

DISCIPLESHIP AND MINOR CHARACTERS IN MARK'S GOSPEL

Joel F. Williams

How should an interpreter approach the study of discipleship in the Gospel of Mark?¹ For the most part, recent studies on the topic have focused on Mark's portrayal of the disciples along with Jesus' teaching to His disciples. In discussing past research on this subject, Malbon states, "Discipleship—that is, following Jesus—has been recognized as a central theme or motif in the Gospel of Mark. Understandably enough, the portrayal of the disciples in Mark has often been the focus of scholarly investigation of the theme of discipleship."² Malbon points out that past scholarly investigations are inadequate because "what Mark has to say about discipleship is understood in reference not only to the disciples but also to other Markan characters who meet the demands of following Jesus."³ In other words the study of discipleship in Mark's Gospel is broader than a study of the disciples.

In addition to Mark's portrayal of the disciples he included a number of so-called "minor characters" who followed Jesus and lived in accord with His teaching. An examination of these minor characters is important for an understanding of Mark's view of discipleship, that is, his perspective on what is involved in fol-

Joel F. Williams is Assistant Professor of Bible, Columbia International University, Columbia, South Carolina.

¹ This article is a summary of certain theological aspects of the author's dissertation, which has been published as *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark's Gospel*, JSNT Supplement Series 102 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994).

² Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 30.

lowing Jesus and living up to His demands and ideals.⁴

The main character groups in Mark's Gospel are the disciples, the opponents of Jesus, and the crowd.⁵ In addition to these groups, a number of individual characters are included in Mark's narrative. Some of them, such as Andrew or Peter, are disciples, while others, such as the high priest or Pilate, oppose Jesus. Also a number of minor characters function neither as Jesus' disciples nor as His opponents. Instead, these individuals come from the crowd, in the sense that they belong to the general population, to the group of people outside of Jesus' disciples or opponents. They were not specifically called and commissioned to be Jesus' disciples, and they did not align themselves with the religious and political establishments that opposed Jesus and sought to destroy Him. These minor characters from the crowd appear in the narrative when they meet with Jesus, and after their encounter with Him, they generally disappear from the narrative. Some, such as the leper, come to Jesus for help, while others, such as the poor widow, exemplify the teaching of Jesus. Mark's Gospel includes twenty-two passages that present these minor characters from the crowd and their response to Jesus. What would Mark's view of discipleship look like if his presentation of minor characters were included in a study of this theme?

BASIC ISSUES

Certain principles help guide this study. The first is that Mark's Gospel is a narrative, that is, a narration of a series of events. The Gospel of Mark is a historical narrative, but it is a narrative nonetheless.⁶ This observation may seem obvious, but

⁴ For other studies of the minor characters in Mark see Robert C. Tannehill, "The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," *Semeia* 16 (1979): 62-68; David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 129-34; Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 24-27; and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "The Major Importance of the Minor Characters in Mark," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, ed. Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1994), 58-86.

⁵ On the validity of referring to people in biblical narratives as characters, see Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 88; and R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, Foundations and Facets: New Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 105-6.

⁶ For arguments showing that Mark's Gospel presents a coherent narrative, see Norman R. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics, Guides to Biblical Scholarship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 49-80; and idem, "'Point of View' in Mark's Narrative," *Semeia* 12 (1978): 97-121. Hans W. Frei also argues for the need to understand the Gospels as realistic narrative (*The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974]; *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical*

it has important implications, especially for Gospel research, which has often neglected the story elements of the Gospels. In the past several decades New Testament studies have emphasized the theological message of the Gospel writers and the significance of this message for the Gospel writer's community. In such studies the theological concepts of the Gospel are often extracted from the text with little concern for how these concepts fit with the narrative features of the Gospel and the unfolding plot of the story. However, the Gospels are not theological treatises but narratives, and they are best understood when they are treated as such.⁷ This is true even in an analysis of the theological theme of discipleship, since Mark uses narrative features such as plot and characterization to display his perspective on following Jesus. This article examines Mark's portrayal of minor characters to show how this feature communicates his view of discipleship.

