Rebuke or Recall? Rethinking the Role of Peter in Mark’s Gospel

ROBYN WHITAKER
University of Chicago Divinity School
Chicago, IL 60637

In the Gospel of Mark, the author distinguishes Peter above all the other disciples. Yet Peter fails Jesus, leading one to question why the author singles him out in this way. First, Peter attempts to rebuke Jesus for speaking of his imminent suffering (8:32), and, second, Peter denies Jesus three times (14:66-72). In contrast to previous scholarship, I will argue that Peter is reinstated as a disciple following both incidents. We will see that Jesus’ rebuke of Peter in 8:33 functions as an immediate recall to discipleship. Similarly, after the denial, Peter is recalled by name to go and see the risen Jesus and begin anew as a follower of Christ (16:7).

In the first part of this article, I offer a detailed exegesis of the two passages wherein Peter fails and where I will argue Peter is recalled (8:27-9:1 and 14:66-16:7). I offer a literary analysis of the Peter motif in Mark in conversation with current Marcan scholarship. In the second part, I interpret the exegesis in light of the traditional historical setting of Mark’s Gospel in Rome. I inquire into how historical context might inform modern interpretation. There I argue that Mark’s

---

1 Peter is named first and last in the Gospel (1:16; 16:7) as well as far more than any other disciple in Mark. He acts alone (8:32; 14:66-72); he speaks as an individual as well as for the twelve (10:28); and he is always part of any select group of disciples that accompany Jesus (9:1; 14:33). Peter’s role and many of these references to Peter in Mark will be addressed more fully below.

2 For the sake of brevity, the Gospel of Mark will be referred to as “Mark” and the writer of the Gospel as “the author” as a way of distinguishing between the book and the writer. Unless otherwise stated, biblical citations are taken from Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993). English translations of the NT are my own.

3 I use the term “traditional” to denote ancient sources such as Papias, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus of Lyons (see Eusebius Eccl. Hist. 3.39; 5.8.2-3; 6.14.5-7). There is by no means a
The twofold pattern of failure and recall suggests that the author is addressing issues in his community concerning followers of Christ who have failed or denied their faith. Ernest Best wrote that Peter is the “proto-penitent for Mark’s community.”

I contend that Peter is also proto-disciple and proto-martyr—a Christian who ultimately died for his faith, thus exemplifying Marcan discipleship and Mark’s theology of the cross. Mark’s presentation of Peter as a disciple who is distinguished above all others is not despite his failure, but precisely because of his failure.

I. History of Scholarship

A plethora of articles and books have devoted their attention to the motif of discipleship in Mark and the author’s emphasis on the disciples’ lack of understanding. In addition to the acknowledgment of the disciples’ incomprehension of Jesus’ identity and mission, it is widely recognized that all the disciples ultimately fail Jesus. Even the women eventually flee the site of the empty tomb in fear and amazement (16:8). Yet Peter has proven to be a more controversial figure, inspiring divergent views about his place within the group of disciples.

Timothy Wiarda’s approach refers to Peter as a spokesperson for the group. In this view Peter simply reflects the thoughts of the Twelve and is therefore not considered a character or individual distinct from the Twelve. As a spokesperson, Peter is viewed as a “type” rather than an individual, a move that minimizes his importance. He represents the disciples and their failure, but is not considered significant as an individual and hence is a neutral figure. Yet, the fourteen occasions...
when the disciples ask Jesus a question as a group, aside from and without the use of Peter as spokesperson, challenge such a representative view of Peter. The disciples in Mark do not need Peter to represent them—they already function as a cohesive group. Peter is, however, singled out as much more than a spokesperson on several occasions.

Other scholars, such as Terence V. Smith and Theodore Weeden, have argued that such singling out of Peter is done in order to portray him negatively. Mark certainly lacks the softening comments about Peter’s leadership found in Matt 16:17-20 or the generalizing tendency of Luke 22:31-32. These textual differences are interpreted as evidence that Peter functions as an allegory for a historical group outside of the text. Thus, the author highlights Peter’s failure as a polemic against a pro-Petrine group in the early church and their christology. Weeden was one of the first to propose this interpretation, and part of his argument is that traditions prior to Mark had a “much higher regard for Peter” than Mark’s Gospel. In fact, he believes that Mark has a “vendetta” against the twelve disciples and wants to bring them into disrepute.

Conversely, the arguments in favor of Peter as a positive character for the reader and the author have been equally strong. A famous study by Best analyzes how Mark uses his source material to portray Peter. By comparing Mark with Q, Best concludes that where Peter appears as a negative example of discipleship, Mark has actually lessened the critique by associating him with other disciples. Moreover, he argues that where Mark has introduced new material about Peter he

---

9 Mark 4:10, 38; 5:31; 6:35-38; 7:17; 8:1-5, 14-21, 28; 10:10, 13; 14:12-16. Peter is arguably included in a group of four in 9:11. Previously in this pericope he has been singled out, but here the question is asked by “them.”

10 Terence V. Smith, Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity: Attitudes towards Peter in Christian Writings of the First Two Centuries (WUNT 2/15; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1985) 190; and Theodore J. Weeden, Mark—Traditions in Conflict (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 50. Smith and Weeden both take the view that Mark intends to portray Peter negatively, although their reasons differ.

11 Weeden, Mark—Traditions, 64-69. Weeden insightfully notes the shift in ch. 8 from what he calls a theios-anēr christology to an emphasis on the suffering Son of Man christology in the second half of the Gospel. He interprets the author’s juxtaposition of these two christologies as evidence for two christological positions in the early church that come to a head in the rebuke of Peter in 8:33. External support for such a view is scant, and this hypothesis relies on a particular reading of Mark 13 (see, e.g., pp. 72-73).

