

Eyes to See and Ears to Hear: Discipleship and the Senses in Mark's Gospel

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Abstract: *Mark uses many narrative techniques and word pictures to illuminate the meaning of true discipleship. The senses of seeing, hearing, and touch are particularly striking elements of Mark's story throughout the narrative as people see and hear Jesus with varying responses. Indeed, Mark's characterizations often hinge on how people see and hear. This essay will argue that a central piece of discipleship in Mark is listening to and obeying the words of Jesus with the effect that the senses, especially the aural and the visual, produce embodied portraits of discipleship. Accordingly, Mark uses the tangible reality of the senses to capture the imagination of readers and invite them on the journey with Jesus.*

Key Words: discipleship, faith, hearing, senses, sight, touch, wonder

“Do you have eyes and not see; do you have ears and not hear?” Drawing on Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Jesus asks these penetrating questions to his disciples when they failed to understand his words.¹ Clearly, Jesus is not referring to the functionality of the disciples' eyes and ears; rather, Jesus moves metaphorically from the physical act of sensation (seeing and hearing) to the spiritual act of understanding. Mark uses many narrative techniques and word pictures to illuminate the meaning of true discipleship.² The senses of seeing, hearing, and touch are particularly striking elements of Mark's story throughout the narrative as people see and hear Jesus with varying responses. Indeed, Mark's characterizations often hinge on how people see and hear. The two major teaching discourses are marked by calls to “listen” (Mark 4) and “watch” (Mark 13).³ This essay will argue

that a central piece of discipleship in Mark is listening to and obeying the words of Jesus with the effect that the senses, especially the aural and the visual, produce embodied portraits of discipleship. Accordingly, Mark uses the tangible reality of the senses to capture the imagination of readers and invite them on the journey with Jesus.

Recent studies have shown that the senses are important teaching tools within biblical narratives.⁴ While the human senses are common to life, and therefore, common to narrative in general, this essay will argue that they play a particular role in Mark's story. The importance of the senses for understanding Mark's theology of discipleship is evident in the exegesis that follows as healing stories of the blind and deaf are presented as pictures of discipleship.⁵ Conversely, the failure to rightly see and hear Jesus demarcates those standing in opposition to him.

This essay will move exegetically through Mark, focusing on his use of the senses in relation to discipleship. The study will begin with the prologue, followed by a close analysis of the rest of Mark under three headings: the senses and responding to Jesus, the senses and rejection of Jesus, and the senses restored by Jesus. Based on the exegetical analysis, the essay will conclude with some final observations on the role of the senses in Mark's theology of discipleship.

⁴ See, e.g., Dorothy Lee, “The Gospel of John and the Five Senses,” *JBL* 129.1 (2010): 115–27; Yael Avrahami, *The Senses in Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (London: T&T Clark, 2012); Louise J. Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels: Depictions of Sensory-Disabled Characters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Dorothea Erbele-Küster, “Senses Lost in Paradise? On the Interrelatedness of Sensory and Ethical Perceptions in Genesis 2–3 and Beyond,” in *Sounding Sensory Profiles in Ancient Near East*, ed. Annette Schellenberg and Thomas Krüger (Atlanta: SBL, 2019).

⁵ It is beyond the scope of this essay to compare Mark's use of the senses to the other Gospel writers. This essay does not argue that the senses are more prominent in Mark than the other Gospels. Rather, the aim of the essay is to understand the narrative importance of the senses for Mark. Nevertheless, if the senses are indeed significant for Mark, one would expect similar prominence in Matthew and Luke, assuming Markan priority. Louise Lawrence has shown that the senses were used prominently both in Mark's Gospel and other writings in the first century (“Exploring the Sense-Scape of the Gospel of Mark,” *JSNT* 33.4 [June 2011]: 387–97). Hence, it is reasonable to explore the precise use of the senses within Mark's narrative.

¹ Mark 8:18, quoting Jer 5:21 and Ezek 12:2.

² Scholars have noted, e.g., Mark's use of the “sandwich” technique in which Mark weaves together two stories as in Mark 5:21–43. For an overview of additional narrative features in Mark, see David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 47–62.

³ See the discussion below.