A second principle is that Mark's Gospel as a whole, that is, every aspect of his text, is important for understanding his viewpoints.⁸ In recent decades critics have treated Mark as a scissors-and-paste editor, who cut and pieced together traditions to create a portrait of Jesus. In studying Mark's viewpoints, critics have isolated and set aside the traditional elements in Mark's Gospel and have concentrated instead on the seams and patches that Mark contributed to the story. Such an approach, however, often treats large sections of the Gospel as irrelevant to Mark's message, even though Mark himself considered these sections important enough to include them. It is easy to see how an approach that ignores traditional material would diminish the significance of

Bases of Dogmatic Theology [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975], xiii–xiv; and "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank McConnell [New York: Oxford University Press, 1986], 62–63).

⁷ "Themes and other such literary characteristics rightly belong in the centre of an interpretation of Mark in a way that 'theology' and 'theological themes' do not, if for no other reason than that the form of the Second Gospel is not that of a self-consciously theological treatise. Mark is first of all a narrative and, at least on initial approach, should be treated as such" (C. Clifton Black, "The Quest of Mark the Redactor: Why Has It Been Pursued, and What Has It Taught Us?," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33 [1988]: 32). On this point also see C. Clifton Black, *The Disciples according to Mark: Markan Redaction in Current Debate*, JSNT Supplement Series 27 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 239. For descriptions of how recent studies examine the narrative features of the Gospels, see Stephen D. Moore, "Narrative Commentaries on the Bible: Context, Roots, and Prospects," *Forum* 3 (1987): 29–62; idem, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 3–68; Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism? Guides to Biblical Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?" in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 23–49.

⁸ Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* 7, 91–93.

Mark's presentation of minor characters, since most of this material would be identified as coming from Mark's sources.

A third principle is that interpreters should give attention to the sequence of the narrative, to Mark's order of presentation.⁹ A narrative is more like a path than a picture. A narrative is not a spatial object that may be viewed as a whole at any one moment. Rather a narrative tells a story in sequence, with a beginning, middle, and end. In a narrative the author takes the reader through the presentation of a story step by step, and the story may have twists and turns along the way. Interpreters have sometimes presented Mark's view of discipleship as a set of abstract concepts. Evidence for these concepts is taken from the Gospel with little concern for the place of this evidence in the development of the plot. Such an approach neglects the way in which Mark uses the twists and turns of the story to affect the way one looks at a theme such as discipleship. Therefore this article follows Mark's order of presentation in analyzing the relationship between minor characters and the theme of discipleship.

A fourth principle is that Mark's Gospel has a rhetorical function.¹⁰ Mark did not write simply to convey historical in-

⁹ The importance of the sequential flow of the narrative and the temporal nature of reading is emphasized in the work of some New Testament scholars. See Richard A. Edwards, *Matthew's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 9; Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 3, 42-46; David B. Howell, *Matthew's Inclusive Story: A Study in the Narrative Rhetoric of the First Gospel*, JSNT Supplement Series 42 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 43-44, 243-45; and Jeffrey L. Staley, *The Print's First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel*, SBL Dissertation Series 82 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 8-9, 19-20. For a similar approach to interpretation within the broader field of literary criticism, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978), 108-9; idem, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 280; Steven Mailloux, "Learning to Read: Interpretation and Reader-Response Criticism," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 12 (Spring 1979): 96, 100; Menakhem Perry, "Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings," *Poetics Today* 1 (Autumn 1979): 35-64, 311-61; Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 34, 96-97; and idem, "Time and Reader," in *The Uses of Adversity: Failure and Accommodation in Reader Response*, ed. Ellen Spolsky (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1990), 50-51, 77-78, 85.

¹⁰ On the rhetorical function of narratives, see Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 89-116; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1-2; idem, "Time and Space in Biblical (Hi)story Telling: The Grand Chronology," in *The Bible and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina Schwartz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 89, 91; and Susan R. Suleiman, "Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Su-

formation, theological ideas, or a well-formed story. Mark also wrote his Gospel to move his readers to follow Jesus and live up to Jesus' demands. Mark's Gospel is a call to discipleship. A true interpretation of Mark must not ignore or obscure its rhetorical purpose, but instead must convey its message in such a way that the call to follow Jesus will be heard again.

MINOR CHARACTERS IN MARK

What can be learned about discipleship from Mark's treatment of minor characters? Through these individuals Mark emphasizes the importance of faith, the open invitation to follow Jesus, and the real possibility of failure in discipleship. Mark develops these minor characters in three stages. First, in the chapters that deal with Jesus' ministry in Galilee and His journey to Jerusalem (1:1-10:45), Mark presents the minor characters as suppliants, that is, as those who come to Jesus asking for His help. In the second stage, minor characters function as exemplars, as positive examples of what it means to follow Jesus and to accept His teachings and values. This second stage begins with the portrayal of Bartimaeus at the end of chapter 10 and continues through the death and burial of Jesus (10:46-16:7). In the final stage, at the very end of the Gospel (16:8), Mark presents minor characters as negative examples, as examples of failure and disobedience. This final stage is not an extended section, but rather an unexpected turn of events at the end of the narrative.