12 Ibid., 44.

13 Ibid., 50.

14 T. E. Boomershine, “Peter’s Denial as Polemic or Confession: The Implications of Media Criticism for Biblical Hermeneutics,” Semeia 39 (1987) 47-68. Boomershine argues that, contrary to the expectations of those who hold that Peter is negatively portrayed, readers identify with Peter, especially in his denial. The author reestablishes a sympathetic relationship with Peter even after Peter has denied Jesus (pp. 56-57).
either presents him neutrally or positively.\textsuperscript{15} The exception is the account of Peter’s denial, which necessarily portrays him acting alone but resists the urge to cast him as a villain. Resisting the bifurcation of either positive or negative, Best contends that Mark is not anti-Peter nor is he necessarily privy to eyewitness testimony from Peter.\textsuperscript{16} Building on the work of Best, I propose that Peter fulfills a special narrative role as one who fails, is penitent, is forgiven, and is restored.

This is only a small sample of a great deal of scholarship addressing the character of Peter in Mark’s Gospel, yet it demonstrates the wide range of views with regard to Peter’s portrayal. To claim Peter as either a positive or negative figure is, of course, an oversimplification of a complex character in the Gospel. Even the notorious failure of the disciples in Mark cannot be simply summarized as negative, something Elizabeth Struthers Malbon calls a “half-truth.”\textsuperscript{17} In a Gospel marked by reversals and the overturning of expectations, Peter simultaneously follows and fails Jesus. The tension between Mark’s portrayal of Peter’s faithful following and his immense failure of both understanding and courage is precisely why his character is powerful.

Indeed, Richard Bauckham calls Peter the “most fully characterized individual” in Mark.\textsuperscript{18} It is Peter’s prominence as a character that allows him to be a disciple with whom the reader may connect.\textsuperscript{19} Peter is named twenty-five times in the Gospel—far more than any other disciple.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, he is the first disciple called (along with his brother Andrew, 1:16), the first named in the list of the

\textsuperscript{15} Best, Disciples and Discipleship, 174-75. One example of this is the inclusion of Peter’s name in 16:7, according to Best (p. 173). He also cites the author’s tendency to associate Peter with other disciples as evidence for not wanting to make Peter look bad. For example, 8:14-21, which Best views as Marcan original composition, could have been written about Peter, not the entire group (p. 175).

\textsuperscript{16} Tannehill (“Disciples in Mark,” 394) also concludes that Mark is not writing a polemic against a particular group. He argues against Weeden’s thesis that Mark reflects a wider Christian church in conflict (see Weeden, Mark—Traditions, 50; and n. 11 above).


\textsuperscript{18} Richard Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 175. Bauckham argues that Peter’s importance in the text is evidence that he was an eyewitness for the author. Though I agree with Bauckham’s assessment of Peter’s importance in the text, I am not convinced that there is evidence for his next step, which makes Peter an eyewitness. Bauckham reads a literary trope (the bookend effect of Peter’s name) as a historic claim about source. A critique of Bauckham’s position can be found in Jens Schröter, “The Gospels of Eyewitness Testimony? A Critical Examination of Richard Bauckham’s Jesus and the Eyewitnesses,” JSNT 31 (2008) 195-209.

\textsuperscript{19} Tannehill, “Disciples in Mark,” 405.

\textsuperscript{20} The first three occurrences use the name “Simon” (1:16, 29, 36). The reader is explicitly told in 3:16 that Simon is Peter, making explicit that the author considers these to be one and the same person.
Twelve (3:16), and the last to be individually named in the Gospel (16:7). The naming of Peter thus bookends the Gospel, framing the entire narrative with his initial call in Galilee and his recall to Galilee. Peter is an important part of Mark’s literary construction, indicating that he was a significant model of discipleship for the Marcan community.

II. The First Failure: Rebuke and Recall (Mark 8:27–9:1)

Mark 8:27–9:1 denotes a turning point in the Gospel, beginning with Jesus and his disciples going out to the region of Caesarea Philippi. The setting is significant for two reasons. First, it is the farthest point from Jerusalem in Mark’s Gospel and the place from which Jesus begins his southward journey to Jerusalem and therefore his death. As the geography shifts, so too does the thematic focus of Mark. From this point onward the Gospel is increasingly punctuated by language of the cross, of suffering, conflict, and death. Additionally, the disciples are ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ (“on the way”), a metaphor for discipleship.21 Second, Caesarea Philippi was the location of a temple built by Herod the Great in honor of Caesar Augustus.22 Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Messiah presents a competing ideology to the local icons of imperial power in much the same way that the confession of the centurion does in 15:39.23

In the conversation that ensues, both Peter and Jesus agree that Jesus is the Christ.24 The difference lies in their understanding of the term. Jesus’ description of a suffering Son of Man in 8:31 is a “shocking inversion” of the current Jewish expectations that anticipated a military messiah who could free Israel.25 Peter, whose mind is on earthly things, expects Jesus to triumph at a historical level (8:33), whereas Jesus speaks of a cosmic, eschatological triumph (8:38).

These conflicting understandings of the messianic role are perhaps why Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him (8:32). Often overlooked in English translations is the back-and-forth use of ἔπτημα (“rebuke”) in this interchange of

21 Mark 8:27; see also 1:2-3; 4:15; 8:3; 9:33; 10:17, 32, 46, 52; 11:8; and 12:14 (which associates the way with God).
22 Joel Marcus, Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AYB 27A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 603. Marcus also associates the city with messianic hopes, violent death, and visionary activity in ancient Jewish tradition because of its location on the slopes of Mount Hermon (1 Enoch 12–16 and T. Levi 2–7). Thus, the combination of imperial power and Jewish expectation makes it an apt location for the unveiling of Jesus’ identity as well as his prophetic announcement that he will suffer and die as well as come in triumph (8:31–9:1). See Marcus, 602–3.
23 Collins, Mark, 401.
24 Ibid., 402; Marcus, Mark 8–16, 612; Tannehill, “Disciples in Mark,” 400.
25 Collins, Mark, 403.
messianic ideology. Jesus first rebukes (ἐπτιμῆσεν) the disciples not to reveal his identity in 8:30, heightening the drama of the revelation. Then Peter begins to rebuke Jesus (ἐπτιμήσαν, 8:32). Lastly, Jesus rebukes Peter as “Satan” (ἐπτιμήσεν, 8:33).

