An exegetical and literary study of the characteization of the rich man in the Gospel of Mark and of its implications

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An Exegetical and Literary Study of the Characterization of the Rich Man in the Gospel of Mark and of its Implications

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To my mother

Thank you for your love and support

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Introduction[1]

Characterization is a device by which an author fashions a written portrait of a character.[2] The narrator forms characters through their action, dialogue, and relationships in the narrative. As Rhoads and Michie assert, characters are a central element of the story world of a narrative.[3] Furthermore, characterization helps an author to both compose/advance a plot and significantly convey his or her own viewpoints. In addition, characterization helps the reader to understand the identity and function of the people in the narrative, and it draws them into the narrative as participants who may reflect on their lives and perhaps make life-changing decisions.

From the outset of Mark's Gospel, the narrator explicitly states that his purpose is to reveal to his readers that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God[4] who has brought εὐαγγέλιον to human beings (1:1).[5] In order to accomplish this purpose, Mark, like an astute playwright,

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1 All biblical references are taken from NRSV, exceptions will be clarified.

2 R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 105.

3 David Rhoads, Johnna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999),101.

4 Scholars argue whether Mark 1:1 should be regarded as an element in the first verse of Mark's Gospel or as the purpose of Mark's Gospel. Here I follow M. Eugene Boring who asserts that the opening line of Mark's Gospel sets the tone for the entire narrative and can best be understood as the author's title to the whole Gospel. M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, The New Testament Libraries (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 232-3. Francis. J. Moloney suggests that Mark carefully crafted a story that not only reveals Jesus is the Messiah, a suffering Messiah, but challenges readers to decide if they want to follow him. See Francis. J. Moloney, "The Markan Story," *Word &World* 26, no.1 (2006):5-13. Richard Valantasis, Douglas K. Bleyle and Dennis C. Haugh consider that the citation of the Old Testament in Mark's Gospel not just help Mark to characterize Jesus as Son of God, but it also helps his readers to recognize that Jesus is the Israelite Messiah. See Richard Valantasis, Douglas K. Bleyle and Dennis C. Haugh, *The Gospels and Christian Life in History and Practice* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 63.

5 In the beginning of Mark's Gospel, Jesus announces "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the εὐαγγέλιον." (1:14-15). In Mark's view, the good news of Jesus Christ (1:1) refers not to a book but to the good news of God's saving act in Jesus Christ. Jesus as the Son of God not only preaches εὐαγγέλιον, but himself is the εὐαγγέλιον. He frees humankind from the slavery of sin (2:5) and shows the way of truth (3:27-28) and eternal life to God's people (10:29). In the Greco-Roman world, the Greek writers use εὐαγγέλιον to announce a royal birth, a political or a military triumph. The Roman emperors are often described as lords that bring peace and prosperity to his country. Craig A. Evans considers that Mark uses εὐαγγέλιον to present Jesus as the Son of God in parallel and in opposition to the Roman ideology. In doing so, Mark deliberately places Jesus in opposition to the imperial claims. Craig A. Evan, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), xxxii-xxxiii.

portrays a great many characters[6] who interact with Jesus, the protagonist, in a variety of scenes. By doing so, Mark not only reveals that Jesus is the Son of God and the suffering Servant,[7] he also elicits an array of belief-responses. For instance, he tells us of the amazement of the crowd when Jesus taught them with authority (1:27), at his conversation with the demoniac at Capernaum (1:21-28), and when he forgave the sins of the paralytic, which led some scribes to consider him a blasphemer (2:6-7). Mark contrasts the faith of the Gentile Syrophoenician woman who called him 'Lord' (κύριε) (7:28) to the unbelief of his skeptical countrymen in Nazareth who refused believe even as they expressed astonishment at his teaching in their synagogue (6:2b-3). Mark presents us with a similar characterization in Jesus' Jerusalem ministry. The people came out to greet him (11:1-11), in contrast to the chief priests and scribes who sought a way to put him to death (11:18).

In the light of these various belief-responses and presentations in the narrative, commentators have typically viewed the characters either as representatives of belief or as representatives of unbelief. For example, they regard Judas the Iscariot as a type of unbelief because he colluded with the priests and handed Jesus over to them (14:10). In other words, Mark negatively portrays him as Jesus' betrayer (3:19; 14:43-45). In contrast, he presents blind Bartimaeus as an exemplary figure[8] and as a representative of belief, because he followed Jesus on the way to Jerusalem after receiving his sight from him (10:46-52).[9]

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6 Mark's supplicant characters represent such a wide variety of people (males, females, Jews, Gentiles, and those of high and low status) that they have a large potential to connect with mixed readers.

7 Throughout Mark's Gospel, Mark uses different plots and titles to implicitly or explicitly confirm that Jesus is the Son of God and the suffering Messiah. For example, demons declare Jesus' divinity when they meet him (3:11), Peter professes Jesus as Son of God at Caesarea Philippi (8:29); the centurion calls Jesus Son of God while he stands under the cross (15:39). Mark depicts Jesus as Christ seven times (1:1; 8:29; 9:41; 12:35; 13:21; 14:61; 15:32). He also uses "Son of God" nine times for Jesus (1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 8:38; 9:7; 13:32; 14:61; 15:39). Meanwhile, the second half of Mark's Gospel focuses on Jesus' passion and stresses his identity as the suffering Son of God who sacrifices his life as a ransom for many (10:45). A powerful Son of God Christology and a Suffering Servant Christology co-exist in Mark's Gospel simultaneously.

8 Joel F. Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark's Gospels* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 152-165. See also Edwin Keith Broadhead, *Mark* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2001), 144.

9 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 cross and service.

Nonetheless, the evangelist does not characterize all the persons in the Gospel as clearly. In fact, the presentation of the Rich Man (RM),[10] who appears in Mark 10:17-31, does not fit the template of positive-or-negative characterization. As a consequence, exegetes and commentators have argued about him and remain sharply divided in their evaluation of the characterization of the RM.

Many scholars interpret the RM's sad refusal of Jesus' call as an indication that he is negative figure[11], a hypocrite, a type of unbelief, and an enemy of discipleship[12] Others, in contrast, view the RM more positively and see him as a devout Jew,[13] an observer of Torah,[14] and a candidate for discipleship.[15] They argue that the reason the RM failed to follow Jesus was not due to a complete lack of faith but to the radical nature of Jesus' call which demanded more than what was expected for a first-century Jew.[16] Jesus, in fact did not ask

[10] The RM's wealth is not disclosed until the end of the story not only dramatizes the story, but it also makes it possible for both rich and poor readers to identify with the RM.

[11] Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 205-208. Elizabeth divides the characters in Mark's Gospel into three categories: exemplars, fallible followers and enemies. Based on the RM's refusal of Jesus' call, she regards the RM as a negative exemplar of followership and an enemy of discipleship.

[12]Joel F. Williams compares the story of Jesus' encounter with the RM with the healing stories in Mark's Gospel. He suggests that the RM comes to Jesus looking for information rather than healing. He voices no need, expresses no faith, displays no understanding, and receives no healing. Joel F. Williams, "Discipleship and Minor Characters in Mark's Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra 153* (1996): 332-43. See also Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus*, 173-175.

[13] Bas M.F. van Iersel, trans. W. H. Bisscheroux, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 323.

[14] Alan R. Culpepper, *Mark*, Smyth & Helwys Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2007), 336. See also Arsent Ermakov, "The Salvific Significance of the Torah in Mark 10.17-22 and 12.28-34" in *Torah in the New Testament: papers delivered at the Manchester-Lausanne seminar of June 2008*, ed. Michael Tait (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark: 2009), 25.

[15] Christopher M. Hays remarks that the RM is not described as "a special case with a unique handicap, but as nothing more than another would-be disciple who is not willing to do what it takes to follow Jesus." See Christopher M. Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 172. See also Culpepper, *Mark*, 334-6.

[16] In the Jewish tradition, almsgiving is encouraged but rabbis restrict generosity lest the benefactor become poor. Even those entering Qumran did not give away their goods to the poor but offered them to the community and might have retained some control over them. For the retained control of goods, see 1 QS 7:6–7,27–28. See also Gregory Sterling, 'Acts of the Apostles,' in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. L. Schiffmann and J. VanderKam, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University, 2000), 1:6. Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 3rd edition (London: Penguin, 1987), 8, 15–16. Meanwhile, the reaction of Jesus' disciples' shows his teaching on the rich and entering of the kingdom of God (10:26) affirms that Jesus' question to the RM is harsh. They both are shocked when they hear Jesus' teaching on wealth (10:22, 24).

the RM to sell part of what he owns and to give part of his possessions to the poor, but to sell all he has and give it to the poor.[17]

Whether they regard the RM favorably or unfavorably, most of these scholars share a common methodological limitation. They treat the RM like a cardboard character: a two-dimensional figure who embodies only a single quality and does not undergo change. We should also note that since Mark narrates Jesus' encounter with the RM (10:17-31) in the "way section" (εἰς ὁδὸν) (8:22-10:52)[18] of his gospel and within a larger section about teaching on wealth (10:23-31), most scholars either focus on the tension between wealth and the kingdom of God or merely regard this episode as an example of Jesus' teachings on the renunciation of wealth as a condition of discipleship.[19]As a result, they hardly grasp the significance of Mark's portrayal of the RM, the other themes that lie beneath this Gospel passage, and the crucial roles they play in the characterization of the RM. These themes include eternal life and its relationship to the Torah; wealth as the reward for observing the Torah and for following traditional Jewish ascetic practices, and the body language and emotions of the RM.[20] These themes notably enrich the content of this episode and provide us with essential keys for our analysis of Mark's characterization of the RM.

In this thesis, I will explain the socio-historical background necessary for evaluating the Gospel's characterization of the RM, and then I will apply the method of literary criticism

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17 Donahue and Harrington translate 10:22b as "Go, to sell whatever you have, and give to the poor…" John R. Donohue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina Series, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 302. Boring translates 10:22b as "To sell everything you have and give to the poor…" Boring, *Mark,* 290.

18 Mark 8:22-10:52 is named the "way section" because this unit describes what happens while Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. More importantly, this unit reveals Jesus' "way" of being a suffering Messiah and indicates that the "way" of discipleship is marked by sacrifice, humility, and service. Daniel. J. Harrington, *The Church According to the New Testament: What the Wisdom and Witness of early Christianity teaches us today* (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 102-3. Thomas D. Stegman provides a detailed explanation on the meaning of the "way section." Thomas D. Stegman, *Opening the Door of Faith: Encountering Jesus and His call to Discipleship* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), 30-1.

19 Valantasis, *The Gospels and Christian Life,* 49.

20 Some other minimal themes in the episode are the imminence of the kingdom of God and Jesus' radical question to the RM; the concept of a new family in God.

to argue that the RM's portrayal in Mark's Gospel is neither positive nor negative, but undetermined. The RM is ambiguous and thus similar to the disciples who are characterized in Mark's narrative[21] with both positive and negative attributes. In this way, Mark's presentation of the RM mirrors the evangelist's characterization of the disciples, and thus allows us to view the RM as a "case study" in discipleship.

This study of the characterization of both the RM and of the disciples in Mark's Gospel raises important questions for us today. Just as their futures were uncertain and open-ended, so too are our own. This uncertainty provides a window into Mark's theology and his community, and a point of contact between Mark's first-century readers and readers today. All readers can easily imagine the struggle of total obedience that the RM is facing.

The chapters are organized as follows. **Chapter one** will introduce the methodological approach and a survey of the scholarship on the study of characterization in Mark's Gospel. I will also present pertinent details from the contrasting assessments of the RM in order to illustrate the complexity of the characterization of the RM. **Chapter two** will discuss the larger Jewish context for interpreting Mark 10:17-31, especially as regards the ethics of wealth from two aspects: wealth as divine blessing and wealth as corruption. **Chapter three** will present a close exegetical study of Mark 10:17-31. Here, I will examine the Greek text, analyze distinctive words and imagery. Then I will study the larger literary context for this passage—its structure and details—and provide a detailed exegesis to show that the characterization of the RM is paradoxical and ambiguous.

In chapter four, I will develop the characterization of the RM in the context of Mark's portrayal of discipleship in the rest of his Gospel and show that the RM embodies or typifies disciples who have a genuine interest in Jesus and his teaching, who are taught by Jesus

[21] In the recent scholarly literature, the ambivalence of the disciples has been largely recognized by interpreters. Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 29-34.

alone, but have not yet come to the full recognition of Jesus's divinity and lordship as the Servant-Messiah. **Chapter five** will explore the implications of the characterization of the RM and of the disciples in Mark's Gospel from three points of view: 1) their ambiguity within the narrative of Mark's Gospel; 2) their ambiguity in the context of Mark's Gospel as a two-level drama; 3) and finally, their embodiment of the tensions for the spiritual life of Christians today.

Chapter One

Methodology and the Two Different Readings of the RM

This chapter begins with a historical survey of the character study in Mark's Gospel, a discussion of methodological approach, and an introduction to two typical readings of the RM in the scholarship on Mark's text. The first two parts are interrelated. They will not only explain why I am taking the approach of Narrative Criticism, but they also point out the significance of the present study. Although the narrative about the RM has been analyzed by other scholars, no one has provided a systematic analysis of the ambiguity of this character from a literary-hermeneutic viewpoint. The third part will demonstrate the complexity of the RM's characterization and prepare for both the teachings on wealth in Jewish literature and for the exegeses that are contained in subsequent chapters.

1.1 A Historical survey of Character Study in Mark

For the better part of two millennia, Mark's Gospel was overshadowed and unappreciated in contrast to the other Gospels. Mark L. Strauss wrote "Though the most dramatic and fast-paced of the Gospels, Mark's was also the most neglected."[22] There was no commentary written on the entire narrative of Mark's Gospel until the late fifth century[23] and a second commentary was not written until four hundred years later.[24] Although portions of Mark's Gospel had been used in Christian worship, it was not included in the Common Lectionary shared by Roman Catholics and Protestants until 1969.[25] Even the patristic writers who knew

[22]Mark L. Strauss, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark*, ed. by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 20.

[23] The earliest patristic commentary on Mark was written by Victor of Antioch, though his work is essentially a catena of texts drawn from the Gospel. See Christopher W. Skinner, "The Study Character(s) in the Gospel of Mark: A Survey of Research from Wrede to the Performance Critics (1901 to 2014)" in *Character Studies and the Gospel of Mark,* ed. Christopher W. Skinner and Matthew Ryan Hauge (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 3.

[24] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 159.

[25] C. Clifton Black, *Mark*. Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 35.

that Mark belonged in the canon could not agree which of the allegorical beasts should represent him (cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* III.11.8 and Augustine, *conf.* 4.9).

Part of the reason for the neglect of Mark's Gospel can be attributed to Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) who is the first church father to comment that Mark's Gospel is little more than an abbreviation of Matthew's Gospel.[26] He writes:

> Mark follows him (Matthew) closely and looks like his attendant and epitomizer. For in Mark's narrative he gives nothing in concert with John apart from the others… Mark narrates in words almost numerically and identically the same as those used by Matthew. (Augustine, *conf.* 2.3)[27]

The dramatic change of the scholarly attitude towards Mark's Gospel took place with the rise of Historical Criticism in the nineteenth century. In seeking to resolve the relationship among Matthew, Luke, and Mark, scholars came to regard Mark's Gospel as the earliest written Gospel. Then, Mark's Gospel became the most popular of the Synoptics for scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth century. At present, although a few interpreters are still convinced of Augustine's view, the majority of New Testament scholars judge Mark's Gospel as the earliest of the Gospels written and support the theory of "Marcan priority."[28]

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[26] Approximately 90 percent of its stories can be found either in Matthew or Luke.

[27] Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall (ed.), *Mark*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), xxvii. Mark Goodacre argues against the theory that Mark's Gospel is the abbreviation of Matthew's. Goodacre accepts the Farrer hypothesis, namely Mark was written first, Matthew used Mark, and Luke used both Mark and Matthew. He rejects the Griesbach hypothesis – that Mark used both Matthew and Luke. He argues from references (Matt 22:4-8, 23:37-39; Lk 13:34-35, 21:20-21, 23-24) to the fate of Jerusalem and the temple that Matthew and Luke are post-70, while Mark's no later than 70. Moreover, he draws on Mark's omissions (notably the Lord's Prayer) and Mark's additions (the healings of the deaf man (7:33-36) and the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26), and the young man running away naked (14:51-52)) to demonstrate that these materials play a crucial role in Mark's theology and further reveal Mark's priority. Mark Goodacre, "Setting in Place the Cornerstone: The Priority of Mark" in *The Case against Q* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002): 19-45.

[28] Mark Goodacre and Robert H. Stein both have discussed the rationale of "Marcan priority" in their books. The main reasons can be concluded: (1) 97% of Mark's Gospel is duplicated in Matthew; and 88% is found in Luke; (2) In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is depicted as a great teacher. If Mark borrowed from Matthew or Luke, he would not omit many of significant events of Jesus' life such as the birth of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer, the resurrection appearance by Jesus; (3) the order of the events in both Matthew and Luke followed Mark's order. (4) Matthew and Luke tend to alter the negative elements that appear in Mark. For instance, Jesus' anger (Mk 3:5) and indignation (Mk 10:14) 'are not present' OR 'do not appear' in Luke and Matthew; (5) the preservation of original Aramaic words in Mark are consistently replaced with Greek translation in Matthew and Luke (cf. Mk 5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36). Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem: A Way*

Interestingly, as scholars became concerned with Mark's Gospel, some of them began criticizing Mark's style. One calls Mark a "clumsy writer unworthy of mention in any historical literature."[29] Rudolf Bultmann followed Martin Dibelius,[30] one of the pioneers of Form Criticism, and regarded Mark's Gospel as a sloppy and haphazardly constructed account. He claimed that "Mark is not sufficiently a master of his material to be able to venture on a systematic construction himself."[31] Because of these doubts about the literary quality of Mark's Gospel, Historical Criticism can be less helpful since it mainly focuses on seeking to reconstruct the life and thought of the biblical era.[32] Mark Allen Powell wrote, "The historical-critical method attempted to interpret not the stories themselves but the historical circumstances behind them."[33] These factors contribute to a lack of understanding of the structure of Mark's Gospel and to the relative disinterest in the way characterization plays a role in the narrative.

A call for a more literary approach was made by William A. Beardslee in 1969.[34] He pioneered Narrative Criticism and explained that Narrative Criticism focuses not on the historical world behind the narratives but on the literary nature of the text itself in its present version.[35] Hans W. Frei and Norman R. Peterson soon followed his lead.[36] A groundbreaking narrative study on the Gospels were produced by David Rhoads and Donald Michie.[37]

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through the Maze (New York: T & T Clark, 2001). See also Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 50-60.

29 Etienne Trocme, *The Formation of the Gospel According to Mark*, trans. P. Gaughan (London: SPCK, 1975), 82-83.

30 The word "Formgeschichte" (form history) in the field of Biblical criticism does not appear to have been current before the publication of the first edition of Martin Dibelius's Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums in 1919. See Martin Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr), 1919.

31 Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. J. Marsh (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 350

32 Mark Allen Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 2.

33 Ibid.

34 William A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

35 Ibid.

36 Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1974). Norman R. Peterson, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

37 David Rhoads and Donald Michie analyzed Mark's Gospel from a literary approach. See David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982). Afterwards, they reedited the book and separately published it in 1999 and 2012. David Rhoads, Johnna

Afterwards, more scholars came to draw on Narrative Criticism,[38] which brought attention to Mark's literary style. For example, in his essay "The Marcan Story," Francis. J. Moloney utilizes Narrative Criticism to argue against Bultmann's idea and to demonstrate that Mark was a creative and skilled author who carefully designed the story of Jesus and ventured "on a systematic construction" in his Gospel.[39]

With the rise of Narrative Criticism, scholars began to pay particular attention to the role of the characters in the Gospels. There are many books dedicated to the study of characters in Mark, such as:[40] the study of the disciples, the Gentiles and women, as well as other minor characters. However, there are no monographs or essays that offer an extended study of the ambiguity of the RM from a narrative perspective. The present study will fill this gap.

1.2 Methodology

In this thesis, I will use Narrative Criticism to explore the characterization of the RM in Mark's Gospel.[41] This approach will not only reveal Mark's outstanding artistry, it will also be more helpful in assessing the RM character as the Gospel writer has presented it. Because none of the New Testament narratives were written in isolation from their socio-cultural context, I will draw on the related social-cultural background to reconstruct the

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Dewey, and Donald Michie. *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999). David Rhoads and Johnna Dewey, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

[38] R. Alan Culpeper wrote his book—*the anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: a study in literary design*, Jack Dean Kingsbury wrote his book, *Matthew as story*, Robert Tannehill wrote *the narrative unity of Luke-Acts: a literary interpretation*.

[39] Moloney, "Marcan Story," 5-13. See also Moloney's literary commentary on Mark. Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 8-10. See also Culpepper, *Mark*, 3.

[40] Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus.* Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000). Kelly R. Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark: 'Even the Dogs Under the Table Eat the Children's Crumbs,'* LNTS 339 (London: T. &T. Clark, 2007). Seong Hee Kim, *Mark, Women and Empire: A Korean Postcolonial Perspective* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010). Jeffrey W. Aernie, *Narrative Discipleship: Portraits of Women in the Gospel of Mark* (Eugene: Pickwick publication, 2018).