STAGE ONE: MINOR CHARACTERS AS SUPPLIANTS

In his prologue (1:1-15), Mark introduces Jesus as the authoritative Messiah and Son of God, who proclaimed the gospel, a message that demands repentance and faith in light of the nearness of the kingdom. Following the prologue Mark narrates the initial ministry of Jesus in the region of Galilee. The early chapters of the Gospel introduce different character groups and show their response to Jesus, so that in a rough pattern of rotation Jesus interacts with the disciples, the crowd, the demons, and the religious authorities.¹¹ At times Mark narrates scenes that show Jesus dealing with more than one character group.¹² In the first three chapters of Mark's Gospel, the minor characters appear in these mixed episodes, which present more than one character group. Often the demons, the disciples, or Jesus' opponents play the more active role in the passage. The minor characters are

san R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 9.

¹¹ Tannehill, "The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," 68.

¹² *Ibid.*, 69.

suppliants, needy people who come to Him for help, but the needs of these individuals serve to highlight some other feature of the narrative. The appearance of a possessed man in the synagogue provides an occasion for Jesus to display His authority over the demons (1:21–28). The sickness of Simon Peter's mother-in-law gives the disciples opportunity to express their trust in Jesus (1:29–31). The healing of the paralytic (2:1–12) and the healing of the man with the withered hand (3:1–6) highlight the growing conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities.

In the first three chapters of Mark's Gospel, the minor characters most fully developed are the leper (1:40–45) and the paralytic (2:1–12), both people of faith. The leper says to Jesus, "If you are willing, you are able to cleanse me" (1:40). The paralytic and his four helpers express their faith by overcoming the obstacle of the crowd in order to meet with Jesus (2:2–5). In the following narrative, faith continued to be an important feature in Mark's depiction of these characters.

In chapters 4–8, Mark presents minor characters as figures contrasting to the disciples.¹³ While the disciples respond to Jesus with a growing incomprehension and lack of trust, the suppliants react with faith and insight. Particularly prominent in chapters 4–8 are the three boat scenes in which Jesus travels with His disciples on the Sea of Galilee.¹⁴ In each of these scenes, either Jesus or the narrator criticizes the disciples for their lack of faith and understanding (4:40; 6:52; 8:17–18). In the first boat scene (4:35–41), Jesus stills the storm by rebuking the wind and the waves, and then He rebukes the disciples for their timidity and lack of faith. Mark furthers the criticism of the disciples by noting that they "feared a great fear." This fear was no longer directed at the fierce storm, but at Jesus, the One who demands the obedience of the wind and the sea.

The first boat scene is followed by three miracle stories that present minor characters as people who overcome fear and respond with faith. After calming the sea, Jesus delivers a tormented man, the Gerasene demoniac (5:1–20). With a response similar to that of the disciples in the preceding episode, the people of the region become frightened after they learn of the miracle, and, like the disciples, their fear is directed at Jesus. They ex-

¹³ For a description of the disciples' story in Mark's Gospel, see Robert C. Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," *Journal of Religion* 57 (1977): 386–405. For the idea that minor characters serve as foils for the disciples, see Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 25–27; Rhoads and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 132–34; and Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark," 391, 404–5.

¹⁴ Norman R. Petersen, "The Composition of Mark 4:1–8:26," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980): 195–96.

press their fear by asking Jesus to leave. In contrast to the onlookers and thus in contrast to the disciples, the Gerasene demoniac is not afraid of Jesus, and instead of wanting to be rid of Jesus, he begs for permission to be with Him. Faith and fear continue to be prominent themes in the following scene, which includes the healing of Jairus' daughter and the healing of the hemorrhaging woman (5:21-43). According to Jesus, the woman is healed of her affliction because of her faith. She also overcomes her fear and comes to Jesus when He insists on making this private miracle a matter of public record. When Jesus calls on Jairus to put away fear and to continue to believe, Jairus obeys even though all hope seems lost after the report of his daughter's death. In this way both the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus stand in contrast to the disciples who lack courage and fail to trust.