Peter’s failure is in his rebuke, for to rebuke is not the role of a disciple. Only three times in Mark does someone other than Jesus rebuke (ἐπτιμάω). In 10:13 the disciples rebuke the children for coming to Jesus, an action that vexes Jesus (ἄγναυκτέο). The crowd rebukes Bartimaeus in 10:48 for shouting out to Jesus. Again the text is clear that this is an inappropriate response, as Jesus summons Bartimaeus to himself and the members of the crowd rapidly change position, this time urging him forward (10:49). Peter’s rebuke of Jesus is the third instance of ἐπτιμάω being enacted by someone other than Jesus.

On the lips of Jesus ἐπτιμάω is a powerful action word. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus rebukes demons, chaotic nature, and those who know his true identity, both demonic and human (1:25; 3:12; 4:39; 8:30, 33; 9:25). Jesus’ rebuke is most often a command to be silent or to keep his identity hidden (1:25; 3:12; 4:39; 8:30). Jesus’ stilling of the stormy wind is described in the same terms: ἐπτιμῆσεν τῷ ἀνέμῳ, “he rebuked the wind” (4:39). During two exorcisms the author uses ἐπτιμάω to describe Jesus’ command for the unclean spirit to exit a person, highlighting the sense of power and reordering of the chaotic universe implicit in Jesus’ rebuke (1:25; 9:25). Thus, ἐπτιμάω is also the language of exorcism.

The contrast between Peter’s inappropriate, off-to-the-side rebuke and Jesus’ frank or bold rebuke is accentuated in 8:32 through the juxtaposition of the terms παρρησία (“boldness”) and προσλαμβάνω (“to take aside”). The NRSV translates

---

26 Collins (Mark, 396) is one of the few commentators who retain the English term “rebuke” for all three instances, helping readers see the play on words. Unfortunately, the NRSV switches between “sternly ordered” and “rebuked.”

27 I have taken the position, along with Collins (Mark, 406), that the exchange of rebukes between Jesus and Peter is private. The translation sense of the participle of προσλαμβάνω, indicating a movement to the side, is supported by Jesus’ action of turning and seeing his disciples in v. 33 as they are not immediately in front of him or next to him. Furthermore, the rebuke is in the second person singular, not plural.

28 Matthew’s use of this Marcan material makes clear that the rebuke is the point of failure, not the initial confession. Matthew praises Peter for his confession that Jesus is the Christ (Matt 16:17-19) and separates the later rebuke from this praiseworthy episode (16:21-22).

29 Those who know his true identity in Mark are the demons, with the exception of this pericope, where the disciples are rebuked to remain quiet following Peter’s declaration.

30 In 1:25 the dual function of silencing and exorcism is included in the command.


32 Mark actually juxtaposes a number of elements throughout this pericope in addition to the comparison of secret and to the side (8:30-32) versus openly/frankly (v. 32). Other pairings include Christ (v. 27) versus Satan (v. 33), divine things (v. 33) versus human things (v. 33), saving (v. 35) versus losing a life (v. 35), and the suffering Son (v. 31) compared with the Glorious Son (v. 38).
παρηγορία as “openly,” yet the usage of the word in classical and Hellenistic sources suggests that “boldly” or “frankly” may be a better translation. Philodemus’s essay On Frank Criticism suggests that it is a term of friendship and moral reform.33 A true friend or philosophical teacher does not flatter but speaks frankly when the need to admonish occurs. Three passages in On Frank Criticism combine the terms for frank speech (παρηγορία) and rebuke (ἐπιτιμάω) when discussing how teachers should address students.34 The author’s use of these terms together thus portrays Jesus behaving in a manner befitting a teacher who is correcting a disciple.

Jesus addresses Peter with language identical to his initial calling: ὑπάγει μου (“behind me”).35 Peter was first called to follow Jesus with δεῦτε ὑπάγει μου (1:17). Now he is told, ὑπάγει ὑπάγει μου (Origen Comm. Matt. 12.21-22).36 The only difference is that the initial word changes from the interjection “come” to the verb “go, go away.” With the exception of 13:16, ὑπάγοι always occurs in the context of a call to follow as a disciple in Mark (cf. 1:17, 20; 8:34).

The verb ὑπάγοι is frequent in Mark and is usually translated as “to depart” or “go away.”37 It is not a negative term. The author uses it for Jesus’ address to numerous healed people as part of a dismissal or command, such as to go and show oneself to the priest as in the case of the leper who is cleansed (1:44; see also 2:11; 7:29; 10:21, 52). Both the bleeding woman and blind Bartimaeus are dismissed with ἤ πιστς σου σέκωκέν σε, ὑπάγει, “go, your faith has saved you” (5:34; 10:52). In these cases ὑπάγοι is part of a positive affirmation and sending off of those who have exhibited faith. Even the less faithful rich man is likewise dismissed with ὑπάγετε (10:21). In this context the command for him to “go and sell” whatever he has (ὑπάγετε, ἵνα ἐξαγαγωθήτω) is the first part of a call to discipleship. This call is made explicit by Jesus’ continued address to “come follow me” (καὶ δεῦτε ἀκολούθε μοι, 10:21). At other times Mark uses ὑπάγοι as a simple command such as the commission of the angel to the women in 16:7: ἀλλὰ ὑπάγετε εἴπατε τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ, “but go, tell his disciples.” Indeed, 8:33 is the only instance where the term has a negative connotation and there only in relation to Jesus’ subsequent address.

