack of faith are also directly responsible for the outcome of the story - it is one of the twelve who betrays Jesus to the authorities, and despite their protests of loyalty, the rest of the disciples abandon and deny him. Given the persistent failure of the disciples over the course of the narrative, the flight and silence of Jesus' female followers at 16:8 is a bitterly consistent ending.

This conflict, unlike the previous one, gradually gathers a sense of inevitability as the weight of the disciples' misunderstanding accumulates. This is less a sense that events are leading somewhere in a causal chain than that the reader, based on the disciples' previous performance, comes to *expect* them to misunderstand and fail, particularly after the brevity of Peter's moment of insight. It also lends a degree of inevitability to the outcome of the conflict between Jesus and the authorities - how can Jesus succeed when everyone is against him, even his followers?

I pause here to consider Dewey's refutation of conflict development in Mark. She argues that to see an intensifying conflict is to artificially impose standards of modern, written literature on a text that was composed with oral delivery and aural reception in mind - Mark "makes no attempt at climactic linear development" (Dewey 1989, 37). She claims that the "conflict" between Jesus and the authorities, for instance, would have already reached its peak at 3:6 with the conspiracy of the authorities to destroy Jesus, and is brought up only unevenly through the remainder of the gospel (Dewey 1989, 37-38). I agree that these conflicts alone are not enough to drive Mark's plot, particularly given its episodic, paratactic structure. Finding a straightforward, rising-and-falling, causally related dramatic development in such a plot is indeed more a creative operation of the

modern reader who is accustomed to such conventions. I believe, however, that the presence and persistence of these conflicts do constitute their intensification, but perhaps in a different way from what the modern reader of written texts might expect. Despite the alleged unevenness of Mark's conflict development, the effect of the plot is hardly one of directionless meandering with an accidental outcome; both the authorities and the disciples are clearly implicated in the Passion. In order to achieve this implication, conflict in Mark must work together with - and is perhaps subordinate to - other devices that structure the narrative and guide reader expectation.

Mark as "interwoven"

We have said that Mark does not develop conflict in the straightforward manner we are accustomed to from modern narrative. Nevertheless, the text is organized in such a way as to produce fearful suspense in the reader as the inevitable outcome of the conflicts becomes clear. The key to this organization lies in the non-linear connections it forges between events.

Joanna Dewey (1991) and Elizabeth Malbon (1993) have noted that an "interwoven" model is better than a "linear" model for Mark's structure. Mark consists less of "acts", as scholars have for so long tried to divide it, than of interlocking sets of figures created by devices that point the reader's attention both forward and backward, foreshadowing things yet to come and echoing what has gone before. Vernon Robbins anticipated this thesis by arguing that Mark's three-step progressions marked an outline in Mark (Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher*, 26-27), but this is far from the only device that structures and develops the gospel's plot. If we were to represent Mark's plot

graphically, it would resemble a spiral more than an angled, ascending and descending line - foreshadows and echoes drive the plot forward by means of recalling and comparing what has gone before; the plot still progresses in a linear direction, but by directing the reader to span gaps instead of filling them with straightforward causal relationships (Fowler 137). The text, in other words, is structured in such a way as to invite the reader to consider one event or episode in the light of others. Fowler, citing Gerard Genette, refers to these “verbal signals” that point forward and backward as “prolepses” and “analepses” (Fowler 139). Prolepsis and analepsis may not only refer to events within the plot but also reach outside of it, into what I have defined as the story: the events that extend beyond the “necessary” dictates of the plot. This foreshadowing and echo structure takes form by means of several prominent plot devices in the Gospel, particularly prophecy and fulfillment, repetition and parallelism, and intercalation.

Prophecy and fulfillment

The prediction of events that are fulfilled by their later occurrence is perhaps Mark’s most straightforward way of creating connections, both within the plot and between plot and story. The prediction looks forward to later in the plot (or, occasionally, later in the story, a possibility which I will discuss shortly), while the fulfillment looks backward, recalling the prediction and its context. Jesus, for example, makes several predictions, and

virtually everything he predicts...comes to pass within the bounds of the story. Once the reader catches on to this *inevitability*, Jesus’ predictions will be perceived as reliable prolepses that will be matched sooner or later by an analepsis (explicit or implicit) at the point in the story when the prediction is fulfilled. Jesus’

predictions always seem to be explicit in the story...but their fulfillment is rarely noted explicitly.... (Fowler 139, *my emphasis*)

Even when the narrator of Mark does not explicitly remind us that an event was foretold, the fulfillment of these events immediately rings a bell for the reader or hearer, who understands the events in the light of the prediction.

Other events are arranged so that they fulfill predictions external to the text, from the prophets of the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible (Malbon, *Echoes and Foreshadowings*, 213)¹³. This is sometimes made explicit by Mark's narrator or by Jesus. John the Baptist appears "as it is written in the Prophet Isaiah" (1:2); Jesus predicts his desertion by the disciples, and at the same time he refers back to where "it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'" (14:27). Mark also contains less explicit scriptural echoes, such as the implied parallel between John the Baptist and Elijah or Jesus' "unmarked" quotation of Psalm 22 from the cross.

Even when the events predicted are relatively banal - Jesus predicting that the disciples will meet a certain man who will give them a room for the Passover meal, or that the disciples will find a colt at a particular place - their prediction and fulfillment serves to establish the reliability, indeed the inevitability, of Jesus' foretellings that have not yet come to pass. When Jesus predicts the passion and the abandonment of the disciples, for example, the reader does not doubt that these things will come to pass. The

¹³ These citations, however, are often inaccurate or - in the case of the opening quotation, ostensibly from Isaiah - a pastiche of several different sources.

fulfillment of prophecies from outside the plot also adds to this sense of inevitability, for the implication is that these events were foreseen long ago.¹⁴

Repetition and parallelism

Within Mark's narrative are several sets of episodes whose vocabulary and content mark them as repetitions or parallels of earlier incidents. Much previous scholarship dismissed these repetitions as redundancies, clues to seams and overlaps in Mark's redaction of traditional material (Neiryck 71). They are now acknowledged, however, as an important rhetorical and structural device in Mark's gospel: the repetition is treated as a deliberate device that is meant to somehow add to the meaning of the narrative.

This repetition occurs on several levels. Neiryck identifies four varieties of Marcan repetition: grammatical, by which words are repeated or paired with cognates; that of "duplicate expressions and double statements" (Neiryck 34), which include elaborations, translations, and appositive descriptions as well as the repeated use of a particular phrase; pairs within one episode, which are mostly cause-and-effect based (e.g. command and fulfillment, request and realization, question and answer (Neiryck 36); and parallels between pericopes.

Most important for my purposes is the last type of repetition, which is the most obvious both in terms of its scale and the emphasis it appears to have been given by the

¹⁴ But what of those prophecies which are not fulfilled or are partially fulfilled within the plot (post-resurrection meeting with the disciples, parousia)? The implication of Jesus' reliable prophecy is that these events, too, will inevitably come to pass. I will discuss the role of these unfulfilled prophecies below.

evangelist. Sometimes a repeated event is even marked by the narrator's comment that something happens "again" (παλιν), such as the repeated story of Jesus miraculously feeding a multitude (8:1) or Jesus' final passion prediction (10:32). Other less prominently marked repeated episodes are Jesus' healing of an affliction by spittle (7:31-37, 8:22-26), as well as an episode demonstrating Jesus' miraculous command of the sea (4:35-41, 6:47-52). Other episodes are repeated in series of three: the call of the disciples (in a threefold pattern of Jesus seeing the prospective follower, calling to him, and the disciple "following"; this pattern also occurs on three occasions, 1:16-18, 1:19-20, and 2:14) the passion predictions (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34), Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane and the disciples' sleepiness (14:34-38, 14:39-40, 14:41-42), and in Peter's denial of Jesus (14:67-68, 14:69-70a, 14:70b-71).

Such repetition has a number of immediate effects. First of all, it creates a certain emphasis on the repeated episode, suggesting to the reader that the parallel stories are important. It also creates a sense of closure or division within the text, particularly in the case of three-fold repetition, which builds momentum toward a dramatic conclusion, as Vernon Robbins states (Robbins, *Three Step Progression*, 101). Peter, for instance, denies Jesus more vehemently each time, finally swearing an oath. The passion predictions grow more detailed with each telling, eventually including crucifixion specifically and naming the authorities as the ones responsible. The reader is forcefully reminded that this has happened before, and the previous episode is thus brought to the background of any reading of the second episode (Fowler 140). In addition to recalling what has gone before, repeated episodes point forward in their gathering weight: Jesus'

repeated passion predictions, for example, bring the coming crucifixion all the more dramatically in view on the horizon. Jesus' ministry is closely paralleled by that of John, who appears in the desert "proclaiming" (κηρύσσων) a "baptism of repentance" (1:4) just as Jesus comes to Galilee "proclaiming" (κηρύσσων) the "good news of God" (1:14); the disciples of the two leaders are compared (2:18); John is "arrested" or handed over (παραδοθῆναι) (1:14) just as Judas hands Jesus over (παραδοῖ) (14:10); each leader's corpse (πτῶμα) is put in a tomb (6:29, 15:46). In addition to parallels of vocabulary, there are parallel events: each leader is an outspoken religious figure arrested and executed by a reluctant authority (Herod and Pilate) whose hand is forced by another's hatred (Herodias "had a grudge against [John the Baptist], and wanted to kill him" (6:19)) or jealousy (as Pilate perceives, "it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over" (15:10)). In each account a feast provides an occasion for treachery (Judas and Herodias) that would otherwise have been prevented (by Herod's perplexed interest in John (6:20) or the crowds that flock to Jesus and make the authorities hesitate to arrest him (12:12)) (Focant 348). When the reader hears of John's gruesome and violent death, the parallels already drawn between Jesus and John suggest a shadow of dread: Jesus' ministry, it is implied, will end in the same manner as John's. When Jesus' death does parallel John's in many ways, this dread is confirmed, lending the events the weight of inevitability.

Repeated episodes also form a "frame" which encloses other material; when the reader is directed back to the previous episode, the reader's gaze also travels across the material in between. The effect is not only a suggestion that the framing episodes be read

together, but also that the intervening material also be read in the light of the framing episodes. By framing other material, repetition suggests, “implicitly, turns of metaphor in narrative form” (Fowler 147) - we are invited to “grasp together” diverse episodes, to consider their similarities and their relatedness. For example, when parallel healing stories frame the disciples’ egregious misunderstanding of the second feeding of multitudes, deafness and blindness become “implicit metaphorical...commentary” on the disciples’ failure to understand. The ailments healed by Jesus “are offered implicitly to the reader as metaphors for the incorrigible spiritual and intellectual handicaps of the disciples in the framed episodes” (Fowler 146). This implicit commentary underscores the conflict between Jesus and the disciples, adding to the reader’s growing dreadful expectation that the disciples will continue to misunderstand as the conflict grows more dire.

Intercalation

Fowler counts intercalation as a type of repetition, but I think it can be distinguished from repetition in that repetition repeats discrete episodes while intercalation interrupts one episode to insert another, and then goes on to complete the interrupted episode. Tom Shepherd points out that the “framing” episode is linked by continuity of action and participants, while the intercalated episode is about a discrete series of events and shares at most one or two participants with the framing episode. Thus the healing of Jairus’ daughter is interrupted by the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage - but the framing material clearly narrates a single story, one that is held together by the common presence of Jesus, Jairus, and the little girl who is ailing and then

is raised from death. (Shepherd 525-526). Fowler takes this arrangement to be simply “a crafty manipulation of the discourse level that creates the illusion that two episodes are taking place simultaneously” (Fowler 144), but I am inclined to agree with Shepherd that simultaneity does not adequately explain the function of intercalation. Peter’s denial and Jesus’ trial are the only intercalated pair that could conceivably be occurring at the same moment; the others allow the “story time” to flow through both episodes without doubling back. It makes no sense, for instance, to take Jesus’ healings of Jairus’ daughter and the hemorrhaging woman as simultaneous; Jesus merely pauses on the way to Jairus’ house, and the chronology of the narration is not disturbed. Likewise, the cursing of the fig tree and Jesus’ overturning of tables in the temple are marked as occurring in clear chronological sequence. Jesus and the disciples “look around” in the temple, and afterwards go to Bethany (11:11); “on the following day” (11:12), Jesus curses the fig tree; they “then...came to Jerusalem” (11:15), where Jesus creates a disturbance in the temple, and they leave the city in the evening; “in the morning as they passed by” (11:20), they see and discuss the withered fig tree.

Intercalation, too, sometimes contributes to Mark’s conflict development and the generation of fearful expectation. What is the effect, for instance, of the story of John the Baptist’s death intercalated into the mission of the Twelve at 6:14-29? John’s death casts an ominous shadow over the initial success of the disciples, for it creates a subtle association between the two episodes that is later taken up and emphasized by Jesus’ oblique reference to John the Baptist as Elijah and his prediction of the fate that awaits them all (9:12-13). Jesus’ deliberate acts of provocation and disruption in the Temple are

intercalated into the withering of the fig tree at 11:15-19; the fate of the fig tree lends gravity to the conflict between Jesus and the authorities, for its “metaphorical commentary” makes it clear that the stakes of the conflict are life and death.

Conclusion - function of an interwoven text

All of these devices, in creating echoes and foreshadowing, function as a way to “grasp together” episodes and suggest that they are somehow related; Mark simultaneously creates gaps and builds bridges by which these gaps may be spanned (Fowler 144). I have noted some ways in which such strategic gaps impress the inevitability of a grim outcome upon the reader, but the most important way this is accomplished lies in the difference it creates between the reader’s perception and the characters’: in other words, in the irony it generates.

Effects of an interwoven text: irony

Irony is a frustratingly vague and much-discussed phenomenon whose importance in Mark’s gospel has long been recognized. The evangelist undermines and misdirects the reader’s expectations by means of the devices that create forward- and backward-looking structure, even as he builds and directs reader expectation using the same devices (Fowler 142). While Mark builds reader expectation such that the grim outcome is inevitable and consistent, he also disappoints - indeed, flouts - reader expectation in presenting such an outcome. The inevitability of events thus becomes terrible and *fearful* in its reversals of the reader’s hopes. At the same time, however, irony is also at work in the resurrection and Jesus’ teachings on discipleship to suggest a comic irony - not only must the Messiah die (tragic irony), but one must lose one’s life *in order to save it* (comic irony).

Defining irony

Irony is above all a “two-story phenomenon” (Muecke 19). One level is that of the perception of the ironist; the other level is that of the victim of irony - the *alazon*, to use Frye’s term - who does not perceive things in the same way. The levels are distinguished by a gap in knowledge, whereby the “upper” level is privy to information that undermines the perspective of the “lower” level. There is thus opposition and tension between these two levels, a dissonance consisting of “contradiction, incongruity, or incompatibility” (Muecke 20); there is also an element of “innocence”, whereby “either a victim is confidently unaware of the very possibility of there being an upper level or point of view that invalidates his own, or an ironist pretends not to be aware of it” (Muecke 20). Irony undermines and thwarts *assumptions* and *expectations* that are based on a confident but mistaken perception of reality.