[41] Characterization is a special interest within Narrative Criticism.

characterization of the RM. A study of Mark's Gospel cannot be conducted independently from an understanding of its historical, social, and cultural background. Knowledge of the social, historical, and cultural context of the first-century Mediterranean world is necessary for gaining insight into the narrative world of Mark's Gospel and the personality, motives, and behaviors of a character. The reconstruction and assessment of a character must include both a literary analysis of the text and an historical analysis of the social-cultural contexts in which a narrative was created. In other words, my methodology could be considered as what Cornelis Bennema calls "Narrative Historical Criticism that takes a context-orientated approach but examines aspects of the world outside the text."[42]

There are, however, a few literary considerations that will determine how I approach the RM in Mark's Gospel. Contemporary approaches to characters within the narrative world can be roughly categorized as belonging to either of two camps: the "purists" and the "realists."[43] The "purists" regard characters as nothing more than words on a page, which means they are simply verbal phenomena, recurring figures, and the creation of the author that only exist in a narrative world. Conversely, the "realists" treat the characters as real people. Aspects of both the "purist" and the "realist" approaches are attractive and several critics have attempted to mediate a course between them.[44] What is undeniable is that characters can be regarded as literary devices employed by an author to advance the narrative both with regard to plot and purpose. However, it does not mean that fictional characters are completely fabricated, since they do claim to describe the real world and real people. As Malbon notes, "All the characters internal to the narrative exist not for their own sakes but for

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[42] Cornelis Bennema, *A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 67.

[43] The terms 'purists' and 'realists' are from M. Mudrick. He used these two terms in his article "Character and Event in Fiction," *Yale Review 50* (1961), 211. See also R. Scholes, *Elements of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 17.

[44] Championed by Seymour Chatman and adopted by S. Rimmon-Kenan, the "open theory of character" treats the character as both people and words. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics (London: Methuen, 1983), 31-36.

the sake of the communication between author and audience."[45] In this study, I plan to regard characters primarily as literary devices. At the same time, I will not deny their reality as "people."[46] Unfortunately, we cannot flesh out the minor characters who appear so briefly in the course of the narrative, since the Gospel does not provide us with a "back story" for them. We cannot provide them with a history, nor will I seek to prove their historicity in Mark's Gospel. Culpepper, in fact, acknowledges that the minor characters…have a disproportionately high representational value.… So they are best understood as literary devices.[47] Thus I will not explore the historicity of the character of the RM.

The reason why I read them as "people" is that they are "life-like." They not only manifest the qualities of real people beyond the world of the narrative they are textualized in, but they also share the culture that readers live in. More importantly, they project readers into the perplexities of life and lead them to reflect on their own lives. Therefore, I will not only explore the function of the RM as a character within Mark's Gospel, but I will also explore the implications of the RM for Mark's readers in the past and now.

1.3 The History of Scholarship regarding Mark's Characterization of the RM[48]

While the RM in Mark's Gospel has drawn the attention of many scholars, there is no systematic monograph written on the RM's ambiguity from a literary perspective. From the

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[45] Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "The Major Importance of the Minor Characters in Mark." In *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, ed. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight, JSNTS 109 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994): 58-86.

[46] Although scholars debated the historicity of characters in the Gospels, most scholars ascertain that the major characters, especially Jesus, are historical and cannot be understood independently of faith in him and cannot be understood independently of the gospels. See Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 99-101. Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 1-23. Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xxii. For more information about the relationship between the truth of the Bible and the genres contained in the Biblical writings, see the *Constitutio Dogmatica De Divina Revelatione (Dei Verbum), especially no. 1-13.*

[47] Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 102.

[48] Due to limited materials, I will mainly focus on the Church Fathers' interpretation and the point of view of contemporary scholars on the RM.

time of the Church Fathers,[49] most scholars[50] regard the RM negatively, or as a failed disciple. Other scholars[51] have noted positive traits in him, but no one fully utilizes the ambiguity in the way Mark presents him to discuss the Gospel's mixed presentation and its implications. In this part, I will introduce these two contrasting critical assessments of the RM separately according to the sequence of Mark 10:17-31.[52] Doing so will indicate the complexity of the RM's presentation and prepare us to study the ethical implications of wealth and to undertake an exegesis of Mark 10:17-31 in the following chapters.

1.3.1 Unfavorable Assessment of the RM

As Jesus and his disciples are traveling to Jerusalem, an unnamed male inquirer (the RM) runs to Jesus and "falls on his knees" (γονυπετήσας) before Jesus. He calls Jesus "good teacher" (διδάσκαλε ἀγαθέ) and asks Him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17).

Scholars as early as Cyril of Alexandria, have regarded the RM's question as the wrong question because eternal life needs to be received as a gift rather than as something one can attain by one's effort.[53] They understand his actions and words as signs of adulation and hypocrisy.[54] They interpret the RM's action as those of one who "tries to impress with a compliment and perhaps hopes to be greeted with a lofty title in turn. In the Oriental world,

[49] While introducing the Church Fathers interpretation of the RM, two things that need to be clarified are (1) aside from some short works by some Church Fathers, there is no extensive interpretation of Mark's Gospel in the patristic period; (2) the interpretive methods that they utilized were not Historical or Narrative criticism but analogical textual reasoning. Thus, they didn't assess a certain Gospel passage within a certain Gospel, but usually commented on Mark while focusing on a passage in one of the other three Gospels.
[50] Such as Cyril of Alexandria, Kenneth E. Bailey, Joel. F. Williams, Mark J. Keown etc. I will provide full information of these scholars in the subsequent footnotes.
[51] Such as Andrew T. LePeau, Robert C. Tannehill, John T. Carroll, Raymond F. Collins etc. I will provide full information of these scholars in the subsequent footnotes.
[52] I will concentrate on the conversation between Jesus and the RM (Mk10:17-22) because it focuses the presentation of the RM.
[53] Thomas C. Oden (ed.), *Luke, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 282. L. Hurtado, *Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) 151. See also Culpepper, *Mark*, 335.
[54] Cyril of Alexandria explains that the "good teacher" is a title that is mostly used by Jesus opponents (*Cyril Comm.* Lk 18:18). Oden, *Mark*, 140.

one compliment requires a second…" [55] Jerome even compared the RM to "a priest who, while inwardly despising his bishop, continues to address him openly as 'bishop'." (Jerome, *Homily* 53).[56]

Jesus' reply to the RM's question "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments…" (10:18) is seen as proof that the RM spoke and acted insincerely and had a shallow understanding of goodness. Furthermore, in his reply, Jesus points to commandments five through nine of the Decalogue—the social commandments—because they all deal with man's treatment of his neighbor.[57] Since the commandment "You shall not defraud" does not appear either in Luke's account or Matthew's, some scholars put it into the social-economic context and argue that the emphasis of "do not defraud" indicates that the RM's wealth has been gleaned through defrauding and exploiting the poor—and that he was far from blameless.[58]

In the RM's reply to Jesus, he dropped the word "good" and said, "Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth." Joel F. Williams interprets the omission of the word "good" as a demonstration of the RM's shallow view of Jesus' identity: He regards Jesus as a teacher and nothing more.[59] His statement about obeying the commandments that Jesus cited confirms, in his view, the assessment of him as an arrogant hypocrite who thought that he would be saved by his works rather than by God's grace.[60]

Upon hearing he had observed the commandments from his youth, the evangelist wrote, "Jesus looked at him and loved him." (10:21). Scholars have debated why Jesus

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[55] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parable in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 162. See also Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1966), 425.
[56] Oden, *Mark*, 140.
[57] Moloney, *Mark*, 199.
[58] Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Gospel of Jesus* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 272-74.
[59] Joel F. Williams, "Jesus' love for the RM (Mark 10:21)" in *Between Author and Audience in Mark: Narration, Characterization, Interpretation*, ed. Elizabeth S. Malbon (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009):143-4.
[60] Ibid.

looked at him and loved him. R.T. France and C. Clifton Black ascertain that Jesus' esteem for the RM's obedience to the Torah causes Jesus to love him. [61] In contrast, Joel Williams avers that Jesus' love for the RM was not motivated by his obedience to the commandments, but "serves to characterize him more negatively as someone who is needy and worthy of pity." [62] According to this view, Jesus grasped the precarious position of the RM, blinded as he was by wealth and self-satisfied goodness, and was moved by pity for him.

The RM's rejection of Jesus' command—"Go, sell what you have, and give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (10:21b-22) confirmed his blindness to his own need. Some scholars have noted irony in this scene: Jesus had compassion upon the RM, while the RM refused to have pity upon the poor.[63] John Painter observed that the RM's moral flaw did not relate to the last six commandments. Rather, he failed to keep the first and greatest command expressed in the Shema Israel (Deut. 6:4-6).[64] Williams added that "His (the RM) refusal to give up his possessions, care for the poor, and follow Jesus reveals that he does not genuinely love God or his neighbor." Mark J. Keown wrote that the RM's "final response of walking away sad but unrepentant demonstrates that he denies not only Jesus, but the one who sent him."[65]

Even though the RM does not appear in the verses that immediately follow this pericope (10:23-31), Williams interprets the conversation between Jesus and his disciples (10:23-31) as a negative judgment of the RM. His failure to respond to Jesus' call sharply contrasted with the disciples' response to it (10:28-31), putting the RM in a bad light that

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[61] R.T. France, The Gospel pf *Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 2002), 403. Black, *Mark*, 223. Williams understands the word "love" as compassion or pity (σπλαγχνισθεὶς) (cf.Mk 1:41, 6:34; 8:2; 9:22). However, in the Greek, the word used in Mark 10:21 is "ἠγάπησεν" which literally means "love." I will explain the difference between these two words in the exegesis.
[62] Williams, *Jesus' love for the RM*, 146.
[63] Williams, *Jesus' love for the RM*, 154.
[64] John Painter, *Mark's Gospel* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 145.
[65] Mark J. Keown, *Jesus in a World of Conflict Empires: Mark's Jesus from the Perspective of Power and Expectations* (Eugen: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 61.

makes him an example that the disciples should not emulate.[66] Moreover, Williams and Andrew T. Le Peau compare him unfavorably with other characters in the Gospel. Williams contrasts him to the scribe who understood the centrality of a whole-hearted love toward God and human beings (12:28-34). [67] Le Peau compares him to Bartimaeus who throws aside his possessions and follows Jesus (10:46-52). [68]

In summary, scholars who see the RM in a negative light consider him to be a hypocrite and an example of unbelief. They view his striking words and actions as insincere flattery. They fault him for focusing on his own efforts rather than on God's grace. They take Jesus' harsh response to mean that the RM had only a superficial understanding of Jesus. According to the negative reading of the RM, we should not interpret the love that Jesus had for him as motivated by his obedience to the commandments. We do better to see it as Jesus' pity for the RM's ignorance and blindness to his real need. Finally, his rejection of Jesus' call revealed that the RM lacked genuine love for God and for his neighbor.

1.3.2 Reading the RM in a Favorable Way

This section presents a reading of the RM that contrasts with the negative views of him. In what follows, we will see that the RM is presented as a seeker of faith, an observer of the Torah, and a candidate for discipleship.

Mark provided many telling details when introducing the RM into the narrative. The RM does not walk to Jesus but "runs up" to (προσδραμὼν) Jesus, "having fallen on his knees" (γονυπετήσας) before him (10:17a).[69] Even before he speaks to Jesus, his unusual

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[66] Ibid. See also Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus*, 148-50.
[67] Williams makes a very detailed comparison between the RM and the scribe. See Williams, Jesus' love for the RM, 147.
[68] Andrew T. Le Peau, *Mark through Old Testament Eyes: A Background and Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2017), 194-197.
[69] The only other person who fell on his knees (γονυπετήσας) before Jesus was a leper (1:40). Adela Yarbro Collins interprets the gesture that appears in both passages as an expression of esteem for Jesus and of the intensity of his petition. The leper came to Jesus for healing; the RM approached Jesus for authoritative

body language already expresses his brave and sincere enthusiasm and his homage because running and kneeling were the gestures of subordination in the ancient world.[70]

He addressed Jesus as "good teacher," which is a rare title in Jewish literature. Then he asked Jesus a significant question. No one who listened to Jesus teaching in Galilee had asked a question of such magnitude, nor indeed had Jesus' own disciples. His question "What should I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17b) not only gave Jesus an opening for divulging the meaning of his ministry,[71] but it also hinted that he realized something was missing from the RM's religious ethical practice.[72] These traits of the RM suggest to Robert C. Tannehill that he was a serious man, morally and religiously.[73]

In answer to Jesus' question, the RM drops the word "good" and replies that he had kept the commandments since his youth (18:21). Joop F.M. Smit notes that, by dropping the word "good," the RM shows that he is an attentive and obedient pupil who took Jesus' reprimand to heart.[74] The RM has not only obeyed the commandments Jesus mentioned but he has been doing so from his youth. This makes him an observant Jew and made him prosperous. In Jewish thought, wealth was a sign of God's favor given to those who obey God's commandments (Gen 26:12-14; 41:40; Lev 26:3-5). The narrator implies that his faithful observance of the law had brought the RM wealth.[75]

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instruction. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, ed. Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 480.

70 Strauss, *Mark*, 439.

71 James R. Edwards, *The Gospel of According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 309.

72 John T Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 364.

73 Robert C. Tannehill, *A Mirror for Disciples: A Study of the Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1977), 81.

74 Joop F.M. Smit, "Propagating a New Oikos: A Rhetoric Reading of Mark 10:17-31" in *Persuasion and dissuasion in early Christianity, ancient Judaism and Hellenism*. ed. Pieter W. van der Horst (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 114.

75 Ibid. See Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 304. Collins, *Mark*, 480.

The RM's reference to keeping the commandments from his *youth* may be an allusion to the doctrine of Mark 10:15—that one must receive the Kingdom like *a little child*.[76] It would seem to be this which moves Jesus to look at him with love.[77] This is the first and only time in Mark's Gospel, that Jesus states that "he loved him" (ἠγάπησεν αὐτὸν), a certain figure. Jesus' love for the RM eliminates any suggestions of the RM's hypocrisy and it confirms the RM as a man of his word—he did what he said.[78] Moved by love, Jesus instructs him to sell all he has and give it to the poor, and he will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me (10:21). Dennis M. Sweetland regards Jesus' conversation with the RM as a call story.[79] As when Jesus calls his first disciples, he shows his favor to the RM by calling him. However, the RM does not respond in the same way as Jesus' disciples did in the other call stories.

Unlike Painter and Williams who interpret the RM in a negative light, Bruce J. Malina, Richard L. Rohrbaugh, and Raymond F. Collins have argued that the reason the RM fails to follow Jesus was not because he does not want to follow him but because Jesus asks for something that was too radical for him to comply.[80] Malina and Rohrbaugh observe, "The demand to sell what one possesses, if taken literally, is the demand to part with what was the dearest of all possible possessions to a Mediterranean: the family and the land."[81] Collins

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[76] Black, *Mark*, 226.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Moloney, *Mark*, 200. Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 303. See also James A. Brooks, *Mark* (Nashville: Broadman, 1991),163.
[79] Dennis M. Sweetland, *Our Journey with Jesus: Discipleship according to Mark* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987), 30.
[80] In the Jewish tradition, almsgiving is encouraged but rabbis restrict generosity lest the benefactor become poor. Even those entering Qumran did not give away their goods to the poor but offered them to the community and might have retained some control over them. For the retained control of goods, see 1 QS 7:6–7,27–28. Also Gregory Sterling, 'Acts of the Apostles,' in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. L. Schiffmann and J. VanderKam, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University, 2000), 1:6. See also Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 3rd edition (London: Penguin, 1987), 8, 15–16. Meanwhile, the reaction of Jesus' disciples' shows his teaching on the rich and the entering of the kingdom of God (10:26) affirms that Jesus' question to the RM is harsh. They are shocked when they hear Jesus' teaching on wealth (10:22, 24).
[81] Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 123.

states that Jesus' request was too much for the once-eager inquirer.[82] Jesus did not ask the RM to sell part of what he owned and give it to the poor, but to sell everything that he owned and give it to the poor.[83]

Jesus' radical teaching about wealth not only confounded the RM but also perplexed his disciples (10:24a) and astonished them (10:26a). They asked Jesus "Then who can be saved?" (10:26b). They, too, are unable to accept Jesus' radical teaching that is so contrary to the prevailing notion that material abundance is a sign of divine favor. Furthermore, Moloney explains that it was hard for Jesus' disciples to understand his teaching since the world they inhabited was a world where the wealthy determined everything, from religion to politics, and all that lay in between. [84]

In summary, from the moment the RM appears in the narrative, he shows his piety and sincere enthusiasm through his comportment, even before he speaks to Jesus. His question reveals him to be a seeker of faith and a morally serious man. Jesus' puzzling question explains why he dropped "good" in addressing Jesus. His obedience to the commandments from his youth shows that he is a righteous Jew and elicits love from Jesus. His rejection of Jesus' call does not mean he is a negative figure but exposes the radical nature of Jesus' request. In other words, the point of the narrator, is not so much to portray the RM in an unfavorable light as to stress the radical nature of discipleship.

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[82] Raymond F. Collins*, Wealth, Wages, and the wealthy: New Testament Insight for Preachers and Teachers* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), 77

[83] Donahue and Harrington translate 10:22b as "Go, to sell whatever you have, and give to the poor…" Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 302. Boring translates 10:22b as "To sell everything you have and give to the poor…" Boring, *Mark,* 290.

[84] Moloney, *Mark*, 201. The other reason Jesus' disciples are amazed by Jesus' teaching is that wealth was perceived as a sign of God's favor and blessing, and a sign that a person was obeying God's commandments in Jewish culture. See Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 304.

1.4 Summary

Though Mark's Gospel has been unappreciated in the scholarly literature for a long time, the rise of Historical Criticism has brought scholars to notice the priority and significance of Mark's Gospel. Since Historical Criticism focuses on exploring the historical circumstances behind the narratives not the narratives themselves, Literary Criticism comes to the stage and is utilized by interpreters to study the structure and analyze the narrative character of the biblical narratives.

However, not only is there no systematic study of the ambiguity of the RM in Mark's Gospel from a literary perspective, but the assessments that have been made on the characterization of the RM are sharply contrasting. The RM is either regarded as an example of unbelief or a perfect candidate of discipleship. These contrasting readings reveal the complexity of the RM's portrayal and ask for further study of the presentation of RM.

In order to better evaluate the characterization of the RM in Mark's narrative, I will draw on the Narrative Historical Criticism as my approach that is both context-orientated and historical-orientated. On one hand, it focuses on the literary features of Mark 10:17-31 and interprets the RM in the context of the entirety of Mark's narrative. On the other hand, it requires an exploration/examination of aspects of the social-cultural context in which Mark 10:17-31 is situated. This approach will help me to better reconstruct the presentation of the RM in Mark's original context and see the ambiguity of the RM from the lens of Mark's first readers.

Chapter Two

The Ethics of Wealth

The previous chapter introduced the approach and examined two prominent ways the RM has been understood in the scholarly literature. The differences between them make us aware not only of the importance of the social-cultural background of the text, but also that any serious analysis of Mark's presentation must examine the significance of wealth in the story. This is true for two reasons: (1) It is unlikely that readers today understand the significance of the use of wealth in Jesus' time; and (2) not only the RM but also Jesus' disciples and adversaries were influenced by cultural attitudes toward wealth.

As regards the RM himself, scholars like Collins, Gundry, Donahue and Harrington[85] argue that Mark depicts his wealth as a divine reward bestowed upon him because he was faithful to the Law. However, scholars like Williams and Painter take an opposite view and argue that his wealth indicates that he is a sinner, since many rich gain their wealth by exploiting the poor.[86] Furthermore, Williams and Painter see the RM's refusal of Jesus' request as a confirmation of a sinful attachment to wealth and even of hypocrisy.[87] But Collins and Geza Vermes disagree with this approach and argue that the RM drew back in response to the uncompromising quality of Jesus' command.[88]

Wealth thus plays a pivotal thematic role in comprehending Mark's presentation of the RM. It furnishes the link between the opening dialogue in Mark's account (10:17-22) and Jesus' subsequent conversation with his disciples (10:23-31).[89] In order to gain a fuller

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[85] Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 304. Collins, *Mark*, 480. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross, vol. 2* (Cambridge:Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 557.
[86] Williams, *Jesus' love for the RM*, 154. Painter, *Mark's Gospel*, 145.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Raymond F. Collins, *Wealth, Wages, and the wealthy: New Testament Insight for Preachers and Teachers* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), 77. Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 1987), 8, 15–16.
[89] I will provide a detailed explanation of the unity of Mark 10:17-31 in the next chapter.

understanding of this important element, we will investigate the understanding of wealth in the Hebrew Bible, the Second Temple period, and first century Mediterranean world from two aspects: wealth as divine blessing and wealth as corruption.[90]

Our findings will provide us with the cultural and theological-contextual framework that we need for interpreting Mark 10:17-31 and enable us to grasp more fully the ambiguous characterization of the RM. The treatment of this broad topic will necessarily be in the nature of a general survey rather than a detailed exposition.[91]

2.1 Wealth as Divine Blessing

The notion of wealth as blessing from God manifests the best in the Deuteronomic theology of wealth. To those who trust in God and obey God's commandments, God promises them blessings in offspring, in abundant harvests, and in flourishing livestock.[92] Abraham is described as a wealthy man whose success was not achieved in spite of his relationship with the Lord but as a result of it (Gen. 24:1). Due to Abraham's faith to God's command, God has promised to him to become a great nation (Gen 12:1-2) and says: "I (God) bless you and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky…your descendants will take possession of the gates of their enemies…" (Gen 22:17-18). Although he and his successors do not fully experience the fulfillment of God's promise, each of them enjoys periods of enormous wealth (Gen 13:2; 26:12-14; 30:43; 41:41-49). God explicitly announces through Moses to the Israelites:

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90 The treatment of wealth varies among the Hebrew Bible, Second Temple period and first century Mediterranean world. However, they can be generally categorized into two groups: wealth as divine blessing and seeing wealth as corruption.