In the second boat scene (6:45-52), the disciples react with fear and amazement when Jesus comes to them walking on the water. According to Mark their amazement is a negative response because it grew out of their lack of understanding and their hardness of heart. The next minor character, the Syrophenician woman, with her boldness and insight, stands in contrast to the disciples (7:24-30). She is faced with the dilemma of Jesus' rejection of her request for help, a rejection that is made on the basis of her status as a Gentile.¹⁵ With humility she accepts the position of a household dog and does not ask for the privileges that belong to Israel, but only for the crumbs children leave behind. The woman has sufficient insight to recognize that she is able to trust in the abundance of God's mercy. In the next two passages concerning minor characters, Jesus heals a deaf man (7:31-37) and the blind man of Bethsaida (8:22-26). Between these two healing miracles stands the third boat scene (8:14-21). There the disciples misunderstand Jesus' warning concerning the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. Jesus scolds them with a series of pointed questions that highlight their lack of understanding. Using parabolic language, Jesus asks, "Having eyes, do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?" (8:18). Jesus is able to overcome physical deafness and blindness, but He has not yet healed the disciples of their spiritual insensitivity.

In chapters 4-8, minor characters stand in contrast to the disciples, because they express faith in Jesus and because they exemplify or symbolize a true understanding of Jesus' ministry and teaching. In this way Mark shows that following Jesus involves faith, even when fear is the more natural response.

¹⁵ On the enigmatic character of Jesus' remark and its impact, see Jouette M. Bassler, "The Parable of the Loaves," *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986): 170-71.

In the so-called "central section" of Mark's Gospel, which extends from 8:27 through 10:45, Mark continues to present minor characters as suppliants, but now he includes negative features. In chapters 8-10, Mark emphasizes the predictions of Jesus concerning His death, the inability of His disciples to understand the implications of His suffering for His followers, and Jesus' teaching on the cost of discipleship.¹⁶ This teaching on discipleship takes on a new dimension in this section of Mark's Gospel. This new direction is signaled in 8:34, when Mark states that Jesus directs His instructions concerning discipleship toward the crowd as well as the disciples.¹⁷ Jesus begins to open up the demands and opportunity of following Him to "anyone" or "whoever" will come after Him. Discipleship is now for anyone who will deny self, take up the cross, and accept the way of suffering and service. This new dimension in Jesus' teaching creates possibilities for the portrayal of minor characters, since anyone, including suppliants and other minor characters, may follow Jesus.

However, at this point in the narrative Mark's treatment of minor characters takes a surprisingly negative turn. The minor characters in the central section fail to understand or follow Jesus. In contrast to earlier suppliants, the father of the possessed boy struggles with faith (9:14-29). As part of the unbelieving generation that Jesus endures, the father questions Jesus' ability to help. At his best the man's faith is still mixed with doubt, and he pleads for deliverance from his unbelief. Next is the rich man who stands apart from the other suppliants in Mark in a number of ways (10:17-31). He comes to Jesus looking for information rather than healing. The rich man voices no need, expresses no faith, displays no understanding, and receives no healing. He refuses to answer the call to follow Jesus because the deceitfulness of his riches chokes out the Word.

¹⁶ The place of the three passion predictions in the structure of Mark 8-10 is emphasized in the writings of Eduard Schweizer and Norman Perrin. See Eduard Schweizer, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, 4th ed., Das Neue Testament Deutsch. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 214; idem, "Toward a Christology of Mark?" in *God's Christ and His People*, ed. Jacob Jervell and Wayne A. Meeks (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977), 32; idem, "The Portrayal of the Life of Faith in the Gospel of Mark," *Interpretation* 32 (1978): 388-89; idem, "Mark's Theological Achievement," in *The Interpretation of Mark*, ed. William Telford, *Issues in Religion and Theology* 7 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 53-54, 58; Norman Perrin, "The Christology of Mark: A Study in Methodology," *Journal of Religion* 51 (1971): 179; idem, "Towards an Interpretation of the Gospel of Mark," in *Christology and a Modern Pilgrimage: A Discussion with Norman Perrin*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1974), 3-9; and idem, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 155-58.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Disciples/Crowds/Whoever: Markan Characters and Readers," *Novum Testamentum* 28 (1986): 109-10, 124-26.