33 Philodemus, On Frank Criticism (introduction, translation, and notes by David Konstan, D. Clay, C. E. Glad, J. C. Thom, and J. Ware; SBLT 43; Graeco-Roman Series 13; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998) 6.
34 Philodemus, On Frank Criticism, 6.8, 62.1, XIXa.9. The latter reference here refers to how equals should address one another.
35 The verb λέγει (8:33) is here understood expositively; the direct speech is the context of the rebuke. Cf. 1:25, 9:25.
36 Origen was one of the earliest scholars to notice the language of call embedded in Jesus’ rebuke of Peter. Commenting on the parallel pericope in Matthew, Origen makes the connection with the call story stating that to be behind Jesus is a good thing.
Rather than a command for Peter to leave entirely, ὁπετύχεσθε ὁπίσω μου might best be translated something like “go and get back behind me” or “get back into line.” Joel Marcus suggests that it carries the sense of “resume the path of following that he has momentarily forgotten.”\(^{38}\) This is in contrast to what Peter is currently doing standing in front of Jesus, rebuking him as if he, Peter, is the teacher. Consequently, Jesus’ words are simultaneously a rebuke and a recall to adopt the correct posture of a true disciple—one who follows and who thinks according to the divine way and not the human way (8:33).

The author’s play on the language of call and recall is made more explicit by the literary context of Peter’s confession and rebuke. In 8:34, ὁπίσω is combined with another keyword for discipleship and call, ἀκολουθέω (“to follow”). The dual terms emphasize that discipleship involves both obedience in following and suffering through picking up one’s cross. Following Jesus necessitates suffering and dying in exactly the same terms that are used to describe Jesus’ own death.\(^{39}\) It is noteworthy that in 8:34 this heavily loaded call language is addressed to the crowd and the disciples and is therefore an open call to all who would follow, not a burden specific to the Twelve.

Hitherto in Mark the disciples have primarily witnessed Jesus as a miracle worker, healer, preacher, and exorcist. The recall of Peter in 8.33 acts to call him, the disciples, and Mark’s readers to a new definition of discipleship, one that involves denying oneself and picking up one’s cross (Kreuzsnachfolge).\(^{40}\) Hence, this new teaching signifies a shift from the role the disciples have experienced thus far in Mark.

There is no indication in the text that Peter is not instantly restored as a disciple. On the contrary, Marcus writes, “if, moreover, 8:33 were a definitive rejection of Peter, his continuing role in the story would make little sense.”\(^{41}\) As noted above, the subsequent speech of Jesus about discipleship is addressed to the whole crowd and the disciples. Following Jesus’ speech, Peter is named again in a select group that accompanies Jesus up the mountain for his transfiguration. No reason is offered as to why Peter is included (9:2). The simplest explanation, then, is that Mark does not think him excluded in the meantime. He was and is still a disciple.\(^{42}\)

Of course, such a reading invites the response, How can Peter still be a disciple when Jesus addresses him as “Satan”? It is an unambiguously negative term. One possibility is that Peter is called Satan because, like the demonic forces, he

38 Marcus, Mark 8–16, 615.
41 Marcus, Mark 8–16, 608.
42 Peter’s role as an individual in Mark actually increases in the second half of the Gospel (Smith, Petrine Controversies, 164).
has perceived who Jesus really is. No human being in Mark achieves the christological insight of the demons, except perhaps the centurion in 15:39. If so, we would need to read this address somewhat ironically; however, the context indicates that something more serious is intended.

Another possibility is that, by focusing on human things, Peter is failing to be a faithful disciple whose mind should be on godly things. Such a dichotomy is present in other parts of Mark. For example, Jesus clashes with the Pharisees in 7:5–8 because their teaching is based on human precepts and not divine commands. Jesus clearly condemns such teaching (7:13). Similarly Jesus challenges the Jewish authorities to decide whether John’s baptism was of human or divine origin, a question they cannot answer (11:30). That Marcan discipleship involves a renunciation of worldly things is implicit in the call narrative, when the first disciples leave their nets and boats (1:16–20), and explicit in Peter’s claim that he left everything to follow Jesus (10:28).43

A further possibility is that Peter is described as behaving in a satanic manner because he is questioning God’s plan as predicted by Jesus. In Mark, Satan plays such a role when he tests Jesus in the wilderness (1:12–14). Likewise, Satan is an adversary of the received word in the parable of the sower (4:15).44 Peter’s understanding of Jesus’ mission stands in direct contrast to the language of divine necessity implied by Jesus’ ἀδελφοί (8:31).45 It is precisely the temptation to evade suffering that Jesus will face in the garden of Gethsemane (14:36).

Further, Peter is behaving in a way that blinds others from seeing the path of true discipleship. In other parts of the NT Satan is portrayed as a “blinder,” one associated with darkness and incomprehension rather than light (2 Cor 4:4; Acts 26:18). The possibility that this kind of satanic role also is in the author’s mind is heightened by the immediately preceding account of the blind man’s healing (8:22–26). Scholars have noted that the Marcan “bookends” to this middle section of the Gospel are two stories of the healing of blind men (8:22–26; 10:46–52).46 Blindness

43 It is possible that Levi also leaves his position as tax collector in 2:13–14, although the inference is less clear in Mark’s version of Levi’s call.