91 There is no intention of covering all aspects in details, since that goal is beyond the scope of this thesis.

92 That wealth is one of God's blessings on the righteous is see in, e.g., Gen 26:3; 28:13-15; 49:3-4,26; Deut 6:1-3; 7:12-14; 8:6-9; 11:8-15; 28:4-5; Lev 26:3-5. This pattern has led some scholars to speak of something like an Israelite "prosperity gospel." C. Levin, "The Poor in the Old Testament: Some Observations," *R&T 8* (2001):253-73.

> If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. (Lev 26:3-5).

In the subsequent verses, God continues promising to those who put trust in him peace, destruction of their enemies, and the numerical growth of the people. God will be with them and provide abundantly for them (Lev 26:6-13). This kind of arrangement reappears frequently in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Deut 7; 11; 27-30). Meanwhile, God warns the Israelites not to forget God and disobey the Law. Once they fail to do so, they would be cursed with difficulties such as failed crops, involuntary enslavement and severe poverty (Deut 8:11- 20; 28:15-48; Lev 26:14-26).

From Deuteronomy through Kings, the Deuteronomic theology of wealth continues to be highlighted: God would bless the land, the people with seasons of peace and prosperity as they show their faith and obey God's commandments. When they prove more faithless than faithful, the land would produce less crops, famine or blight at times ensued, or nations would successfully attack their land.[93]

Though later many teachings in the Hebrew Bible point out the dangers that accompany the growth of wealth,[94] wealth as a whole is shown to be one legitimate result of the faithful and wise life. By contrast, poverty results from sloth or vice (Prov 10:4; 12:27; 13:4; 14:23; 20:4,13); God blesses those who are diligent and obey God's commandments with disproportionately large abundance of affluence (Prov 3:9-10; 12:27; 21:25; Ps112:1-3). For example, the virtuous Jewish heroines, Susanna and Judith, both are rich and gain their

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93 Jonathan Lunde, *Following Jesus, the Servant King: A Biblical Theology of Covenantal Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 37-114.

94 I will expand this topic in the subsequent section.

reputation and wealth through their faithfulness to God (Dan 13; Jdt 8-15). Furthermore, they would pass on the wealth they get from God to their offspring when they pass away (Prov 13:22; Jdt 16:24; Job 15:15).

In the book of Tobit and the book of Job, the predictable pattern of blessing and deprivation based on obedience and disobedience seems to be challenged. Both protagonists are righteous but suffer greatly. They lost wealth they attained by obeying the Law and hard works unexpectedly. However, after the suffering, they both finally have been lavishly blessed by God (Job 42:10-17; Tob 13-14).

Thomas Scott Cason examines Tobit's story from the viewpoint of the economics involved. He concludes that Tobit's possessions are what facilitates his religious devotion over the course of the story. For instance, the journey from the place where Tobit stays to Jerusalem (Tob 1:6) would have cost considerable money. Cason likewise says that abstaining from foreign food while living in exile also requires money. An Israelite who wished to abstain from local food stuffs (Tob 2:2) while living in exile in Assyria would have had to import goods from his or her homeland. Had Tobit been a historical figure, his Pentecost meal would also have been a luxury afforded to him by his wealth. Cason observed that the sacred writer depicted Tobit observing a feast in his own home (Tob 1:16-17).[95] Although Tobit suffers a lot, God gives him material blessings because of his piety. Cason's point of view stresses the importance of wealth and reaffirms that wealth is a divine reward for the righteous. Benedikt Otzen also asserts that the book of Tobit as "a story about divine reward bestowed on the faithful to the Law of Moses." [96]

In the first century Mediterranean world, people's attitude towards wealth is nevertheless complicated. Even though Deuteronomistic theology of wealth prevails in

[95] Thomas Scott Cason, "A Preferential Option for the Rich: Wealth as the Facilitator for Faithfulness in the Book of Tobit," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, vol. 81* (2019): 217-234.
[96] Benedikt Otzen, *Tobit and Judith* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 2.

rabbinic literature,[97] the pursuit of honor and avoidance of shame have become pivotal values, especially among the elite. Bruce J. Malina writes:

> From a symbolic point of view, honor stands for a person's rightful place in society, a person's social standing. This honor position is marked off by boundaries consisting of power, gender status, and location on the social ladder. From a functionalist point of view, honor is the value of a person in his or her social group. Honor is a claim to worth along with the social acknowledgement of worth. The purpose of honor is to serve as a sort of social rating which entitles a person to interact in specific ways with his or her equals, superiors, and subordinates, according to the prescribed cultural cues of the society.[98]

At that time, individuals do not think of their identity apart from the identity of the group or groups to which they belong. One's identity is rooted in these groups, which includes families of origin, marriage alliances, political and religious affiliations. Though the pursuit of honor and avoidance of shame are central values, wealth is highly valued by people since wealth allows them to create, preserve, display, or recover one's honor.[99]

The most obvious way of displaying one's honor was by one's clothing; and, in antiquity, one's dress indicated one's social status. Wealth enabled the rich to dress elegantly. Garments were symbols of honor. For instance, the restored honor of the prodigal son was indicated by the clothing that his father allowed him to wear: "Bring the best robe… and put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet" (Lk 15:22). When Jesus was arrested, he was clothed in a purple cloak and mocked by the soldiers as King of the Jews (Mk 15:17). After

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[97] Rabbinic texts associate prosperity with everything from tithing (*Sabb* 119a; *Ber.* 631) and knowledge of the Law (*Sanh*. 92a *Pesah* 491). Pharisees who still uphold the conviction that it was covenant disobedience that leads them to be languishing under foreign domination. Craig L. Blomberg explicitly explains these rules in his book. Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), 101-2.

[98] Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 54.

[99] Ibid.

they mocked him, they stripped his of the purple cloak. Symbolically, the purple cloak represented the honor of Jesus.[100]

Besides clothing, another common way for people to proclaim honor was through the display of the table settings and the manner in which they dined. Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus writes:

> With no one to look on, wealth becomes sightless and bereft of radiance. For when the rich man dines with his wife…he uses common furnishings, and his wife attends it in plain attire. But when a banquet is got up, the drama of wealth is brought on: the repositories of the lamps are given no rest, the cups are changed, and the cup bearers put on new attire…gold, silver, or jeweled plate…. (Cupid, *divit. 528B*)

Wealth not only brings honor to the rich, but it also provides the means to get a good education. In the first century, most men and some women of the elite could read and write, even though they often have educated slaves to read to them and write letters and other documents for them. But literacy is not used in most social and economic interactions, especially not among the ordinary people.[101]

Wealth in antiquity was acquired by the ownership of land or inheritance. In an agrarian society, wealth is based on the ownership of land. Most land is controlled by a small number of wealthy elite families. The landowners rent the land for tenant farmers, who–together with their families and possibly slaves–actually work the land. The wealth and status of the elite families ensure their influence in politics, so that they are able to control both local and regional governance and also profit from taxation.[102] In order to maintain the family's honor

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100 See other examples Luke 7:25; Acts 12:21.
101 Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus in context: Power, people & performance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 89-92.
102 Steven J. Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty" in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008),19.

in society, people normally marry someone who has the same social status. After the death of the patriarch, the family's wealth would be given to the heir of household.[103] Wealth not only brings honor to them, but it also helps them to sustain or improve their social status. In contrast, as one loses his wealth, he would probably face the danger of losing his social status and family.[104]

2.2 Wealth as Corruption

Though the Deuteronomistic theology of wealth is widely spread in the Hebrew Bible and the Second Temple period, the potential dangers of wealth are never overlooked. The Hebrew Bible acknowledges the great temptation to sin that desire for riches can embed in one's life. Material possessions seduce people to not fear God and transgress God's Law in a myriad of ways. God warns the Israelites through Moses before they enter into the Promised Land:

> O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being…Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10:12-19)

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103 K.C. Hanson, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 43-46.
104 Jerome H. Neyrey, "Honor and Shane" in *The Social World of the New Testament*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Stewart (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008): 85-102.

> When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery . . . Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." …But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. (Deut 8:12–14, 17–18)

At first, both passages do not run against the Deuteronomistic theology of wealth, since both demonstrate that wealth is given by God. However there are two crucial nuances. The first is that God demands the Israelites to rightly use their wealth, namely to give alms to the poor and the marginalized.[105] The second is that God's gift of wealth carries within it latent dangers—the accumulation of wealth is quite often accompanied by self-glorification (cf. Hos 12:8-9), which in turn obscures the recognition of one's dependence on God and hence one's responsibility toward those who might be less fortunate.[106] Wealth both marks their ascension to great power and creates the circumstances leading to their downfall.

For instance, much of Solomon's wealth was brought from foreign countries and his economic alliances were cemented by marriages. His wives and concubines led him into idolatry in his old age (1Kgs 11). Material wealth corrupted the first kingdom and divided the

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[105] Almsgiving is underscored throughout the Jewish history. It has been regarded as a typical act of righteousness. Numerous righteous people in the Bible are described as practitioners of almsgiving (Gen 18:1-8; Ruth 3:8-17; Tob 1:6-8, 16-18 etc.). Many edicts are made to take care of the needy. There are laws against interest-taking (Exod 22:25-27; Lev 15:35-37), on tithes, on taxes, and on harvest gifts. Laws regulate the establishment of the Sabbath (Exod 20:8-11), the sabbatical year (Lev 25:1-7) and the Jubilee (Lev 25:54).Though the privileged have an obligation to help the poor with their wealth, Craig L. Blomberg comments that "God does not require unmitigated asceticism." Almsgiving is seen as an action of righteousness and a mean that provides one with security and affluence. (Prov 11:24-15; 28:28; Sir 17:22-23; 31:11). Blomberg explicitly explains these rules in his book. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 41-49.

[106] For an interesting discussion of Deuteronomy 8 in relation to social scientific theories suggesting that wealthier and more secure people tend to become more secular, see Zoltán Schwáb, "Faith and Existential Security: Making Deuteronomy 8 Respond to a Current Sociological Theory," *JTS* 68 (2017): 530–50.

monarchy. Rehoboam's greed led him to alienate his people thorough an increase in forced labor. Jehoshaphat imitated the sins of Aaron and the Israelites in the wilderness by fashioning two idols in the form golden calves (1Kgs 12:25-33). Ahab's covetousness caused him to fall. Though he was extremely well off, he wanted more. His wife, Jezebel, framed Naboth, the owner of a vineyard Ahab coveted and had him put to death so that Ahab could expropriate it (1Kgs 21:1-16). Eventually, their sinfulness brought God's wrath upon them. Elijah announced that God's death-sentence would be on Ahab and his wife for their unbridled greed (1Kgs 21:17-24).

The authors of the prophetic writings harshly criticize the unrighteous wealthy and their failure to seek justice and give alms to the needy and disadvantaged. Wealth is no longer the sign of the covenant fidelity or virtue but disobedience and the result of the oppression of the poor. The wealthy are seen as having accumulated their wealth at the expense of the underprivileged. Amos, the prophet of justice says,

> You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many your offenses are and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. (Amo 5:10-12; cf. 6:6; Sir 14:9; 26:29-27).

Wealth had corrupted the justice system of society. The leader demanded gifts; the judge accepted bribes (Mic 3:11); the rich and authorities plunder the poor and crush God's people. They make unjust laws and oppressive decrees to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. Furthermore, they use the wealth they have deprived from the poor to make idols for themselves (Isa 2:7-8). Injustice has permeated the society (cf. Isa 10:1-2).

Confronting these evils, the prophets severely reprimanded them and cried out: repent and seek justice for the marginalized (Isa 1:17; 58:6-7; Jer 22:13-17). They have promised God would rain down some future punishment upon the wicked rich (Prov 21:6; 28:20-22)[107] but would bring hope to the poor who put their trust in him. Isaiah 61:1-2 is one of the classic prophetic text:

> The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn.

In the wisdom literature, it stresses the vanity of trusting in wealth (Eccl 5:8-17; 6:1-12) because it is transient (Eccl 9:11). Since God is the maker of all things (Prov 22:2, 29:13), the author of the Proverbs teaches the reader must put their trust in God, not in whatever measure of earthly resources they possess because of their temporality (Prov 3:9-10; 23:5). They must earn their riches by hard work and by righteous deeds,[108] not by exploitation.[109] Wealth is not spurned (Prov 30:8b-9) but people must use it wisely and in the fear of God.[110] Poverty with righteousness is preferable to riches with injustice.[111]

The late OT pseudepigrapha known as *the Epistle of Enoch*[112] criticizes the popular notion that riches denote righteousness. The body of *the Epistle* consists of eight woe oracles

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[107] The foreign conquest is a way of divine judgment upon the iniquitous in Israel (Isa 5:8-15; Hos 12:8-9; Zech 15:5-6; Jer 5:26-29). The failure of the people to heed the prophets led to both the catastrophe of the Babylonian Exile and the prophecies of a Messianic restoration.
[108] Poverty results from sloth or vice (Prov 10:4; 12:27; 13:4,18; 14:23; 20:4,13; 23:21; 28:19).
[109] Prov 3:27-28; 6:10-11; 10:4; 11:24-25; 13:22, 25.
[110] Prov 15:16-17; 28:6; Eccl 7:1-12.
[111] Prov 16:8; 17:1; 19:1; 28:6.
[112] It was probably written in the late second to first century BCE. Matthew explicitly talks about eight woe oracles in his book. See Mark D. Mathews, *Riches, Poverty, and the Faithful: Perspectives on Wealth in the Second Temple Period and the Apocalypse of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 51-60.

situated within three discourses. Each woe curses the rich who obtain their wealth by unjust means and declares the coming punishment that would fall upon them. For instance,

> Woe unto you, your sinners! For your money makes your appearance of righteousness, but your hearts convict you of being sinners, and this fact will serve against you – a testament to your evil deeds. Woe to those who build their houses with sin, for they will be overthrown from their entire foundation and they will fall by the sword. And (woe to) those who accumulate gold and silver: in the judgement they will be quickly destroyed (*1En.* 96:4, 7).[113]

The first-century Hellenistic-Jewish historian, Titus Flavius Josephus and Philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, both inveigh against avarice. Josephus viewed wealth as a temptation to people (*Vita* 73; *Ant.* 4.190; 5.132), a view Philo of Alexandria also shared. He states that wealth is a temptation (*Fug.* 39, 151-152; *Mut.* 214; *Mos.* 1.167-268)[114] and asserts love of money to be a vice common to humanity (*B.J.* 5:558), going all the way back to Cain (*Ant.*1:53). It enslaves people and leads to pride (*Ant.* 1:194; 15:91) and a multitude of wicked behaviors (*B.J.* 2:279). Philo indicts defraud for throwing natural human relations into disorder, replacing friendship with enmity and justice into injustice (*Contempl.* 17).

One thing deserving notice in Philo's and Josephus' writings is that they both praised the Essenes' self-impoverishment (*Somn.* 1:126). The Essenes themselves thought wealth to be "wicked" and perilous (1QS10:19; CD 6:15; 19:17). They believed that both priests and temple in Israel had betrayed the Law and become corrupt through wealth (CD 4:15-17). Moreover, they declare that the Israelites "have not placed you (God) before them, but they

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113 See the other woe oracles in Mathews, *Riches, Poverty, and the Faithful*, 53.

114 Scholars have noticed that there is a discrepancy between Philo's teaching on wealth and his personal affluence. Thomas E. Phillips argues that Philo's view of wealth is inconsistent. Philo's criticism of wealth should not be understood as criticism of the possession of wealth itself, but rather as criticism of the unbridled desire for wealth. Philo condemns wealth only when it represented acquisitiveness that cannot coexist with virtues. See Thomas E. Phillips, 'Revisiting Philo: Discussions Wealth and Poverty in Philo's Ethical Discourse', *JSNT 83 (*2001):111-121.

act bully against the poor and needy" (4Q501:9). In order to abstain from defiling influence of wealth, one must refrain from the exploitation of the poor and the marginalized (CD 6:16-17) and give alms to them (CD 6:21). Therefore, they prefer to live an ascetic life. Best known is the communal arrangement of possessions whereby the would-be initiates surrendered all their property in stages to the common pooling of money and resources. However, recent studies indicate that what we know of the Essenes was more complex, with possibly two types of community life for this group.[115] This consideration makes the Essenes' attitude toward wealth more complex. The first group, called the Qumran Community lived a common life.[116] The second group, town-based Essene Communities, lived in the secular world and could be compared to lay oblates.[117]

The Qumran Community is well known for its ascetical practices, for divesting from personal possessions, committing to celibacy, and living a communal form of life.[118] This community had a very strict process for choosing its members. During the first year, the new members' behavior would be scrutinized before they were allowed to eat the egalitarian common meal with the official members (1QS 6:16-17). Once the novices were accepted, the inspector of the community would assess and take their possessions into holding (1QS 6:18-20). Then, they would have another year of training. Their possessions would not be dedicated to the community until they were fully integrated into it in the third year (1QS 1:1-

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115 The Essenes gained fame in modern times as a result of the discovery of an extensive group of religious documents known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are commonly believed to be the Essenes' library.

116 Christopher M. Hays states that the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Khirbet Qumran has often misled people that the Essenes lived in the place isolated from the rest of Jewish civilization. He believes that the Qumran community is unique among Essene communities. See Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 47. Hoppe states the Qumran community left the population center of Palestine and stayed in the Judean desert was primarily for running away from persecution rather than for ascetical reasons. Leslie Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 137.

117 Kyoung-Jin Kim, *Stewardship and Almsgiving in Luke's Theology* (Sheffield.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 385-6.

118 See Josephus, *Ant.* 18:21; *B.J.*2:119-123; Philo, Prob.85-87; 1QS 6:19-22.

3; 6:17-23).[119] It is noteworthy that they did not exhibit a negative attitude toward possessions but attempted to eliminate distinctions between the affluent and the poor.[120] Most of this group's members lived in towns and villages near Jerusalem (Josephus, *War* 2:124; Philo, *Hypoth.* 11:1).[121]

The town-based Essene Communities were very different from the first type. They were allowed to marry (Josephus, *War* 2:160-161; CD-A 7:6-7) and to maintain personal possessions (CD-A 12:15-16). Instead of giving all of their wealth to the community, they were only required to donate two days' wages every month to the first group. Besides, relating the Copper Scroll talks a lot about the places where various items of gold and silver were buried or hidden. And the large treasuries of gold and silver have been discovered by archaeologists at Qumran and Masada[122] makes the attitude of Essenes toward wealth more complicated and elusive.

Furthermore, though the Essenes' ascetic lifestyle was praised, some rabbis, in later years, started forbidding complete divestiture of possessions, as when the rabbinic council at Usha (135 CE) placed an upper limit of giving 20 percent of one's property, for fear that the well-disposed giver might impoverish himself and become a burden on the rest of the community.

2.3 Summary

Jewish attitudes toward wealth are complex. Regard for wealth as a sign of God's blessing is a continuous tradition running through the Hebrew Bible, Second Temple period and Jewish

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[119] Catherine M. Murphy states the details of this acceptance process. He also mentions that an initiate could at any time withdraw from the process. Catherine M. Murphy, *Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Qumran Community* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 141.
[120] Hoppe, *There Shall be no Poor among You*, 138.
[121] Josephus claims that there were four thousand celibate Essenes (*Ant.* 18:20), but archeological evidence suggests that only two hundred people live at Qumran.
[122] K. C. Hanson & Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 114.

traditions in the first century in which the rich are thought as those who observe the Law and conduct themselves with wisdom and righteousness. The potential danger of wealth is also underscored: wealth seduces people into self-glorification and the exploitation of the poor.

In the Prophetic books, the Wisdom literature and the Epistle of Enoch, wealth is described as corrupting and ephemeral and calls the understanding of wealth as divine blessing into question. They state the obvious contrast between the righteous poor and the evil rich. In other words, the unrighteous enjoy what a Deuteromistic theology of wealth suggests belongs to the righteous, while the righteous experience what appears to be the covenant curses. Wealth is no longer a sign of covenant obedience but becomes a make of disobedience and the exploitation of the poor.

Although some of the Essenes divested themselves of their possessions and lived an ascetic life, most of them were still attached to their properties. Wealth in the first century Mediterranean world was regarded as necessary, for it not only supported people and enables them to maintain a heathy life, it also brought honor to them and their families. Though almsgiving and having a simple life was praiseworthy and highlighted throughout the Jewish culture, deprivation of material wealth was never presented as beneficial or desirable. Philo and Joseph both praised the divesting of personal wealth of the Essenes, but they both led a wealthy life.

These brief reflections now enable us to contextualize Mark's RM in a larger Jewish context and will help to explain the ambivalent attitude of readers in our exegesis in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

A Detailed exegesis of Mark 10:17-31

In the previous chapters, I introduced the complexity of Mark's presentation of the RM and the ethics of wealth in his world, especially in Jewish culture. In this chapter I will present a closer reading of the RM in Mark 10:17-31, both by using scholarly descriptions of the RM and by examining further his characterization in its historical-cultural context.

In order to determine the intended meaning of this episode by the author and to come to an understanding of its function in Mark's Gospel, I will prioritize the Greek text and apply textual and lexical analysis to it. I will study this episode's literary context and structure and undertake a detailed exegesis. While interpreting the text, I will pay heed to the use of body language and emotions as well as other telling details of this Gospel passage. My findings will demonstrate the ambiguous character of the RM in the narrative.