Irony is typically divided into two categories: verbal and situational. Verbal irony is often defined as “saying one thing and meaning another”, but Muecke points out that this is too broad a definition, for metaphor and other figures of speech could also fall under this definition. What distinguishes irony is the contradiction, the unresolved dissonance, between what is said and what is meant. In metaphor, by contrast, the apparently inappropriate predication forges a new concordance of meaning; the tension is productive rather than erosive. To use Booth’s famous example, when the Roman soldiers robe Jesus in purple and proclaim him “King of the Jews”, they are mocking him, not glorifying him (Booth 28).

Situational irony occurs when a situation is contrary to previous expectation - as in, for example, the necessity of the Messiah's death. One is confident in one's expectation, which is then proved to be exactly wrong. The victim of situational irony may recognize his error and the irony in it. Situational irony that receives no "uptake" within the story, however, becomes dramatic irony. While anyone - reader or character - may recognize simple situational irony, dramatic irony creates a gap in knowledge between these two levels of narrative. Dramatic irony, to use Booth's example again, turns the soldiers themselves into victims: what they say in mockery is, unbeknownst to them, in fact the truth (Booth 28-29). Jesus, the narrator, and the audience all know this and are thus in a position to appreciate this irony; the soldiers, however, do not have access to this information. They are victims of irony, but unwittingly.

Interwoven plot and irony

Mark generates a great deal of dramatic irony in his juxtaposition of events, for he allows the reader to make connections that are unavailable to the characters. The characters cannot be aware, for example, of intercalations, which often involve completely different sets of participants (e.g. the death of John the Baptist does not involve either Jesus or the disciples; Peter, standing outside, cannot know what is going on at Jesus' trial; the authorities, implied to be the "victims" of Jesus' cursing of the fig tree, do not witness it). They could, by contrast, pick up on the story's repetitions, which makes it all the more shocking when they don't. It is astonishing to the reader that the disciples have to ask how they will feed the second assembled multitude: "the irony is manifest: Jesus had more food and a smaller crowd, but still the disciples, who

distributed the food in the earlier episode, professed ignorance about how the crowd would be fed” (Tolbert 102). The audience, in a position of privileged knowledge, can recognize the ignorance of the characters. Even if the reader does not understand Jesus’ reference to the “yeast of the pharisees”, it is at least glaringly obvious that it is *not* “because we have no bread” (8:16). The reader “takes up” the situational irony of a crucified messiah and glory that comes only through suffering and humiliation, but the authorities clearly expect a very different kind of messiah, while the disciples just as clearly expect a very different kind of glory. The reader, therefore, can see what is coming; they can also understand that the characters do *not* see. Jesus predicts that the disciples will abandon him and that Peter will deny him. The reader, knowing that Jesus’ prophecy is reliable, knows that this will come to pass, but Peter, by contrast, protests that he will follow Jesus even unto death. He does not see his failure coming, but the audience knows it is inevitable.

Perhaps we can see a larger dramatic irony, however, that victimizes the audience. Reading the gospel, our own expectations serve as a dissonant contrast to what actually happens. That the disciples misunderstand, betray, and abandon Jesus is made inevitable by the plot, but this stands in stark opposition to what the audience would have expected: shouldn’t the disciples have been closest to Jesus? The ending, too, upsets reader expectation, for prophecy has prepared us for a post-resurrection meeting in Galilee and, implicitly, forgiveness and reconciliation. We have been told that we are hearing “the good news of Jesus Christ” (1:1), but in the end we are faced with the apparent total failure of that good news.

Effects of irony

Mark's dramatic irony contributes to a strong sense of inevitability, almost predestination in the gospel's plot. The reader can see that the characters are consistently and obviously wrong in their perception of who Jesus is, what he teaches, and what it means to follow him, but the reader gains this insight through a perspective not available to the characters. How could the characters perform otherwise when they labour under such a lack of information? How could the outcome be avoided? The reader can only follow the story, foreseeing and dreading the outcome, as one disaster follows another.

Mark's irony makes the ending of the gospel not only terrible, but perverse as well. Irony, after all, is cruel; it calls not simply for the unexpected event but for the exact opposite of what *is* expected:

I do not expect to meet a tiger in the streets of Melbourne and it would not be ironic if I did. At least it would not have been ironic yesterday; but now that I have formulated and raised to consciousness my non-expectation, changing it in effect from a 'not-expecting' to an 'expecting-not', my meeting a tiger would be ironic. (Muecke 31-32)

The characters expect the Messiah's success and get, apparently, his complete failure. The reader, who at least expects the resurrection to thwart the authorities and expects a reconciliation with the disciples to absolve their failure, is instead faced with the women's fear and silence. The outcome is inevitable and consistent, but it is exactly the opposite of what is *supposed* to happen. This is precisely what Exum means by the "uncanny and contingent" (Exum 11) aspect of tragedy: tragic misfortune is not simply

random disaster but is poetic in its irony, to the point that hostile cosmic design is implied.

The threat of tragedy and the plot of Mark

It is in the combined irony and inevitability of the Gospel's plot that I believe we can find tragic weight, for "irony entails hypersensitivity to a universe permanently out of joint and unfailingly grotesque. The ironist does not pretend to cure such a universe or to solve its mysteries" (Gurewitsch, quoted in Muecke 27). The inevitable and consistent reversal of all hopeful expectation leads even Jesus, God's "beloved son", to feel that God has deserted him; when the resurrection might have ameliorated this terrible cry, the women who could make it known say nothing to anyone. Everyone has failed Jesus; the sower's word is apparently abandoned to silence and fear. The threat of meaninglessness and futility in this outcome is clear. Have Jesus' mission, his suffering, and even his resurrection been for nothing?

Tolbert suggests that Mark is "a divine comedy" despite its elements of "human tragedy" (Tolbert 295). The divine comedy suggested by Jesus' resurrection, however, must overwhelm the apparent tragedy of the women's silence, which isolates the world from this comedy - a world already so isolated from God that its inhabitants kill and silence the very messenger who proclaimed the inauguration of "the kingdom of God" on earth. Jesus is resurrected, but his cry of dereliction on the cross still haunts the end of the gospel; for while Jesus may be reconciled with God, the rest of the world appears to remain isolated from Him, and the plot builds inevitably towards this ending. The world

is so isolated from God that it inevitably perpetuates its own isolation and rejects salvation even when it is offered.

Refuting tragedy

Even as Mark's organization of events creates the looming threat of tragedy, it also works against that threat, promising reconciliation, justice, and comedy. The plot has established that Jesus' prophecies are reliable, and it leaves two of these prophecies unfulfilled within the plot: reconciliation with the disciples in Galilee (14:28) and the parousia (chapter 13, 14:62). The significance of these dangling prophecies for the overall tone of the gospel is ambiguous. It is true that they point beyond the fear and silence that closes the gospel, but even if this renders the *story* comic, we must wonder if it is enough to do the same for the *plot* of Mark's gospel. How much does the "rest of the story" inhere in Mark? Can we, as previous tragic readings of the gospel have maintained, find Mark tragic despite the promise of comedy beyond the plot? Do partially fulfilled prophecies tie "the rest of the story" into the plot closely enough to create a comic ending?

In assessing the impact of the horizons of the *story* on the effect of the *plot*, we must take into account how much of this story the reader brings to the gospel. Any reader, ancient or modern, will most likely have encountered the story of Jesus before reading Mark's text, if not in the particular presentation that Mark offers: "the concern of the audience...is not *what* is going to happen but *how* it will happen" (Tolbert 67). Whether from other books of the New Testament or through oral traditions, readers came to Mark knowing about the resurrection and probably also knowing that Peter and other

disciples did in fact go on to succeed in preaching the word and, eventually, dying for it.

What effect does this knowledge have on the balance of comedy and tragedy in Mark?

Can the reader supply the missing comic ending?

Magness argues that the end of Mark's story has been "suspended", and that the promise of a comic ending is enough to provide closure and reconciliation to the plot of Mark's gospel: "Mark affirms and communicates a resurrection and post-resurrection reunion without narrating them" (Magness 14). He cites several ancient works as other examples of suspended endings; among these examples are several tragedies. In most of the cases Magness cites, however, the suspension is of a clearly inevitable event, something that is "certain but unnarrated" (Magness 37). Several plays have "the climactic and concluding event...predicted, ordered, implied, and then suspended before its dramatization" (ibid.) - the burial of Ajax, for instance, "while resolved in word is not carried out in deed" (ibid.); Medea murders her children offstage, and the deed is only reported by the chorus - neither Jason nor the audience sees their bodies (Magness 38-39); Iphigenia is "led off to her death" (Magness 39) but the original ending does not dramatize or even report her sacrifice.

I would argue that these are less cases of suspended endings than of the end of the events the author *must* depict to meet his purposes - Iphigenia's death itself is not, for instance, as important as the events that led up to her sacrifice. I do not believe these are very apt parallels for Mark's gospel, for in Mark, the story's comic ending is challenged by the tragic ending of the plot. There is a greater degree of doubt and ambiguity at the close of Mark's gospel than at the close of the plays cited by Magness: we do not need to

see Medea's children killed, because their deaths are certain and inevitable; the promised redemption of the disciples, however, must contend with the disciples' faithlessness and the women's silence. Magness does not lend enough weight to the scandal of 16:8.

Deborah Roberts declares a perspective such as Magness' simplistic: "we might imagine that in ancient literature, where plots are more often than not selected from a body of stories continuous and to some extent familiar, the author can present whatever part of the story he or she chooses, and the reader will be satisfied, knowing the rest if not in detail, and knowing how it ultimately turns out. But of course things are much more complicated" (Roberts 255). She argues that an unfulfilled prophecy, a device Magness dismisses as "includ[ing] the least foreshadowing and anticipation...[and] the least crucial to the plot" (Magness 37), may create a situation where "the predicted ending stands in contrast with the narrated or enacted end" (Roberts 256). When such a contrast occurs, it does not necessarily mean that the predicted ending cancels out the narrated ending:

Odysseus's homecoming and Odysseus's renewed travels;
Aeneas's slaughter of Turnus and the future of Rome;
Orestes' mad plans in Euripides' *Orestes* and Apollo's
reconciliatory conclusion - in all these instances, critics
have noted what amounts to a kind of doubling of ends.
The interpretive authority of the second may seem greater
in that it comes later and is in that sense more truly the *end*;
but the first derives an authority of its own from enactment,
from fuller narration, and sometimes (as in the epics cited)
from the fact that it comes last in the narrative if not in the
chronology of the story.... The double ending thus has the
effect not only of making us read the poem in two different
ways, but of making the reader experience, however briefly,
the happiness-turned-sadness [or vice versa] of the
characters.... (Roberts 256, 262)

Unfulfilled or partially fulfilled prophecy thus “tell[s] us that we are to bear the aftermath in mind” (Roberts 256); it exists in tension with the ending as narrated instead of erasing it.

If the reader knows about the resurrection and (or) the disciples’ later careers, this knowledge still creates room for the tragic effect in that it creates a set of reader expectations that the plot mercilessly overturns - especially in the ending. The end of the gospel is startling in its refusal to fulfill expectations built within the text itself; it would be rendered all the more shocking by a reader’s knowledge of the traditional end of the story. The evangelist does seem aware of such traditional expectations, since he has Jesus predict their fulfillment, even though he does not represent them. According to Roberts’ logic, the promise of fulfillment creates room for comedy in Mark, but it is not necessarily enough to overwhelm the scandalous suspension of the ending. While the reader’s knowledge may cast the potentially tragic events of the gospel in a comfortingly positive light (it all works out in the end), it is just as possible that the gospel may cast the shadow of tragic doubt over the reader’s knowledge of “the rest of the story”. Exum, discussing Job as tragedy, asks whether a restored Job can trust God again (Exum 8); we may just as well ask whether the successful disciples can ever make up for their initial failure. By not directly resolving the failure of the disciples within his plot, Mark allows that failure to linger instead of being healed and erased. The effect may be that the *question* of the disciples’ success is extended beyond the plot and into the story: the reader must hold both possibilities in tension with each other.

The other option, of course, is for the reader to give more authority to their knowledge of the story than to Mark, in which case the reception of Mark is very different: Mark may be dismissed as simply incorrect or incomplete. This is a possibility I will discuss further in Chapter 4.

Conclusion

I believe it is justifiable to see a strong threat of tragedy in Mark's plot. The interwoven structure of the plot lends a strong sense of the inevitability of the crucifixion of Jesus and the flight and silence of his followers, while at the same time making it clear through irony that this is not what should have happened. This same interwoven structure, however, makes it clear that Mark's "ending" is not the end of the story at all, for it excludes the predicted meeting in Galilee and coming of the Son of Man.

The plot of Mark's gospel, then, is not unambiguously comic or tragic. Attempts to read it as straightforwardly comic must reckon with the gospel's drive towards a bleak ending, while attempts to read it as straightforwardly tragic must account for the apparent certainty of an *eventual* happy ending beyond the plot as narrated.

In generating this ambiguous effect, Mark's plot is supplemented by his characters. Mark's portraits of the people who act out the events of the gospel bring the tragic and comic dynamics of the gospel into even sharper relief. We will turn, then, to an examination of Mark's characters to further explain the fear and pity elicited by the gospel and the grounds it offers for hope.

CHAPTER 3: Character and pity

Previous tragic readings of Mark have glossed over character as secondary to plot or even irrelevant in creating the tragic effect. I believe that it is a mistake to dismiss character so lightly. Although ancient characterization employed very different techniques than those familiar to us from modern literature, characterization still remained important - even Aristotle, although he held plot to be of primary importance in tragedy, acknowledged that a lack of characters in a play was a “defect” (*Poetics* 1450a26).

In Mark, I will argue, characters are established in such a way that they deserve our *pity*. Against their potentially tragic situations, however, the evangelist pits the responses of Jesus, who cures the desperate and forgives the fallible. We see in Mark’s characters, then, the same ambiguous balance between comic and tragic possibilities that we have seen in Mark’s plot. The evangelist also creates a level of reader identification with the characters that invites the audience to see the gospel world in continuity with its own. Tragic fear or comic celebration are held in tension as possible responses not only to the gospel world, but also to the world of the reader.

In order to elaborate on these remarks, I will first introduce the concept of character and how it may be established, as well as the special problems that come with

characterization in ancient literature. From this preliminary groundwork I will turn to Mark's characters and how they contribute to the meaningful effect of the gospel.

What is character?

Character remains perhaps the most nebulous of the elements of narrative discussed by theorists. It seems a straightforward enough concept at first glance - much of literary theory dismisses character simply as the people who carry out the action of the narrative (C. Black 608). However, as many others point out, such a definition is far from adequate, and its terms are far from unproblematic. Can we really refer to fictional characters, abstract constructions of words, as "people"? (Chatman 108) In the case of the gospels, we are dealing with characters which purport to be historical; what is the relationship between a real, historical individual and the character who bears his likeness? In either case, what is the relationship between the characters and the actions they perform, which constitute the plot?

I will begin to explore these questions by first attempting an explanation of how character is constructed. From this vantage point we may gain some perspective on the issues of the relationship of character to reality and to the plot in which character is embedded.