44 The parable of the sower provides two relevant images for Mark 8. The first is the above-mentioned reference to Satan, and second is the image of the rocky ground. Seed that falls on rocky soil withers in the face of tribulation (θωρύσται) and persecution (διεσκίνεται, 4:17). The wordplay between Peter (‘rock,” πέτρα, Πέτρος) and rocky ground (πετρίδος) may well be intentional, thus heightening the relationship between Peter and failure in the face of persecution. The importance of the parable of the sower for Mark is argued in Mary Ann Tolbert, Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

45 Collins, Mark, 403. Marcus (Mark 8–16, 613) claims ἀδελφοί emphasizes divine will and relates to Jesus’ critique of Peter in 8:33.

46 Collins, Mark, 397; and Marcus, Mark 8–16, 597. Collins rightly describes them as transition narratives (p. 506). The Bartimaeus story both concludes the section of passion predictions and looks forward to Jerusalem.
and sight certainly become important motifs from here to the end of the Gospel. Who sees and whom they see when they look upon Jesus is one of the indicators of discipleship for Mark.47 Blindness indicates incomprehension and misunderstanding of Jesus’ true identity. In this pericope Peter is blind to Jesus’ true calling and role. Jesus’ response to Peter’s failure is to reproach and recall him to follow on the path that now turns toward Jerusalem and death.

III. The Second Failure: Denial and Recall (14:66–16:7)

Perhaps a more serious challenge to the notion that Peter is a proto-penitent and proto-disciple in Mark is his adamant denial of Jesus. Yet, even after denying Jesus, Peter is called again to follow. The author embeds the account of Peter’s denial between two scenes depicting Jesus’ own trial and questioning (14:53–65; 15:1–5). By placing these stories together in a typical “Marcan sandwich” the author accentuates the environment of a courtroom trial and the possibility of punishment that lies before Peter.48 Furthermore, the sandwich technique gives the impression that these two trials are occurring simultaneously. The juxtaposition of the two stories highlights its discrepancies: Jesus is questioned by the high priest, but Peter by a lowly slave girl; the accusations against Jesus are false, whereas those against Peter are true; and Jesus confesses “I am” (ἐγώ εἰμί, 14:62), while Peter denies his discipleship three times. The greatest irony is that, at the precise moment Jesus is taunted to prophesy, the cock crows and Peter realizes that Jesus’ earlier prophecy has come true.

There are several terms here that pick up on themes introduced in the first passion prediction such as being “on the way,” being “handed over” (παραδίδωμι), and cross/crucify.49 The word ἀρνέωμαι/ἀπαρνέωμαι (“deny, disown”) in this pericope is particularly significant. The only occurrences of (ἀπ)αρνέωμαι in Mark are in this pericope of Peter’s denial, in Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s denial in 14:30-31, and in the previously discussed passage on discipleship (8:34).

47 For example, a verb of sight prompts the centurion’s confession, making him one who has truly seen Jesus (15:39). Verbs of sight also dominate the empty tomb account, where the invitation to the disciples is to come to Galilee where they will see him (16:1-8).

48 Marcus, Mark 8–16, 1022.

49 Mark uses language of sight somewhat ironically in this pericope. The servant girl accusing Peter is the one who sees clearly (ἀμβλύόμου), a verb used to describe Jesus’ insightfulness as well as the anonymous blind man’s ability to see again (Mark 8:25; 10:21, 27). It is also noteworthy that these references occur in the introduction to the passion prediction and during Jesus’ teaching on discipleship. They are one of several linguistic links tying together the second half of the Gospel. For example, verbs of sight (8:24; 9:1; 10:51; 13:2, 14, 26; 14:62; 16:7), ἀρνέωμαι (8:34; 14:30-11, 46, 70, 72), being “on the way” (8:27, 9:33-34, 10:32, 52, 11:8), being “handed over” (παραδίδωμι, 9:31; 10:35; 13:9, 11, 12; 14:10-11, 18, 21, 41-42; 15:1, 10, 15), and cross/crucify (8:34; 15:13, 14, 20, 21, 25, 27, 30, 32; 16:6).
In Matthew’s Gospel ἀρνεόματι is used only in the context of someone denying Jesus before others (10:33; 26:70-72), and Matthew clearly condemns those who do so (10:33). The Epistles 1 John and 2 Timothy warn their readers of the dire consequences of denying (ἀρνεόματι) Christ (2 Tim 2:12; 1 John 2:22-23). In the Book of Revelation, the communities of Pergamum and Philadelphia are commended for not denying (ἀρνεόματι) Jesus despite the possibility of death (Rev 2:13; 3:8). In the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the proconsul attempts to persuade Polycarp to denounce (ἀρνεόματι) Jesus, to make the oath to Caesar, and thus to save his life (9.2). The same language is used in the Shepherd of Hermas when addressing the specific issue of forgiveness for those who have denied Christ in a trial situation (Herm. Vis. 6.8). We see here a development of denial language in texts that address issues of persecution beginning with the NT and extending into later martyrdom literature.

Consequently, at least in later Christian tradition, such language is associated with martyrdom or apostates. In fact, by the fourth century, the call to “take up one’s cross” (8:34) is interpreted literally, and martyrdom is seen as a way to continue the work of Christ. Such a development is, of course, not necessarily an argument that Mark is doing the same, only that the Gospel was later interpreted thus. What we can claim is that Mark’s Gospel is embedded with key terms that become part of later martyrdom language; that the author exhibits a preoccupation with persecution and suffering; that Christ is presented unashamedly as one who was betrayed, rejected, and killed; and that despite Peter’s failure he continues to be called to discipleship.

In Mark’s account of Peter’s denial, the charge against Peter and his response escalate, each time becoming more specific. Mark’s repeated use of ἀλλὰ (―again‖) emphasizes the persistence of the accuser. The author evokes discipleship language in the question of the servant girl: καὶ σὺ μετὰ τοῦ Ναζαρηνοῦ ἠσθα τοῦ Ἡσιοῦ, “and you, you were with Jesus the Nazarene” (14:67). To be “with Jesus” is the role of the Twelve whom Jesus appointed (3:14).