3.1 The Remote Literary Context of Mark 10:17-31

There seems to be a consensus among scholars that Mark 10:17-31 is part of a larger section called the "way section" (εἰς ὁδὸν) (8:22-10:52)[123] that narrates Jesus' journey from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem. On the way, he continually gives instruction (8:31; 9:31; 10:1), especially to the disciples who accompany him. This section is bracketed in typical Marcan fashion by two miracles: the cure of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) and the healing of

[123] Mark 8:22-10:52 forms the central section of Mark's Gospel. The reason it is named the "way section" is this unit describes what happens while Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. More importantly, this unit reveals Jesus' "way" of being Messiah—a suffering Messiah, and indicates that the "way" of discipleship is marked by sacrifice, humility, and service. See Daniel. J. Harrington, *The Church According to the New Testament: What the Wisdom and Witness of Early Christianity Teaches Us Today* (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 102-3. Stegman provides a detailed explanation on the meaning of the "way section." See Stegman, *Opening the Door of Faith*, 30-1.

Bartimaeus outside of Jericho (10:46-52).[124] These two healing stories serve as an introduction and conclusion to the "way section."[125] This section is significant because it not only reveals Jesus' true identity as the suffering Messiah, but it also indicates the cost of discipleship: for those who walk in the way of Jesus.[126] Commentators state that this vital "way section" is essential for understanding the gospel of Mark. The evangelist carefully constructs his narrative around the three predictions of the passion (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Jesus explicitly directed all three predictions to his disciples. Each prediction is followed by an instance of the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus' Messianic identity.[127] Rhetorically, the disciples' misunderstanding gives Jesus an opportunity for teaching them about discipleship, and, through them, for teaching the recipients of Mark's Gospel.

Immediately after Peter's profession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah (8:29), Jesus makes the first prediction of his passion and resurrection. Peter, the spokesman for the Twelve, rebukes Jesus and refuses to accept the possibility that Jesus would suffer (8:32).[128] In turn, Jesus rebukes him and reprimands him for "setting his mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33). Immediately after this, Jesus calls his disciples together and gives the first of his teachings in the "way section" on discipleship: To be a disciple, one must deny oneself, take up the cross, and follow him (8:34-38).

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[124] Boring states "Mark reserves Jesus' healing of the blind for these two stories, which have an obvious symbolic meaning. In the opening scene the man is healed gradually and does not see clearly at first, while the concluding scene portrays a blind man fully healed who follows Jesus "on the way" (10:46-52). See Boring, *Mark*, 232-3. Black, *Mark*, 188-9.

[125] The theological implication of these two blind healing stories is that the spiritual blindness of Jesus' followers may also by cured, though only with difficulty. See Black, *Mark*,189-190.

[126] Stegman, *Opening the Door of Faith*, 30.

[127] It has been noted that there are many threefold patterns in Mark's Gospel: three boat scenes (4:35-41; 6:45-52; 8:14-21); three popular opinions about Jesus (8:27-28); three failures of the disciples to stay awake in the garden of Gethsemane (14:32-42); three denials of Jesus by Peter (14:66-72); there predication of the Passion (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34); three declarations that Jesus is the Son of God (1:11; 9:7; 15:39). This triadic pattern demonstrates the rhetorical ability of the author of Mark's Gospel.

[128] What Peter and his Jewish contemporaries expected was a Davidic messiah who would free them from Roman bondage and rule triumphantly on the earth.

Following the Transfiguration, Jesus makes his second prediction of the passion (9:30-31). Again, his disciples are incapable of understanding the meaning of his words (9:32). Instead, they argue about who among them is the greatest (9:33-34). Their obtuseness creates a narrative need for Jesus to instruct them further. Jesus told them that, to be his disciple, they must be the least and servant of all (9:35-37).

The third prediction of the passion follows the narrative about the RM and Jesus' instruction about wealth. James and John reveal how little they have understood by seeking power and privilege in the Kingdom. Their request not only irritates the other disciples but provides another chance for Jesus to teach one of the most crucial lessons on discipleship "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be the servant of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" (10:35-45).

The Jesus' teaching on his way to Jerusalem reveals to his disciples both his true identity and the meaning of genuine discipleship. The three predictions of the passion together with the ensuing teachings make Jesus' passion a model for Jesus' followers.[129] The disciples' obtuseness and lack of comprehension exposes the weaknesses of their faith and puts them in an unfavorable light.[130] They are not concerned about Jesus' fate but think only of their personal ambitions. Though they walked with Jesus, their concerns are for the things of this world not the things of God.

[129] Tannehill avers that Jesus' passion prediction probably reflect problems of the early church as perceived by the author: the possibility of persecution and martyrdom (8:34-38) and the desire for status and domination (9:33-37, 10:35-45). Robert C. Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," *TJR, vol. 57* (1977), 402.

[130] Before the "way section," Jesus' disciples already show their misunderstanding of Jesus' identity (4:1-20, 37-41; 6:31-33, 52). The three consecutive failures to comprehend Jesus' identity in the "we section" makes their obtuseness evident.

3.2 The Immediate Literary Context of Mark 10:17-31

The episode of the encounter between Jesus and the RM (10:17-31) occurs between Jesus' second (9:30-32) and third passion predictions (10:32-34) and constitutes the last part of Jesus' second teaching (9:33-10:31) to his disciples in the "way section." Jesus not only instructs his disciples in humility (9:33-37), but also teaches them the implications of discipleship for community inclusiveness (9:38-40), mutual good example (9:41-50), marriage and divorce (10:1-12), attitudes toward children (10:13-16) and the place of wealth and family relationships in the kingdom of God (10:17-31). Each of these episodes has a practical purpose in Jesus' forming his disciples. Boring claims that Jesus' second teaching not only reveals the meaning of discipleship but additionally it also reveals the growing conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities (10:1-12).[131] It foreshows what will happen to Jesus later in Mark's narrative.

The episode in which Jesus blesses children (10:13-16), which immediately precedes the story of the RM (10:17-31), contains Jesus' teaching on entering the kingdom of God and simultaneously reveals to the disciples that the kingdom of God is transcendent and eschatological. Then Mark introduces a very dramatic episode. An unnamed man comes to Jesus and asks him a question that takes up the theme in the previous episode, namely how to inherit eternal life (10:13-16).[132] Mark characterizes this anonymous inquirer through the details of the narrative, but he leaves the detail about his wealth to the very end (10:22). Clearly Mark is calling our attention to more than simply the wealth of the RM. The narrative, the longest sustained treatment of any ethical issue in Mark's Gospel, is concerned with the relationship between discipleship and wealth. Mark poses questions that we may summarize as follows: How is the RM characterized? Why does Jesus ask the RM to

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131 Boring, *Mark*, 284-5.
132 Donahue and Harrington concerns that eternal life is equivalent to the kingdom of God. See Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 302.

relinquish all his possessions? What is the response of those who first received Mark's Gospel to Jesus teaching and to the RM's actions? Exegesis will help us answer those questions.

3.3 The Structure of Mark 10:17-31

Even though some scholars assert that Mark10:17-31 is a composite of different traditions,[133] most regard Mark 10:17-31 as a literary unit consisting of three scenes[134]: (1) the encounter between Jesus and the RM (10:17-22); (2) Jesus' instruction to the disciples (10:23-27); and (3) Peter's question about the rewards of discipleship and Jesus' reply to it (10:28-31)[135]. While these three scenes can exist independently, as each scene has its own concern and emphasis, they are in fact interrelated. The theme of wealth and renunciation of possessions runs through these three scenes. It heightens Jesus' teaching on possessions and on the role renunciation of wealth plays in discipleship. Furthermore, internal rhetorical clues prove the coherence of this episode: (1) Mark 10:17-31 begins and ends with the reference to "the way" (ὁδός) (10:17, 32); (2) the question of eternal life forms an inclusion in this unit (10:17, 30-31); (3) the carefully crafted descriptions of emotions in this unit take the reader from hope (10:17-21), through sadness (10:22) and dismay (10:23-26), to assurance (10:26-31); (4) the structure of this episode basically has the form of a "scholastic dialogue" in which a question is posed to the teacher (10:17, 26) who responds with a counter question (10:19, 27). Then,

133 Best and Boring claim Mark 10:17-31 is pre-Marcan. They divide it into three paragraphs: (a) vv.17-22; (2) 23-27; (3) 28-31. These three paragraphs might be from different traditions and then united together by Mark. See Ernest Best, *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel According to Mark* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 110. Boring, *Mark*, 291. Collins provides a more specific discussion on the sources of Mark 10:17-31. See Collins, *Mark*, 475. Since I regard Mark's Gospel as a unified narrative, I will not further discuss the composition of Mark 10:17-31.

134 Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 302. See also Boring, *Mark*, 291.

135 Black sees Mark 10:17-31 comprises two scenes: an exchange between Jesus and a new supplicant (10:17-22) with a subsequent conversation between Jesus and his disciples (10:23-31). See Black, *Mark*, 225.

the questioners reply in turn (10:20, 28) and receive the definitive answer of the teacher (10:21, 29).[136]

In the light these literary traits of Mark 10:17-31, I treat Mark 10:17-31 as a self-contained unit made up of three conversations: the conversation between the RM and Jesus (10:17-22); the conversation between the disciples and Jesus (10:23-27) and the conversation between Peter and Jesus (10:28-31). The first conversation begins with a question about eternal life, Jesus' response, and the departure of the RM. The second conversation recounts the reaction of Jesus' disciples to his word and especially to his teaching that wealth is an obstacle to entering into the kingdom of God making it hard for the rich to enter. The third conversation records Peter's question about the rewards for those who renounce their possessions and Jesus' reply to him. The conversation concludes with an aphorism on the eschatological reversal of conventional human values.[137] In all three conversations, Jesus is the primary actor. He is portrayed as the true teacher[138] who instructs his followers about true wealth and true discipleship. The unit begins with the question about eternal life and concludes with an answer to the question of eternal life (10:17b, 30-31). Following Strauss' literary analysis, we will use the following outline of the structure of Mark 10:17-31 for our exegesis:[139]

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136 Boring, *Mark*, 286, 291.

137 Ibid.

138 Myers explains the verbs in Mark 10:17-31 indicate that this passage is meant to be didactic. Because each of the conversation includes the "gaze" of Jesus (cf. 10:21, 23, 27). Myers, *Binding the Strong Man,* 271.

139 Myers provides a chiastic structure of Mark 10:17-31:

A Question about eternal life (v.17);
B RM cannot leave possessions and follow;
C Jesus' explanation, disciple's reaction (twice);
B' Disciples have left possessions and followed;
A' Answer to eternal-life question (v.30).

In this structure, the contrast between the RM's failure and the disciples' obedience is emphasized. The question about eternal life is not answered until the end of the account. In line C, Jesus' explanation and disciples' reaction become the center. It answers the question about inheriting eternal life, that is, it is possible with God, not with man. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 272. See also Strauss, *Mark*, 438-429.

Section one: the conversation between the Rich Man and Jesus (10:17-22)

a. Jesus and the RM (v.17a);

b. The RM's question (v.17b);

c. Jesus' initial answer: keep the commandments (vv.18-19);

d. The RM's affirmation (v.20);

e. Jesus' reaction (v.21a);

f. Jesus' final requirement: the demand of the renunciation of possessions and the RM's reaction (vv.21b-22).

Section two: the conversation between the disciples and Jesus (10:23-27)

a. Jesus' pronouncement about the difficulty of entering the kingdom of God for the rich and the disciples' reaction to it (vv.10:23-24a);

b. Jesus' second pronouncement –"the eye of the needle" saying and the disciples second reaction to it (vv.10:24b-26);

c. Jesus' conclusion: all things are possible with God (10:27).

Section three: the conversation between Peter and Jesus (10:28-31)

a. Peter's response "we left all we had and followed you" (10:28);

b. Jesus' promise of reward in this life and the future life (10:29- 30);

c. Jesus' final proverb: the first will be last (10:31).

Mark 10:17-31 finds parallels in Matthew 19:16-30 and Luke 18:18-30. However, their texts differ from each other in detail. They all have their own specific nuances in their biblical

contexts.[140] In the following exegesis, I will pay attention to the variations in Mark and explore their functions in Mark 10:17-31, especially in understanding the presentation of the RM in Mark's Gospel.

3.4 Greek Text and Its Translation[141]

Καὶ ἐκπορευομένου αὐτοῦ εἰς ὁδὸν προσδραμὼν εἷς καὶ γονυπετήσας αὐτὸν
ἐπηρώτα αὐτόν· 17a Διδάσκαλε ἀγαθέ, τί ποιήσω ἵνα ζωὴν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσω.
17b ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Τί με λέγεις ἀγαθόν; οὐδεὶς ἀγαθὸς εἰ μὴ εἷς ὁ θεός.
18 τὰς ἐντολὰς οἶδας· Μὴ φονεύσῃς, Μὴ μοιχεύσῃς, Μὴ κλέψῃς, Μὴ
ψευδομαρτυρήσῃς, Μὴ ἀποστερήσῃς, Τίμα τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ τὴν μητέρα. 19
ὁ δὲ ἔφη αὐτῷ· Διδάσκαλε, ταῦτα πάντα ἐφυλαξάμην ἐκ νεότητός μου. 20 ὁ δὲ
Ἰησοῦς ἐμβλέψας αὐτῷ ἠγάπησεν αὐτὸν. 21a καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Ἕν σε
ὑστερεῖ· ὕπαγε ὅσα ἔχεις πώλησον καὶ δὸς τοῖς πτωχοῖς, καὶ ἕξεις θησαυρὸν ἐν
οὐρανῷ, καὶ δεῦρο ἀκολούθει μοι. 21b ὁ δὲ στυγνάσας ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ ἀπῆλθεν
λυπούμενος, ἦν γὰρ ἔχων κτήματα πολλά. 22

Καὶ περιβλεψάμενος ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγει τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ· Πῶς δυσκόλως οἱ τὰ
χρήματα ἔχοντες εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ εἰσελεύσονται. **23** οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ
ἐθαμβοῦντο ἐπὶ τοῖς λόγοις αὐτοῦ. **24a** ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς πάλιν ἀποκριθεὶς λέγει
αὐτοῖς· Τέκνα, πῶς δύσκολόν ἐστιν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ εἰσελθεῖν· **24b**

[140] For instance, Matthew's account is better at linking Jesus and the Twelve to the OT and the twelve tribes of Israel. The last verse of Matthew's account "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (19:30) is a preparation for the following account, the parable of the workers in the vineyard (20:1-16) which also concludes with the same words "the last will be the first, and the first will be last" (20:16). In Luke's account, he omits "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" but ends the account with an emphasis on the renunciation of possessions and its rewards which prepares for his unique account of Zacchaeus the tax collector who gives his possessions to the poor. (Lk 19:1-10).

[141] The Greek text is from SGL Greek New Testament (SBLGNT). After the Greek text, I provide my own translation in English.

142 εὐκοπώτερόν ἐστιν κάμηλον διὰ τῆς τρυμαλιᾶς τῆς ῥαφίδος διελθεῖν ἢ πλούσιον εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ εἰσελθεῖν. **25** οἱ δὲ περισσῶς ἐξεπλήσσοντο λέγοντες πρὸς ἑαυτούς· Καὶ τίς δύναται σωθῆναι; **26** ἐμβλέψας αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγει· Παρὰ ἀνθρώποις ἀδύνατον ἀλλ᾽ οὐ παρὰ θεῷ, πάντα γὰρ δυνατὰ παρὰ τῷ θεῷ. **27**

Ἤρξατο λέγειν ὁ Πέτρος αὐτῷ· Ἰδοὺ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν πάντα καὶ ἠκολουθήκαμέν σοι. **28** ἔφη ὁ Ἰησοῦς· Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐδείς ἐστιν ὃς ἀφῆκεν οἰκίαν ἢ ἀδελφοὺς ἢ ἀδελφὰς ἢ μητέρα ἢ πατέρα ἢ τέκνα ἢ ἀγροὺς ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ καὶ ἕνεκεν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου. **29** ἐὰν μὴ λάβῃ ἑκατονταπλασίονα νῦν ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τούτῳ οἰκίας καὶ ἀδελφοὺς καὶ ἀδελφὰς καὶ μητέρας καὶ τέκνα καὶ ἀγροὺς μετὰ διωγμῶν, καὶ ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τῷ ἐρχομένῳ ζωὴν αἰώνιον. **30** πολλοὶ δὲ ἔσονται πρῶτοι ἔσχατοι καὶ οἱ ἔσχατοι πρῶτοι. **31**

English Translation:

And as he (Jesus) was setting out on the way, the man ran up and fell on his knees before him, and asked him.**17a** "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"**17b** Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God." **18** You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder;

142 Verse 24 is variant among ancient manuscripts. One MS (W) has the additional word πλούσιον, "rich man," which transforms the saying to "How difficult it is for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God!" Other MSS (A C D et al.) have the additional words τοὺς πεποιθότας ἐπὶ χρήμασιν, "those who trust in possessions" which produces the saying "How difficult it is for those who trust in possessions!" Scholars including Bruce M. Metzger, Boring, Stein, Harrington and Donahue claim that these two versions of v.24 are later readings; they also regard them as modifications meant to alleviate the felt difficulty of the pericope by transferring the problem from having wealth to trusting in it. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 89-90. Boring, *Mark*, 291. Stein, *Mark*, 476. Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 304.

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you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother.'"19 He said to him, "Teacher, all of these things I have kept from my youth." 20 Jesus intently gazed on him, loved him21a Jesus said [to the RM]:"One thing is lacking to you. Go, sell all you have, and give (it) to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." 21b At this saying his face fell, and he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 22

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." 23 And the disciples were amazed at his words. 24aBut Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter into the kingdom of God. 24b It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 25 But they were astounded at his words, and saying to one another, "Then, who can be saved?" 26 Jesus looked at them and said "With humans it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." 27

Peter spoke to Jesus "Look, we left all we had and followed you" 28Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the gospel29 who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions and eternal life in the age to come." 30 But many that are first will be last and the last will be first. 31

3.5 The Conversation Between the RM and Jesus (10:17-22)

While Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, an anonymous man (the RM) approaches him and asks a soteriological question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus replies, "You know the commandments," and then enumerates the last six commandments of the Decalogue. The RM replies, "Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth." Then Jesus looks at him with love and asks him to renounce all his possession, give all he had to the poor, and then come and follow Jesus. However, Jesus' radical invitation dismayed the RM who departed sadly because he was wealthy.

Verse 17a: The genitive absolute "Καὶ ἐκπορευομένου αὐτοῦ εἰς ὁδὸν" is a rhetorical marker that introduces the geographical and literary setting of this episode. In contrast to the Gospel of John, in which Jesus goes to Jerusalem multiple times, Jesus journeys to Jerusalem only once in Mark's Gospel. In the beginning of the "way section," the narrator informs the reader that Jesus passes through Caesarea Philippi (8:27), Galilee (9:30), Capernaum (9:33) and the regions of Judea and Transjordan (10:1). The phrase "αὐτοῦ εἰς ὁδὸν" is a spatial marker that reminds the reader that Jesus is moving away from the previous setting and on his way to Jerusalem—the way of the cross. In addition this phrase indicates that this episode belongs to the "way section" because the phrase "αὐτοῦ εἰς ὁδὸν" repeatedly appears in the "way section" (10:17; 8:27; 9:33-34; 10:32, 46, 52).

Then the narrator sets the characters on the stage: "προσδραμὼν εἷς καὶ γονυπετήσας αὐτὸν ἐπηρώτα αὐτόν." Unlike the interlocutor in the accounts of Matthew and Luke, Mark's is neither a ruler (Lk 18:18) nor a young man (Matt 19:22), but a nameless man. The word "εἷς" literally means "someone, somebody." Collins suggests that the use of "εἷς" instead of the indefinite pronounce "τίς" is typical of nonliterary writers in the Koine. [143] However, more and more scholars claim that anonymity is a functional literary device. It invites the

[143] Collins, *Mark*, 475-476.

reader to participate in the narrative world of the text by subjectively identifying with the unnamed character.[144] On this occasion, bystanders who share the RM's concern are led to identify themselves with his question and to listen eagerly for what happens next.

Since I believe that the Gospel is both literary and historical. I follow Moloney's and Stein's translations which regard "εἷς" as "the one, the man." Although his wealth is not mentioned until the end of story, it is possible that his apparel, demeanor, and manner of speech gave him away. According to the cultural background I provided in the previous chapter, we can identify him as a wealthy Jew who has received a good education and has a considerable status in society. Whatever the case may be, Mark's original audience would likely have inferred from the RM's wealth that he belonged to a socially elite group.

Though an elite Jew, his next action was truly surprising: He "ran up" to Jesus (προσδραὼν) and "fell on his knees" (γονυπετήσας). Matthew and Luke both omit this detail (Matt 19:16; Lk 18:18). In fact, what the RM did is inappropriate for a member of a socially elite class in the first-century Mediterranean world. Running and kneeling were actions typical of slaves or servants. It was considered undignified or shameful for a man, especially for a rich man, to run or kneel. In order to run, one had to pull up his robe, exposing his legs, and make the unpleasant noises of sandal flapping.[145] Furthermore, one knelt only to a superior person exercising power over an inferior.

What was the meaning of this unusual behavior? Was the RM trying to test Jesus? Had he come to boast about his righteousness? Is he perplexed and intrigued by Jesus's statement about the necessity of receiving the kingdom like a child? Was he searching for further light on this teaching?[146] How familiar was the RM with Jesus and his teaching? The text does not provide clear answers to these questions, so the characterization of the RM must

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144 David R. Beck, "The Narrative Function of Anonymity in the Fourth Gospel Characterization" in *Semeia 63* (1993): 143-155.
145 Culpepper, *Mark*, 334. See also Strauss, *Mark,* 439. Boring, *Mark*, 294.
146 Jesus fails to specify which qualities of a child his followers should emulate.

be inferred indirectly through his speech and actions. Our initial portrait of the RM is necessarily sketchy.