Chatman argues that a character is a "vertical" axis consisting of a collection of relatively stable traits; this vertical axis intersects with the horizontal movement of the plot. Our conception of the character is cumulative, however, built as the plot unfolds, subject to revision; our impressions may also include the character's change and growth over the course of the plot. If plot is the sequence of events in time, the characters

represent part of the space through which this sequence moves; the vertical axis of character intersects with the horizontal axis of plot (Chatman 127). By trait, Chatman means a “relatively stable or abiding personal quality” (Chatman 126), constructed or inferred by the audience based on fragmentary indicators scattered throughout the text, across the expanse of the plot. We infer traits from several different sources - the opinions of other characters, which may be more or less reliable; the judgment of the narrator on the character; the character’s own speech and actions; and, most subtly, the character’s interaction and juxtaposition with other characters. In real life, in fact, we analyze others in a similar fashion, building a cumulative impression from actions we observe, the reactions of others we consider more or less reliable, and interpersonal interaction (Chatman 128). Actions are not themselves traits, as Chatman points out - a “habit” of fastidious cleanliness may, for example, lead an audience to infer the trait “compulsive” (Chatman 122). The words we use to designate traits, however, are convenient labels for a cumulative and inarticulate impression: “the names for traits are ‘socially invented signs, by no means perfect designations of what is going on materially in the depths of nature. Trait-names are not themselves traits’” (Allport and Odbert, quoted in Chatman 124).

That we may infer a character’s traits from his actions, however, brings up the question of the relationship between character and action. The debate over this relationship has two poles. On one end of the debate is the mimetic position, which claims that characters are created to imitate real individuals, and thus exist as individuals abstractable from the actions they carry out. It is possible, for instance, to discuss the

character of Hamlet apart from the play that bears his name. The opposite pole is the semiotic, which argues that characters exist solely for the sake of the plot, as mere agents of the action.

It is impossible to generalize the characterization of all literature into one simple category in these terms, however, for conventions and their purposes have varied widely over genres and centuries, even within Western European literature. Characters in 19th century novels, for instance, fit much better into the mimetic mold than do the characters of medieval allegories, which are more clearly semiotic. E.M. Forster famously characterized the difference between these poles of character as a difference between “round” and “flat” characters. The former has many traits, which may even conflict with one another, resulting in action that may surprise the reader; the latter is reduced to only one or two traits that do not change, resulting in predictable and uniform behavior (C. Black 605). This has led some critics to label Jesus, for instance, as a “round” character, while the authorities are “flat”. This distinction, while it is popular, has come under criticism as overly simplistic and reductive, especially because of its implied preference for “round” characters as a more perfect literary achievement. “Flat” characters were condescendingly explained “as an expression of the primitive level of social development at which the individual is not properly distinguished from the collectivity, and as a result of the early narrator to understand and delineate the personal traits of many characters or handle scenes with many actors” (Simon 11). Even in flat characters, after all, “a dynamism exists, without which such characters would emerge as static or even lifeless” (C. Black 610).

Several scholars caution against painting the distinction between mimetic and semiotic characters in black and white, and suggest that it would be more realistic to place these terms on a scale, with shades of gray in between the two poles. In accordance with my earlier distinctions about mimesis, it seems that characters are always mimetic to some extent: that is, they are both like and unlike real people. Even the most minimally functional character is still cast as a *person* - the fairy-tale princess may be a mere symbol without any recognizable personality, and the messenger may simply be a device by which to deliver information, but it is significant that the symbol or the device is nonetheless cast in the image of a human being. On the other side of the scale, however, the most memorably complex and lifelike character is still a construction of words. Even historical figures in narrative texts remain constructed re-presentations, depicted by the same fragmentary means as fictional characters. No biography could exhaust the immediate reality of a human personality. While characters may exist along different points on the mimetic scale - and may, as Burnett observes, even move back and forth on the scale over the course of a narrative - they are clearly all *imitative* of the real individual.

Just as in plot, imitation of personality implies that the author strives to selectively “re-present” reality in the interest of communicating meaning. Character is not necessarily dictated by the requirements of the *plot* - as Henry James observed, they are inextricably intertwined: “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” (James, quoted in Chatman 112-113) - but the representation of story and character are both governed by the larger objectives of the

narrative. Bathsheba, for instance, is sketched out in the barest of terms because the narrative of 2 Samuel 11 is more concerned with David and his actions; the narrative requires a married woman in order for adultery to take place, and Bathsheba is introduced as a minimal character to fulfill that role (Berlin 73). In another narrative, however, she is depicted as much more complex: in 1 Kings 1-2, “she is a ‘real’ person, a mother concerned with securing the throne for her son. She emerges in these episodes as one of the central characters, important in affairs of state as well as in family matters” (Berlin 74). The degree of complexity in a character is dictated, like the selection of the plot’s events, by *meaning*. To illustrate this point, Merenlahti quotes David Mamet: “‘Two guys go into a farm house. An old woman is stirring a pot of soup.’ What does the woman look like? What state is the farm house in? Why is she stirring soup? It is absolutely not important. The dirty-joke teller is tending toward a punch line and we know that he or she is only going to tell us the elements which direct our attention toward that punch line, so we listen attentively and gratefully” (Mamet, quoted in Merenlahti 47)

These observations are neatly summed up in a definition cited by Black as a helpful amendment to the usual definition of character as “the ‘persons’ brought to life in a narrative” (C. Black 608):

A literary character is an artificial construct drawn from, and relatively imitative of, people in the real world. The identity of a character becomes known primarily from a continuity of his or her own choices, speeches, and acts, consistent with the kind of person to be presented. Secondly, identity is reinforced by description, diction, and in incidents of apposition to other characters. The choices, acts, and habits that constitute a character are limited by, consistent with, and suitable to the governing principle of the

whole work of which the character is a part. (Springer, quoted in C. Black 608)

Another dimension of character as a guided construction of the reader is that of distance: what is the relationship between the audience and the character? Boomershine explains this relationship as established in range and dynamics by the character's balance of "sympathetic and alienating qualities" (Boomershine 284). The devices by which a narrative elicits the audience's sympathy or revulsion for a character fall under two main categories:

1. The character's standing in relation to the narrative's norms of judgment, which are either assumed or explicitly established in the narrative. As Boomershine states, the reader "must share [the narrator's] major evaluations of the events and characters...or the story will not communicate in the way intended by the narrator" (Boomershine 276). The character's standing as good or bad according to these values is inferred by the reader from the character's actions, and is also established by narrative commentary by the narrator or other reliable characters.
2. Narrative point of view, which can "focalize" through a character's perspective and present emotions, motives, and the character's perception of events. We must deal with this aspect of distance with caution, however, for while the narrative may reveal a character's point of view and thereby bring the reader "close" to that character, what is revealed by this "inside view" may be highly negative and alienating (Boomershine 286). The audience's distance from a character and its sympathy for that character are thus related, but not necessarily directly proportional.

Characters in ancient literature

I have cited Chatman's remark that our inference and designation of character traits is profoundly culturally determined. Pursuant to this, it is important to note that the Gospel of Mark is a text from a time and place very far removed from 21st century North America. If we are to interpret its character "indicators" aright, if we are to use an appropriate lens through which to read the evangelist's encoding of character, we must ask ourselves: what kinds of character can we feasibly look for in Mark's gospel - what was the range of character available to the evangelist within the literary conventions of his day? Where do ancient characters, and gospel characters in particular, fit on the mimetic-semiotic scale? How would an ancient audience have related to these characters?

Tolbert, for instance, issues a strong caution against reading the gospel's characters as one would the characters of a modern novel. She presents ancient characterization as "consist[ing] of stereotypical mimetic attributes employed to 'color' the figure or agents of the required actions. In ancient literature, characters were more illustrative than representational.... The illustrative characters of ancient literature are static, monolithic figures who do not grow or develop psychologically. They have fundamentally the same characteristics at the end as at the beginning" (Tolbert 76-77). Others, however, accuse this view of being simplistic in a number of ways. While typical characterization is acknowledged to be genre-dependent, the gospel defies attempts to fit it neatly into any of the categories of Hellenistic literature. More importantly, the suggestion that Hellenistic characters are uniformly typical and static may be a distortion

of a more subtle difference between ancient and modern characterization (Burnett 6-10).

Gill explains this difference as existing between a “character-viewpoint” and a “personality-viewpoint”:

I have associated the term ‘character’ with the process of making moral judgments; and I have taken this process to involve (i) placing people in a determinate ethical framework and (ii) treating them as psychological and moral ‘agents’, that is, as the originators of intentional actions for which they are normally held responsible and which are treated as indexes of goodness or badness of character. The term ‘personality’, on the other hand, I have associated with responses of a different type. I have connected it with a response to people that is empathetic rather than moral: that is, with the desire to identify oneself with another person, to ‘get inside her skin’, rather than to appraise her ‘from the outside’. (Gill 2)

Gill, like Tolbert, denies that the ancient “character-viewpoint” allows for concern for the individual as anything more than a moral exemplar. I agree with the distinction between the different viewpoints, but is it really necessary to exclude the possibility of identification? Burnett acknowledges that “the modern understanding that a character is to be understood *primarily* through his or her psychological development is not part of ancient characterization”, but is not willing to follow this difference to the same conclusion: “does it also follow that ancient historiographers had no interest in the character as an *individual* since little of the character’s inward life is presented? This remains an open question” (Burnett 11).

This “character-viewpoint” has some important implications for the kinds of distance and sympathy an audience can have for an ancient character. What exactly does sympathy imply? Gill and Tolbert would seem to rule out an empathetic, emotional

response in favour of simple approval or disapproval; we are not meant to “identify” with ancient characters but to evaluate and learn from them. Revealing the character’s emotions is a rhetorical strategy that contributes to the reader’s moral evaluation of the character: are the character’s emotions appropriate or inappropriate? (Malina 137) I will have occasion later in this section to call this assessment of distance in ancient characterization into question. Augustine records an emotional and sympathetic response to the *Aeneid* in his *Confessions*: he “wept for Dido, who surrendered her life to the sword” (Augustine, *Confessions*, I.13); is this really a reaction to a moral exemplar? As we will see, Mark’s gospel appears to encourage relationships between the audience and many of its characters that are more ambiguous than straightforward approval and disapproval. I will argue that there are times, in fact, when the audience appears to be directed specifically to *identify* with certain characters, particularly (though not exclusively) the disciples and the little people. I agree that the modern reader cannot talk about identifying with gospel characters without reflection and caution, but I do not believe we can rule it out entirely as an element of ancient characterization.

Another problem with restricting gospel and ancient narrative to typological characterization is that it ignores the influence of Hebrew narrative, in which “the characters are less stylized [than in Hellenistic literature] and more open to change” (Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie 100). Alter follows Auerbach in noting that this is partly because of the “drastic selectivity” (Alter 64) exercised by the biblical narrator; “the narrator of the Homeric poems”, by contrast, “makes his characters beautifully perspicuous even (as in the *Iliad*) when he is dealing with the most darkly irrational

impulses of the human heart” (Alter 64). According to Alter, biblical narrative evokes “a sense of character as a center of surprise” (Alter 64), defying fixity and type. Realistically complex and puzzling characters would not have been unknown to Mark, though the technique used to depict them was different from the psychological interiority to which we are accustomed in modern literature. An unilluminated character is not necessarily meant to be perceived as “flat”.

It is perhaps more accurate, then, to allow for a range of different characterization in ancient - and gospel - narrative. Berlin divides biblical characterization into three categories: (1) the agent, who exists only to further the plot and about whom we know next to nothing: “they are not important for themselves, and nothing of themselves, their feelings, etc., is revealed to the reader” (Berlin 78); (2) the type, who still has a limited and fixed range of traits, but is more developed than the agent. Of the typical character’s behavior, Berlin says that “we have no idea why he is like this, what motivated him; it is simply his nature to be so” (Berlin 77); (3) the character, “who has a broader range of traits (not all belonging to the same class of people), and about whom we know more than is necessary for the plot” (Berlin 78). Relative roundness or flatness, then, is determined by the character’s role in the action, and also, I would add, by the degree of distance between character and audience - both of which requirements are in turn determined by the meaning of the text. I would also add that a character, particularly in an episodic plot, may contribute to the work thematically even though he or she seems to have little or no role in the action: the anointing woman of 14:3-9, for example, along with many of Mark’s other minor characters, falls into the category of *thematic* agents. It seems fair to

assume, then, that while we may meet typical characters in the gospels, we may also meet characters whose development is more or less complex, even if their complexity never becomes the interior, psychological intricacy of a character in a modern novel.

Mark's characters

It is with these considerations in mind that I turn to the characters in the Gospel of Mark. Mark builds character - or, more accurately, prompts the reader to build character - from the same materials listed by Alter: "the report of actions; through appearance, gestures, posture, costume; through one character's comments on another; through direct speech by the character; through inward speech, either summarized or quoted as interior monologue; or through statements by the narrator about the attitudes and intentions of the personages, which may come either as flat assertions or motivated explanations" (Alter 59). To this I will also add the consideration of *distance* - to what degree *do* we see the character's interior world, and to what effect?¹⁵ Taken together, all these aspects of character depict characters whose pitiable, potentially tragic situations are countered with comic possibility through Jesus' intervention.

The religious authorities

The religious authorities are depicted, *almost* without exception, as the "villains" of the gospel. They are set in opposition to Jesus from the narrative's first mention of

¹⁵ In exploring these questions I will be careful not to fall into the common trap of psychologizing, offering motives and internal states where none are given; I will restrict my comments on each character or character group to the observations of the narrator and other characters. Where I am proposing that the characterization is the result of the reader's creative "gap-filling", I will note it and show how the gap encourages such an interpretation.

them to its last, and are consistently portrayed in a negative light, through both direct and indirect means. This portrait, consistent to the point of being “monolithic” and negative to the point of caricature, suggests to some scholars that the religious authorities should be thought of “as a single, or collective, character” (Kingsbury 1990, 45) united by the primary trait of wishing to destroy Jesus.

Others, however, point out distinctions between the various subgroups among the authorities, suggesting they are characterized in subtly different ways - they are concerned with different issues, and occupy different geographical space (Galilee or Jerusalem). Kingsbury responds that these distinctions are “artificial”, and that undue emphasis on them represents a “misreading” of the text in that it creates a distracting “second front” of tension among the authorities (Kingsbury 1990, 45). The role of the religious authorities as enemies of Jesus overwhelms any subtle distinctions among the subgroups mentioned by Mark or any suggestion of disagreement among them.