The Senses in the Prologue⁶

Following the incipit of 1:1, Mark employs a brief integration of citations from the OT in 1:2–3.⁷ For our purposes, this programmatic use of the OT raises two important points. First, the quotation begins with a call to “see” or “behold” (ἰδοῦ). The first words of the quotation are taken from the LXX of Exod 23:20, where Yahweh comforts his people with the promise to prepare the way ahead of them. Within Mark’s narrative, ἰδοῦ functions as a call to attention, pointing forward to the important information to follow.⁸ The quotation could serve as a subtle call to give careful attention to the story to come.

Second, the focus of the OT passages is the messenger whose “voice” is crying in the wilderness. The implication for readers is that the voice is to be heard. Of course, the narrative moves quickly to John the Baptist, who is identified as the voice. John’s voice prepares the way of the Lord through his baptism of repentance and subsequently pointing his listeners to Jesus. As Macaskill notes, the OT background “points to John’s eschatological identity as the one by whom the way of the Lord will be prepared and to the story that follows as concerning the day of the Lord’s visitation.”⁹ As such, the implicit command is to take heed of John’s prophetic voice. In short, the opening of the Gospel uses both sight and sound to prepare the way for the story of Jesus and discipleship.

Theologically, these opening verses display a key link between discipleship, Christology, and eschatology that sets the trajectory for the rest of the Gospel. The composite citation indicates that the coming of Jesus the Messiah fulfills the eschatological promises: the end of exile (Is

⁶ There is some debate about the precise divisions of Mark 1. Some commentators see Mark 1:1–15 as a unit, functioning as the prologue of the Gospel. Others see the prologue ending at verse 13. Neither approach makes much difference for my argument. See the discussion of Joel Marcus who suggests taking 1:1–15 as a unit and is followed here (*Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 27 [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008], 137–40).

⁷ On the use of the OT in Mark 1:2–3, see Rikki E. Watts, “Mark,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 113–20.

⁸ See, e.g., Mark 3:32, when someone in the crowd uses the word to call Jesus’s attention to the fact that his mother and brothers are outside. On the narrative function of ἰδοῦ, see Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), 122.

⁹ Grant Macaskill, “Apocalypse and the Gospel of Mark,” in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought*, ed. Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 56.

40:3), the purification of Israel (Mal 3:1), and the inauguration of the kingdom of God.¹⁰ The way into the kingdom is giving careful attention—listening to—the prophetic word pointing to Jesus. Listening is the beginning of the gospel and, for Mark the beginning of discipleship.

As chapter 1 continues, the aural and visual appear again in the baptism of Jesus. As he comes out of the water, Jesus sees the Spirit descending (1:10) and hears the voice of God (1:11). Jesus is identified as the Messiah via sight and sound.¹¹ Readers encounter the voice of God one other time in Mark’s Gospel: the transfiguration (9:2–13). There, Peter, James, and John *see* Jesus transfigured and *hear* the voice of God. God again announces Jesus as his Son, but adds a command: “Listen to him!” (ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ). The command echoes Deut 18:15, where Israel is commanded to listen to the promised prophet like Moses.¹² As such, the authoritative voice of God calls on people to listen to the authoritative voice of the Son of God. The last time Jesus is confessed as the Son of God is in 15:39 when the centurion, upon seeing Jesus die, proclaims, “Truly this man was the Son of God.” These three announcements of Jesus’s identity as the Son of God at the beginning, middle, and end of the story frame the Gospel’s primary message. And each directly involves the senses.

Jesus’s senses being attuned to God also provides a model for his followers. Jesus clearly sees the heavens ripped open and the Spirit descending and hears the voice of God. Ostensibly, God is well-pleased with his beloved son on the basis of his ability to rightly see and hear God. After the baptism and temptations, Jesus returns to Galilee and transitions from hearing the words of God to proclaiming the kingdom (1:14–15). Like the words of John the Baptist, but with elevated authority, these words of Jesus must be heeded if one wishes to enter the kingdom. This demand of the kingdom is illustrated in the calling of the first disciples (1:16–20) when two sets of brothers hear the call of Jesus and respond by leaving their former lives to follow him. In fact, as Best demonstrates, there is a similar pattern in the call of Levi in 2:14—Jesus sees, calls, and

¹⁰ Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 89.