It is the bystanders, not the servant girl alone, who make the third accusation. The credence of the charge is heightened by the addition of other witnesses. This accusation, “truly you are one of them for you also are a Galilean” (14:70), intro-
duces the importance of Galilee for Mark, this time as a place associated with discipleship. It is unclear in the narrative how the bystanders know that Peter is from Galilee, something Matthew clarifies by reference to an accent and John changes completely (Matt 26:73; John 18:26). At a literary level Galilee is vitally important. Peter was called in Galilee (1:16) and will be called again back to Galilee (16:7). Its inclusion here suggests that not only is Peter denying Jesus but that in doing so he is denying his very calling as a disciple and his very identity as a Galilean.

Peter’s first response to the servant girl is vague and pleads ignorance. But by the third time he is questioned, his denial is emphatic, distancing him from any knowledge of Jesus (14:71): ὁ δὲ ἤρξατο ἀνθηματίζειν καὶ ὀμνύειν δὴ οὐκ οἶδα τὸν ἄνθρωπον τούτον ἃν λέγετε, “and he began to curse and swear, ‘I do not know this man of whom you speak.’”

Understanding what Mark means by Peter’s cursing and swearing has proven notoriously difficult. In classical Greek literature swearing is often associated with religious activity: one swears upon or to the gods. Swearing language is similarly associated with showing allegiance to Caesar, something required of later Christians if they wished to avoid being martyred by the Romans. In the Martyrdom of Polycarp, for example, the verb ὀμνύω is used five times to describe swearing allegiance to the emperor, a necessary step in denouncing Christ. The presence of both curse and oath terminology emphasizes the vehemence with which Peter denounces Jesus and raises the possibility that a courtroom trial is in the author’s mind.

Up until his denial Peter has been, literally, the last man standing. All the other male disciples have fled (14:50-51). Peter, who so emphatically promised to die with Jesus, makes it to the courtyard (14:31). This is the same Peter who bravely vowed to be a co-martyr with Christ rather than ever deny him (14:31): ἤταν δὲ ἦν μὲ συναπόθανεν σοι, ὅποι μὴ σε ἀπαρνησόμαι, “even if it is necessary for me to die with you, I will never deny you.”

One can scarcely fail to be struck by the linguistic parallels between Peter’s promise in 14:31 and the first passion prediction: δεῖ (“it is necessary”), ἀπαρνήσομαι (“to deny”), and a verb denoting to be killed or to die (8:31-34). The weight of the reader’s expectation on Peter is heightened by the fact that the other disciples also promised to die with Jesus but have fled. They have already failed, as Peter will now fail. The scene ends poignantly, evoking sympathy rather than judgment from the reader. Peter, hearing the cock crow and recalling what Jesus said, weeps.

54 The object of the verbs is unclear, and thus Peter could be cursing himself or someone else (Marcus, Mark 8–16, 1018-19). Collins (Mark, 708) interprets this verse as Peter bringing a curse upon himself.

55 E.g., Diodorus Siculus Hist. 37.11.1 (“I swear upon Zeus . . .”). The LXX also uses ὀμνύω/δεῖμα in this way in 1 Kgs 1:17, 29; Dan 12:7; Jer 38:16. It is more common in the LXX, however, for God to be the one who swears an oath to the people.
Immediately Mark shifts the readers’ attention back to Jesus’ trial, leaving them with a weeping Peter, unsure of his fate.

Yet, though Peter’s fate hangs in narrative suspense, readers know that Jesus has already prophesied about the restoration of all the disciples even while predicting their failure (14:26-28). All deserters will be gathered again in Galilee, where the resurrected Jesus will precede them. Notice the marked similarity of phrases that connect this prediction with its fulfillment in 16:7.

14:28 προάρχῃ ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν Γαλατίαν “I will go before you to Galilee.”
16:7 προάρχῃ ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν Γαλατίαν “He goes before you to Galilee.”

Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s denial and Peter’s subsequent promise to be a martyr in 14:26-31 are essential for understanding what has preceded and what follows. It points backwards to the rebuke and recall of Peter in chap. 8 and forward to the post-resurrection recall of Peter in chap. 16.

Peter’s first failure is best characterized as a failure of understanding. Peter oversteps the bounds of discipleship by rebuking the teacher and is simultaneously rebuked and recalled by Jesus to adopt the stance of a disciple who would pick up his cross and follow. The second failure by Peter is arguably more serious. Rather than an immediate recall (as in 8:33), the author narrates the entire death and burial of Jesus before mentioning Peter again. Peter’s final inclusion comes in the call of the angelic young man (ναστίσκος) issued through the women to go and see the risen Jesus in Galilee (16:7). Peter is the only disciple mentioned by name at this point in the Gospel, and the explicit inclusion of Peter with the disciples in 16:7 makes it clear that even he can be restored as a disciple. The inference is that his failure does not exclude him from discipleship permanently. Best acknowledges that the use of Peter’s name by the angelic young man “implies final acceptance” of him as a disciple.

IV. The Historical Context for Mark’s Gospel

Although Mark’s Gospel portrays Peter as one who failed Jesus, the story does not end there. Historical evidence indicates that Peter was an important leader in the early church. Paul, our earliest extant Christian source, names him as one of

---

56 According to BDAG, ἐπιβάλλω has a wide semantic range, including “put on,” “set to,” “throw oneself,” “earnestly apply oneself,” and the possible meaning of “reflected/thought about.” In this context it is probably best taken as a reflexive (“threw himself down, cast himself outside”), although an inceptive sense would also work, though it is less common (“he began to cry/he set to crying”). The parallel in Matt 26:75 would support the reflexive sense.