The evangelist’s characterization of the authorities is indeed presented mostly through specifically named subgroups. Appendix A shows a breakdown of the actions of and remarks about the religious authorities in the gospel. Thus schematized, it becomes apparent that there are in fact visible patterns that differentiate the subgroups. The Pharisees are “hard of heart”, hypocritical, and confront Jesus on matters of religious law and tradition. The Herodians are associated with the Pharisees in some way, as they never appear independently of them; they conspire against Jesus and are accused of hypocrisy. The Sadducees are characterized only as “wrong” in their doctrine, knowing “neither the scriptures nor the power of God” (12:24) The chief priests and elders,

meanwhile, are distinguished by their fear of the crowd or the people, their “jealousy” of Jesus (15:10), and their power to arrest and accuse him. The Pharisees and scribes “raise religious objections, based on their interpretation of scripture and tradition. The chief priests, scribes, and elders raise also what must be called political objections, based on their struggle with Jesus for authority and influence over the people” (Malbon 1989, 266). The Pharisees appear mostly in Galilee, while the chief priests and elders appear only in Jerusalem. Kingsbury is correct, however, to note that there is some geographical overlap (Kingsbury 1990, 46) - scribes “from Jerusalem” accuse Jesus of having Beelzebul, and the Pharisees and Herodians appear in Jerusalem to attempt to trap Jesus with a question.

The scribes are the only group to appear throughout the gospel - indeed, they are present from the first mention of the religious authorities (1:22) to the last mention of them (15:31). They are associated both with the Pharisees of Galilee and the chief priests and elders of Jerusalem, and are tarred with the same brush. Like the Pharisees, they question Jesus on legal matters, and they are accused of hypocrisy and false worship, although in possibly more scathing terms: “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation” (12:38-40). Like the chief priests and elders, the scribes plot against Jesus and seek his downfall, prevented only by their fear of the crowds. Their association with both the Pharisees and the chief priests, as well as the characteristics they share with each group, suggests not only a certain unity among the authorities - the scribes act as a

common thread across differences in characterization and geography - but also a certain uniformity; the chief priests are not explicitly accused of hypocrisy, but their association with the scribes perhaps suggests that they are not free of that trait, even if it is not primary.

There seems to be good reason, then, to understand the religious authorities as a “united front” in their opposition of Jesus. After all, the most obvious thing the various groups have in common is the desire to “destroy” Jesus - the only exception is the Sadducees, and this group is nonetheless denounced by Jesus. If anything, the differences between the subgroups serves to underscore their united hostility towards Jesus - *all* the religious authorities seek his death. Malbon rightly sees the transition from Galilee to Jerusalem as a heightening of conflict and tension, for the opponents are now not only plotting against Jesus but are also in a political position to carry out their plots against him (Malbon 1989, 273-274).

The difficulty with seeing the religious authorities as a “united front” is the few exceptions alluded to above: Jairus, who is the leader of a synagogue; the so-called “friendly scribe”; and Joseph of Arimathea, a “respected member of the council” (15:43). Unlike the rest of the religious establishment, these characters respond to Jesus favourably, with faith, praise, or respect. Kingsbury dismisses Jairus and Joseph as not to be associated with the religious authorities; they are wealthy and prominent men, but not necessarily members of the establishment (Kingsbury 1990, 50, 50n.). He explains the friendly scribe as an “ironic character” who is meant only as a foil to further vilify the rest of the authorities (Kingsbury 1990, 47). I believe Kingsbury’s dismissal of Jairus and

Joseph stems at least in part from a blurring of the distinction between character and role. Kingsbury has cast the authorities in the role of “opponents”; because Jairus and Joseph appear in the very different role of “little people”, he groups them with the other little people instead of with the opponents. I believe the prominent positions of Jairus and Joseph are indeed positions in the establishment; unlike, for example, the “rich man”, they are given explicit titles.. It is also significant that Matthew alters these titles to differentiate them from the religious authorities - Matthew’s Jairus is only an ἀρχόν, not an ἀρχισυνάγωγος, while Joseph is “a rich man...who was also a disciple of Jesus” (Mt 27:57) instead of a “respected member of the council”. The scribe who questions Jesus about the most important commandment, meanwhile, is in Matthew no longer “friendly”; he does not praise Jesus, nor does Jesus praise him (Malbon 1989, 280n.).

Kingsbury is correct, to an extent, in identifying the friendly scribe as an ironic figure who serves as a foil for the rest of the authorities, an example of what “might have been” if the authorities only had ears to hear. Malbon, however, puts a more positive spin on the friendly scribe and the other exceptional authorities: they show the categories of “friend” and “foe” to be “open-ended” (Malbon 1989, 276), dependent not on status or group allegiance but on one’s response to Jesus. As Malbon puts it, “scribes are free *not* to be enemies of Jesus” (Malbon 1989, 275). Particularly when combined with Jairus’ example, this episode makes it clear that although “members of the Jewish religious establishment are generally characterized as foes of the Marcan Jesus, they may not be automatically so categorized” (Malbon 1989, 276). *Opponents* of Jesus may behave in a

typical way, but the religious authorities are not necessarily included in that type; the categories of “religious authority” and “friend of Jesus” may in fact overlap.

Narrative critics usually identify the authorities as a group as a “flat” character, uniformly villainous to the point of caricature. If we include the exceptional figures of the friendly scribe, Jairus, and Joseph of Arimathea - as I believe it is reasonable to do - the authorities become slightly more three-dimensional; they are not incapable of acting differently, even if the positive and negative possibilities are not as evenly balanced as they are in other characters such as the disciples.

The relationship between the reader and the authorities as a character is uncomplicated; they are consistently portrayed as in opposition to the narrative’s normative values. Jesus and the narrator both condemn and vilify the authorities, and the reader is encouraged to share their stance, since they are established by the narrative as the two main sources of reliable commentary.

Jesus

Jesus, of course, is the gospel’s protagonist, the character upon whom the story focuses and the side of the *agon* the audience is primed to accept as normative, as authoritative, as the “good guy”. This occurs largely through the omniscient dictation of the narrator, who tells the audience that Jesus is the Anointed and the Son of God; this immediate association with God confers not only authority but goodness on Jesus’ teachings and actions. Jesus also exhibits knowledge accessible only to the narrator (and the reader). He knows, for example, when the scribes are questioning in their hearts; he knows when somebody touches his clothes and receives healing. Mark’s Jesus is

portrayed, above all, as God's beloved son, and as having the authority that comes with that designation; he is nonetheless passionate (angry, anguished, compassionate) and not entirely omniscient.

Jesus' authority is established as early as 1:1, where the narrator identifies Jesus as the "son of God", and confirmed at 1:11, where a heavenly voice confirms the narrator's statement. This identification serves to solidify the omniscience and reliability of the narrator, who is privy to such information, and also to establish the reliability of Jesus; from this point, Jesus' words and actions carry the authority - for the audience, at least - that comes with the privileged position of God's beloved son. Among the first things the reader learns about Jesus is that he teaches "with authority" (1:22). His miraculous healings, exorcisms, and control over nature only reinforce this point ("he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (1:27), "so that you may know the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (2:10), "the son of man is lord even of the sabbath" (2:28)), as do the fulfillment of his prophecies, discussed above. His command of scripture and *halakhah*, with which he apparently confounds the religious authorities - if they are allowed any response to Jesus' arguments, it is only amazement - is another manifestation of this same divine authority.

Mark also portrays Jesus as passionate, as moved by human emotion. The narrator tells us that Jesus is angered and saddened by the Pharisees' "hardness of heart" (3:5), that he is "moved with pity" for the leper who asks for cleansing (1:41), that he "loves" the rich man (10:21), that he has compassion for the crowd (6:34, 8:2), that he is "distressed and agitated" (14:33) and "deeply grieved, even to death" (14:34) by the

looming ordeal of the Passion. More indirectly, Jesus also expresses anger at the authorities (“Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites...” (7:6ff)) and exasperation with the disciples (“Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?” (8:17-18)).

In terms of distance, these attributes of authority and passion create a character who is unambiguously sympathetic; in Tolbert’s terms, Jesus is established as the hero of the gospel (Tolbert 216), a strongly positive character who not only preaches but practices according to the normative values of the narrative: he is compassionate, faithful (his frequent prayer stands in contrast to the disciples’ failure to exorcize a demon that can be driven out “only by prayer” (Tolbert 188)), humble (he rejects even the simplest epithet: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (10:18), and stands resolute in the face of suffering; as he instructs his disciples, he loses his life and becomes “last of all” (9:35), crucified between two bandits (15:27). He is clearly meant to prompt the audience’s approval and admiration. He is also a case in which we must wonder whether Tolbert and Gill were correct to caution against empathetic identification, for while the reader is clearly meant to “take up his cross and follow” Jesus, can the reader really presume to put herself in his position? In this view, although the “monologue” prayer in Gethsemane and the anguished cry from the cross are moving, they serve more to underscore moral judgments: Jesus’ positive attributes of obedience and faith, and the terrible wrongness of his fate. It could also be argued, however, that Jesus’ expression of harrowing emotion, particularly when expressed through narrative means which make the

reader so intimate with him (no one but the reader and God hear Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane), is strongly suggestive that the reader is meant to *recognize* such suffering; as Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie put it, such "inside views" of Jesus' emotions act as indicators of Jesus' humanness (Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie 110). Indeed, to follow Jesus is implied to be precisely the act of putting oneself in his place by taking up one's cross; by allowing the reader to identify with Jesus' remarkable but human example, Mark allows the reader to fully understand the implications of the fate that awaits the true disciple.

This is particularly true given that Jesus is not entirely omniscient or omnipotent, despite the privileged knowledge he possesses. Although he is aware that someone has touched his cloak at 5:30, he must ask who it was; he appears to lose the *χρεῖα*-like exchange with the Syrophenician woman at 7:24-30; his stern commands do not prevent people from spreading the news about his miraculous deeds (1:43-45, 7:36); he cannot make the disciples understand, despite his obvious frustration with them (8:17-21); most strikingly, he cries out from the cross that God has "forsaken" him (15:34). What the reader sees in Jesus is a man of extraordinary authority, insight, and virtue - but he is not *entirely* unlike the reader, and thus he is not beyond her ability to identify with or imitate.

We may also note what Mark does *not* say about Jesus. Strikingly, Jesus is one of the only characters - and certainly the only main character - who is never said to be afraid. In this he stands in clear contrast with both the authorities and his followers, whose words and deeds the narrator often explains as motivated by fear. Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie

argue that Jesus fears the crucifixion (111) but I believe it is significant that Mark does not describe Jesus as “afraid” in Gethsemane. He is “deeply grieved” by the prospect of crucifixion, and clearly dreads the ordeal God has set before him, but the φόβος which makes the authorities hostile and Jesus’ followers weak is never attributed to Jesus himself.

In the context of tragedy, one further intriguing aspect of Jesus’ characterization is his struggle as depicted at Gethsemane and Golgotha. Cox, Exum, and Frye all argue that the tragic hero’s dilemma is one of being faced with suffering on the one hand and personal, moral incoherence on the other, and that tragedy is brought about when the hero chooses suffering over loss of identity. This is strikingly descriptive of Jesus’ situation in the Gospel of Mark. He actively engages in conflict with the authorities despite the end foreshadowed for the reader as early as 3:6 and predicted by Jesus beginning at 8:31. He could have, we imagine, called off his ministry when the conflict became heated (Beck 52); he could have answered the questions of the high priest or Pilate in the negative. But any of these actions would have contradicted his identity as Messiah and Son of God: it would mean abandoning the people he had come to teach and heal (“that is what I came out to do” (1:38)) or outright denying his Messiahship. The antagonism of the authorities and the failure of the disciples makes it clear, however, that this tragic dilemma was created by a fearful world that thinks only of the things of men; as Rhoads and Michie put it, “suffering by persecution was the tragic consequence of faithfulness to God’s rule in an evil world. It is the commitment to be faithful, in spite of such a cost, that Mark honors” (Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie 113). Jesus is responsible for his fate in that he

acts in full knowledge of the consequences, but it is the fear and weakness of those around him that determine those consequences. Jesus acts in accordance with his identity as God's beloved son; those actions lead to his suffering only because of the people's negative response. As we have seen, however, this negative response is lent a strong sense of inevitability and even - in the case of the disciples, which we will soon examine - sympathy.

One question that should be addressed before I continue is: what would make Jesus a tragic hero instead of a martyr? The innocent who refuses to sway from the path of righteousness and faces suffering at the hands of an evil and uncomprehending world as a result is, after all, paradigmatic of martyrdom.

We may profitably compare the case of Jesus to that of Eleazar, the seven brothers, and their mother in 4 Maccabees, a text that is roughly contemporary with the gospel. Like Jesus, the martyrs of 4 Maccabees refuse to compromise their religious principles despite the threat of terrible torture - they each opt for excruciating death rather than eat "defiling food". Like Jesus, they promise their vindication: Jesus predicts the destruction of the "vineyard's" current "tenants" and the arrival of the Son of Man; the seven brothers predict the eternal perdition that awaits the evil king: "you, because of your bloodthirstiness toward us, will deservedly undergo from the divine justice eternal torment by fire" (4 Macc 9:9). They also predict that they "shall be with God, on whose account we suffer" (4 Macc 9:8), while Jesus predicts his own resurrection and is in fact "risen" at the end of the gospel.

There is also, as Christian Grappe points out, a sacrificial overtone to the deaths both of the Maccabean martyrs and Jesus. The text of 4 Maccabees makes reference to the precedents of Isaac and the three young men who were thrown in the furnace in Daniel, both of which were given “une interprétation sacrificielle, voire expiatoire” (Grappe 345) in ancient Jewish commentary. 4 Maccabees, which “insiste certes sur la destinée des martyrs qui a permis le salut d’Israël, procurant au peuple le pardon de ses péchés” (Grappe 349), is thus in close parallel with New Testament christology, which sees “une dimension expiatoire” (Grappe 354) in the death of Jesus. Indeed, Mark’s Jesus declares that the wine he shares at the Passover feast is “my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (14:24), a passage with vivid sacrificial overtones.

There are, however, some significant differences between the two accounts. Jesus is not as eager as the martyrs of 4 Maccabees to endure suffering. While the martyrs make bold and impassioned speeches declaring their lack of fear and their confidence in God - one of the brothers in fact throws himself into a brazier (12:19) - Jesus is “deeply grieved, even to death” (14:34), an emotional state which lends his apparently meek request for God to “remove this cup from me” (14:36) the tone of a plea. The martyrs seem barely affected by their torture - Eleazer seems “as though [he was] tortured in a dream” (6:5); one of the brothers declares “how sweet is any kind of death for the religion of our ancestors!” (9:29); their mother “did not shed tears” (15:20) when forced to watch her sons’ torture. Jesus, however, cries out in agonized protest to God from the cross. His cry of dereliction stands in stark contrast to the confidence of the martyrs of 4

Maccabees that “even if you remove my organ of speech, God hears also those who are mute” (4 Macc 10:18).

Another key difference is between the portraits of the forces acting against the heroes. King Antiochus is unambiguously evil, “bloodthirsty, murderous, and utterly abominable” (4 Macc 10:17) by the narrator’s own declaration, but Mark paints a slightly more ambivalent portrait of the people responsible for Jesus’ fate. As I will argue, the disciples in particular are depicted with some sympathy despite their failings - they are not entirely to blame for their misunderstanding and their abandonment of their teacher.