¹¹ Kent Brower, “Hearing Voices: Identity and Mission in Mark,” in *Listening Again to the Text: New Testament Studies in Honor of George Lyons*, ed. Richard P. Thompson (Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2020), 31.

¹² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 355. See also the discussion in Watts, “Mark,” 185–88.

people leave their former lives to follow.¹³ Anthropologically, “for Mark, authentic human identity is found only in discipleship to Jesus.”¹⁴ And this true identity begins with hearing and responding to the voice of Jesus.

The Senses and Responding to Jesus

Touch and Responding to Jesus

Following the introductory section, the next explicit sensory interaction between people and Jesus is found in 1:41, where Jesus touches the λεπρός.¹⁵ The act of touch in this passage is significant since those coming into physical contact with people suffering from such skin diseases would themselves become ritually unclean.¹⁶ That is, for the reader familiar with the Jewish setting of the story, physical contact between the man and Jesus is risky.¹⁷ Strikingly, rather than Jesus becoming ritually impure, life passes from Jesus to the man, resulting in cleansing by the removal of the source of impurity. The act of touching the λεπρός vividly illustrates that for Mark, anyone can come near to Jesus. Accordingly, there is an implicit invitation to follow Jesus as the one who can give life. Again, the use of the senses, deeply Christological, has immediate application to discipleship.

There are other instances of touch in response to hearing about Jesus. In 3:7–12, the crowd has gathered closely around Jesus because they “heard about everything he was doing” (ἀκούοντες ὅσα ἐποίει). Mark

¹³ Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, JSNTSup 4 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1981), 166.

¹⁴ Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 185.

¹⁵ On the meaning of λεπρός, see Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels’ Portrayal of Ritual Impurity Within First-Century Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), 43–68.

¹⁶ Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 209. To be sure, Mark does not draw an explicit connection between touch and the other senses as he does with sight and hearing. Nevertheless, I argue that the sense of touch plays an important role in Mark’s narrative and the broader connection to discipleship alongside the more prominent senses (sight and hearing). See the discussion below of Mark 3:7–12.

¹⁷ Jonathan Klawans demonstrates the differences between moral impurity (resulting from sin) and ritual impurity (resulting from normal life circumstances) (“Moral and Ritual Impurity,” in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, and John Dominic Crossan [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006], 266–84). The risk was to contract ritual impurity, not sin. Moreover, contracting ritual impurity was a normal part of life in the Jewish world of the first century and only became sinful if not addressed according to the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law. Therefore, while there was the risk of becoming ritually unclean, this was not an uncommon occurrence.

identifies the purpose: “that they might touch him” (ἵνα αὐτοῦ ἅψωνται). It may be that the people believed that the power was magical, but Mark’s portrait of Jesus displays him as having “authority as Messiah and Son of God.”¹⁸ In any case, this story moves from one sense (hearing) to another (touch). Significantly, Mark mentions the origins of those coming to Jesus, which is unique among the summaries of Jesus’s ministry in the Gospel.¹⁹ The precise ethnicity of this crowd is inconclusive, but the varied locations at least indicate the wide dissemination of news about Jesus. For our purposes, we need only note that people from many locations were “hearing” about Jesus and coming to him.

Contextually, this passage follows directly after the plot of the Pharisees and Herodians to kill Jesus. Later in the Gospel, Jesus predicts that the Son of Man “will be handed over into the hands of men” (9:31)²⁰ and repeats the same phrase when he is betrayed in Gethsemane (14:41). For Mark, there is a sharp contrast between those who want to lay hands on Jesus to destroy him and those coming to Jesus to touch him for healing.

In other healing stories, people come to Jesus seeking touch from him. In the intercalation of Jairus’s daughter and the woman with the blood issue in Mark 5:21–43, both problems are resolved by touch. Jairus begs Jesus to come lay hands on his daughter “so that she might be saved” (ἵνα σωθῇ). The woman with the blood issue decided to fight through the crowd because she believed “If I touch even his clothes, I will be saved” (ἐὰν ἅψωμαι καὶ τῶν ἱματίων αὐτοῦ σωθήσομαι). Like the story of the λεπρός in Mark 1, there are ritual purity themes at work in this story.²¹ Mark is intent to display Jesus as the one who removes the causes of ritual impurity and does so through touch.