58 Collins, Mark, 797.

59 Best, Disciples and Discipleship, 162.
the pillars of the Jerusalem community and the first person to whom the risen Christ appeared (Gal 2:9; 1 Cor 15:5). Furthermore, Paul’s own conflict with Peter indicates that he was an influential person in the early church, worthy enough for Paul to take seriously even though they disagreed on some issues (Gal 1:17-18). John’s Gospel agrees with the Synoptics in maintaining the tradition that Peter entered the tomb of Jesus first. John uniquely narrates that the Beloved Disciple outran Peter, reaching the tomb first, yet the Gospel records that Peter still entered the tomb ahead of the Beloved Disciple (John 20:4-6). The canon also includes two Epistles attributed to Peter that, although most likely pseudepigraphical, indicate his importance in early Christianity.

One of the earliest noncanonical testimonies to Peter is a letter from the Roman church reminding the Corinthian church that Peter “testified” (μαρτυρεῖον) and went to his appointed place of glory (1 Clem. 5.4).60 This is almost certainly a reference to martyrdom. Eusebius (Eccl. Hist. 2.25) records that Peter was martyred in Rome under Nero, placing his death around 64–67 c.e., when Christians were blamed for the fires in Rome.61 Early Christian literature related to Peter’s martyrdom agrees that Peter was martyred in Rome by crucifixion sometime during Nero’s reign.62 Moreover, Peter’s martyrdom became common knowledge shortly after the event.63

Rome is the nexus of Peter’s martyrdom and Mark’s portrayal of Peter. Traditionally, Peter was strongly associated with Rome.64 The tradition that Mark was written in Rome and for a Roman Christian community has been a long-standing part of the history of tradition. Papias was the earliest writer to associate Mark’s community with Peter, allowing others to assume a Roman location as likely (Eusebius Eccl. Hist. 3.39).65 Though admittedly not conclusive, both internal and external evidence points to Rome as a likely location.

---

60 Clement refers to the deaths of Peter and Paul with reference to those who have died in “our own generation” (5.1). Although Clement does not explicitly cite Rome as the location, he writes from Rome.

61 The dates mentioned are not from Eusebius, but rather are a necessary conclusion based on the dates of the fires in Rome (64) and the death of Nero in 68 c.e. Eusebius does record that Peter and Paul were killed together. See also Robert M. Grant, Augustus to Constantine: The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 78.

62 Richard Bauckham, “The Martyrdom of Peter in Early Christian Literature,” ANRW II. 26.1 (1992) 539-95, here 588. Bauckham compares both canonical and noncanonical literature of the first three centuries, limiting his study to literary evidence. His most convincing evidence for Peter’s martyrdom includes 1 Clem 5.4, Ignatius’s letters (Smyrn. 3.2-3; Rom. 4.3), Ascen. Isa. 4.2-3, and Apocalypse of Peter. The latter refers to a “city over west,” which Bauckham argues is a reference to Rome (p. 572). If so, the Apocalypse of Peter is the earliest noncanonical reference to Rome as a site for Peter’s martyrdom.

63 Bauckham, “Martyrdom of Peter,” 588.

64 Black, Mark, 28.

65 See also Collins, Mark, 7. I will not rehearse here the arguments for or against a Gospel’s audience as a specific community or all Christians (nor the problems with these two options being
Rome was an unstable place just prior to and after 70 c.e., particularly for Christians (Tacitus Ann. 14.44; 15.44; Dio Roman Hist. 62.17-18). Nero famously blamed the fires of 64 c.e. on the Christians. His suicide in 68 c.e. led to a brief period of civil war with no fewer than four emperors ruling over the empire in 69 c.e. (Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian). Concurrently a war was being waged in Judea that would result in the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 c.e. Several references in Mark to tribulation, suffering, and a concern for Christians facing persecution offer internal evidence for such circumstances. The third passion prediction is preceded by Jesus’ prophesying that his followers would be persecuted (10:29-30). The prophetic discourse of Mark 13 mimics the language of Jesus’ fate. Followers of Jesus will also be handed over (παραδίστωμι) and beaten (δέρω) (Mark 13:9, 11, 12). Betrayal by a brother or friend is also prophesied, again echoing Jesus’ betrayal by one of his own.

Furthermore, Mark’s particular portrayal of the Messiah as one rejected and crucified indicates a concern for Christians facing persecution or dealing with the aftermath of persecution in Rome during this period. Jesus’ teaching after the first passion prediction utilizes language of martyrdom and persecution, such as self-denial (ἀπαρνηθησόμεθα ἑαυτῶν), picking up one’s cross (ἀρίθμον τῶν σταυρῶν ἀροῦ), and the juxtaposition of saving and losing one’s life (8:34-38). When these ideas are combined with the evidence for Peter’s martyrdom in Rome, a fuller picture of Mark’s context emerges.

In the discussion of the first passion prediction (above) I noted that this was the first time the disciples were confronted with the reality of Jesus’ impending suffering and death. The three imperatives in 8:34 mimic the sense of divine necessity inherent in the δεῖ of 8:31 – “the Son of Man must suffer many things”. Suffering for God is the theme which sandwiches Jesus’ rebuke of Peter, adding weight to the notion that the author is also addressing issues of martyrdom and persecution here.

presented as either/or claims). These issues have been carefully laid out in an article by Margaret M. Mitchell, “Patristic Counter-Evidence to the Claim that ‘The Gospels were written for All Christians,’ ” NTS 51 (2005) 36-79.