Finally, the element of sacrifice is not quite the same: its efficacy seems to be somewhat more in question in Mark than in 4 Maccabees. Frye acknowledges that there is an element of sacrifice in tragedy by characterizing the tragic hero as the *pharmakos* who suffers because of the sins of the world. Tragedy focuses on the necessary suffering of the *pharmakos* rather than the salvation or expiation that suffering achieves, and even asks whether such a sacrifice is just, whether such suffering is “worth it”. Grappe claims that the expiation of Jesus’ death is “assumé une fois pour toutes...Jesus Christ et ceux qui croient en lui sont...encore, désormais et à jamais, en communion avec Dieu” (Grappe 356), but the difficulty in Mark is that at the close of the plot the world does not in fact seem to enjoy this eternal communion with God; nearly everyone, in fact, has rejected it (the religious authorities), failed to reach it (the disciples and the political authorities), or fled from it in fear (the women at the tomb).

The political authorities

The political authorities - namely Herod and Pilate - form one group of characters that is portrayed with a surprising degree of sympathy. Despite Jesus' castigation of the Gentile leaders as "tyrants" at 10:42, Herod and Pilate are both portrayed as weak more than malevolent. Herod is "perplexed" at John the Baptist's teachings but nonetheless "liked to listen to him" (6:20); he is "deeply grieved" (6:26) when he is tricked into promising Herodias' daughter the Baptist's head on a plate. Pilate, likewise, is "amazed" at Jesus' silence in the face of accusation (15:5) and understands that the religious authorities persecute him out of "jealousy" (15:10). Both authority figures order an execution to please the crowd, "out of regard for...the guests" (6:26) or "wishing to satisfy the crowd" (15:15) - Herod cannot be foresworn in front of his court, and Pilate wishes to appease the crowd that has been stirred up to call for Jesus' crucifixion. In both cases the true fault lies with another character whose hatred or jealousy fuels homicidal intentions, but the authority in question is forced into complicity by their desire to please others.

Tolbert likens these authority figures to the thorny ground of Jesus' parable, where "the cares of the world" (4:18) prevent the word from taking root. In this, and in the authorities' apparent helplessness, there is the suggestion of tragedy: they clearly are not eager to send John and Jesus to their deaths, but are ironically trapped into doing so by their positions of "power" - it seems that the characters who are in a position to "lord it over" others are, in fact, ruled by others.

The disciples, especially Peter

The disciples are the other characters most frequently hailed as “round”, complex, and “realistic” (Malbon 1986, 104), for Mark’s characterization of them is one of peculiar ambivalence, both positive and negative. On one hand the disciples respond positively to Jesus by following him without question when he calls them (1:18, 1:20), obeying his instructions (4:35-36, 11:2-7, 14:13-16), and accompanying him almost wherever he goes, “despite storms, trips to the desert, corrections, warnings, and little or no praise or assurance of reward” (Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie 124). He selects them specifically as the ones to receive the secret of the kingdom of God (4:11), names them “apostles, to be with him” and sends them to preach and perform healings and exorcisms in his name (3:14-15, 6:7, 6:13, 9:14-29); with the exception of the epileptic child in 9:14-29, they succeed at this task (6:13). Jesus thus confers some of his authority on the disciples. A positive spin may even be put on their lack of understanding, which offers opportunities for Jesus to teach and act: “it was customary in material from that period which concerns a teacher and disciples for the disciples to ask questions and to perform actions which elicit instruction from the teacher. Indeed...it may be that much of that failure...is natural and implies no hostility towards the point of view represented by them” (Best 384). Jesus also makes it clear that some disciples, at least, will share in his death; he tells the sons of Zebedee that they will indeed drink of his cup and be baptized with his baptism (10:39).

On the other hand, however, the disciples misunderstand Jesus’ teachings, his actions, and his identity; they fail to understand his parables (4:13, 7:18), the import of

his sea miracles and the feedings of the multitudes (6:51-52, 8:4, 8:17-21), and the reality and necessity of his (and their) suffering (8:33, 9:32, 10:38-39). They are characterized as hard of heart (6:52), as concerned with money (10:23-26, 14:5, 14:11), with glory and the high regard of others (9:34, 9:37), as challenging and rebuking Jesus (4:38, 5:31, 6:37, 8:4, 8:32, 14:29) . Even if their lack of understanding affords Jesus the opportunity to teach both them and the reader, the disciples do not appear to benefit from this teaching, or even sometimes to hear it (e.g. their discussion of who is greatest immediately following the second passion prediction.) It is significant that these same characteristics are associated with the religious authorities, who challenge Jesus, are called hard of heart, and who “like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets” (12:38-39). They also share with the authorities the response of fear - they are afraid of the storm at sea, afraid at seeing Jesus walking on water, afraid to ask Jesus what he means by the second Passion prediction, afraid on the way to Jerusalem. Their error (as we have seen in the previous section) becomes more and more grievous, culminating in their betrayal, abandonment, and denial of Jesus. Jesus declares that the “secret of the kingdom of God” (4:11) has been given to his listeners, and that “those outside” will hear only parables. Scholars have long been troubled by Jesus’ apparent exclusion of “those outside” - he seems to tell parables “so that” they will not understand (Tolbert 160). Tolbert offers a solution to this problem by pointing out that Jesus is not only speaking to the disciples but to a large group of “those who were around him” (4:10); therefore

the division between those who are given the mystery, the insiders, and those who hear riddles, the outsiders, is not a simple opposition of disciples versus crowds; instead, it is an opposition of categories: those who do the will of God and those who do not, those who have ears to hear and those who do not...outsiders *will not* understand, *because they are outsiders*, and insiders *will* understand, *because they are insiders*. (Tolbert 160)

The disciples' continual misunderstandings, then, ironically identify them - not the crowds - as "those outside", despite Jesus' private explanations.

The gospel, however, holds out some hope for their forgiveness and their continued mission. Jesus, who as I have explained represents the normative values of the story, does not condemn them, and indeed predicts their eventual success. Despite his obvious disappointment ("Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial" (14:37-38)), Jesus does not condemn the disciples for their failure to "watch" in Gethsemane, but rather remarks that "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (14:38); this comment "suggests a basis within the narrative for excusing the disciples' behavior at the time of the arrest" (Dewey 1982, 98). Jesus predicts that the disciples will scatter like sheep at his arrest (14:27), but nonetheless promises to meet them in Galilee, a promise which is reiterated by the young man at the tomb (16:7) and implies that their "scattering" is forgiven - along with their hardness of heart, fear, and failure. The "apocalyptic" discourse of chapter 13 also implies that the disciples will have a continued role to play after Jesus' death (Dewey 1982, 98). Interestingly enough, as Best points out, not even Judas is excluded from this promise (Best 387) - although Peter's inclusion is perhaps more remarkable, since Judas is a mere agent; depending how one translates the messenger's words, he may invite "the

disciples, *even Peter*" (16:7, *my emphasis*) to join Jesus in Galilee. If such a translation can be credited, Peter appears to be the one whose inclusion is singled out as surprising.

As Dewey and others point out, the characterization of the disciples is not static but rather emerges and changes over the course of the narrative. Although the development of the disciples is revealed through action instead of internal psychological states, they do clearly progress from an initially positive portrait (generated by their call and commission) to a terribly negative one (generated by their betrayal, abandonment, and denial). Positive and negative notes are mixed throughout the story, however; the mention of Judas' betrayal at 3:19 is already "blatantly negative" (Tolbert 196), and the fulfillment at 16:7 of Jesus' promise at 14:28 suggests a final positive reversal.

What Mark achieved by this characterization - what its effect is on the reader - has long been a matter of debate. How should we respond to Mark's disciples? Is the reader directed to vilify them or identify with them? The major proponent of the disciples as opponents of Jesus has been T.J. Weeden, who argues that Mark's portrait of the disciples as "either obtuse, obdurate or inept" (Weeden 28) is inspired by a polemical attempt to discredit a historical group that clashed with the Christian community. In making this argument Weeden dismisses the initially positive reaction of the disciples and their election by Jesus, as well as the hopeful possibility offered by the unfulfilled prophecy of 14:28 - in his reading, the initial success of the disciples only makes their failure more appalling (Weeden 27). Tolbert's reading is also hard on the disciples; she argues that the gospel identifies the disciples as the "rocky ground", those who receive the word with joy but whose faith withers away as soon as "trouble or persecution arises" (Mk 4:17).

Dewey cites Tannehill as one source of a near-total positive identification with the disciples. Tannehill argues that the reader “will identify most easily and immediately with characters who seem to share the reader’s situation. Assuming that the majority of the first readers of the Gospel were Christians, they would relate most easily and immediately to characters in the story who respond positively to Jesus” (Tannehill 392). The disciples are the only major characters - that is, characters whose presence is sustained throughout the story - who respond positively to Jesus, at least at first. Thus when Mark’s portrait of the disciples takes a turn towards the negative, the readers, while repelled, still maintain a level of identification, “for there are similarities between the problems of the disciples and problems which the first readers faced” (Tannehill 393). Such a perspective, while it does acknowledge the tension between positive and negative in Mark’s portrayal of the disciples, is still not entirely accurate. Boomershine, for example, takes a similar position and describes the disciples’ vehement protests that they will remain faithful unto death at 14:29-31 as the “high water mark of the sympathetic characterization of Peter and the disciples” (Boomershine 311). Tolbert rightly disagrees: “The ideal reader identifies with Jesus.... The ideal reader evaluates people and situations from the standpoint of the hero, Jesus. When Jesus favors the disciples, so does the reader; when Jesus despairs over the disciples, so does the reader” (Tolbert, quoted in Dewey 1982, 98). I would side with Dewey, however, in her assessment of the reader’s identification as *dual* - as sympathetic to both the disciples and to Jesus. Jesus sets the normative values of the story, but “Tannehill still has a point: the situation of the implied reader is similar to that of the disciples, not to that of Jesus” (Dewey 1982, 99).

Jesus often speaks to the reader, as it were, over the disciples' shoulders: when Jesus is alone with the disciples, the reader is present too, and overhears teachings and warnings; teachings are sometimes addressed to "whoever", or to "anyone" - "let anyone with ears to hear listen" (4:9), "if any want to become my followers..." (8:34), "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35) - and this general term may include the reader (Malbon 1986, 25). The reader is also told to "watch" alongside the disciples - "and what I say to you I say to all" (13:37) - and then, like the disciples, is present to "watch" with Jesus in Gethsemane, and in fact succeeds in staying awake and witnessing Jesus' anguish, while the disciples fail. There are instances, in fact, where the reader is only slightly better off than the disciples in understanding what they hear - the reader knows that Jesus is not talking about "having no bread" (8:17) when he mentions the yeast of the Pharisees, but what exactly he *does* mean is something of a mystery, as is the significance of the numbers of baskets of leftovers, which Jesus seems to imply should lead to understanding: "do you not yet understand?" (8:21). There is also one striking parenthetical remark directed straight at the reader: "let the reader understand" (13:14). Other parenthetical remarks have been in the narrator's voice, explaining Jewish customs (7:3-4, 7:19) but the comment at 13:14 appears in the middle of Jesus' discourse. Presumably this is the narrator's voice putting in a parenthetical appearance, but the lack of any marker to indicate such a shift in voice has the arresting effect of having Jesus address the reader directly. The "desolating sacrilege" underscored by this address, however, remains obscure in its meaning. Jesus demands directly that the reader

understand - but the reader, or at least certainly the modern reader, remains puzzled, even if she is moved to dread by the passage's tone of dire warning.

For Dewey, the two sides of this dual identification occur on two different levels. The reader accepts Jesus as the authority on how one *should* go about following him, but she also accepts the disciples as mimetic models of the lived experience of following Jesus:

The placing of the implied reader side by side with the disciples suggests that s/he should compare him/herself to the disciples. But it is not a question of the implied reader emulating the disciples' behavior; rather both the disciples and the implied reader are to live according to the behavior demanded by Jesus. So while the situation of the implied reader is that of the disciples, the criteria by which s/he is to be judged derive from Jesus (and the omniscient narrator). (Dewey 1982, 103)

This dual identification is another source of *pathos* in Mark's gospel. To return to Boomershine's example of the disciples' protests of loyalty at 14:29-31, Tolbert rightly disagrees with Boomershine's interpretation on the grounds that we find *Jesus'* promise authoritative, not that of the disciples, who have already established a pattern of thickheadedness such that their promises to remain faithful are immediately suspect. Despite the fact that her knowledge discredits the disciple's claims, however, the reader understands that the disciples do not *intend* to betray Jesus (with the exception of Judas, who "began to look for an opportunity to betray him" (14:11)); Mark presents them as misguided but nonetheless zealous. At 14:29-31 they have every confident intention of following Jesus into death; the reader simply knows better - her position of privileged knowledge casts the disciples' boasts in an ironic light. One wonders whether this might

be a classic case of *ἄμαρτία*, in the sense of a mistake which, in that it is made out of ignorance, generates only ambiguous guilt. Tolbert's convincing identification of the disciples with the metaphorical "rocky ground" reinforces such an interpretation, as does the ironic characterization of the disciples as "those outside" who will hear only riddles: the implication of such typology is that the disciples were bound by their nature to fail and could not have done otherwise.¹⁶ Although Tolbert insists that "Mark is not high tragedy" (Tolbert 159n), she sees that the depiction of "the pitiable and fearful experiences of failure to bear fruit" may create a "popularized, diminished form of catharsis" (Tolbert 159) in its audience: "as the characters interact and the plot moves toward its inevitable climax, the audience can begin to understand the 'fatal flaws' that propel the scribes and the Pharisees, the disciples, Herod, and the rich man to their various unproductive ends" (Tolbert 159).

The reader's relationship with the disciples (superior in knowledge, but in a similar relationship with Jesus, and not encouraged to condemn them) suggests, I think, that we can legitimately identify with the disciples in an empathetic way, particularly when their strong emotions are revealed in an intimate way (i.e. Peter's weeping, which allows us access to his thoughts). Particularly given the sense of inevitability that surrounds the disciples' misunderstanding and Peter's own distress at his failure, the form of this identification would be more accurately called *pity* or "fearful anticipation" (Tannehill 391) than straightforward moral approval or condemnation.

¹⁶ Tolbert's identification of Herod and Pilate as the "thorny ground" has a similar effect; the parable typifies them, suggesting that it is their nature to react as they do - with desire to please the crowds - and that they are powerless to do otherwise.