The other instances of healing through touch (7:31–37; 8:22–26) will be examined below. For now, we only note that blessing comes to those who respond to Jesus and seek his touch. In addition to the purity themes, Mark’s use of touch in these narratives makes discipleship concrete—tangible—for the reader. The sense of touch implies intimacy as touch “cannot be experienced from a distance.”²² As such, discipleship demands the closest of relationships to Jesus and the community of faith. The apostles were appointed “to be with Jesus” (3:14), implying continued

¹⁸ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 155.

¹⁹ Peter Dschulnigg, *Das Markusevangelium*, TKNT (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 2007), 112.

²⁰ Author’s translation here and elsewhere, unless noted otherwise.

²¹ See Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 69–122.

²² Dorothy Lee, “The Gospel of John and the Five Senses,” *JBL* 129.1 (2010): 123.

nearness. This feature, combined with Mark's use of the sense of touch, is essential for Mark's theology of discipleship as relational closeness to Jesus.

Hearing and Responding to Jesus

In Mark 2:1, we find the first occurrence of ἀκούω in the Gospel. With this first use, a pattern emerges in which ἀκούω is followed by the gathering of a crowd. Of course, Mark reports crowds gathering around Jesus after the healing of the λεπρός in 1:45. Yet, the introduction of ἀκούω here elicits further attention since Mark will use the same verb with the same result several more times in the Gospel (as seen below). In 2:1–2, ἀκούω is used in verse 1 with the sense of “it became known” (ἠκούσθη) and is followed by the gathering of many in verse 2 (συνήχθησαν πολλοί). The pericope focuses on the paralytic carried to Jesus, presumably because they had also heard about Jesus. Upon “seeing their faith” Jesus proceeds to forgive the paralytic's sins, resulting in controversy with the Jewish leaders (2:5–11). Nevertheless, the entire scene begins with people hearing about Jesus and responding.

The pattern of hearing and coming to Jesus repeats in 3:8 and 6:55. In both verses, people hear (ἀκούω) about Jesus and immediately gather. In 7:25, the Syrophoenician woman comes to Jesus because she heard (ἀκούσασα) about him. Bartimaeus called out for mercy “when he heard (ἀκούσας) that it was Jesus of Nazareth” (10:47). As Jesus debates with the Sadducees in the temple, a scribe “heard” them (ἀκούσας) and “saw (ἰδών) that he answered them well” (12:28). Having heard Jesus's words, the scribe approached Jesus to ask a further question. In distinction to the questions of other Jewish leaders, Jesus affirms him as being “not far from the kingdom” (12:34). The crowds and the minor characters in these passages are pictures of discipleship as they hear and respond to Jesus. Mark uses the sense of hearing symbolically as the inauguration of discipleship: listening to the voice of Jesus and coming to him.

At other times, Jesus takes the initiative in calling people to listen. I have already noted the call of the first disciples (1:16–20) and the call of Levi (2:13–17) above. In the summary of Jesus appointing the apostles, Mark records that Jesus “went up the mountain and summoned (προσκαλεῖται) those he wanted” (3:13). Mark will use προσκαλέω seven more times with Jesus as the subject, each time followed by important teaching to the disciples or the crowd (3:23; 6:7; 7:14; 8:1; 8:34; 10:42; 12:43). Again, people hear the voice of Jesus calling and respond.

The act of hearing is central to the Parable of the Sower (4:1–20). Forms of ἀκούω are found thirteen times in Mark 4, nine in the telling and explanation of the parable. As France has shown, Mark 4 is one of

two “explanatory discourses” in the Gospel (the other is Mark 13). These two blocks of teaching are placed at the midpoints of the two halves of the Gospel (1–8 and 9–16) and provide the “theological framework” for interpreting the surrounding narrative.²³ For the purposes of this essay, it is important to note the concentration of ἀκούω in this programmatic chapter.

Jesus opens the parable with the command “Listen!” (4:3) and closes with “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear” (4:9). The opening “Listen!” (ἀκούετε) serves as a “wake-up call,” grabbing the attention of the reader and alerting to the importance of the teaching to come.²⁴ Those with intertextual ears probably hear the echo of the Shema. As such, the command is not simply to hear the words spoken by Jesus, but to obey them.²⁵ Placed at the beginning of the parable, which is the central block of teaching in this “theological framework” chapter, this use of ἀκούετε bears interpretive weight for Mark's other uses of ἀκούω in the narrative. Indeed, Jesus interprets the various results of sowing on different types of ground as varied responses to hearing the word (4:13–20). This observation suggests that for Mark, discipleship begins not simply by the physical act of hearing but hearing that produces obedience.