In the central section of Mark's Gospel the disciples continue to misunderstand, refusing to accept the idea of a suffering Messiah. Jesus healed the blind man of Bethsaida with a second touch, but in spite of repeated instructions from Jesus the disciples still do not see clearly. The disciples are not exemplary in this section, but neither are the suppliants, who struggle with faith and refuse to follow. Significantly, in this section (8:27-10:45) Jesus repeatedly presents Himself as the true example or paradigm for His followers. Jesus, as the Son of Man, must suffer many things and be killed, and so His followers must deny themselves and lose their lives for His sake. Jesus, as the Son of Man, did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life, and so His followers must take the lowly position of servants. Mark refrains from referring to other exemplary characters in this section so that nothing will detract from Jesus' example. Discipleship involves an acceptance of suffering and lowly service because this is the example Jesus left for His followers.

STAGE TWO: MINOR CHARACTERS AS POSITIVE EXAMPLES

Blind Bartimaeus functions as a transitional figure in Mark's presentation of minor characters (10:46-52). Like earlier minor characters he is a needy suppliant who comes to Jesus in faith, so that he might receive healing. In fact Bartimaeus has an exuberant faith that is commended by Jesus. Yet he is not only the last of the suppliants but also the first of a series of minor characters who serve as positive examples of what it means to follow Jesus and live up to His demands. In his final comment on the healed blind man, Mark states that Bartimaeus received his sight and was following Jesus in the way. Thus Mark characterizes Bartimaeus as someone who has taken on a devotion to Jesus and His teaching. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem to suffer and die, and Bartimaeus follows Jesus on this path of service. Bartimaeus stands in direct contrast to the rich man who would not follow Jesus because of his many possessions.

In chapters 11-13, Mark organizes his material around Jesus' activity in the temple on three consecutive days.¹⁸ The next two minor characters after Bartimaeus, the wise scribe (12:28-34) and the poor widow (12:41-44), appear in the midst of the controversy stories that take place on Jesus' third day in the temple. Both individuals are commended by Jesus, because in some way they understand or live up to His expectations. Mark portrays the wise scribe as unusually perceptive both because of his willingness to

¹⁸ Werner H. Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979): 57. For a similar approach, see Stephen H. Smith, "The Literary Structure of Mark 11:1—12:40," *Novum Testamentum* 31 (1989): 112.

ask about the foremost commandment and because of his acceptance of Jesus' answer. Jesus recognizes in this scribe an openness to God's demands and thus an openness to the kingdom of God. Jesus also commends the sacrificial giving of the poor widow. The scribe agreed with Jesus concerning the importance of loving God with one's whole heart, understanding, and strength. Then Jesus points to the poor widow as an example of such a wholehearted response to God. In contrast to the rich man who possesses a shallow understanding of God's commandments and refuses to enter the kingdom, the wise scribe shows insight into the commandments and stands open to God's kingdom. Unlike the rich man, the poor widow gives all that she owns.

In chapter 14 the disciples move from misunderstanding to failure. They have repeatedly displayed confusion about the necessity of taking the way of the cross, and so when they are called on to suffer, they cease to follow Jesus. Mark implies that there is a future restoration for the disciples beyond the resurrection and that the disciples will indeed become "fishers of men." However, Mark concludes his portrayal of the disciples with their failure, with Peter weeping after he denied Christ.

In light of the desertion of the disciples, Mark once again in the passion narrative contrasts minor characters with the disciples. Minor characters fulfill certain duties that the disciples should accomplish but do not, because they abandon their responsibility to follow Jesus. Mark expresses the action of Simon of Cyrene who carries Jesus' cross (15:21), with words that recall Jesus' teaching to His followers concerning the necessity of taking up the cross (8:34). Thus Simon of Cyrene serves Jesus in a way that is appropriate for a follower. The centurion confesses that Jesus is the Son of God and does so in the face of His suffering and death on the cross (15:39). The disciples recognize Jesus' messianic identity, but they seem unable to accept His way of suffering. The centurion, however, is able to view together the divine sonship of Jesus and His destiny on the cross.

Joseph of Arimathea takes the corpse of Jesus down from the cross, wraps it in a linen cloth, and lays it in a tomb (15:42-47). By taking on the duty of Jesus' burial, Joseph acts in a manner that has been associated with discipleship earlier in Mark's narrative. After John the Baptist is beheaded, his disciples come and take his corpse and lay it in a tomb (6:29). After the crucifixion Jesus' disciples are absent, and so Joseph of Arimathea assumes responsibility for the burial. Yet Joseph is not the only minor character who cares for Jesus' burial. Earlier, a woman in Bethany expresses her love for Jesus by anointing His head with a costly perfume (14:3-9). Jesus interprets this good deed as an

anointing for His burial before His death.