One feature of the disciples that draws the reader closer is the use of proper names: Peter, for example, is represented as an individual. I use Peter as an example because he repeatedly and memorably emerges from the more amorphous group of the “twelve”. He is clearly representative of the disciples as a whole - he sometimes speaks for them (e.g. 10:28, 14:29), and once Jesus rebukes him for a more collective fault (“Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?” (14:37)¹⁷; the narrator, however, has just remarked that Jesus “found *them* sleeping” (14:37, *my emphasis*)). In terms of traits, Peter does not stand out from the disciples as a group. But unlike the authorities, who appear as faceless, disapproving groups, the disciples are allowed Peter as an individual representative. If we are to speak of the reader “identifying” with a character, she will more easily identify with the specific actions of a single individual as more closely imitative of lived experience. Peter becomes a kind of disciple *par excellence*, whose actions represent both the zenith and the nadir of the disciples’

¹⁷ Commentary has made much of the “nickname” Peter and Jesus’ use of Peter’s proper name, Simon, at 14:37. Fowler sees the name Peter as deeply ironic, for the “rock” is no rock at all, and Jesus addressing him as Simon emphasizes his failure to live up to the name Jesus gave him (Fowler 181). Fowler is perhaps reading through Matthew’s interpretation of “Peter” (“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Mt. 16:18)), but the possible double meaning of “rock” (steadfast or thickheaded) is undoubtedly an irony in Mark. Tolbert suggests that the name “Peter” underscores Peter’s typological status as the parable’s rocky ground (Tolbert 145), and, like Fowler, believes Jesus’ reversion to addressing Peter as Simon underscores the initial possibility of “Simon”’s success as contrasted with “Peter”’s eventual failure (Tolbert 216). Merenlahti argues that Jesus’ supposed reversion to calling Peter “Simon” is in fact the only time Jesus addresses Peter as anything; what is remarkable is not Jesus addressing Peter as Simon but Jesus addressing Peter personally (Merenlahti 73-74). I would contend, however, that the reader still finds the name “Simon” jarring after the narrator’s consistent use of “Peter” - the effects of emphasis and personal address remain.

collective relationship to Jesus - Peter acts these out in, respectively, his identification of Jesus as *christos* (8:29) and his threefold denial of Jesus (14:54-72). The others never make such explicit affirmations and denials.

To use another example, Peter acts as a spokesperson for the group in saying that “even though all become deserters, I will not...even though I must die with you, I will not deny you” (14:29, 14:31), for “all of them said the same” (14:31). This avowal sets the scene for Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s denial, a specific and individual elaboration on the theme of the disciples all fleeing. The disciples as a group scatter and flee in a single, simple sentence; Peter, by contrast, as an individual, follows Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, falters in the face of accusations, and breaks down weeping upon realizing what he has done. The young man’s direction for the women to speak to “the disciples, and [even?] Peter, and tell him...” (16:7) also reinforces Peter’s position as first among the disciples - both in their faith and their failure.

Peter weeping in the courtyard of the high priest is one of the most heartbreakingly sympathetic and startlingly intimate moments of the gospel. Peter’s individuality is suddenly pronounced; Burnett suggests that Peter shades from a typical figure into a full-fledged, rounded character in this scene. Tolbert points out, however, that sorrow at the recognition of failure is not necessarily indicative of willingness to “turn again and be forgiven” (4:12) - the rich man, for example, goes away grieving, but does not return (Tolbert 218). Within the strict limits of the plot, Peter’s tears remain somewhat ambiguous. Do they in fact represent repentance and a change of heart?

Even if Tolbert is correct in likening Peter's tears to the rich man's sorrow, it seems to me that there is something tragic in the situation of Peter and the rich man alike. Each is eager to follow Jesus - Peter leaves his nets without question when Jesus calls, and the rich man questions him in faith ("Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17)) - and each is on the right path; Peter is one of the only characters to correctly identify Jesus, and Jesus tells the rich man that he lacks only "one thing" (10:21). Jesus offers approval to each: Peter is invited to meet Jesus in Galilee, and Jesus "loved" the rich man. Neither Peter nor the rich man, however, can live up to Jesus' standards. Peter denies him, and the narrative leaves him sobbing in the high priest's courtyard; the rich man, unable to give up his "many possessions", departs in sorrow. If Tolbert is correct and these characters display change of state (from ignorance to knowledge) without a change of type (from fearful to faithful), their failure becomes not only inevitable, given their lack of privileged knowledge, but *final*. Even when the narrator gives the reader knowledge these characters lack, it is difficult to condemn characters that Jesus "loves" and seems to forgive. The reader regrets that these initially positive characters cannot follow through; she *pities* them. The promises of Jesus that extend beyond the plot, however, still afford some hope that the finality of their failure may be reversed.

One very important effect of the reader's identification with and pity of the disciples is that it is impressed upon the reader that the experience of the disciples might be her own. The world of the disciples and the world of the reader are made to be one and the same - the reader recognizes and appropriates the disciples' situation as that

which faces any would-be follower of Jesus. That the failure of the disciples is at least somewhat sympathetic also makes it clear that discipleship is a terribly daunting task; one may fail abysmally despite the best and most zealous of intentions. After hearing Mark's account, the reader could only take up such a cross with fear and trembling.

Minor characters - "little people"

Rhoads and Michie coined the term "little people" in the first edition of their book, borrowing it from Jesus' reference to "these little ones [τῶν μικρῶν τούτων] who believe in me" (9:42), to describe the minor characters who emerge from the crowd to accost Jesus and then fade back into the crowd, never to appear again. These characters are, for the most part, positive examples of faith and what it can accomplish - typically, they hear about Jesus and seek him out, certainly a "more encouraging" response (Malbon 1986, 115) than that of other groups in the story. In the more elaborate episodes, these characters must persist in their petition for healing, despite discouragement, until Jesus responds by commending them for their faith and granting their request. In some cases the character does not even speak to Jesus - the action of the woman who anoints him in Simon the leper's house prompts the anger of others but the strong approval of Jesus; in the unique case of the poor widow in 12:41-43, the character does not even notice Jesus, much less speak to him, but her quietly self-sacrificing act of giving her whole living (12:44) is nonetheless observed and singled out by him for positive comment. They are largely anonymous, with a few exceptions such as Simon of Cyrene, Jairus, or Simon the leper, a condition which suggests humility; their faith is not born of desire for praise or glory - though ironically it is these anonymous characters who are singled out for

remembrance through the ages (e.g. the anointing woman in Simon the leper's house, of whom Jesus says "wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (14:9)).

The audience is encouraged to sympathize and to some degree identify with these characters. Jesus' responses indicate that they are not only to be praised, but also *pitied*, a response which can be further prompted by a surprisingly detailed and drawn-out descriptions of the character's plight (as in the cases of the hemorrhaging woman (5:25-26), the Gerasene demoniac (5:2-5), or the epileptic child (9:21-22)). Even when they are not described so exhaustively, the situations of the characters who seek Jesus' aid are desperate; they are sick, crippled, or possessed, or else parents of children so afflicted. Their ailments (leprosy, hemorrhage, possession) sometimes render them "unclean" and marginalized, isolated from both God and society. Even the rich man is seeking "eternal life" (10:17). Their situations are often inherently fraught with emotion - for example, what person, ancient or modern, could not identify with a distraught parent? Once again, the reader's sympathy for these characters - her *identification* with them - implies a recognition of their situation, a continuity between the world of the little people and the world beyond the text. Their suffering is not completely unknown to the reader. These pitiable situations, however, are met with Jesus' sympathetic and miraculous response, which implies God's sympathetic "hearing" of the petitioner's plea; for the little people who seek Jesus out in faith, comedy prevails over the tragedy of their afflictions. This in turn suggests that comedy may prevail over tragic suffering in the world of the reader, as well.

I will proceed to examine some specific examples of this group of characters.

This list is not exhaustive - some characters are used as agents or straightforward plot devices (e.g. the paralytic and the man with the withered hand prompt controversies with the Pharisees in chapters 2 and 3) and others serve as models for faith and, in this faith, as metaphorical foils for the authorities and disciples (e.g. the healings of the blind and deaf at 7:31-37 and 8:22-26 are commonly recognized as metaphorical commentary on the disciples' blindness and deafness, their lack of eyes to see and ears to hear; Bartimaeus, who cries out for Jesus to heal his blindness and then follows Jesus on the way, is a positive example of discipleship). Still others make "cameo" appearances where they are mentioned but do not participate dramatically in the story (e.g. Simon of Cyrene). I believe that all the little people who make a dramatic appearance fall into the paradigm of the tragic situation made comic by Jesus' intervention, but I will only make further comments on a few that I believe to be of special significance or interest in establishing that theme.

** The leper*

The exchange between Jesus and the leper at 1:40-45 is brief, and I include it chiefly to point out the nature of Jesus' response to the leper's plea. Jesus - the gospel's normative perspective - looks at the leper and is "moved with pity" (1:41). This first healing sets the tone for both Jesus' response and the reader's to the supplicants who follow. The tone of these healings, which become the subject of controversy, also lends the Pharisees' "hardness of heart" a nuance of lacking compassion, in addition to

stubborn lack of faith; they are, for example, more concerned with strict adherence to laws concerning the Sabbath than they are for the man with the withered hand (3:1-5).

** Jairus*

As discussed in the previous chapter, Jairus' status as leader of a synagogue places him among the religious authorities, although his emergence from the crowd and his plea for Jesus to heal his daughter are typical of the role of a "little one". I find it significant, in fact, that Jairus is an authority acting in this capacity. Jairus, despite his position, approaches Jesus in the same way as any other supplicant; he approaches him not as a leader but as the desperate parent of a sick child ("[he] fell at [Jesus'] feet and begged him repeatedly..." (5:22-23)). Not only does Jairus serve as an exception to the enmity of the religious authorities, he demonstrates that status does not provide immunity to suffering - nor to faith.

** The woman with the hemorrhage*

The woman with the hemorrhage is drawn particularly close to the reader. Her ailment is described in some detail – it has lasted twelve years without responding to the many treatments she has "endured" (5:26), "and she was no better, but rather grew worse" (5:26). The episode is also "focalized" partly through her point of view; the narrator reveals what she is doing when neither Jesus nor the disciples are aware of it (Jesus has to ask who touched his clothes, and the disciples have no answer) and even explains her reasoning ("for she said, 'if I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.'" (5:28)). Despite her "fear and trembling" (5:33) at being discovered, the woman tells Jesus "the

whole truth” (5:33); he in turn characterizes her actions as those of faith (“your faith has made you well” (5:34)).

Malbon, citing Marla Schierling, notes that “the hemorrhaging woman has suffered as Jesus: ‘Only here and in relation to Jesus is the word ‘suffering’ ...ever mentioned.... Mark recognizes the suffering of this woman in society as similar to that which Jesus experienced before his death’” (Malbon, *Fallible Followers*, 36). Given the connection between the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus’ daughter (their stories are intercalated, and linked by the number twelve (the girl’s age and the number of years the hemorrhaging woman has suffered)) might we extend this similarity in suffering to the girl as well, who is restored to life just as Jesus promises to be “raised” himself? This is far from conclusive evidence, but I find it suggestive; is Jesus’ suffering unique, or a paradigm of what happens to the faithful in an evil world governed by a “faithless generation”? But if this parallel is sound, then the healing of the hemorrhaging woman and the resurrection of Jairus’ daughter serve as comic echoes which reinforce Jesus’ promise that he will be “raised up”.

* *The Syrophenician woman*

This episode is remarkable because the Syrophenician woman’s daughter is the only person Jesus refuses - at least initially - to heal. It is also remarkable because the Syrophenician woman appears to “win” the $\chi\rho\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$ -like exchange, for Jesus relents: “For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter” (7:29). It is difficult to construe the tone of the exchange - is Jesus testing the woman’s faith? Or is he in fact persuaded to change his mind by her *logon*? - but one thing that is striking in the context

of tragedy and comedy in the gospel is that the Syrophenician woman accepts Jesus' harsh characterization of her relationship to God; even her rejoinder portrays her (and, presumably, other Gentiles) as a dog eating crumbs that happen to fall her way (7:28).

This is strongly expressive of a terrible distance between the Syrophenician woman and God's miraculous actions - a distance that is bridged when Jesus hears her plea.

* *The father of the epileptic child*

Like the hemorrhaging woman, the epileptic child's plight is described in some detail: he has for many years been possessed by a demon that tries to destroy him (9:22). The difference here is in a slightly more ambivalent evaluation of the father, for unlike many of the other little ones, his faith is imperfect: his plea is prefaced by the doubtful "if you are able to do anything" (9:22). Jesus insists that "all things can be done for the one who believes" (9:23), and the father's desperation is palpable in his "immediate" cry of "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:24).

What is interesting about this episode is that Jesus responds even to such imperfect and conflicted belief. It is also interesting to me that the father's plea is for Jesus to "have pity on us and help us" (9:22), which Jesus apparently consents to do; the father's cry is already fraught with emotion and highly sympathetic, but Jesus' response to it further suggests to the reader that pity is the appropriate response. The father's cry is further reminiscent of the disciples' attempt at faith and, indeed, "has been justly celebrated through the centuries as the condition of most of humanity" (Tolbert 188).

** The women at the tomb*

Just as Jairus stands as an overlap between the authorities and the little ones, so too do these women stand at an intersection of the disciples and the little ones. Like the little ones, they emerge out of the crowd without any previous appearances; like the disciples, however, they are said in an analepsis to have “followed” Jesus in Galilee (15:41). Like the anonymous woman in Simon the leper’s house, they have come to anoint Jesus’ body. Opinion is divided about how their intentions should be evaluated. Some, like Weeden, believe that this represents a misunderstanding on the women’s part, for the anonymous woman’s anointing has already prepared him for burial; others, such as Malbon, argue that the women would not have been expected to know about that anointing, since their presence was not mentioned at the time (Malbon, *Fallible Followers*, 44), and that their actions are therefore a positive display of faith and devotion. Everyone agrees, however, that it is a terrible failure and a very negative development when the women run from the empty tomb in fear and “said nothing to anyone” (16:8), “either as an element that seals the disciples’ failure (the disciples never hear the news) or as a parallel to the disciples’ fallibility (the women never tell the news)” (Malbon, *Fallible Followers*, 44).

Comparing characters

It is illuminating to consider how these characters and groups of characters compare with one another. Such comparison is a standard operation of the reader’s evaluation of character, as I have mentioned, and this is especially true of Mark, given his establishment of Jesus as embodying the normative values of the gospel. It is in fact by

measuring other characters against Jesus' example that the reader formulates an evaluation of these characters' moral status in the text. Further, Mark often encourages such comparisons by means of devices such as intercalation and parallelism that - as discussed in the previous chapter - forge implicit connections between episodes and juxtapositions between characters.

It is brought to the reader's attention that both the disciples and the authorities, for instance, fall short of Jesus' example through similar failings. Despite their initial differences - the disciples follow Jesus immediately, while the scribes question in their hearts - they are given many of the same negative characteristics: "hardness of heart" hinders the understanding of both parties; both disciples and authorities respond to Jesus in fear; both groups contribute to his downfall. Both groups appear anxious for worldly glory and prestige - the disciples ask Jesus for it, while Jesus accuses the authorities of using theirs hypocritically (8:38-40). Both groups lack compassion and "lord it over" others, the authorities using Jesus' healings to accuse him and the disciples turning children away from Jesus (Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, 121, 126).

The disciples are also contrasted with the "little people", whose faith-inspired healings and requests to follow Jesus provide frequent foils for or metaphorical commentary on the disciples' lack of faith. The hemorrhaging woman, for instance, is certain that she will be healed if she touches Jesus' clothes; the disciples, by contrast, can't believe that he is asking who touched him with a crowd pressing in all around (5:31). We may further note, however, that the disciples and the little people have very different relationships with Jesus. Jesus calls the disciples, at which they leave

everything behind to follow him, as Peter protests at 10:28. The little people, in desperation, seek him out. The little people are far more successful in their faith than the disciples, but the disciples seem to have been given the more difficult task: the little people have nothing more to lose, and Jesus asks nothing of them. They are driven to belief by their suffering; all other alternatives, if they existed, have been exhausted. To be a disciple, by contrast, means not only abandoning one's livelihood, but indeed even one's life. I find it suggestive of tragedy when faith appears all but impossible except for those in "limit situations", those who have exhausted every other hope and are close to despair. The cares of the world prove overwhelming of the possibility of faith in every other character - whether Satan snatches it from them, or it withers from lack of soil, or thorns choke it out. It seems, indeed, that only the very least may be first among Jesus' followers; but Jesus' *commission of discipleship* does not go to them.