Nonetheless, his body language spoke of both his eagerness to see Jesus and his respect for Jesus. This intense degree of reverence has no parallel in the Jewish literature of the time, apart from a single fourth-century rabbinic example.[147] The RM's posture indicates that he was a suppliant, in contrast to those who engaged Jesus in legal debates (cf. 12:28). The only other person who fell on his knees (γονυπετήσας*)* before Jesus was a leper (1:40). Collins interprets the gesture appears in both passages as an expression of esteem for Jesus and of the intensity of his petition.[148] The leper came to Jesus for healing; the RM approached Jesus for authoritative instruction.

Verse 17b: After describing the body language of the RM, Mark tells us that he straightforwardly asked Jesus a personal religious question that no one who had heard Jesus' teaching in Galilee had asked. He was asking the most vital of question of the most informed source— "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" This question created dramatic tension for Mark's first audience. They knew Pharisees would not ask such a question because Pharisees were convinced that God owed them eternal life in return for their meticulous observance of the Law. The question would have drawn listeners into the episode, eager to hear Jesus' answer to the question. Did the RM's question reveal that he had realized that something was missing in his religion? Or did he ask it in order to be confirmed in his legal righteous?

Eternal life is a late concept in the OT.[149] It refers primarily to salvation understood as a life with God after death, a life that will never end, and a life that has such a quality that is suited for the age to come. This notion evokes the eschatological vision in Daniel 12:1-3. In that vision, Daniel describes the resurrection of the righteous at the end of the world,

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147 Collins, *Mark, 477.*
148 Collins, *Mark*, 476.
149 Life or eternal life is mentioned in Mark's Gospel only four times (9:43, 45; 10:17, 30). It always overlaps the kingdom of God (9:47; 10:23-25) in the texts.

because Jesus' coming and the kingdom of God that he proclaims are signs of the coming of the eschatological age.

Many scholars interpret "inheriting eternal life" as equivalent to "entering the Kingdom of God." They understand the RM's question as "Good Teacher, what must I do to enter into the kingdom of God?" [150] Some scripture scholars regard the RM's query as wholly wrong-headed because eternal life must be received as a gift rather than be earned.[151] However, there are two reasons to justify the RM's question. In the first place, Jesus' responded by telling him to follow the commandments. In other words, deeds are necessary for attaining eternal life (10:18). Secondly, the usage of inheritance in OT and Jewish tradition accords with the question. In the OT, the word "inheritance" (κληρονομιά) is generally used to inherit land (Gen 12:7; 17:8; 35:12) from God (Exod 6:8; Deut 34:4). In addition, it may also be used for inheriting non-material things. The phrase "to inherit eternal life" is well established in late OT Jewish writings. For example: "The devout of the Lord will inherit life in happiness" (Dan 12:2; Ps 14:10; 1En 40:9; 2Macc 7:9; 4Macc 15:3). The phrase appears more frequently in the NT (Matt 19:29; Lk 10:25; 1Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:21). Brown claims that "the physical dimension of the Promised Land set the stage for the NT inheritance through the kingdom of God and the promise of eternal life."[152]

The RM's title for Jesus is significant. He calls Jesus, "Good Teacher" (Διδάσκαλε ἀγαθέ), a title that is relatively rare in Jewish literature. [153] In Mark's Gospel, the image of Jesus as a teacher appears more often than any other Gospel. The word "Διδάσκαλε" is used twelve times (4:38; 5:35; 9:17,38; 10:17, 20, 35; 12:14, 19, 32; 13:1; 14:14)[154]. This

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[150] Morna Dorothy Hooker, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: A & C Black, 1991), 241. See also Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 302.
[151] Stein, *Mark*, 468.
[152] *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 295.
[153] Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 272
[154] Besides the word "*Διδάσκαλε,*" the other words used to depict Jesus as teacher are "Rabbi" (9:5; 11:21; 14:45) and "rabbouni" (10:51).

designation of Jesus is used by crowds, interested individuals, Jesus's disciples, and by Jesus himself (14:14). The adjective "good" was predicated of a good person (Eccl 9:2; Prov 12:2) in the OT. "Good" here means "meeting a high standard of worth and merit," especially one's moral quality.[155] However, there are no examples from the first century or earlier of anyone being called "good teacher" as we find here.[156]

Did the RM in some way intuit Jesus' divine origins? Or did the RM merely regard Jesus as a great teacher? We have no definite answer; but the view that suggests the RM was flattering Jesus seems to be excluded by parallels in Mark's Gospel. In other passages, when people approached Jesus with ulterior motives, their ruses were plain to see (10:2; 11:27-33; 12:13-17, 18-27). Here the narrator neither gives a motive for the RM's inquiry nor labels him with judgmental tags. Mark characterizes the RM only indirectly through his speech, so the burden of constructing his portrait rests squarely on the shoulders of those who receive the Gospel.

At the very least, we can say that the RM's question showed his keen interest in Jesus. He wanted to know Jesus's view on the requirements necessary for gaining eternal life. Darrell L. Bock asserts that he must have been aware of the interdependence of observance of the law and inheriting the land (Deut 6: 16-25) and of the connection between obedience to the law and everlasting life in the age to come (Dan 12:2).[157]

Verses 18:[158] In response to the RM's query, Jesus acts like a teacher by asking the question: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Jesus' question has led

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155 BDAG, 3.

156 There is no instance in the entire Talmud of a Rabbi being addressed as "Good Teacher." Joseph. A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (X-XXIV)* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 1198. See also Evan, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 95.

157 Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008),1476.

158 Verses 18 and 19, discussed next, form a unity. For the sake of clarity, I will discuss them separately.

to debate among scholars. Is Jesus denying that he is good? Is he admitting his inadequacies vis-à-vis God? Various explanations have been offered, which fall into five main groups.

1. One reading interprets Jesus' response as an acknowledgement of Jesus' own sinfulness. Morna Dorothy Hooker suggests that in rejecting the description "good" Jesus betrays a consciousness of sin, so that he cannot possibly be the son of God.[159]

2. Another reading understands the question of Jesus as an attack on the RM's flattery. Williams stated that the RM saw Jesus as a mere man and therefore he had no right to use "good," a word that can be predicated in the absolute sense of God alone. This interprets the failure of the RM to obey Jesus as an indication that the RM did not really take the goodness of Jesus seriously nor should he have used the word in an empty way.

3. A third interpretation sees Jesus' question as an expression of modesty and piety, since it differentiates the man Jesus from God the Father. Jesus reminds the RM that there is only one source of goodness. He himself is no exception. His goodness is the goodness of God working in him.[160]

4. Donahue and Harrington note that the reason Jesus takes offense at being called "good teacher" is puzzling. The smoothed-over version in Matthew's account reveals how strange Jesus' question in Mark is. In Matthew, Jesus is only addressed as "teacher." Matthew seeks to ameliorate the problem raised by Jesus' question by rewording it: "Why do you ask me about what is good?" (Matt 19:17).[161]

5. Finally, Jesus' question can be regarded as a rhetorical one that serves to guide the RM to thinking about the implication of calling him good, which is that it should lead him to perceiving that Jesus is God. That is, if you call me good you should realize that you are

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159 Hooker, *St. Mark*, 241.
160 Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, 1197. See also Collins, *Mark*, 477.
161 Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 303. See also Edwards, *Mark*, 310. Stein states that the difficulty of Jesus' question in Mark guarantees its more authentic nature. Stein, *Mark,468.*

calling me God.[162] Brant Pitre asserts **"**No one is good but God alone" echoes the language of both the Shema (Deut 6:4-6) and the scribes at Mk 2:7. Jesus' reply does not deny his own goodness, rather it is part of Jesus' strategy to stress his divine identity. Pitre argues that the command Jesus gives to the RM is a sign of Jesus' divinity because only God has the authority to command (Exod 31:18). Additionally, Jesus' question can be considered an invitation to the RM. Jesus wants to elicit from the RM what he thinks and to freely accept and follow Jesus.[163]

The first approach outlined above is the most difficult reading, because it does not cohere with what we see in Jesus' portrait elsewhere in Mark's Gospel. It also goes against Jesus' portrait found elsewhere among the teachings of the NT (Lk 1:32; Heb 4:15; 2Cor 5:21). Jesus is presented in Mark's narrative as Lord (5:19), the suffering Servant (10:45), the Christ (1:1), the Son of God (1:11) who is fully human and divine, who is true God and true human without sin (10:45; cf. Heb 4:15).[164] The second approach is less tenable because the text does not indicate that the RM is flattering Jesus.[165] His body language stresses his sincerity in paying Jesus high homage. His "kneeling exceeds the reverence shown to an ordinary teacher and thereby highlights for Mark's audience the divine sonship of Jesus." [166]

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[162] This interpretation was popular among church fathers. For Ambrose, Jesus in fact said, "Realized that if you call me good, you are calling me God" (Ambrose, De Fide 2.1).

[163] Brant Pitre, *The Case for Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ* (New York: Image Press, 2016), 148-50.

[164] Rather than accepting the common opinion that Mark's Gospel displays a low Christology, Richard B. Hays draws upon the use of the Old Testament in Mark's Gospel to suggest that Mark has a high Christology. In Mark, Jesus is depicted as the Davidic Messiah (Mk1:2-3 vs. Exo 23:20; Mal 3:1; Isa 40:3; Mk12:35-37 vs. Ps 110:1) and the one acting that only God can act (2:1-12 vs. Exod 34:6-7; Isa 43:25; Mk 6:45-52 vs. Job 9:8). Moreover, Jesus himself clearly acknowledges his Messiahship and divine Sonship (Mk14:62-3 vs. Dan 7:13-4). In his article "The Identity of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: Past and Present Proposal," Daniel Johansson wrote that scholars who contend Mark has a low Christology are interpreting it against the Jewish background of Mark's Gospel. Besides, this high Christology does not deny Jesus humanity. As a matter of fact, Jesus' suffering and death are all fulfillments of the Messianic prophecies in the OT. He is fully human and fully divine. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 15-103. Daniel Johansson, "The Identity of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: Past and Present Proposal" *Current Biblical Research*, *vol.9* (2011):388.

[165] Ben Witherington avers that it is hard to decide the RM's address is flattery or as sincere remark. Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publisher, 2001), 281-282.

[166] Gundry, *Mark*, 552.

The third reading is possible. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is addressed as "Son of God" several times.[167] That Jesus is Son of God is declared by the centurion, the demon and Jesus himself. At the Garden of Gethsemane, he addressed his Father in the Aramaic word "Abba" (14:36). Jesus' prayer in 14:36 declares the intimate relationship between himself and his Father. The relationship between the Father and the Son is more obvious in the Fourth Gospel (cf. Jn 5:19; 17:3).

The fourth one makes sense. Mark is the earliest gospel and was later used as a major source by Matthew and Luke. When Matthew and Luke used Mark, they made changes and alterations to its accounts. For instance, Matthew and Luke sometimes smooth Mark's negative portrayal of the apostles and alter Jesus' negative emotions.[168]

The fifth reading is tenable. In the question, Jesus stresses himself. The word "με" is the accusative direct object of "λέγεις." It seems as if Jesus is guiding the RM to knowledge of his divinity. His words could be paraphrased as, "If you call me good and if only God is good, you should reflect upon what you have said."[169] Jesus' invitation to the RM to follow him as well as his later teachings to his disciples further reveal his divinity.

Verse 19: Immediately after the counter question, Jesus responded directly to the RM's question. He cited the commandments from the Torah (10:19).[170] He replied with the law because Jewish belief of the time was that acts of righteousness are necessary for

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[167] Mk 1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 13:32; 14:61; 15:39.
[168] The most obvious example is Jesus' rebuke to Peter after his first passion prediction. Matthew used the word "said" instead of "rebuke." (Matt 16:13-20). Luke did not mention Peter's rejection to Jesus' suffering at all (Lk 9: 18-22). Jesus' anger (Mk 3:5) and indignation (Mk 10:14) do not appear in Luke and Matthew.
[169] In early Judaism, in the ultimate sense only God is addressed as good. Witherington, *Mark*, 281.
[170] The commandments Jesus cites are from the second half of the Decalogue, the social commandments. Why does Jesus only cite the second half of the Decalogue? I. Howard Marshall asserts that that the commandments mentioned are the ones that can be visibly measured. I. Howard Marshall, The *Gospel of Luke,* The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: The Paternoster Press, 1978), 685. Moloney contends that the six commandments cited are precepts that a ritually observant person might well violate. Moloney, *Mark*, 199. Stein contends that speculation as to why other commandments were omitted is of little value. Stein, *Mark*, 469.

attaining eternal life (cf. Deut 30:15-20).[171] Since the injunction "you shall not defraud" (Μὴ ἀποστερήσῃς) neither appears in Luke's account nor Matthew's,[172] it has drawn much attentions from scholars and has become an exegetical problem in the scholarly literature.[173]

One intriguing interpretation of Mark's characterization of the RM is that Jesus used this injunction to expose the RM's sinfulness. Some scholars connect the word "ἀποστερέω" Mark uses with the Hebrew word " עָשַׁק " (cf. Deut 24:14; Lev 19:13; Mal 3:5) and claim that "μὴ ἀποστερήσῃς" is another way of prohibiting covetousness. Then, they put it into the social-economic context of the time and suggest that the RM, as a first century Jew, must have gotten his wealth by exploiting the poor.[174] In the first century Greco-Roman world, the elite were a tiny percentage of society.[175] To defraud others of their inheritances and wages was not only a specific temptation for the rich but also a common means by which one became rich.[176]

This point of view is possible because it reflects part of historical truth of first-century antiquity. However, it may not necessarily apply to the RM. The RM might be an exception among his colleagues. In Jesus' statement, the fourth commandment "Τίμα τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ τὴν μητέρα" ("Honor your father and mother") is placed behind "μὴ ἀποστερήσῃς" which is viewed by Keown as an "end stress." This end stress points out another cultural norm in the ancient world, which was that wealth was mostly corporately

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171 Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1478. Fitzmyer comments "Jesus responds with a generic answer which any teacher of the Law in his day would have given." Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, 1197.
172 Most scholars see it as a replacement for the tenth commandment. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries, (New Haven: Yale University Press)721,727. Hooker, *St. Mark*, 241. W.D. MacHardy suggests that there is a scribe's error including a phrase that was originally put in the margin in order to point out the source of quotation—Exod 21:10. W. D. MacHardy, "'Mark 10:19': A reference to the Old Testament," *ExpTim 107* (1996):143.
173 Michael Peppard lists different readings of "do not defraud" in Mark's Gospel. Michael Peppard, "Torah for the Man Who Has Everything: 'Do Not Defraud' in Mark 10:19," *JBL 134* (2015): 595-604.
174 Ibid. Richard Hicks, "Marcan Discipleship according to Malachi: The Significance of 'μὴ ἀποστερήσῃς' in the Story of the RM (Mark 10:17-22)," *JBL 132* (2013): 179-199. Iersel, *Mark: A Reader—Response Commentary*, 325. See also Collins, *Mark*, 478. Hooker, *St. Mark*, 242.
175 According to different space occupation and the relation between the general distributions of space among population, Oakes concludes that 97% of population was the non-elite. Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).
176 Collins, *Mark*, 478. Hooker, *St. Mark*, 242.

owned by the extended family. This cultural norm suggests that the RM's wealth may have been inherited and was the result of a long family history of exploitation of the poor.[177]

In the light of this discussion and of the discussion of the ethics of wealth in chapter two, we cannot determine whether the RM's wealth was a blessing for having kept the Law, was the fruit of his oppression of the poor, or was derived from his family's unethical behavior. All these answers are possible in one way or another. The source of the RM's wealth remains ambiguous, because there is no clear indicator available in the text.

Verse 20: The conversation continued, not with a reply to Jesus' counter question but a response to the commandments that Jesus recited. "Teacher, all of these things I have kept from my youth." The phrase "ἐκ νεότητός μου" is translated in various ways,[178] but it likely refers to the time when he reached the age of accountability, namely the age of religious and legal majority from which he was obliged to fulfill the commandments of Jewish Law.[179]

In the RM's reply, "ταῦτα πάντα" are emphasized because they are put at the beginning of his utterance and are the direct object of "ἐφυλαξάμην". The RM's answer affirms his righteousness. A few scholars doubt him and regard his answer as a sign of his arrogance and hypocrisy: (1) they assert the impossibility of keeping all the commandments; (2) the Pharisees and Scribes commonly claimed that they were righteous (Mk 7:6). In his favor, we should note that the Bible depicts many characters as blameless, law-observing, and righteous: Elizabeth (Lk 1:6), Simeon (Lk 2:25). Paul also spoke his legal righteousness in Phi 3:6, "According to righteousness by law I was blameless." In the Talmud, Abraham, Moses, and Aaron are all said to have kept the whole law. Therefore, the RM's claim is not impossible.

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177 Keown, *Jesus in a world of Colliding Empires*, 62.
178 Boring translates it into "since I was a boy." Boring, *Mark*, 290. Fitzmyer translates it into "since I was a youth." Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, 1199.
179 His claim suggests that he is probably no longer young. Stein, *Mark*, 469. Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 303.

Scholars have argued about the reason the RM dropped the adjective "good" in his response to Jesus. There is no easy answer. As I discussed in my first chapter, dropping the word "good" can be interpreted either as indicating that the RM had a shallow view or that it was as a sign that the RM had heard Jesus' question—"Why do you call me good?"—and took it to heart.[180] For a better answer to this question, we have to reflect on Jesus' reaction to the RM's reply.

Verse 21a: Having heard the RM's reply, Jesus gazed on him and loved him. This is the first indication of a movement from Jesus toward the RM. Hitherto, it was the RM who took the initiative, now Jesus does so. The word "look" (ἐμβλέψας) is slightly different from the word "βλέπω" that Mark usually uses (8:25; 10:27; 14:67). The word "ἐμβλέψας" is a strengthened form of the word "βλέπω" and means "to direct one's vision and attention to a particular object."[181] It suggests that Jesus' look was not a fleeting glance. Moreover, this is the first time "love" (ἠγάπησεν) appears in Mark's Gospel[182] and is the only time that Mark's Gospel explicitly express Jesus' love for (ἠγάπησεν αὐτὸν) a particular individual.[183]

The use of the words "look" (ἐμβλέψας) and "love" (ἠγάπησεν) not only heightens the drama of the moment but also shifts the mood of the encounter from its tense beginning (10:17-18) as well. By detailing Jesus' perception and emotion, Mark implies that Jesus realizes the RM is not like the Pharisees and Scribes whose questions are full of guile.[184] France believes that Jesus' love for the RM eliminates all assumptions about the RM's hypocrisy. Instead of understanding the RM as approaching Jesus to test him, the RM is tested by Jesus and passes Jesus' careful scrutiny.[185] Jesus' reaction not only reveals that he is

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180 Collins, *Mark*, 479.
181 Rodney J., *Mark 9-16: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 52.
182 In a parallel account (Matt 19:16-22; Lk 18:18-23), Matthew and Luke say nothing of Jesus' love for the rich young ruler.
183 The other place where word of "love" is used is 12:34.
184 Strauss, *Mark*, 441.
185 France, The *Gospel of Mark*, 403.

impressed by the RM's reply, but it also proves that the RM was a truly observer of the Law and a candidate for discipleship.

Against this view, Williams argues that Jesus' love for the RM should be interpreted as Jesus' pity for the RM's spiritual blindness rather than as Jesus's favorable response to RM's observance to the law.[186] In comparing the RM with the Scribe (12:28-34), he suggests that the RM stands in contrast to the Scribe. The Scribe knows the centrality of a whole-hearted love toward God and others, but the RM refuses Jesus's command to renounce his possessions, to give to the poor, and to follow Jesus. The RM's refusal shows that he loves neither God nor God's people. His wealth blinds him to his true need.[187]

Williams' view is questionable. In Mark's Gospel, the word "compassion" (σπλαγχνίζομαι) is used several times to describe Jesus' personal view. Each time, it is used to expect a sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others: the despised leper (1:41); the starving crowd in the wilderness (6:34; cf.8:2) as well as the demon-possessed people (cf. 7:24-30; 9:14-29). However, the word in this episode is "ἠγάπησεν" not "σπλαγχνίζομαι". The verb ἠγάπησεν is from αγάπη. It is hard to identify the content of αγάπη. The best translation of this term would be the Latin "caritas" or "dilectio." In the Septuagint, it was used to translate the Hebrew word "אָהַב" (cf. Deut 6:5; 10:12). The word "אָהַב is not just an emotion, but also an act of doing. It is connected directly with action and obedience.

In the OT, "אָהַב" is usually used to describe the love-relationship between God and the chosen people. This love-relationship is best demonstrated and manifested in God's covenant with the Israelites in a form of reciprocal expression: the one who loves God keeps God's commandments and the one who observes God's law will be favored by God (Deut

186 Williams suggests his view is supported by the RM's failure to follow Jesus' request. I will discuss the meaning of RM's failure later. Williams, "Jesus' love for the RM," 156.
187 Williams, "Jesus' love for the RM," 147-161.

4:31). God loves his chosen people. However, this love does not come about automatically: God demands a co-respective love from his people (Deut 6:4-9; 7:9).[188]

Love for God is expressed in loyalty, service and especially in complete obedience to the precepts of the Law (Deut 5:10; 7:9; 13:22; 16:20; cf. Josh 22:5; 1Kgs 3:3). In this context, the love Jesus showed the RM can be understood as Jesus' agreement with the RM's claim and not pity. The RM's heightened religious sensitivity led Jesus to love him and to invite him to have a closer relationship with God.[189]

We might expect Jesus to praise the RM for his conduct and conclude the conversation here. However, what happens next reveals that Jesus' love is a mystery, and the RM's response to it has led many interpreters to view the RM unfavorably.