Interestingly, the other major teaching block—Mark 13—repeats the call to “watch out!” (βλέπετε) five times. This chapter is eschatological in nature with a focus on the coming Son of Man, the fate of the temple, and future suffering of Jesus's followers.²⁶ The important point is that within the narrative, another sensory verb—to see—symbolizes a key aspect of discipleship. In this case, rightly “seeing” means heeding the words of Jesus in preparation for future events. That is, followers of Jesus are to practice discernment so that no one deceives them (13:5, 23), that they be ready for persecution (13:9), and be prepared for the unknown hour (13:33). Within the flow of the narrative, the warning serves to call followers of Jesus to rightly understand the identity of their master and thereby be prepared for the future.²⁷

²³ France, *Mark*, 14–15.

²⁴ Eduard Schweizer, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 45.

²⁵ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 1991), 122.

²⁶ The details of the chapter cannot be explored here. See Robert H. Stein, *Jesus, the Temple and the Coming Son of Man: A Commentary on Mark 13* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014) and the relevant sections in the major commentaries.

²⁷ Macaskill, “Apocalypse and the Gospel of Mark,” 72–73.

Amazement and Responding to Jesus

Returning to the pericope of the healing of the paralytic (2:1–12), Mark introduces us to another pattern of reaction to seeing or hearing Jesus: amazement.²⁸ Upon seeing the paralytic healed, “they were all astounded and glorified God, saying ‘We have never seen anything like this!’” (ἐξίστασθαι πάντας καὶ δοξάζειν τὸν θεὸν λέγοντας ὅτι Οὕτως οὐδέποτε εἶδομεν). Note the use of the verb of sight (εἶδον). The verb “astounded” (ἐξίστημι) is used two other times in Mark to describe the reaction of people seeing the mighty works of Jesus (5:42; 6:51). The parents of the girl raised from the dead and the disciples both respond to Jesus in utter amazement.

In addition to ἐξίστημι, other verbs—ἐκπλήσσω, θαμβέω, φοβέω, θαυμάζω, ἀπορέω, παράσσω, ἐκθαμβέω—are used to express wonder at the works of Jesus. Sometimes, people are astonished by Jesus’s teaching or the things they hear about Jesus (1:22; 6:2, 20; 10:24, 26; 12:17; 14:5). More often, however, Mark uses the verbs of amazement to describe the reaction of people to Jesus’s miracles (1:27; 2:12; 4:41; 5:15, 20, 33, 42; 7:37; 9:6, 15; 10:32). For example, Mark reports in 1:27 that, after seeing Jesus cast out a demon in the synagogue, “they were all astounded” (ἐθαμβήθησαν ἅπαντες). The amazement of the crowd leads to the first of what Bauckham calls “Mark’s leading questions.”²⁹ In short, Mark uses these questions within the narrative to press the issue of Jesus’s identity and “expected his readers to answer for themselves by inferring Jesus’s divine identity.”³⁰ The next “leading question” (4:41) follows the same pattern: the disciples are “terrified” (ἐφοβήθησαν) after seeing the wind and waves obey Jesus and ask, “Who then is this?”

At the end of the Gospel, Mark curiously gives the names of a group of women three times (15:40, 47; 16:1). As Bauckham notes, the repeated naming of the women most likely points to them as Mark’s eyewitness sources.³¹ For the present discussion, two points are notable. First, each time the women are named, they are explicitly said to “see” something. In 15:40, they are “watching” (θεωρέω) the crucifixion from a distance. In

²⁸ Timothy Dwyer counts 32 references to wonder/amazement in Mark (*The Motif of Wonder in the Gospel of Mark*, JSNTSup 128 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], 12). This is not the first time in Mark that people are amazed at Jesus, but this is the first time the amazement is explicitly linked with a sensory verb.

²⁹ Richard Bauckham, “Markan Christology According to Richard Hays: Some Addenda,” *JTI* 11.1 (2017): 26–28.