Moreover, Jesus' followers include a number of women who serve Jesus and follow Him all the way to the cross (15:40-41). This group of women includes Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, who come to the tomb on the first day of the week to anoint Jesus' body with spices (16:1-3). Therefore a number of minor characters continue to demonstrate their devotion to Jesus, even after the disciples deserted Him.

From Bartimaeus to the end of the passion narrative, minor characters exemplify the truth that following Jesus is open to all. Discipleship is not simply for those like the disciples; who receive a specific call to follow (1:16-20; 3:13-19) and a unique commission to preach and have authority (3:13-19; 6:7-13). Those who read Mark's Gospel, like these minor characters, may respond to the general call to discipleship that goes out to "anyone." or "whomever." Mark's minor characters are unlikely heroes: a blind beggar, a scribe, a poor widow, a woman in the house of a leper, a passerby, a soldier, a member of the Sanhedrin, a small group of women followers. Yet these individuals accept Jesus' teaching, fulfill His demands, and live with devotion toward Him. They illustrate that in God's kingdom the first will be last and the last will be first (10:31).

STAGE THREE: MINOR CHARACTERS AS NEGATIVE EXAMPLES

The end of Mark's Gospel presents a number of problems, not the least of which is a major text-critical problem. The assumption of this article is that Mark intended to conclude his Gospel at 16:8.¹⁹ This would mean that the final passage (16:1-8) deals with minor characters, with the three women followers, and that the final verse of the book (16:8) records their surprising reactions. The women flee from the tomb with trembling and terror, and they speak to no one because of their fear. The young man at the tomb had just reported the resurrection to the women and commanded them to tell Peter and the disciples to go to Galilee, where they would see Jesus. The young man's words clearly point back to the promise of Jesus in Mark 14:28, where Jesus predicted He would meet with the disciples in Galilee after His resurrection. Apparently the purpose for this meeting was to bring about a restoration for the disciples, so that they might fulfill their mission as Jesus' apostles. The command of the young man, therefore, is a message of hope for disciples who have failed.

Mark follows the command in 16:7 with the negative reaction

¹⁹ For a further discussion of this point, see Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus*, 191-94.

of the women in 16:8. The flight of the women from the tomb is similar to the cowardly flight of the disciples after Jesus' arrest in the garden. Their trembling and terror is a rejection of the young man's call to them to put aside their amazement. Out of fear, the women remain silent, and as a result they disobey the command of the young man and fail to pass on the message to the disciples.

The disobedient silence of the women forces the reader to reflect again on the message of hope given in Mark 16:7. Does the disobedience of the women negate the promise implied in the young man's message for the disciples? No, the promise holds true because it is based on Jesus' word, which will never pass away. Therefore the anticipated meeting predicted by Jesus and confirmed by the young man would take place in spite of the disobedience of the women. However, the failure of the women must not be neglected, because it carries a significant warning for others who seek to follow Jesus. The women's failure warns that disobedience and fear are not simply part of the disciples' condition before the resurrection. The time between the resurrection and Christ's coming again, or, in other words, the present time, is also a period of potential fear and failure.

In 16:7-8, Mark juxtaposes promise and failure.²⁰ The prediction in verse 7 implies a promise that restoration to discipleship is possible in spite of disobedience. The fear and silence of the women in verse 8 shows that failure in discipleship is a real possibility in the present time. Therefore in the end Mark uses minor characters as negative examples for a warning concerning the potential problems of discipleship.

CONCLUSION

Mark's presentation of minor characters is both a call and a caution. The call to follow Jesus is open to anyone, but it involves self-denial, sacrifice, and willing, humble service. Through the failure of the disciples and then that of minor characters, Mark cautions that the demands Jesus places on His followers are difficult. Fear and disobedience are potential problems for any who choose to follow Jesus. In this way Mark's narrative, including his presentation of minor characters, carries a twofold message: "Anyone can be a follower; no one finds it easy."²¹

²⁰ On this point, see Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Promise and the Failure: Mark 16:7,8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 283-300.

²¹ Malbon, "Fallible Followers," 46.