Verses 21b-22: Jesus neither contests the RM's claim that he has kept the commandments nor invalidates obedience to them as an appropriate path to eternal life; but Jesus tells him that there is yet one more thing he must do: "Go, sell all you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven;[190] and come, follow me." (10:21b). Jesus' contemporaries would not have appreciated this answer since they regarded wealth as a blessing from God that came to the righteous.

Jesus' saying consists of four distinct imperatives: go (ὕπαγε); sell all (πώλησον); give it to the poor (δὸς τοῖς πτωχοῖς); come and follow me (δεῦρο ἀκολούθει μοι). [191] The fourth imperative "come and follow me" echoes the words that appeared in Mark's earlier "call

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[188] William Lambert Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 25 (1963): 77-87. See also William Lambert Moran, "The Most Magic Word: Essay on Babylonian and Biblical Literature," *CBQMS* 35 (2002):171-81.

[189] Some scholars even suggest that Jesus actually hugged the RM or took the RM by the shoulders as an expression of his love. Since there is no hint of physical contact in the text, these scholars may be reading their own cultural practices back into the situation. See Gunday, *Mark*, 554. Evans, *Mark*, 98.

[190] The phrase "treasure in heaven" appears many times in the Bible (cf. Sir 29:10-12; Tob 4:8-9; Matt 6:19-21; Lk 12:33-34). It is seen as a future spiritual reward in contrast with the transitory nature of earthly things. It is equated with eternal life and represents eternal life in relationship with God. Gundry, *Mark*, 554.

[191] These imperatives make some scholars see Jesus' words more as a demand or request than as an invitation. However, the majority of scholars interpret Jesus' words as an invitation to the RM. See Moloney, *Mark*, 200. Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 303.

stories" (1:16-20; 2:13-17; 3:13-19; 6:7-13). The word ἀκολούθεω (to follow) is used as a technical term for discipleship wherever the object is Jesus (1:18; 8:34; 2:14). It leads Sweetland to see Jesus' conversation with the RM as a call story.[192] Sweetland describes four elements in Mark's call stories: (1) Jesus' invitation to the person; (2) Jesus invites the person to form a relationship solely with him; (3) The call is made as Jesus is on a journey; and (4) the person being called needs to leave his possessions and follow Jesus. [193]

As when Jesus called his first disciples, he called the RM, and spoke to him in the imperative mood (10:21b). Mark seems to build up an expectation for the RM to respond in the same way as the disciples in the other call stories. However, an unexpected turn occurs. The narrator provides a vivid description of the RM, "He was crestfallen at Jesus' saying and went away grieving." (10:22). The RM's departure makes this call story a failed call story.[194] We should note that, in the earlier call stories, Jesus or the narrator has not given any indication that wealthy individuals must sell everything and give it to the poor as preliminary requirements for becoming his disciples. Nor can we find call stories like this in the rabbinic tradition. The demand Jesus places upon the RM is contained only in this story.[195]

Other scholars argue that the renunciation of one's possessions is not a necessary criterion for becoming a disciple. Some of Jesus' disciples evidently retained both homes and tools of their livelihood (Mk 1:29; 3:9; 4:1, 36; Jn 21:3; Acts 4:34-37; 5:1-4). Joseph of Arimathea and some of female disciples all possessed wealth and used it to support Jesus' ministry (Lk 8:1-3).[196] The question their example raises is: If they can be disciples without divesting of their possessions, why cannot the RM do the same?

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[192] Mark's reader may recall the possessed Man in the region of Gerasa (5:1-20). When Jesus cast out the demon from him he begs Jesus to be with him. But his request is refused by Jesus, he begins to proclaim what the Lord has done for him in the Decapolis. The RM must be favored in Jesus' eyes thus being invited by Jesus to follow him.

[193] Sweetland, *Our Journey with Jesus*, 30.

[194] In Luke's account, Luke does not report the RM's departure, he only profiles his emotional response (Lk 18:23).

[195] Moloney, *Mark*, 200.

[196] Strauss, 446-447.

Why would the RM leave and not follow? Was his observance of the law a lie or was Jesus's demand too harsh to follow? In Matthew's account, Jesus says, "Go, sell your possessions," but does not specify "all" (Matt 19:21). Joel B. Green argues that this is not a request in favor of poverty as a kind of 'ascetic ideal' or a 'renunciation' of wealth, but the disposition of one's wealth in favor of the poor.[197] Whether its use here stresses the redistribution of wealth or renunciation of wealth, the command "sell all you have and give it to the poor" is startling and radical. In the second chapter, I introduced the ethics of wealth in Jewish culture. Renunciation and redistribution are both encouraged and praised as extraordinary acts, but wealth is scarcely inconsistent with the overall ethical orientation of the OT.

Witherington and Best suggest that Jesus is clearly characterizing a new Jewish ethic here since there are no known parallels in Palestinian Judaism.[198] They contend that Jesus' radical directive is culturally abhorrent and far beyond the scope of the Ten Commandments.[199] In the first-century Palestinian world, one's wealth was owned collectively by families.[200] One's social identity was defined by the family to which one belonged. To ask someone to abandon his property is equivalent to asking him to abandon his family and to forfeit his very existence in society. The action would not only bring dishonor upon himself, but it would also bring shame to his immediate and extended family. Material wealth goes a long way toward insulating against the cold hardships of life in an agrarian hierarchical limited-goods society such as that of first-century Palestine. Jesus' demand runs counter to all that the RM learned from his culture.

Facing Jesus' radical demand, the RM is not like the religious authorities who would take offence when they were challenged by Jesus. He was deeply distressed. The word

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197 Joel B. Green, The Gospel of *Luke* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1997), 656.
198 Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 283. See also Best, *Discipleship and Disciples,* 26.
199 Ibid.
200 David May, "Leaving and Receiving: A Social-Scientific Exegesis of Mark 10:29-31," *PRS 17* (1990):144-6.

"λυπούμενος" literarily means "his face fell"[201] is from the word λύπη, meaning "to experience deep emotional pain." Here we can interpret it as extremely sad, overwhelming sorrow or severe grief. Some scholars understand it as the inability of the RM to follow Jesus's demand.[202] However, the use of λύπη in Mark brings a nuanced insight.

The word λύπη is used three other times in Mark's Gospel: the first time is to express Herod's reaction (περίλυπος) to Herodias's request for the immediate execution of John the Baptist (6:26); the second time is the disciples' reaction (λυπεῖσθαι) when they heard Jesus predict that one of them would betray him (14:19); the third time is to describe Jesus' state of mind (περίλυπος) in Gethsemane just before his arrest and trial (14:34). In these three cases, a sudden realization that some difficult or unpleasant course of action must be taken triggers the response of deep grief. Thus, the RM's grief suggests that he might have accepted Jesus' injunction as a valid requirement for attaining eternal life and had already even begun considering its cost. The dialogue between Jesus and the RM ends here. The RM has not yet made a final decision for or against Jesus' call. Moreover, we learn neither whether the RM decided to maintain his current lifestyle or to divest himself of his possessions and distribute them.

At the conclusion of this scene, Mark's audience then, like us today, would have been unable to interpret the RM in entirely negative or entirely positive terms. To be sure, the narrator confirms that this unnamed inquirer is wealthy. However, there is no clear textual indication that the RM has a moral flaw.

201 Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 304.
202 Ibid.

3.6 The conversation between the disciples and Jesus (10:23-27)

The narrative shifts from the conversation between Jesus and the RM to Jesus with his disciples at verse 23. In response to the RM's departure, Jesus continues to teach about possessions (10:23-27). He states twice that it will be difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. His disciples respond twice with amazement. Their astonishment reveals the radical and uncompromising nature of Jesus' teaching, and it leaves Mark's audience sympathetic with the departed RM. However, Jesus emphasizes that everything is possible to a man who counts on God (10:24b-25).

Verses 10:23-24a: Seeing the RM's grief and upon his departure, Jesus looks at his disciples and says "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God" (10:23). Collins points out the word "look" links this verse with the preceding scene, "As he (Jesus) looked intently (ἐμβλέψας) at the RM (v. 21), now he looks around (περιβλεψάμενος) at his disciples.[203] The story now centers on the disciples. As Jesus usually does in his public teaching, he provides private instruction to his disciples (4:10-12; 7:17-23). He says, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." (10:23b). The word "difficult" (δυσκόλως) only appears twice in Mark's Gospel (10:23, 24). It heightens the sense that the difficulty of entering into the kingdom of God is not limited to the RM; it is equally difficult for all who are rich. Thus, we can also read the RM as a type that represents the wealthy.

Jesus' hard saying makes his disciples astounded (θαμβέω). This is a typical emotional response to Jesus' teaching or acts (cf.1:27; 10:32). The word "θάμβος" refers to someone who becomes stunned at what she/he sees or hears or a state of amazement due to the suddenness and unusualness of the phenomenon. The radical nature of Jesus' saying astounded the disciples, who find it hard to accept. Moloney explains that it is hard for Jesus'

[203] Collins asserts that it is out of Mark's careful redactional work. Collins, *Mark*, 480.

disciples to comprehend his teaching since the world they inhabited was a world in which the wealthy determined everything from religion to politics, and all that lay in between.[204] The other reason for the disciples' amazement was likely the prevalent notion we mentioned before—Jewish culture perceived wealth as a sign of God's favor and blessing, and a sign that a person was obeying God's commandments.[205] Furthermore, later rabbinic tradition agreed, considering poverty the severest affliction in the world, outweighing all other adversities combined.[206]

Verses 10:24b-25: Jesus restated his hard saying. Far from being redundant and clumsy, the repetition provides important clues to understanding Jesus' teaching correctly. Repetition in a two-step progression is one of the pervasive stylistic features of Mark's Gospel. The second statement is not mere repetition, but it adds precision to and clarifies the first one. [207] Here in Jesus' second statement, he changes the future tense "it will be difficult (εἰσελεύσονται)…" into the present tense "it is difficult (ἐστιν)…," a change that highlights the timeless aspect of his saying. The second statement does not diminish the uncompromising quality of the first one but increases its rigor. Jesus confirms his teaching when he says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than…." (10:25). Jesus compares the largest Palestinian animal with the tiniest of commonly known openings. This comparison would indicate that it is not merely difficult but impossible for the rich to enter into the kingdom of God. Scholars have been trying to soften Jesus' teaching for centuries with their explanations. Six main readings have been given:

(1) The "needle's eye" refers to a gate in Jerusalem. Some late interpreters suggested that there was a narrow gate in the walls of Jerusalem used by pedestrians, called "the eye of

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[204] Moloney, *Mark*, 201.
[205] Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 304. See also Collins, *Mark*, 480.
[206] Edwards, James R. *The Gospel of According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester: Eerdmans, 2002), 313.
[207] Rhoads and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 47-9.

a needle." It was difficult for a camel transporting goods to walk through it but was possible if the camel was unburdened by baggage. The camel could then get down on its knees and squeeze through.[208]

(2) Jesus' saying is a metaphor and should not be understood literally. It is obvious this saying refers to something that is impossible. Origen also mentioned this comical metaphor, that the rich have a harder time entering into God's kingdom than a camel does squeezing through a needle's eye (Comm. Matt 15:14) in the Gospel of the Nazarenes. [209] Some scholars follow the lead of Clement of Alexandria who insists that Jesus' request should be interpreted allegorically not literally. The RM should rid himself of his anxieties and passions about his wealth, not the wealth itself.[210]

(3) The textual amendment of the word κάμιλον "rope" for κάμηλον "camel." Camel is a change made by some ancient scribes and modern interpreters from the standpoint of a grammatical distinction based on the pronunciation of Greek vowels in late Antiquity. They argue that the present tense κάμηλον is a mistranslation of the original term κάμιλον. They change the word κάμηλον to κάμιλον in order to make Jesus' saying more reasonable and acceptable.[211]

(4) Scholars have tried to explain away Jesus' radical call by assuming there are two levels of discipleship. In Matthew's account, Jesus said to the RM "If you want to be perfect" before demanding that he sell all and give it to the poor. This gave rise to the later church interpretation that distinguished two levels of discipleship. The "ordinary" level is for those who keep the commandments. The "higher" level is for those who want to be perfect and live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience.[212]

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[208] Boring, *Mark*, 292.
[209] Block, *Mark*, 226.
[210] Andrew D. Clarke, "Do not Judge who is Worthy and Unworthy" *JSNT 31* (2009):447-468.
[211] Boring, *Mark*, 292-3.
[212] Boring, *Mark*, 293.

(5) Law versus grace. This reading is prevalent among most Protestant scholars. They consider that the central message of Jesus's radical teaching to the RM and his disciples is not about meritorious works but about the grace of God. That is, no one can be saved by human effort; one must become righteous and be saved by God's grace.[213]

These different interpretations are efforts to downplay and soften the radical challenge of Jesus's saying. However, there is simply no historical evidence to support the first interpretation.[214] The third explanation is unlikely. The alternative reading could have arisen by mistake but is probably a secondary attempt to reduce the extravagance of the hyperbole or to choose an image that corresponds better to the function of a needle.[215]

The second and the fourth interpretations are possible, but they both take some of the edge off Jesus' words. The interpretation suggesting two levels of discipleship serves to get the ordinary Christian off the hook of the radical demand to renounce one's possessions for the sake of the poor.[216] There are some sayings similar to Jesus' words in the rabbinic literature, such as "An elephant passing through the eye of needle" (*Str-B* 1.828). Whether Jesus' saying is hyperbolic or proverbial, it does have a literary function that effectively catches the attention of the audience, leads them to consider Jesus's words seriously, and to realize the importance of one's trust in God (10:27).[217]

As for grace vs. law, Jesus's saying highlights the importance of counting on God. The interpretation has the support of Jesus' subsequent comment that God makes possible things that are impossible for human beings. However, Jesus also stresses the importance of deeds, otherwise he would not ask the RM to sell what he has and give it to the poor.

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213 Most Protestant scholars read the RM as one who believes that he can be saved by his own works. Collins, *Mark*, 521. Schweizer, *Mark*, 215. Gundry sees Jesus' demand as an implied criticism of salvation through obedience to Torah. Gundry, *Mark*, 554.
214 Boring, *Mark*, 262-293. See also Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Liturgical Press, 2012), 216-229. Best, *Discipleship and Disciples*, 19-20.
215 Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 89-90.
216 Collins, *Mark*, 519.
217 Collins, *Mark*, 480.

Verse 26: Hearing Jesus' uncompromising teaching, his disciples were exceedingly astounded (περισσῶς ἐξεπλήσσοντο) by his words. This time, the disciples' reaction to Jesus' saying is much harder than the previous one in 10:24, and it shows that they probably have not even digested Jesus' first saying (10:23b). Now they must listen to a much more demanding one; and they take offense, not comfort, from Jesus' words. It surpasses their comprehension.[218] Then, they ask Jesus "Who then can be saved?" (10:26b).

The disciples' reaction to Jesus' saying underlines its uncompromising radicality. We surmise that the disciples' reaction reflects and heightens the emotions experienced by Mark's audience at this point. In Jewish culture, wealth was often seen as a sign of God's blessing that allowed them to practice their religious obligations, especially almsgiving. The disciples may have thought that if those who are blessed with wealth and are observant of the Law cannot enter God's kingdom, how can others—who are poor and unable to give alms—be saved? [219] The disciples' reaction to Jesus' teaching, to some extent, justified the RM's failure to follow Jesus' call.[220] From a literary view, the disciples' action and question underscores their astonished confusion and provides an opportunity for Jesus to further develop his teaching

Verse 10:27: Jesus looked at them and said (10:27a). This is the third time the narrator uses ἐμβλέψας "look" in this episode. It recalls Jesus looking at the RM with love (10:21) and at the disciples in 10:23. This textual link indicates that Jesus' teaching is still unfolding in the encounter with the RM. Taylor indicates that the use of ἐμβλέψας is peculiar to Mark (cf. 8:25 and 14:67) and functions to highlight the message Jesus is about to convey[221]— For human beings it is impossible, but not for God (10:17b). Jesus' speech

[218]Edwards, *Mark*, 315.
[219]Gundry, *Mark*, 557.
[220] Collins sees the disciples' action and question as revealing their obtuseness and show that the disciples have not understood Jesus' challenge to the traditional biblical and cultural wisdom that wealth is a sign of God's blessing and favor. Collins, *Mark*, 481.
[221] Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 432.

serves to provide an answer to the questions directed to Jesus by his disciples and by the RM (10:17, 26). There are two sets of opposites in Jesus's words: impossible/possible, men/God. These contrasts emphasize the omnipotence of God. Jesus seems to agree with his distressed disciples' question. Humanly speaking, it is impossible for a camel to walk through a needle's eye or for the rich to enter God's kingdom. On the contrary, all things are possible for God. Salvation comes ultimately from God who is the one who decides who enters his kingdom or not.

It is plain that Jesus' teaching on wealth is unique and differs sharply from the social ethics of first-century Palestine. It seems not to fit with traditional Jewish perspectives. Jesus denies neither the Jewish conviction that wealth is a sign of God's blessing nor the obligation of doing righteous deeds for the poor. However, he does teach that salvation is from God alone. Edwards argues that the purpose of Jesus' radical teaching was to bring the RM and the disciples to the awareness that salvation is not a prize given for their behavior, for human efforts cannot win such a prize. God alone can bestow salvation. Even the just depend wholly on God, as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you" (14:36). No moral flaw is implied, rather it calls for openness to the power of God and openness to the Father as they appear in Jesus. [222] Culpepper writes:

> Entering the kingdom, inheriting eternal life, or gaining salvation is therefore a paradoxical matter. It requires abandoning all pretense and proof of one's virtue, abandoning every other pursuit besides the kingdom of God and everything that might offer one security, remove every temptation, and receive the kingdom in childlike simplicity, and still nothing one can do ensures one's salvation. It is entirely a matter of God's goodness, a free gift from God.[223]

[222] Edwards, *Mark*, 315.
[223] Culpepper, *Mark*, 340.

Readers might ask why Jesus gives such a radical and counter-cultural teaching. Gerhard Lohfink provides a reasonable explanation—Jesus' radical teachings can only be understood from an eschatological view, that is in light of the urgency of God's reign breaking into the present world. Mark stressed eschatology in his Gospel. At the very start of his narrative, Mark summarized Jesus' public ministry in Jesus' first proclamation— "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel." (1:15.). The theme of the kingdom of God runs like a golden thread through each chapter of Mark's Gospel and assumes a crucial role in Jesus' ministry. Jesus' coming fulfilled the Messianic prophecies. All that Jesus said and did demonstrated that he was the herald of God's kingdom, and that the kingdom of God is present now. While the kingdom's fullness is yet to come, it requires a radical response of repentance, namely that men and women acknowledge God's sovereignty and put their faith in Jesus who both preached the Gospel and is the "Good News" himself. [224]

3.7 The conversation between Peter and Jesus (10:28-31)

After Jesus spoke of the omnipotence of God, Peter stepped out of the background to speak on behalf of the disciples. His remark juxtaposes the disciples and their response to their calling to that of the RM. He says "Look, we left all we had and followed you" (10:28). Jesus' response indicates that those who follow him form a new family based on a special relationship with him. They will receive their rewards both now and in the world to come. Finally, Mark concludes this episode with Jesus' proverbial saying "Many that are first will be last and the last will be first." (10:31).

Verse 10:28: Upon hearing Jesus' words, Peter, acting as the spokesman for the Twelve as on other occasions in Mark's gospel (8:29; 9:5;11:21), abruptly speaks up to Jesus

[224] Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 230-244.

"Look, we left all we had and followed you." [225] Peter called for Jesus' attention to his following words by using the word "look" (Ιδού). The word "we" indicates that Peter is not speaking for himself but as the representative of the disciples. The word ἀφήκαμεν here means "release, let go or send away with the implication of causing a separation." It could refer to an outward act of separating or an inward separation. Many scholars who read the RM in a negative light indicate that what the disciples have done forms a sharp contrast with what the RM had failed to do.[226]

However, Peter's words are puzzling in that some of the disciples seem not to have really renounced all (πάντα) they have. After Peter and Andrew are called by Jesus, they still possess a home (1:29) and a boat (3:9; 4:1, 36; cf. John 21:3). The disciples probably left all they had only while following Jesus but have not given them away (1:20; Matt 4:22; Lk 22:36). This suggests that the renunciation of one's possessions is not a necessary criterion to become a disciple.[227] Furthermore, some of Jesus' disciples evidently retained both their homes and the tools of their livelihood. Joseph of Arimathea and some of the female disciples all possessed wealth and used it to support Jesus' ministry (Lk 8:1-3, cf. Acts 4:34-37; 5:1-4).

In any case, it is clear that Peter and the other disciples followed Jesus (ἠκολουθήκαμέν σοι). When Jesus called them, they responded to the call immediately and without hesitation (1:17-20; 2:13-14). Since the RM's final response to Jesus' call was left hanging, it remains possible that he did finally become a disciple. We cannot come to a definite conclusion that what he did absolutely contrasts with what the disciples did.