Conclusion

Mark's characters, then, reinforce the inevitability of the plot and contribute to its ambivalent position between comedy and tragedy by generating fear and pity but also the promise of joy and celebration. The narrative also suggests, through placing the reader side by side with some of its characters (especially the disciples), that these tragic dilemmas will face the reader as well - the continuity of the gospel world with the reader's assures the reader that, whether the outcome of the story is finally comic or tragic, the world may well present the reader with the same situation.

SUMMARY: Effects of tragedy and comedy in Mark

I have shown in the last two chapters how Mark's plot and characters function to bring both tragic and comic effects to bear on the reader, threatening one outcome while at the same time promising the other. The reader experiences fear and pity at Jesus' cruel fate and at the inevitable, yet often unintentional failure of the other characters to live up to his example. She is also allowed hope and joy, however, at Jesus' miraculous healings, his promises of reconciliation and restoration, and his resurrection. What, then, is the effect of the tension between these two experiences of the text?

Tannehill proposes that the effect of the reader's identification with the fallible disciples is self-examination and self-criticism, which leads her to repentance and self-correction (Tannehill 393). As Tolbert puts it, the reader is encouraged to "respond by becoming *a better disciple*" (Tolbert 224). I believe that the tension between tragic and comic produces a similar result: it is up to the reader, finally, to appropriate and complete the story in her own world, forging the "rest of the story" that Mark does not provide. She may abandon the *euangelion* to fear and silence, perpetuating its tragedy, or she may prove to be the one, at long last, who has ears to hear and in whom the word bears fruit "thirty and sixty and a hundredfold" (4:20).

The reader, after all, has stayed awake with Jesus in Gethsemane; she hears the message of the *neaniskos* along with the three women at the tomb. When the women flee

at the gospel's close, it leaves the reader as the sole witness to the enduring possibility of a comic story. The plot has shown her that Jesus' fate was inevitable, and the characters are piteous in their unintentional but predictable failure of him; these same elements also promise, however, that all is not lost. Jesus' resurrection was also inevitable; those that fail may be forgiven, and those that suffer may be healed. The reader's identification with the characters - the disciples and the little people in particular - suggests that the gospel world, so hopelessly isolated from God, is in fact the reader's own. The promise of reconciliation offered in the gospel, then, makes it possible for the reader to follow Jesus in hope, but she must take up a cross to do so, and she must carry it in fear and trembling - fear both of the suffering she will inevitably face and of her own very real potential for failure.

This effect, however, is dependent on the reader's perception of comic and tragic possibilities in the gospel. As I will show in the following chapter, such possibilities have not always been evident to readers of Mark.

CHAPTER 4: Matthew and others reading Mark

I have sought to demonstrate in the last two chapters how Mark's plot and characters create the effect of both comic and tragic possibilities, and to demonstrate how these possibilities are held in unresolved tension by ambiguities in plot (the ending) and character (ambivalent characterization of the disciples and some minor characters in particular). I have discussed how this tension might affect a reader by compelling *her* to appropriate and complete the story in her own world.

The question that remains is: is this in fact the way Mark was received by more contemporary readers? I have stated that the tragic effect is dependent upon audience and therefore inevitably relative, and I have gauged the tragic and comic effects of Mark upon a 21st century reader such as myself, although I have tried to keep first century conventions in view; did early readers of Mark have the same experience of the text? If not, how was their experience different, and why?

To explore these questions, I will turn to the Gospel of Matthew and the fragmentary comments of Papias as preserved by Eusebius, both of which record actual, relatively contemporary, and highly influential readings of Mark, despite their greatly differing lengths and forms.¹⁸ I will discuss the question of what effect Mark might have

¹⁸ I assume here the "two-source" theory, which posits that Matthew used Mark and another source, "Q", in composing his gospel.

had on Matthew and Papias to provoke the reactions they expressed in their respective texts; I will also discuss what effect these readings had, in turn, on later readings of Mark.

The Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew has a very different effect on a reader from that of Mark, despite Matthew's use of much of the same material. While I will not go into Matthew's plot and character as exhaustively as I did Mark's, I will note some places where Matthew's narrative is clearly different from Mark's and how this changes Mark's balance of tragedy and comedy. I will then ask why Matthew would have seen fit to make these changes, and finally explore the effect of Matthew's rewriting on the generations of gospel readers that came after him.

Matthew's plot

One of the most obvious differences in Matthew's arrangement of events is the insertion of a great deal of new material. Some of this material appears at the opening of the narrative, offering Jesus' genealogy and stories about his birth and childhood. Matthew thus extends his plot beyond the limits of Mark. He also emphasizes perhaps more heavily than Mark that the *story* extends beyond the beginning and ending of the *plot*. Matthew is more frequent and explicit in pointing out Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and his genealogy of Jesus explicitly makes Jesus' story that of the entire biblical salvation history, beginning with Abraham. Like Mark, Matthew uses eschatological discourse to make it clear that Jesus' story extends forward into the end of the age; as I will discuss in a moment, however, Matthew's revision of Mark's ending makes this extension more pronounced and less ambiguous. The effect of these

extensions, in summary, is to make the “rest of the story” inhere much more closely in Matthew’s plot than it does in Mark’s.

Matthew also adds a substantial amount of “sayings” material, delivered by Jesus in direct discourse. This material is remarkable for the amount of “discourse time” it spends on Jesus’ teaching, effectively halting the progress of the plot for the duration of his speech (Powell 194). Matera, for one, labels the Sermon on the Mount as a “satellite” event, thematically significant but not necessary in terms of the causal logic of the narrative (Matera 238). Weber argues that this position is “paradoxical” (Weber 421n.) and that “it seems improbable that a discourse so important in exemplifying Jesus’ chief activity...would make no contribution to advancing the plot” (Weber 421n.); the Sermon, according to Weber, can be seen as “making an essential contribution to advancing the plot in demonstrating thoroughness and faithfulness of Jesus’ pursuit of his mission to Israel, helping to ground the reader’s horror at Israel’s subsequent rejection” (Weber 421).

I find this argument unconvincing, however, in that it does not account for the unusual amount of direct speech and discourse time expended on the content of Jesus’ teachings; it seems an improbably circumspect way to characterize Jesus and his mission. Like Mark’s more selectively expansive teaching material, Matthew’s sayings and sermons function more to shed thematic light on other events and characters in the gospel (particularly the negative reactions of the religious authorities - the repeated image of trees bearing fruit, for instance (Mt. 7:16-20, Mt.12:33)) than as events in themselves. I would argue, in fact, that the inclusion of this new material slows Matthew’s pace

somewhat from the urgent pace of Mark's gospel; there are still conflicts, which still develop, but the focus of Matthew's discourse is divided between these conflicts and the teachings of Jesus.

This is particularly true of the conflict between Jesus and the disciples, which, while still present, is distinctly muted in Matthew as compared to Mark. Jesus still expresses exasperation at their lack of understanding (Mt. 14:31, Mt. 16:9-11) and their dramatic failure to follow Jesus into persecution and death is preserved from Mark. In Matthew, however, we do see the disciples' failure used by the evangelist as an opportunity for Jesus to offer explanations or teachings. When the disciples misunderstand Jesus' warning against the "leaven" of the Pharisees, for example, Matthew's Jesus rebukes them just as he does in Mark, but unlike in Mark's version, the enigmatic reference to the loaves from the feeding of the multitudes is omitted and the disciples appear to understand: "Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Mt 16:12). The disciples' recognition of Jesus' identity is not nearly so qualified as in Mark; in Matthew's account, nothing appears to suggest that Peter's confession is faulty - indeed, Jesus praises him for it ("Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (Mt 16:17)). While Mark's disciples wonder "who then is this?" when Jesus walks on water, Matthew's disciples respond by worshiping him as Son of God (Mt 14:33). The disciples also receive unambiguous promises of glory and prestige in the coming Kingdom - Peter, for example, is declared to be the foundation, the "rock", of the church (Mt 16:18). The audacity of the

Sons of Zebedee in asking for positions of glory is somewhat downplayed by Matthew attributing the request to their mother; the two disciples appear to be complicit with the request, but do not transgress the values of the narrative as directly as they do in Mark. In any case, the thickheaded and offensive qualities of the request are suppressed by Jesus' apparent acceptance of it - the disciples are promised that "when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Mt 19:28). Mark, too, promises the continuation of the disciples' positions and mission, but it is the promise of continued opportunity rather than the promise of final success that Matthew seems to offer, and Mark's promise stands in severe tension with the actual ending of his gospel.

The conflict with the religious authorities, on the other hand, is if anything intensified from Mark's portrayal of it. Part of this intensification stems from Matthew's slightly different development of the conflict; it is perhaps more linear than in Mark, closer to the rising-and-falling model given by Beck. As Kingsbury notes, Matthew does not mention the deadly conspiracy of the authorities as early as Mark does (Kingsbury 1992, 349). The action escalates in much the same way, moving from the scribes' questioning among themselves at 9:3 to indirect attack through the disciples at 12:2 and 15:2 to open questioning of Jesus' authority at 21:23, but it is only at 12:14 that Matthew's religious authorities begin to conspire against Jesus' life, and this forms a new peak in the tension between Jesus and the religious authorities. Mark makes it clear from the beginning that the stakes of this conflict will be life and death; Matthew, however, builds up to that point (Kingsbury 351). The effect is a plot of "narrowing possibility"

(Chatman, quoted in Matera 239) where “possibility turns to inevitability...because time runs out” (Matera 239).

Perhaps the most glaring difference between the plots of Matthew and Mark, however, is in the ending. While Mark, as we have seen, leaves his ending open and ambivalent, Matthew narrates the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to meet the disciples in Galilee. Matthew ends not with the women’s silent flight but with the risen Jesus’ comforting declaration to the remaining eleven of the Twelve: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). Matthew ends with reconciliation instead of a conflicted and unfulfilled promise.

Powell argues that Matthew’s ending does not in fact provide much more closure than that of Mark. This, too, is what Magness termed a “suspended ending”, for the gospel ends by setting the scene for a new mission and new conflicts: “even at first blush, Matt 28.16-20 reads more like a new beginning than an ending: it initiates goals and conflicts that remain unresolved within this story” (Powell 191). This argument, I think, rests on a confusion of plot and story; just as Matthew did not need to narrate the entirety of biblical history since Abraham in order to bring it to bear on his gospel, neither does he need to narrate the entire career of the church “to the end of the age”. He has brought the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection to a close; the story of the church, while explicitly connected to the one narrated in the Gospel by Jesus’ closing instructions, remains another story - or perhaps another chapter in the larger story of salvation history.

Matters of closure aside, Matthew’s gospel clearly does not end in ambivalence or doubt. Matthew includes Jesus’ cry of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

(Mt 27:46), but ameliorates this expression of despair almost immediately by having apocalyptic portents accompany Jesus' death: "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (Mt 27:51-52). These prodigies demonstrate clearly that God has *not* abandoned Jesus - God is in fact powerfully and dramatically present at the time of his death, so much so that it prompts the terrified confession of several onlookers that "Truly, this man was God's Son!" (Mt 27:54). Not only this, but the note struck by the last chapter is unmistakably positive: the disciples are reunited with Jesus, who promises to be "with" them (and, implicitly, the reader) for all time. The conflict with the religious authorities is not resolved, for they still refuse to believe and spread deceptive stories (Mt 28:11-15), but Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection represent a decisive victory over their persecution; it is only a final irony that the authorities refuse to acknowledge their loss of the *agon*. The mission of the disciples is now turned to "all nations" (Mt 28:19) with Jesus' authority and presence suggesting a positive future for this mission, despite the tribulations promised in chapter 24.

Matthew's characters

Matthew's changes to the plot of Mark are complemented by differences in his characters. Matthew's characters, even more than Mark's, are stereotypical, unambiguous, and "flat"; the protagonists are more clearly sympathetic, the antagonists more clearly alienating and diabolical. There are no longer any exceptions, for example, to the hostility of the authorities - as I noted in the previous chapter, Jairus is now only a

“leader” instead of a synagogue leader; the scribe who asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment asks the question “to test him” (Mt 22:35), and the exchange becomes another agonistic *χρεῖα* instead of a dialogue - the scribe neither praises nor is praised by Jesus (Malbon 1989, 280n.); and Joseph of Arimathea is now a “rich man” with no connection to the religious authorities implied. While the characterization of the authorities as self-serving, materialistic, and deceitful is preserved from Mark, Matthew’s Jesus further castigates the authorities as “evil” (Mt. 9:4, Mt. 12:34-35, Mt. 15:4, Mt. 22:18); evil is, in fact, “the root characteristic” of the authorities and Satan alike (Bauer 364). What little hope Mark offered for this group disappears in Matthew’s gospel - the authorities are hopelessly, monolithically evil, and their final ‘cover-up’ of the resurrection suggests that they remain so “to this day” (Mt 28:15).

The disciples, meanwhile, appear in a much more positive light in Matthew than they did in Mark. While Jesus expresses exasperation at their failure to understand, he also expresses confidence in their ability to understand and persevere in the future. When asked why he speaks in parables, Matthew’s Jesus contrasts the understanding of the disciples with the incomprehension of the crowd (“blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (Mt 13:16)); Mark, however, appears to use the same occasion to ironically suggest that the disciples, though they have been given the secret of the Kingdom, miss it entirely (4:11-12). As noted above, the disciples do learn from Jesus’ rebukes in Matthew - after Jesus expresses his frustration at their lack of understanding, the disciples finally do understand (Mt 16:12). Even in Matthew’s disciples’ most grievous moments of error, there may be grounds to excuse or at least understand them;

Peter's rebuke, for which Jesus calls him Satan, is in Matthew's version a spontaneous outcry of horror at the terrible fate Jesus has predicted for himself. Mark offers no such sympathetic detail. Even Judas is portrayed in a slightly more positive light than in Mark, for he commits suicide out of remorse after betraying Jesus; if we added this detail alone to Mark it would only strengthen the tragic current of that gospel, but in Matthew's context it shows Judas to be less diabolical than the religious authorities, who gave him money in the first place and then callously turn away from his repentance: "[Judas] said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself'" (Mt 27:4). The reader is encouraged to feel some compassion for Judas by the negative example of the authorities. In Mark, by contrast, Judas is an "agent" who is not characterized at all, not even to show a clear motive for his actions.