66 Παραδίστωμι is used to describe Jesus’ fate in the latter two passion predictions (9:31; 10:33) as well as in the prediction of Jesus’ betrayal (14:10-21) and his actual arrest and crucifixion (15:1, 10, 15). Δέρω is used to describe the beating received by the owner of the vineyard’s son in 12:3-5, arguably a reference to Jesus. The language of testimony (μαρτυρία, μαρτυρίον) also links chaps. 13 and 15.

67 Collins, Mark, 652; see Mark 13:12; 14:17-21.

68 Tannehill, “Disciples in Mark,” 400; and Incarneri, Gospel to the Romans, 31. The implications of this view are that Mark is addressing a community of Christians struggling with issues relating to martyrdom and discipleship, rather than writing a Gospel to make converts.

69 These terms will be dealt with in more detail below.

70 Tannehill, “Disciples in Mark,” 401. Tannehill comments that the address in 8:34-9:1 is generic enough to address an audience beyond that imagined in the narrative. Thus, Mark is addressing his own community, offering teaching on both discipleship and Jesus’ identity.
Jesus teaches that the Son of Man must suffer and die.

Exchange of rebukes and Peter recalled to follow.

Jesus teaches that those who wish to follow must be prepared to suffer/die.

In Peter’s denial scene we observed that much of the language was typical of later martyrdom trials. As Marcus notes, the slave girl’s questioning may well have resembled the kind of questioning that members of Mark’s community experienced. He may be right, although we lack the evidence to know what Nero’s punishment of Christians in Rome really entailed (we only have Suetonius’s comment that it happened) and whether Christians in the 60s c.e. faced any kind of official trial process such as those famously described by Pliny the Younger (Letters 10.96-97). Nor do we know the precise details of Peter’s and Paul’s martyrdoms.

What we can assert more confidently is that Peter’s character offers the reader an example of one who failed Jesus twice, but was forgiven and called to follow after each failure. Despite denying Christ, Peter “shows that the doors of repentance are always open.” Although this observation is primarily literary, we might ask what the implications are for Mark’s first readers and the early church. Why might Mark have singled out Peter in such a way? How do we reconcile the portrayal of Peter the failed disciple with Peter the pillar of the early church?

Brian J. Incigneri proposes that “Mark was confronting the painful question of forgiving and readmitting apostates and betrayers who were seeking return to the community.” I wholeheartedly agree with Incigneri’s claim for apostates but see no evidence in the text that Mark means to include betrayers in the community. Judas is the only betrayer in Mark, and he makes absolutely no recovery in the text.

Mark’s Gospel is governed by two main issues: What kind of Messiah is Jesus? And what does it mean to be a disciple? It is the latter of these questions that has been the subject of this article. Yet the two are not separate dichotomies but intertwined theologies. Being a disciple of Jesus is, for Mark, being a disciple of one who was rejected, crucified, hated, and misunderstood by the world. Hence, to be a disciple of this kind of Messiah is to pick up one’s cross, to follow on the way, and to know that the world will hate you too.

Implied in this interpretation of Mark is new insight into early Christian responses to apostates. By the third century there was much debate regarding lapsed Christians who had denied Christ or offered sacrifices to Caesar. Some Christians proposed harsh penalties, but others argued for a more lenient approach to penitent

---

71 Marcus, Mark 8-16, 1023.
72 Ibid., 1025
73 Incigneri, Gospel to the Romans, 342.
74 Grant, Augustus to Constantine, 169.
lapsed Christians. Unfortunately, there is far less literature from the first century regarding Christian responses to martyrdom or apostates. Mark’s Gospel proffers one of the earliest extant views on this issue and one that bears further examination in light of martyrdom accounts. Through the person and example of Peter, the author of Mark’s Gospel advocates for leniency and forgiveness for failed martyrs. Rather than harsh penalties or ejection from the community, Mark’s response is to repeat the call of Christ: “follow behind me” (8:34).

V. Conclusion

I have argued that the call of Peter punctuates Mark’s narrative three times: at his initial call in Galilee, at his recall to be a follower who suffers in chap. 8, and at his recall back to Galilee to begin again after the resurrection in 16:7. Hence, what has traditionally been called a “rebuff” of Peter would better be described as his “recall” to a more informed path of discipleship. Using the example of Peter, Mark offers ancient and modern readers a reevaluation of discipleship in accordance with a suffering Messiah.

In contemporary usage, the term “recall” is most often associated with taking a defective product off the shelf. Such a product is usually returned to the manufacturer and probably thrown away. Certainly, Peter’s characterization does qualify him as a “defective” disciple, and the language also evokes a return to the source, in this case Galilee. Contrary to contemporary usage, however, Peter is neither removed from circulation nor discarded. In 8:33, Peter is immediately called again to follow Christ. Similarly in 16:7, Peter is singled out by name to alert the reader to the fact that Peter is explicitly included in the recall of all failed disciples to Galilee. When we read this literary motif alongside the evidence for Peter’s martyrdom in Rome, it becomes plausible that the author of Mark’s Gospel is advocating for leniency for apostates through appeal to the example of the famous martyr Peter.

---

75 Ibid., 169-71. Grant cites Presbyter Novatian as one who proposed harsh penalties in Rome in the third century. These penalties were later rejected. He claims that similar struggles between those advocating for leniency and those advocating penalties occurred also in Carthage, Alexandria, and Antioch. In the early fourth century, Peter of Alexandria issued a decree outlining the various penalties for lapsed Christians depending on the circumstances of their denial. For example, the proposed penalties for those who lapsed under torture were less than the penalties for those who pretended to sacrifice or who lapsed in prison without torture (p. 251). The levels of response in his decree indicate the complexity of the issues and a perceived need for a clear response.

76 An early Christian counterview is presented in Heb 6:4-6, where no repentance is possible for those who have known Christ and fallen away, although it is unclear whether actual denial and renunciation are imagined here or simply apathy and a return to one’s previous faith or lifestyle.