Verses 10:29-30: Jesus did not commit himself to affirming or denying Peter's claim. He responded with a solemn opening formula "Amen, I say to you" which indicates

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[225] Best argues that vv. 28-31 does not match the previous two sections (vv. 17-22 and vv. 23-27) very well and it is a creation of Mark. He avers that this last section speaks of reward on earth and family relationships that were not mentioned earlier. I am not going to discuss his view. For more information, see Best, *Discipleship and disciples*, 17.
[226] Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 305.
[227] Strauss, *Mark*, 444.

the assurance of Jesus' promise of rewards for the disciples who left everything for his sake and the Gospel (cf. 1:1).[228] A cumbersome construction with a double negative follows this affirmation. "There is no one who has left…. If he does not receive…." It reaffirms Jesus' promise and heightens the close identification of Jesus with the "good news" of the kingdom of God (1:15).

In Jesus' statement, those who leave their house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children and fields for his sake and the sake of Gospel will receive them in one hundred times. The seven objects listed in Jesus' saying are not merely the dearest of all possible possessions to a Mediterranean. More notably, they form a person's essential network of relationships and allegiances. As I noted above, one's security and identity were closely tied to these things in the first-century Palestinian world. To ask one to forsake these is to ask one to deny oneself. Additionally, anyone who abandoned those things risked bringing dishonor upon both himself and his family and being excluded from his natural kinship structure.[229]

Interestingly, Jesus does not mention a wife among the things to be left behind. Why? We can offer two possible answers: (1) Jesus promised blessings a hundredfold in return for renouncing possessions. It would be awkward if such an assurance were to be taken to imply that the disciples would receive a hundred wives. Or (2) It may reflect the indissoluble nature of marriage taught by Jesus in 10:2-12; so that a disciple should not abandon his wife. In fact, Peter and the other apostles were accompanied by their wives in their ministry (1Cor 9:5).

Jesus promised abundant rewards to his disciples both in this age and the age to come. The concept of time as divided between "this age" and "the age to come" was the foundation of Jewish theology. Boring regards the use of the two-ages terminology as a feature of Jewish apocalyptic expectations.[230] Collins affirms that Jesus' statement (v. 28) has

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[228] The formula "Amen, I say to you" occurs thirteen times in Mark's gospel (3:28;8:12; 9:1,41;10:15;13:30;14:9,25). In most cases the statement follows concerns the ultimate rewards.
[229] May, "Leaving and Receiving,"144-6.
[230] Boring, *Mark*, 297.

two levels of significance: it not only spoke to Peter and the other disciples in the narrative, it also speaks to the situation of Mark's audiences of every time.[231] Moreover, some scholars point out that Jesus' promises have been fulfilled in the present age even though not in their fullest dimension. As a matter of fact, Jesus' disciples are blessed with the houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and land that come with belonging to a new family[232]— the Christian community. The new family is constituted not by natural ties, but by doing the will of God (cf. 3:31-35; 6:6).

When we compare Mark's episode to its parallels in the other Synoptics, we discover significant differences. The word "father" is omitted in the second list in Mark's account, and this omission suggests that God is the only father of the new family that does the will of God.[233] The word "God" as the only Father of his people is embedded in the Scripture. God reveals himself as Father of his chosen people in the liberating event of the Exodus. God asks Moses to tell Pharaoh "Israel is my first-born son" (Ex 4:22). This principle is reiterated later on in the formulas "…. because he is our Lord and God, he is our Father forever." (Tob 13:4; cf. Sir 36:12). God himself also declares "I am Father to Israel…." (Jer 31:9). Those who believe in God are depicted as "sons of the living God" (Hos 2:1; Wis 2:13).

Another important variant reading among the Synoptics is important. The term "a hundred-fold" used by Mark is replaced by Matthew and Luke with the term "manyfold." Mark's term more underscores the superabundance of the rewards Jesus promises to his disciples. In what sense do the disciples gain homes and family and fields in the present age? The likely answer is that all stand together as one family—as brothers and sisters in Christ—whose possessions are ultimately God's and so shared by all (cf. Acts 2:42; 4:32).

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231 Collins, *Mark*, 481.
232 In Mark 3:35, Jesus said "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Implying a new family relationship based on doing the will of the Father.
233 Kathleen Elizabeth Mills, *The Kinship of Jesus: Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 192-194.

A third difference is that the word "persecution" appears only in Mark's account. It is the only negative term in the list of blessings. Scholars suggest that we may perhaps extrapolate from Mark's list a concern about a persecution that his community was facing.[234] Jesus' word has a special meaning for Mark's first hearers who were suffering from persecution because of their faith in Jesus and the Gospel.[235] Jesus' words provide encouragement and consolation.[236] Mark's audience suffers the persecutions that they have to accept in this age. In the next age, they will be blessed with the eternal life promised to those who the kingdom.[237]

Verses 10:31: Jesus ended the teaching of this section with a paradoxical saying (v. 31). The chiastic form he uses underscores its provocative nature. On the surface, it foretells a reversal of values. On a deeper level, it indicates that the praise and promise found in Jesus' statement (vv.29-30) are directed to many whom society and culture would regard as the least. It is they who paradoxically will become the first in the kingdom of God. Furthermore, this last saying also points to the reversal playing out in Jesus' life, for he reveals himself not as a Davidic King—a military Messiah, seeking to be served, but as a suffering Servant, who gives his life as a ransom for many (10:45), who humbles himself by becoming obedient to death on the cross, yet who will be raised and will return in glory. Jesus himself is the exemplar of discipleship.

3.8 Summary

The exegesis of Mark 10:17-31 shows us that the characterization of the RM is complex and ambiguous. The text does not give us the RM's name and age nor does it state how the RM

234 Ibid. See also Moloney, *Mark*, 202-3. Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 308.
235 I will discuss the situation of Mark's community in Chapter Five.
236 Taylor*, Mark*, 434-35.
237 The use of eternal life here teams with the same expression in 10:17 to form an inclusion for this episode (10:17-31).

came to be aware of Jesus and his teaching. It only tells us that the RM approaches Jesus with the eagerness and humility shown by running and kneeling. We do not know what motivated him. However, the question he asked Jesus and the title "good teacher" he called Jesus do reveal that he had a strong interest Jesus as well as a certain knowledge of Jesus.

We are not able to decide the exact intention behind Jesus' counter question in reply to the RM's question, whether, for example, Jesus was seeking to bring the RM to a profession of faith in him or to acknowledge the Father as the only Good One and source of all goodness. As Donahue and Harrington point out, Jesus' counter question is puzzling. The dropping of the word "good" in the RM's reply to Jesus might be taken as indicative of a shallow or inadequate view of Jesus or it might equally be understood as his responsiveness to Jesus' instruction.

When Jesus hears the RM's claim that he had kept the commandments, Jesus did not contest the claim. Instead, he looked at him, loved him, and called him. According to the Greek text, Jesus' love here is neither pity nor compassion. It is an invitation that asks for reciprocal love from the one called (cf. Deut 6:4-9; 7:9). However, in response, the RM drew back in dismay and failed to heed Jesus' call.

The narrator's statement "He left because he has many possessions" has suggests a moral flaw that contributed to making him wealthy. However, there is no textual indicator justifying this assumption. In fact, nothing in the text reveals the source of the RM's wealth, leading the reader to conjecture. Was it a divine blessing for observance of the law, the result of exploitation of the poor, or a family legacy?

Indeed, his departure contrasts with the disciples' unhesitating response to Jesus' call, but that does not justify an unfavorable assessment of the RM. No text in Mark indicates that Jesus made the same request of his other disciples "to sell everything and give it to the poor, then come and follow me." Jesus' teaching is unparalleled in his era and would have been

experienced as a spiritual earthquake by the RM who would never have heard anything like it. The disciples' amazed response and Jesus' further affirmation of his teaching reveal the uncompromising radicality of Jesus' teaching. It would be natural for the disciples to sympathize with the RM and indirectly to justify his departure.

We are left with a question hanging in the air. The RM's grief suggests that he might yet take Jesus' proposition seriously but that he needed time to consider Jesus' new teaching and the radical consequences of his call. The RM has not made his final decision for or against Jesus' invitation at the end of the story. Jesus' encounter with the RM is open-ended. The door of the discipleship remains open to the RM.

The RM's appearance in the narrative is too brief and vague to allow us to determine whether or not he represents belief or unbelief. He differs from the Pharisees who have no faith in Jesus and from those who are presented as faithful disciples. The details that Mark wrote into the story of the RM are significant, but the final nature of that significance still eludes us.

Chapter Four

Comparing the Rich Man and the Disciples

As we have seen, Mark characterizes the RM in ambiguous terms. We cannot view him as the embodiment of either belief or disbelief. By comparing him with Jesus' disciples, we will understand better how this ambiguity fits within Mark's narrative. The similarities in Mark's ambivalent characterizations of the RM and of the disciples reveal that the RM can be understood as one who represents the disciple who has not yet come to full faith.

4.1 The Characterization of Disciples in Mark's Gospel

In Mark's Gospel, the disciples play an important role in both the narrative and in Jesus' ministry. Mark speaks of Jesus' disciples forty-four times, from the very beginning to the end of the Gospel. In theatrical terms they have leading parts. Donahue affirms that "Discipleship pericopes have a very important function in the literary structure of the Gospel."[238] Every major section of the Gospel begins with a discipleship scene. Disciples surround Jesus throughout the Gospel.

The disciples in Mark's Gospel were viewed unfavorably by the majority of scholars. Recently, however, more and more scholars have recognized that Mark's depiction is not black-and-white. It includes the gray of the disciples' inconstancy and ambivalence.[239] On some occasions, Mark depicts them positively while on other occasions he is not so favorable. This chapter will consider both aspects of Mark's depiction.

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238 John R. Donahue *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1983), 11.
239 Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 29-34.

4.1.1 The Positive Qualities of the Disciples in Mark

Mark often characterizes the disciples as attractive figures, both by stressing their close association with Jesus and by contrasting them sharply with those who oppose him. We see this especially in: (1) The call of the disciples and their response to it; (2) The participation by the disciples in Jesus' ministry; (3) The instruction of the disciples in private by Jesus.

4.1.1.1 The Call and the Response

Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee by calling his first four disciples. They would later become part of the Twelve. At Jesus' word, Peter, Andrew, John and James promptly left behind their former way of life and, without hesitation, began to follow Jesus (1:16-20). Mark emphasizes and develops the positive relationship between Jesus and his disciples in two further scenes in the early chapters of the Gospel.[240]

Taking his disciples to the side, Jesus summoned "to him those whom he desired" (3:13) and constituted them as a group of twelve disciples. Jesus not only called them and set them apart, but he also promised to make them "fishers of men" (cf.1:17), to give them a share in the work of proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom, and to have authority to exorcise demons. In a later episode, Jesus commissioned them to do the work he did. Mark depicts them as missionaries who traveled light, proclaimed the message of repentance and the Kingdom of God, cast out demons, and healed the sick (3:14; 6:7). Moreover, Mark specifically noted their success at doing these things—"They went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." (6:12-13).

[240] The call of the four disciples (1:16-20), the choice of the Twelve (3:13-19), and the mission of the Twelve (6:7-13, 30) appear to be linked episodes which reinforce and develop a particular view of the Twelve. This can be regard as one of the many threefold patterns in Mark's gospel.

Black claims that "'all should repent' in 6:12 is straight in line with Jesus's own message (1:15), and, before him, with that of John the Baptist (1:4)—whose immediate reappearance (6:14-29) casts a long shadow over the sunshine of the Twelve's mission."[241] Mark emphasizes the positive nature of the disciples' relationship with Jesus by the way Jesus expresses his care for them when they come back from their first mission. "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (6:31).

4.1.1.2 Collaborators in Jesus' Ministry

Mark depicted the disciples as faithful witnesses to Jesus's words and deeds. The disciples are present when Jesus works miracles and they assist him (1:29-32; 2:1-12; 3:1-6, 9). They accompany Jesus when he speaks about the Kingdom of God (3:20-34; 12:28-34). When Jesus faces questioning by the scribes, his disciples, remain steadfastly by his side (3:6, 9, 18, 23-24). In spite of the doubts of Jesus' relatives and countrymen, (3:21, 6:3), they listen to his teaching (3:20). When Jesus feeds the five thousand (6:30-44), they help get the crowd seated and distribute the bread and fish to the people.[242] Mark depicts the disciples as men who immerse themselves in the work of the Kingdom of God. By their deeds, they demonstrate their obedience and loyalty to Jesus. Jesus as their teacher defends them when they face the criticism of the scribes and Pharisees (2:14-17, 23-28). Because of loyalty and obedience to the word of God, Jesus looks upon them as "my brothers" (3:34).

4.1.1.3 Privileged Recipients of Jesus' Instruction

Not only are the disciples witnesses to miracles that Jesus works in private, (4:35-41; 5:37-43; 6:45-52; 9:2-8), they are also the privileged recipients of his teaching in private. Often,

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241 Black, *Mark*, 153.

242 Boring explains that ἀνακλῖναι (sit) in 6:39 is transitive, "seat, cause to sit," as in the NRSV, not intransitive "sit." Jesus does not command all to sit but commands the disciples to seat all. Boring, *Mark*, 181.

after instructing the crowds, Jesus gathers the disciples together in private to explain his doctrines more fully (4:10, 35-41; 6:45-52; 8:14-21). For instance, Jesus explains to them the meaning of the parable of the sower in private. He reveals "the secrets of the Kingdom of God" only to them (4:10-20). He reserves important truths for these private sessions such as the difference between what makes a person clean and unclean (4:17-23) and his teaching about marriage (10:10-12).

These private sessions indicate that Jesus' disciples are intimate with him. This intimacy stands in sharp contrast to his relationship with outsiders. Mark explains this by saying that the mystery of the kingdom is given to those around Jesus, but the crowds do not see or understand. The disciples, in fact, form a privileged inner circle of his followers.[243] This inner circle that has Jesus at its center, is clearly the core of the new community, which stands in contrast to the "outsiders"—the scribes, Pharisees and crowds.

The journey to discipleship is a journey from outside to inside; those who make it are the true family of Jesus. Mark's positive description of the disciples reaches its high point at the end of the first half of his narrative when Peter, the representative of the Twelve, confesses that Jesus is the Messiah (8:29).[244] This is the first time that Jesus' Messiahship is recognized by a human being.[245]

Peter's confession, therefore, is a narrational restatement of the first verse of Mark's Gospel (1:1), and it marked the beginning of the disciples' efforts to understand the identity of Jesus and the implications of his Messianic mission.

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[243] Boring, *Mark*, 167-9.
[244] Most scholars see Peter's confession as a decisive turning point within Mark's entire narrative. Based on Peter's confession, they divide Mark's narrative into two parts: part one (1:14-8:30) and part two (8:31-16:8).
[245] Mark's portrayal does not indicate whether any others of the Twelve are capable of this identification.

4.1.2 Negative Aspects of Mark's Portrayal of the Disciples

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the implications of negative traits in Mark's portrayal of the disciples. Through the more positive portrayal of the disciples above, it seems that Mark has created a paradigm for discipleship that he intends his readers to emulate.

Yet the disciples prove to be fallible models, and many commentators have written at length about Mark's portrayal of the defects of the disciples. As Larry Hurtado wrote: "Though all four canonical Gospels have negative features in their treatment of the Twelve, Mark's portrayal is undeniably more severe than the others."[246] Two of the defects of the disciples appear in a glaring light, and deserve or particular attention. They are: (1) their unperceptiveness and; (2) their cowardice and weaknesses.

4.1.2.1 The Unperceptiveness of the Disciples

Generally speaking, negative characterizations of the disciples are found in the second part of Mark's narrative; however, Mark depicts some of their shortcomings in the first part of the narrative when Jesus and the disciples are on the Sea of Galilee: when Jesus stills the storm (4:35-41), when they see Jesus walking by them on the water (6:45-52), and in their discussion in the boat about the leaven of the Pharisees (8:14-21). Note the careful way that Mark qualifies their deficiencies.

In the first of these episodes, they awaken Jesus who calmed the wind and the waves. Jesus then says to them "Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?" (4:40). Their response to his question indicates that they have not yet realized who Jesus is. In their bewilderment, they ask "Who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

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[246] Larry W. Hurtado, "*Following Jesus in the Gospel of Mark – and Beyond," in Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament,* ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 21.

Although the fear they express is a normal reaction to a dangerous situation, their question about who Jesus might be demonstrates that they had not yet come to understand that Jesus was divine.[247]

Similarly, in the second episode, the fearful disciples fail to recognize Jesus walking on the water and, instead, think he is a ghost. Mark uses explicitly severe language for them: "For they did not understand about the loaves but their hearts were hardened" (6:52). By linking their fear to their failure to grasp the miracle of the loaves, Mark tells us the Twelve, who had assisted in the miracle, were still imperfect disciples.

In the final episode (8:14-21), Mark tells us that, on one of their journeys, the disciples had forgotten to take along bread and had only one loaf with them. Though they had participated in both miraculous multiplications of loaves and fish, they were still worrying about their lack of bread (8:22). Their outlook was carnal. Jesus, the good teacher, reprimands them by asking questions that they do not answer. They have eyes and do not see, ears to hear and do not hear (8:18). They do not understand. This lack of understanding provides Mark with a link to the healing story that follows (8:28-26). The gradual restoration of sight to the blind man reflects the disciples' gradual coming to faith, and it prepares the way for Peter's confession of faith.

Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi, however, does not dispel their lack of understanding. It grows more ambiguous in the second half of the Gospel as Mark demonstrates the disciples' unperceptiveness in various ways. Immediately, after Peter, the spokesman of the Twelve, confesses Jesus as the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi and shows his ability to recognize Jesus' identity, Jesus has to rebuke him, because Peter's understanding is all-too-human and limited. He cannot accept Jesus' prediction of his passion. He takes Jesus aside and protests. His actions amount to a remonstration of Jesus. Jesus replies with a stern

247 Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 176.

public rebuke, and says to him, “Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, not as human beings do” (8:33). Was Peter well intentioned? Mark does not tell us Peter’s motive for speaking out in that way. What is certain is that it was impossible for first-century Jews to relate the sufferings Jesus predicted with the Messiah they expected.

Subsequently, the disciples continue to show their incomprehension and misunderstanding of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus two subsequent predictions of his passion are met by the disciples’ fearful resistance (8:32-33) or by behavior contrary to that of Jesus (9:33-34, 10:35-41). They are not concerned for Jesus’ future. Their worldly ambition shows that they do not grasp the nature of the Kingdom. They argue over who is the greatest among them (9:33-37) and who will sit on Jesus' right or left at the eschaton (10:33-34). Jesus corrects them and teaches them what the “default attitude” of a disciple should be: He should deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Jesus (8:34-38); he must seek to be last rather than first (9:33-38); and he should make himself a servant of others (10:39). Finally, Jesus gives his uncomprehending disciples the model of his own attitude. He tells them that he came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (10:45).

4.1.2.2 The Cowardice and Weaknesses of the Disciples

Mark depicts the disciples as being obtuse to Jesus’ teaching, and also underscores their cowardice and weaknesses in difficult situations. The events that followed the Last Supper fulfilled the terms of Jesus’ predictions of his passion. Mark highlights the disciples’ failures. They fall asleep at Gethsemane, even though he asks them to keep watch. They sleep while he prays in anguish (14:33-41) despite his repeated requests that they should stay awake and pray with him. They repeatedly fail to comply (13:32-42). It is a disciple, Judas Iscariot, who hands him over to the Jewish authorities. The remaining disciples flee in cowardly fear after Jesus is arrested. Mark tells us that an unnamed young man was following Jesus. This

enigmatic person is clothed only with a linen loin cloth. The crowds try to seize him; but he runs off naked, leaving the cloth behind (14: 51-52). Moloney interprets this symbolic figure as representing the condition of infidelity. It also represents shame.

Peter, the spokesman of the disciples, who had sworn that he would never forsake Jesus (14:29), flees with the others. He still follows Jesus "from a distance" (14:54), but in the end because of his cowardice he denies knowing Jesus three times (14:66-72). His cowardly denial stands in sharp, ironic contrast to his bravado at the Last Supper (14:27-31). Finally, when Jesus is led out to his crucifixion, these weak disciples abandon him. Mark depicts only three of the faithful women who watch from a distance (15:40-41). If the story had ended here, our judgement of the disciples would be that these privileged friends of Jesus had abandoned him and left him to die. At this point Mark's characterization of them is very negative.

4.1.3 The Paradoxical Ambiguity of Mark's Characterization of the Disciples

When we combine both the positive and negative aspects of Mark's portrait of the disciples, we end up with a characterization that is both complex and ambivalent. On one hand, they responded promptly to Jesus' call and followed him without hesitation. They witnessed Jesus' words and deeds and also participated in his ministry. They cast out demons, proclaimed repentance, and healed the sick. On the other hand, they constantly show that they misunderstood Jesus' teaching and refused to accept Jesus' identification of himself with the Suffering Servant of God.

The flight of the disciples leads to an important consequence during the Passion. They are not the ones who profess faith Christ at Golgotha. Instead, it is a pagan: "When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last he said, 'Truly this man was the

Son of God!'" (15:39).[248] Overall, we are left with a dark impression of them. Yet Mark's portrayal is not completely negative. It is a highly nuanced ambiguous mixture of paradoxes.

At the end of Mark's Gospel, the disciples seem to have no future. However, the final pages of the Gospel reveal hope. The women who had kept vigil while Jesus was dying had taken note of where Jesus was buried (15:47). On the day after the Sabbath, they go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' corpse,[249] and were startled to see that the stone, which had sealed the entrance, had been rolled back. On entering the tomb, they see a young man in white garments who proclaimed to them: "Get up, go tell his disciples and Peter that he (Jesus) is going on ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, as he told you" (16:7).