Despite this more positive portrayal and thus greater degree of reader sympathy, the disciples are also somewhat further removed from the reader in terms of identification. In Mark the disciples and the readers alike may strive to be candidates for "those for whom [an exalted position] has been prepared" (10:40), but in Matthew these positions are already vouchsafed for the disciples; the reader does not yet share this prestige. The disciples are still closer to the reader's situation than Jesus, but Matthew's disciples are somewhat elevated from the reader, particularly because of their clear redemption at the end of the gospel. The disciples have proven that it is difficult to follow Jesus, but Matthew's ending implies that they have "arrived" in their discipleship and that their failures are redeemed, a thing of the past. They are more examples to the reader than peers.

The little people who were so prominent in Mark's gospel diminish somewhat in Matthew. They seem more often to be agents, opportunities for Jesus to display miraculous powers or offer teachings, rather than contributing to the narrative in their own right. The extended descriptions of their suffering are absent in Matthew, or at least substantially pared down. Significantly, the language of pity and compassion is also largely absent from Matthew's narration of these encounters - Jesus is no longer said to be "moved with pity" (1:41) at the leper's plight (Mt. 8:2-4), nor does he "love" (10:21) the rich man (Mt. 19:16-22); the father of the epileptic child no longer voices his arresting cry for Jesus to help his "unbelief" (9:24) (Mt. 17:14-18); Jairus simply kneels instead of falling at Jesus' feet, begging "repeatedly" (5:23) for his help (Mt. 9:18). The effect is that the emphasis is shifted from the dramatic, desperate plight of the little people healed to the action and miraculous power of Jesus.

Mark, Matthew, and tragedy

Matthew, by clearing up the ambiguity of Mark's ending, flattening the character of the religious authorities towards the negative and the character of the disciples towards the positive, and removing Mark's emphasis on the suffering and alienation of the little people, makes the balance of his gospel clearly comic. Low points (the cry of dereliction, Peter's denial) remain prominent, but Jesus' resurrection and the disciples' final reunion with him overcome these moments of doubt and tension. The gospel ends on a note of hopeful reintegration, with a mission beginning to reunite the whole world with God, leaving only the "evil" authorities isolated from Him. Mark, by contrast, leaves everyone but Jesus (and possibly the "little ones" who have been healed) isolated from God, and

their reunion is left as a tantalizing possibility that does not fully overcome the gospel's grim final note. Thus while Mark is not clearly tragic, by maintaining the possibility of tragedy in tension with the possibility of comedy, his gospel is clearly *more* tragic than that of Matthew, who does not allow for any such ambiguity or uncertainty.

The question that next arises is *why* Matthew changed this nuance from Mark's gospel. Unfortunately, in addition to the thorny theoretical problems associated with discussing Matthew's "intention" in writing his gospel, we must deal with the fact that a narrative gospel provides only indirect evidence of Matthew's reaction to Mark. An in-depth investigation of either problem would require much more space than is available here. I am not, therefore, going to attempt a definitive answer to the question of the reasons behind Matthew's changes. I will explore some possibilities I find suggestive for the question of the tragic effect of Mark, but I will leave a more conclusive analysis for Matthean and synoptic scholars.

One thing that is certain is that Matthew's reaction to Mark is informed by "the rest of the story" as represented in the other sources and traditions he includes in his gospel. We can imagine that much of Mark's audience would have been influenced by such additional traditions - as I mentioned in the chapter on Mark's plot, the audience would have already known the *story*; it is in *how* the story works itself out in the plot that the interest (and the kerygma) lies.

It seems there are three alternatives to explain Matthew's comic gospel as a reaction to Mark's quasi-tragic gospel:

1. Matthew recognized and objected to Mark's tragic undercurrent. We might imagine this as a reaction similar to those who, as discussed in the introductory chapter, find the idea of Christian tragedy scandalous and impossible. Could Matthew have simply found Mark's suggestion of tragedy too intolerable to leave suspended?
2. Matthew recognized the possibility of tragedy in Mark but excluded it on rhetorical grounds - he found that it did not contribute enough to his own theological agenda to include it. Matthew may, for instance, have been more interested in polemicizing against other contemporary Jewish-Christian groups than the suffering of the faithful.
3. Matthew did not see the tragic possibility in Mark - he made changes in an attempt to (a) fill puzzling gaps in Mark's narrative that made it seem incomplete, and (b) communicate his own understanding of the *euangelion* of Jesus Christ. I have asked, in the previous chapters, how the effect of Mark is changed by the reader's knowledge of the story that extends beyond Mark's plot. One possibility is that Mark's ambiguity is seen not as producing the deliberate literary-artistic effect of tragic possibility, but rather as simply - albeit puzzlingly - incomplete and in need of correction. This possibility would seem to be still more feasible in view of Matthew's inclusion of a great deal of new material, presumably from other traditions or sources such as "Q". It is certainly the effect that Matthew's gospel has had in turn upon post-Matthean reception of Mark - read synoptically, Mark has "little to add" to Matthew, but lacks much of Matthew's explanatory (and closure-providing) detail.

This last option leads in turn to two interesting possibilities. Either Matthew's understanding of Mark represents a failure of Mark's rhetoric, or else my reading of Mark

as quasi-tragic is simply not a reading that existed in Matthew's time. While the first is a distinct possibility, especially given Matthew's influence on the following generations of Marcan readers (i.e. tragic readings did not arise before the 20th century because Matthew eclipsed Mark), the second is just as likely, if not more so. I will expand on this second possibility in my discussion of Papias' comments on Mark. For now, however, I will simply note that, following the theoretical framework I outlined in my introduction, I do not believe that the modernity of my reading need invalidate it.

Papias' Interpretation of the Oracles of the Lord

Another interesting early reading of Mark is that of Papias, fragments of whose λογίων κυριακῶν ἐξηγήσεις are preserved in Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Papias makes two remarks that are interesting to consider together with the tragic effect of Mark: that Mark was Peter's ἑρμηνευτής, or "interpreter", and that Mark recorded Peter's recollections "οὐ...τάξει" (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.17).

Mark as Peter's interpreter

I will not discuss the historicity of this tradition here. While it is possible that it is historically accurate, it is just as possible - if not more so - that it was fabricated or distorted for polemical reasons. It is also important to recall that the tradition has been transmitted through the interpretive filter of not one but two works, each of which was constructed for a particular communicative purpose of its own. Whether historically accurate or not, this tradition appears to have been widely known and supported - several patristic works make reference to it (Schildgen 35).

The effect of this tradition on the reader of Mark's gospel is to suggest the identification of the narrator as an older Peter. Hearing Mark as told by Peter puts the close identity of the narrator's and Jesus' values and the strikingly negative portrait of the disciples in an entirely new light - it suggests that Peter's tears did in fact indicate understanding, repentance, and a change in character. The fearful, faithless Peter of the gospel, this connection suggests, became the knowing narrator of Mark's gospel, passing harsh judgment on his past self. Such an explanation shifts the balance of the gospel towards the comic, for it strengthens the gospel's suggestion that Peter is redeemed.¹⁹

This is not, however, inherent in Papias' comments - he would not have recognized Mark as having a tragic effect, nor was his intention in citing the tradition of Mark as Peter's interpreter to counter or ameliorate such an effect. Papias' text is a reaction not only to Mark but, apparently, to some claim against the gospel's legitimacy, for he is careful to insist that the evangelist "did nothing wrong" in recording events the way he did. It is the gospel's legitimacy and apostolic authority that Papias defends, not its comic vision.

Mark as "οὐ...τάξει"

Further evidence against Papias reading Mark as either tragic or comic lies in the second comment we will examine: that Mark's gospel is "οὐ...τάξει". This remark has been the source of some puzzlement to modern scholars, who see Mark as manifestly

¹⁹ This tradition also suggests the makings of a powerful tragedy in the more modern, personal, psychological sense - the drama of a man who recognizes and repents of his most bitter failures too late to change their consequences is surely tragic material. I am not, of course, suggesting that such a tragedy was intended or inherent in the Gospel of Mark.

orderly: “only by clever and often learned squirming...can any lack of order be reasonably detected in Mark’s account” (Rigg 170). What, exactly, does *τάξις* mean in this context? One theory, offered as early as 1913, argues that Papias was defending Mark against detractors who saw his chronology as inaccurate in comparison the other gospels, especially John (Stewart-Sykes 489). Another is that Papias was responding to criticisms that Mark lacked *τάξις* in the sense of literary arrangement. Stewart-Sykes argues that, although “we cannot have complete certainty on which charge Papias is defending Mark” (Stewart-Sykes 492), the charge of literary defect is the more likely one, since *τάξις* was not a term used for chronological order by contemporary historians. Following Kurzinger’s argument that Papias used words such as *τάξις* and *τὰς χρείας* as classical rhetorical terminology in this passage, Stewart-Sykes further argues that Papias was defending Mark on the grounds of genre: Peter taught in *χρείαι*, and thus Mark’s lack of *τάξις* in recalling those *χρείαι* is not a defect. Papias is not making a veiled attack on the quality of Mark’s *τάξις*: “Papias does not say that Mark’s *taxis* is poor, he says that there is none; and *taxis* is absent because none is to be expected in a collection of *chreiai*. Mark is not a *suntaxis* [understood by Stewart-Sykes as meaning “treatise”, as he notes]” (Stewart-Sykes 490). Stewart-Sykes notes that Kurzinger “has found little support” (Stewart-Sykes 487); Black likewise comments that these supposedly rhetorical terms “are in general literary use as well as in rhetorical treatises” (M. Black 32) - *χρεία*, for instance, commonly means “usefulness, needs”, resulting in the usual interpretation of Papias’ sentence as meaning that Peter taught according to the occasion - “so that there is a degree of ambivalence about all this evidence” (ibid.).

Papias' apparent reading of Mark - regardless of how we interpret his terminology, but especially if we can credit the rhetorical meaning of *τάξις* and *χρεία* - indicates that its effect on him was neither one of comedy nor one of tragedy. By reading Mark as an unordered collection of pericopae, Papias indicates that he did not read Mark with a coherent, overarching plot, which is vitally necessary to the literary categories we have defined. We today tend to read Mark as a unified plot, but Papias rejects this interpretation.

This is, indeed, representative of the reading strategy of most of the early Church Fathers. As Schildgen points out, different periods have different interests and concerns that guide their reading of the text. The "interpretive community" of the early Church was surrounded by a particular historical milieu: "the powerful readers of the patristic period were Church authorities who were establishing a new religion with new normative texts in the face of what they perceived as godless paganism, heterodoxies, and heresies. The spiraling danger of political, civic, and social collapse of the Roman Empire threatened to destroy the singular truth of this religion and the institution that supported it" (Schildgen 28). Their readings of the biblical texts were thus guided by an interest in apologetics and in "ecclesiastical standards and theological teachings; they were interested the universality, harmony, orthodoxy, and continuity of the Church, and in establishing their own authority" (Schildgen 39). According to these interests, the Church Fathers favoured a text with connections to apostolic authority over a carefully crafted one, and sought "clarity in sacramental and ecclesiastical issues" (Schildgen 38) in their use of the texts. They sought to harmonize the gospel accounts as a defense against

claims that the “fourfold witness” was internally contradictory. While the Fathers’ preference for an authoritative text allowed Mark access to the canon, by virtue of its connection with Peter, their other interpretive interests led them not only to neglect the “surface of [the] literary narrative” (Schildgen 38) in their search for useful material, but also to neglect Mark almost entirely as an “abbreviator” of Matthew. Mark had “little to add” (Schildgen 60) to a harmonized gospel account. With respect to ecclesiastical concerns, “Mark offers little help in these areas, especially when compared to Matthew and John” (Schildgen 60).

Today, of course, we read the gospels with very different questions and a very different perspective. The legacy of historical criticism ensures that scholars seek to see the gospels primarily as unique documents with their own theological implications, as opposed to a single harmonized account. The historical tradition has also suggested that Mark’s is the most “original” gospel, prompting a level of interest in Mark’s gospel that is unprecedented in the nearly two thousand years of its reception history. We are also heavily influenced in our readings of the gospels by our “bookish” written culture and a literary tradition that includes the rise of the novel. What the early Christians appear to have seen as baffling incompleteness, lack of style, and lack of *taxei*, modern readers interpret as artistry; we have a multitude of subtle literary tools at our disposal to interpret these “blanks” in Mark’s narrative.

Conclusion

A comparison of Mark and Matthew strengthens a tragic reading of Mark - Mark’s gospel is certainly more tragic than Matthew’s in that it does not resolve the threat

of tragedy. The changed effect of Matthew's gospel from Mark's, however, also suggests that Matthew did not read Mark in the same way that I have in this study. Indeed, other contemporary readers appear to have read Mark - whether deliberately, as an apologetic measure, or naturally, as a result of the current literary milieu - as an unordered collection of *χρῆται* instead of a unified story with a plot. The tragic and comic effects of Mark's gospel, then, appear to be modern phenomena, shaped by the reading practices of today's interpretive community.

APPENDIX A

Characterization of the religious authorities in Mark

NC = Narrator's comment

JC = Jesus' comment

A=Action

** = geographical overlap

	Scribes	Pharisees	Herodians	Chief Priests	Elders	Sadducees
1:22	NC: Jesus teaches with authority, not as the scribes					
2:6	A: question in their hearts					
2:16	A: question Jesus about table fellowship	A: question Jesus about table fellowship (scribes of pharisees)				
2:24		A: question about doing what is not lawful on sabbath				
3:1-5		A: question about doing what is not lawful on sabbath A: seek to accuse Jesus NC: they are hard of heart				
3:6		A: conspire to destroy Jesus	A: conspire to destroy Jesus			

3:13	A: claim Jesus has Beelzebul (scribes from Jerusalem) **					
7:1-5	A: question about defiled hands, violating tradition of elders	A: question about defiled hands, violating traditions of elders				
7:6	JC: they are hypocrites, t h e i r worship is false	JC: they are hypocrites, their worship is false				
9:14	A: argue with disciples					
10:2		A: ask about divorce to test Jesus JC: they are hard of heart				
10:33	JC: Jesus predicts they will condemn him			JC: Jesus predicts they will condemn him		
11:18	A: want to kill Jesus			A: want to kill Jesus		

11:27	A: ask Jesus what authority he has JC: Jesus tells a parable against them, predicting their destruction			A: ask Jesus what authority he has JC: Jesus tells a parable against them, predicting their destruction	A: ask Jesus what authority he has JC: Jesus tells a parable against them, predicting their destruction	
12:12	A: want to arrest Jesus, but fear crowd			A: want to arrest Jesus, but fear crowd	A: want to arrest Jesus, but fear crowd	
12:13	A: ask a question to trap Jesus; flatter him NC: they are hypocrites	A: ask a question to trap Jesus; flatter him NC: they are hypocrites **				
12:18						A: ask about marriage and resurrection JC: they know neither the scriptures nor the power of God
12:38	JC: beware their hypocrisy, false worship, self-interest, lack of compassion					
14:1-2	A: want to kill Jesus, fear riot			A: want to kill Jesus, fear riot		

14:43	A: send armed crowd to arrest Jesus			A: send armed crowd to arrest Jesus	A: send armed crowd to arrest Jesus	
14:53	A: gather for Jesus' trial, seek testimony against him, condemn him			A: gather for Jesus' trial, seek testimony against him, condemn him	A: gather for Jesus' trial, seek testimony against him, condemn him	
15:31	A: mock Jesus			A: mock Jesus		

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