Who is this mysterious messenger of the Resurrection? Some scholars see in this depiction a thematic evocation of the naked young man at Gethsemane (14:28). The Messenger of the Resurrection is thus a symbol of transformation from betrayal (nakedness) to discipleship (white garment).[250] Note, too, that the message the young man conveys the fulfillment of the second part of Jesus' prophecy when they arrived at the Garden of Olives (14:27-28): "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be dispersed. But after I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee." The young man's message can be considered "another call" Jesus makes to his disciples. In spite of their desertion and denial, Jesus again calls the disciples to follow him. Even though they have forsaken him, Jesus provides them

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[248] How to interpret the centurion's response to Jesus' death has become a debate among scholars. Scholars like Culpepper, Collins, Moloney and others read it as the centurion's faith confession about Jesus' divinity. Scholars like Richard W. Sawnson, Boring, Black, Harrington and Donahue argue that the centurion's declaration is ambiguous because it is unclear if the centurion speaks out of faith or mockery. It can be understood either as a miraculous confession or a malicious taunt. Whitney T. Shiner suggests that this enigmatic pronouncement is used by Mark on purpose to allow the reader to hear a deeper meaning while leaving the veil of secrecy. Culpepper, *Mark*, 563. Moloney, *Mark*, 329. Collins, *Mark,* 767. Richard W. Sawnson, "This is My: Toward a Thick Performance of the Gospel of Mark" in *From Text to Performance: Narrative and Performance Criticisms in Dialogue a Debate*, ed. Kelly R. Iverson, (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2015): 182-210. C. Clifton, "The Face Is Familiar—I just can't Place it" in *The End of Mark and the Ends of God*: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel., ed Beverly R. Gaventa, (Louisville: Westminister John Know, 2005): 33-50. Boring, *Mark*, 442-3. Harrington and Donahue, *Mark*, 449.

[249] What the women and Joseph did to Jesus shows their courage, faithfulness and love for him because bodies of crucified persons were normally not buried but left on the cross to decay.

[250] The white robe is the symbol of the martyr's garb or angel's clothing.

with another chance to rejoin him. Though they had forsaken him, he remains faithful to them.

Jesus' implied invitation to join him in Galilee, "But after I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee" (14:28); also promised a reversal of the loss of the shepherd and the scattering of the sheep, for he will go before them as their shepherd will restore their broken relationship. Significantly, Mark does not say whether the disciples accepted this invitation or not. The Messenger in the tomb only says, "They will see (cf.16:7)," but Mark does not indicate the outcome.

It is well known that the earliest manuscripts of Mark's Gospel end at 16:8 and do not include the "long ending" (verses 9-20). This short ending finishes by describing the traumatized state of the women who had been commissioned to bear the Resurrection message to his disciples. In these final lines, the narrator leaves his audience in suspense. He states "They (the women) went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewildering. They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid." (16:8). The hearer or reader is left to conjecture. Will they conquer their fear?[251] Will the disciples reunite with Jesus in Galilee whence they were called? Mark's shorter ending gives hope for the restoration of the disciple's faith, but the answer is open-ended. It is like a painting lacking the finishing stroke that demands a response from the characters within the narrative as well as the audience of Mark's Gospel.

4.2 Comparing the Rich Man and the Disciples

Mark's ambiguous characterizations of both the RM and the disciples enable us to make a direct comparison of them. The RM is like the disciples in Mark's Gospel who get off to a

[251] Fear does not mean desertion in Mark. Fear has accompanied those who accompanied with Jesus throughout Mark's narrative (4:41; 6:50; 10:32).

great start. The disciples' unhesitating answer to Jesus' call elicits a positive response from hearers or readers. Similarly, both the eager manner of the RM's approach to Jesus and his significant question both demonstrate his sincerity and put him in a good light. Similarly, the disciples' privileged place in the inner circle as recipients of Jesus' private teaching and collaborators in his ministry, finds an echo in Jesus loving call of the RM.

The imperfect nature of the disciples' understanding of Jesus' identity and mission that is highlighted by their fear and dismay on the Sea of Galilee, finds an echo in the imperfect understanding of the RM. Their obtuseness on the Sea of Galilee is echoed in the RM's dialogue with Jesus. In all these cases Jesus asks a question that should lead to greater understanding and faith. Yet when the RM calls Jesus "good teacher", and Jesus' responds with a counter question "Why do you call me good? No one is good except for God," he did not seem to connect Jesus' goodness with God's goodness. His faith did not develop, and he dropped the word "good" in the rest of the conversation. This showed that his understanding of Jesus was imperfect, like that of the disciples who sometimes showed their lack of understanding of Jesus' teachings and their inability to recognize his true identity. Similarly, Jesus' charge to his disciples to deny themselves radically and lose their lives for the sake of Jesus and the gospel (8:34b-36) has its counterpart in Jesus' radical demand of the RM, to renounce all he possessed and give it to the poor.

Moreover, the relations between Jesus with his disciples on the one hand and Jesus with the RM on the other are depicted as very unsatisfactory. The disciples fled when Jesus was arrested, while the RM left sadly in dismay. However, the narrative engenders a certain suspense regarding their futures. Although their relationships with Jesus are unsatisfactory, the text still leaves open the possibility that they can be restored. The fates of both the disciples and the RM remain uncertain and open-ended. As a consequence, this situation opens a window into Mark's theology and his community, while providing spiritual guidance

for Mark's first readers and today's readers alike. We will look at these themes in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

From Mark's Community to Us Today

In this chapter we will examine the significance of Mark's ambiguous characterization of the RM and the disciples from the literary viewpoint, from the historical viewpoint and from the spiritual viewpoint with the help of the following questions: (1) What is the implication of their ambiguity within the narrative of Mark's Gospel? (2) How does the historical context inform the meaning of their characterization? (3) What lessons may Christians today gain from this ambiguity for his or her following of Christ?

5.1 Mark's Ambiguity as a Function of his Narrative

Few scripture scholars have paid particular attention to the way the ambiguity of the characters function in Mark's Gospel. Most have viewed them either as believers or unbelievers. This either/or approach presupposes that, because the reign of God requires a radical response of repentance, the reader should therefore be interested only in a character's final response to Jesus. Considerations of the historical and social context or their stories, as well as their narrative function in the whole Gospel would be regarded as irrelevant. The bottom line is that each person in the Gospel must either accept or reject the kingdom of God that has come in the person of Jesus. Such a viewpoint would reduce the persons in the Gospel to two-dimensional figures who embody only a single trait: belief or unbelief. It would oversimplify the complexity of the characters and to ignore their implications for understanding Mark's Gospel.

Mark's deliberately ambiguous characterizations of the RM and of the disciples confounds this reading method by revealing that not all characters can be easily labeled as believers or unbelievers. Mark's ambiguity forces the reader to consider the complexity of a

life following Christ. Many of these figures hover between the light of faith and the darkness of unbelief, without giving us a definite indication about where they will land. They both believe and do not believe; they grasp important parts of Jesus' message but misunderstand others. They act in good ways by showing Jesus respect, by listening to his message, and even walking with him; yet they lack sufficient comprehension of what they must do or who Jesus is.

We see a similar ambiguity in the RM and in the disciples, including Peter and the woman. Peter first professed that Jesus is the Son of God and Messiah, then vehemently promised that he would never betray Jesus, yet he had to be rebuked by Jesus as "Satan." After all of this, Peter denied Jesus three times. The women stayed close by Jesus as he hung dying on the cross. Those who had first received news of the resurrection of Jesus, left the tomb in fright without telling anyone what they had seen and heard.

These characters are ambiguous from the viewpoint of belief or unbelief because they cannot be lumped into one or the other of these black and white categories. Mark's portrayal of them forces readers to consider them in a more complex light. His depiction—contrary to the either-or position of many commentators—does more to complicate our understanding of the nature of belief and unbelief than offer labels to by which people judge. The mixed responses to Jesus of these men and women distinguish them from other more clearly-drawn characters in the Gospel, and it refuses easy classification.

More notably, the ambiguity of these characters has an important literary function. It closely connects with the message Mark wants to convey—all who walk the road of discipleship may still be far from the perfection of a mature faith in Christ. Furthermore, the ambiguity serves as a literary device to advance the plot and to show the reader very clearly what discipleship entails."[252] On entering the narrative, readers are constrained to avoid

[252] Leo O'Reilly, "The Gospel of Mark—Good News for Bad Disciples" *The Furrow, vol. 39*(1998):78- 85

judging Mark's characters, but instead, to identify with them and to understand them as a mirror for their own lives.

5.2 Marcan Ambiguity in the Historical Context of the Gospel

The provenance and date of Mark's Gospel have been argued in the scholarly literature for many years. Although there is wide consensus that Mark was written around AD 70, there have been several attempts to either date Mark earlier or to discover the specific time and place of composition. Here I will briefly introduce three different theories that try to explain its historical origins.[253]

The first theory speculates that Mark's Gospel was written in Rome sometime from the mid-50s to early 60s. This viewpoint was largely influenced by statements accorded to the Bishop of Hierapolis, Papias (c. AD 110) and Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150 —215). The famous Jewish historian, Eusebius, writes:

> Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor, had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave his attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them. (*Hist. eccl. 3.39.15*).

Later, Clement of Alexandria commented on 1 Peter 5:13 and relates:

[253] Since the exact location of Mark's community and the date of Mark's composition are not of critical importance in my thesis, I will not explicitly discuss them. For more information, see Strauss, *Mark*, 33-44. Collins, *Mark*, 96-102.

> When Peter was openly preaching the Gospel in Rome, in front of certain imperial *equites* (men of the equestrian order), and furnishing for them many testimonies about Christ, Mark, a follower of Peter, having been petitioned by these men, wrote the Gospel called 'According to Mark' from the things which were spoken by Peter.[254] (*Adumbrationes*, 1Pet 5:13).

A second view argues that Mark's Gospel was written in the mid-60s in response to Nero's persecution. The Neronian persecutions were sparked by a devastating fire in Rome in AD 64. In order to find a scapegoat for this great fire, Nero accused the Christians of setting the fire. The Roman historian Tacitus writes:

> Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost exquisite cruelty, a class loathed for their abominations, whom the crowd styled 'Christian'…They were wrapped in the skins of wild beasts and dismembered by dogs; others were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. (*Ann. 15:44*).[255]

Brown believes that "although Christians were harassed in various places, only the capital city's Christian community [which is Rome] is known to have undergone major Roman persecution before 70 C.E., namely, under Nero."[256]

The third view holds that Mark's Gospel was written around the time of the Jewish war of 66-74.[257] Scholars who support this standpoint relate the prediction of the temple's destruction (Mk 13) with the First Jewish Revolt (AD 55-70). They explain that the

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254 Michal Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in tis Social and Political Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 90.
255 Black*, Mark*, 36.
256 Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 162. Edwin D. Freed writes, "The author was writing to those who were already Christians in Rome who were persecuted during and after the time of Nero (54-68)." Edwin D. Freed, *The New Testament: A Critical Introduction* (Belmont: Wadsworth,1990), 124:
257 Myers argues that Mark's Gospel was written at the height of the Jewish war around A.D.69. Kathleen Milles, *The Kinship of Jesus* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 26.

destruction of the temple was the traumatic end to the four-year revolt of the Jews against Rome. As foretold in 13:14 "Let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains." In fact, Christians actually did flee Jerusalem when the armies of Titus invaded in C.E. 67, many of them traveling to Pella in the Decapolis (*Hist. eccl.* 3.5.3.).[258] These scholars suggest that the provenance of Mark's Gospel might be Galilee.[259] Marxsen, a pioneer of this view, interprets verse Mark 16:7 as corresponding with this setting. He further asserts that the angel's words, "He is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him, just as he told you," speaks of the Parousia rather than the resurrected Jesus. Mark wrote his Gospel to reorient eschatological expectations from Jerusalem to Galilee.

As we see, there are several theories among scripture scholars on the place and date of the composition of Mark's Gospel. In fact, each of these perspectives has been argued in the scholarly literature. However, there does seem to be a consensus among scholars on the purpose of Mark's Gospel. They take the prominence Mark gives to the issue of persecution as evidence that Mark wrote his Gospel in a historical context in which it was dangerous to be a follower of Jesus.[260]

These scholars believe that the many references to persecution in Mark's Gospel provide a window into the historical situation of Mark's community. For example, they extrapolate from the use of the word "persecution" in Mark 10:30 a statement about the relationship between discipleship and the persecution that members of Mark's community were undergoing. The prophecy about persecution and family division in Mark 13:9-12 could then be read as a description of the experience of Mark's community.

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[258] David M. Young, *Extreme Discipleship: Following Jesus from the Gospel of Mark* (Montgomery: EBook Time, 2007), 21.
[259] Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 107.
[260] Mary Ann Tolbert, "The Gospel according to Mark" *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003):1801-1845. See also Marie Noonan Sabin, *The Gospel According to Mark. New Collegeville Bible Commentary New Testament* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006), 7.

The members of a community under persecution would have identified with the ambivalent responses of the RM and of the disciples. They knew what it meant to be drawn to the Lord. They also knew what it meant to falter because of imperfect faith and fear. Thus Mark's ambiguity was especially important as a mirror for them and their relationship with the Lord.[261] The paradoxical portrayals of the RM and the disciples become the symbol for Mark's community.[262]

The imperfect understanding or obtuseness of the RM and the disciples served as a warning to Mark's community not to falter in their faith. Moreover, it brought consolation to those who perhaps did falter. Even though they, like RM, may have had a limited comprehension of Jesus and hesitated to answer the call of faith, they still had a chance to change their minds and again follow Jesus. Though they may have been like the disciples, who did not always have "eyes to see and ears to hear" and who fled, many of them came to be revered as saints and martyrs like the inconstant Twelve. Mark left the story of the RM and of the disciples open-ended on purpose; for Mark's community had hope that, like the Apostolic community of frail disciples that was restored after the Resurrection, it could still find solace in the restorative Shepherd.

5.3 Marcan Ambiguity and Christians Today

A Christian should want to be a person who is as perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect (cf. Mat 5:48), to remain uncontaminated by sin, to renounce darkness, and to walk like a child of holiness and light. But how many live up to that standard? Like the RM and the disciples, can be obtuse. We may not understand. Often we do not think as God thinks but as humans think. We have our own thoughts that do not perfectly fit into Jesus's terms. We wrestle with

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261 Robert C. Tannehill, "Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role" *The Journal of Religion*, *vol. 57* (1977):386-405.
262 Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 45,

challenges and temptations in our daily lives. Our journey of discipleship is replete with questions, doubts, hesitations as well as the need to seek greater understanding of what God wants. We are like the RM and the disciples who vacillate between darkness and light, bravery and fearfulness, acceptance and rejection. Many saints and spiritual masters have had this struggling experience: St. Teresa of Avila, St. Mark Ji Tianxiang,[263] Henry Nouwen[264] and Thomas Merton.[265] These holy people, to some extent, all showed their human weaknesses/ambiguity in their fears, anxieties, and in their occasional indecisiveness. Notwithstanding, they became exemplars of faith who inspire others to seek an intimate relationship with God.

The ambiguity of the RM, the disciples and the Saints as well as those spiritual masters inspires us not to despair when our lives are not perfect. It also makes us realize the meaning and power of the words attributed to Oscar Wilde — "Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future." In a sense we are destined to walk the journey of the blind man at Bethsaida progressing from no sight (8: 22) to partial sight (8:24) to full sight (8:25). Meanwhile, our ambiguous imperfection not only reveals our weaknesses, but also helps us to know God and ourselves better. As a result, we both seek God's mercy and show mercy to others.

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[263] Mark Ji Tianxiang, is a Chinese layman who was martyred in 1900, in the vicious persecution of Christians during the Boxer rebellion. He was an opium addict who was barred from receiving the sacraments for the last 30 years of his life. He prayed for deliverance from his addiction, but deliverance never came. At his trial he was given a chance to renounce his faith, but he refused, which brought death to him. He was canonized by St. John Paul II in 2000. Meg Hunter-Kilmer wrote, "He was an opium addict who couldn't receive the sacraments. But he's a martyr and a saint," last modified July 6, 2017, https://aleteia.org/2017/07/06/he-was-an-opium-addict-who-couldnt-receive-the-sacraments-but-hes-a-martyr-and-a-saint/.

[264] Nouwen accounts his personal struggle in his books: *A wounded healer, The Genesee Diary, and In the name of Jesus*. He wrote "after twenty-five years of priesthood, I found myself praying poorly, living somewhat isolated from other people, and very much preoccupied with burning issues… I woke up one day with the realization that I was living in a very dark place and the term burnout was a convenient psychological translation for a spiritual death." See James Martin, *Becoming Who You Are: Insight on the True Self from Thomas Merton and other Saints*, (Boston: Hidden Spring, 2006), 42-58.

[265] Merton addressed he was tired of the monastic life. He wrote "I have a hard time appearing cheerful and sociable… complete disgust with the stupid mentality we cultivate in our monasteries. Deliberate cult of frustration and nonsense. Professional absurdity. Isn't life absurd enough already without adding to it our own fantastic frustrations and stupidities." Martin, *Becoming Who You Are*, 42-58.

Conclusion

This literary and exegetical study of Mark 10:17-31 shows that the characterization of the RM in Mark's Gospel does not fit the traditional two readings of the RM in the scholarly literature. The presentation of the RM in Mark's Gospel is neither negative nor positive but paradoxical and ambiguous.

The RM appears as an unnamed man who takes the initiative to approach Jesus. Although the text does not tell us how he became aware of Jesus and his teaching, his body language, namely running and falling on his face before Jesus, and the significant question he asks—"Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17) reveal that he has a certain knowledge of Jesus. Whereas, the dropping of the word "good" as he replies to Jesus' counter question might imply that his knowledge of Jesus is partial.

Furthermore, his statement that he has kept all the social commandments Jesus recites makes him the first particular individual to whom Jesus expresses his love. As per the exegesis in chapter three, Jesus' love is neither pity or compassion, but is an invitation that asks for reciprocal love from the one called. However, the RM draws back in dismay and fails to heed Jesus' call. He goes away grieving.

In contrasting to reading the RM's departure as a sign of his rejection of Jesus' call, the social-historical and theological study of wealth ethics in chapter two shows that Jesus' invitation "You lack one thing. Go, sell all you have and give it to the poor…. then come and follow me" (10:21) is radical and harsh. It runs counter to the Jewish tradition and the culture in which the RM lives.

It is true that his departure is a contrast to the first disciples' unhesitating response to Jesus' call. But that does not justify interpreting the RM's action as a sign of his moral flaw or his rejection of Jesus' call. First, nothing in the text reveals the source of the RM's wealth.

It can either viewed as a divine blessing, a result of exploitation or a family legacy. Second, no text in Mark indicates that Jesus makes the similar request to his other disciples. Furthermore, hearing Jesus' radical invitation, the RM is not offended, unlike the religious authorities as they are challenged by Jesus. Mark tells us that he becomes downcast. In Greek, the word "λυπούμενος" literally means "his face fell." The study of the use of "λύπη" in Mark's Gospel indicates that the response of deep grief is triggered by a sudden realization that some difficult or unpleasant course of action must be taken. Thus, the RM's grief suggests that he might have accepted Jesus' injunction as a valid requirement for obtaining eternal life and already begun considering its cost. The details that Mark wrote into the story of the RM are significant, but his brief and vague appearance in Mark's Gospel does not allow us to determine whether he has made his final decision.

He resembles an epitome of the presentation of the disciples who cannot be categorized as the representative of belief or disbelief because they embody both positive and negative attributes. The sincerity and humility that the RM shows to Jesus echo the disciples' unhesitating answer to Jesus' call. The loving call the RM receives from Jesus mirrors the privileges the disciples have as collaborators of Jesus' ministry and recipients of Jesus' private instructions. The omission of the word "good" reflects the disciples' imperfect understanding of Jesus' identity and some of Jesus' teachings. Moreover, both the RM and the disciples reveal their indecisiveness as they encounter Jesus' radical invitation: the RM goes away grieving as Jesus invites him to sell all he has and give it to the poor; Jesus invites his disciples to deny themselves and take up the cross to follow him, but they flee as Jesus is arrested. Though their relationships with Jesus are unsatisfactory, the text engenders a certain suspense regarding their future. Like the RM who does not make his final decision for or against Jesus' invitation at the end of the story, the disciples' fate is not yet certain. Their fleeing has fulfilled the first part of Jesus's prophecy (14:27-28). Then, the second part of the

Jesus prophecy is restated to the women by the mysterious messenger of the resurrection who asks them to bear witness and tell the disciples "He (Jesus) is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him as he told you" (16:7; cf. 14:28). This message gives hope for the restoration of the disciples' faith, but the answer is open-ended. The text says, "They (the women) went out and fled from the tomb…. They said nothing because they were afraid" (16:8). It is like a painting lacking the finishing stroke that demands a response from the characters within in the narrative.

The ambiguous presentations of the RM, the disciples and other characters in Mark's Gospel not only encourage the reader not do flatten the complexity of the characters, but it also reflects its crucial function for Mark's community, a community that was undergoing persecution. On one hand, it serves as a warning to Mark's community not to falter in their faith; on the other hand, it brings solace to those who perhaps already faltered. They might, like the RM and the disciples, have a partial understanding of Jesus, they still can find hope and have the chance to reorient their minds and again follow Jesus.

More importantly, the ambiguity of the RM contains reveals the reality of the faith journey of many people. No one becomes a saint overnight. Many saints and spiritual masters also have shown their human fragility in their fears, anxieties and indecisiveness. Our faith journey is not a straight line. It is a lifelong process of twists and turns, gains and losses that builds us to be who we were meant to be. Those twists and turns help us to come to a deeper knowledge of God and ourselves and empower us to seek God's mercy while being compassionate with others' weaknesses as well.

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