³⁰ Bauckham, “Markan Christology According to Richard Hays,” 27.

³¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 48–51.

15:47, they “watch” (θεωρέω) where the body of Jesus is laid. Finally, 16:1–8 includes several verbs of sight: the women “look up” (ἀναβλέπω) to see the stone rolled away (16:4); they entered the tomb and “saw” (εἶδον) a young man (16:5); the young man commands them to “see” (ἴδε) the empty tomb (16:6); and the young man sends the women to tell the Twelve that they will “see” (ὀράω) Jesus in Galilee (16:7). Of course, the emphasis on what the women saw points to their role as eyewitnesses. Nevertheless, within the broader narrative, they are a picture of discipleship: those who rightly “see” Jesus.

Second, the resurrection narrative also emphasizes the reaction of the women. They were “alarmed” (ἐκθαμβέω) when they saw the young man and the empty tomb (16:5). Moreover, as they leave the tomb to go to the Twelve, “trembling and astonishment” (τρόμος καὶ ἔκστασις) gripped them (16:8). As argued above, these are probably not intended to reflect a negative judgment on the women. Rather, they were filled with awe and wonder at the empty tomb, an attitude commendable for followers of Jesus.³²

Space does not allow detailed analysis of the other instances of astonishment upon seeing the miracles of Jesus. What is important for our purposes is to note the connection between (1) seeing Jesus perform a miracle, (2) astonishment, and (3) the issue of Jesus’s identity. This observation points to the intimate relationship between Christology and discipleship in Mark. The use of the senses with such vivid descriptions of the reactions invites the reader into the story. Mark intends to incite similar feelings of wonder at the story of Jesus, leading readers to the path of discipleship.

The Senses and Rejecting Jesus

Though we have seen many instances of the senses indicating favorable responses to Jesus, seeing is not always believing in Mark. In fact, Mark’s narrative includes numerous occasions in which people, particularly the Jewish leadership, hear Jesus teach or see Jesus’s miracles and reject his message. While Jesus only predicts his suffering after Peter’s confession at the turning point of the Gospel (8:29), opposition to Jesus begins early in the story. Here we focus on human rejection of Jesus upon

³² An analysis of the resurrection narrative is beyond the scope of this essay. I agree with Hurtado’s positive assessment of the women. See Larry W. Hurtado, “The Women, the Tomb, and the Climax of Mark,” in *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Seán Freyne*, ed. Zuleika Rodgers, Margaret Daly-Denton, and Anne Fitzpatrick McKinley (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 427–50.

hearing his teaching and seeing his power.³³

When Jesus healed the paralytic after forgiving his sins, the crowd was amazed (2:1–12). Yet not all those watching were impressed: the scribes thought he was blaspheming. In 3:1–6, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Seeing this, the Pharisees joined forces with the Herodians to see “how they might destroy him” (3:6).³⁴ In both instances, Jewish leaders hear the teaching of Jesus and see his mighty works but reject him. This theme of rejection by the Jewish elite continues through the Gospel and eventually climaxes with Jesus’s crucifixion.

The intercalation of 3:20–35 escalates the theme of rejection. In this section, Mark weaves together the story of Jesus’s family coming to take him away with Jesus’s interaction with the scribes from Jerusalem. In both cases, Jesus receives accusations: his family thinks he is insane (3:21) and the scribes think he is possessed (3:22). Interestingly, Mark informs the reader that his family came when they “heard” (ἀκούσαντες) about the things he was doing. Presumably, the scribes made their assessment on similar grounds. The pericope ends with Jesus redefining the family of God as those sitting around him listening to him teach (3:35). Consequently, there are different kinds of hearing.

It is no coincidence that the parable of the sower follows immediately in chapter 4. As noted above, ἀκούω features prominently throughout the parable and its explanation. Here I make two additional points. First, of the four types of soil, only one truly “hears” and produces fruit. That is, the first three, while hearing, do not truly hear. Only the seed that falls on the good soil are those who “receive it” and produce fruit. Hence, discipleship moves from hearing and receiving to producing fruit. Second, Jesus explains this further by his use of Isa 6:9–10. There are many interpretive issues in Mark 4:10–12 which I cannot address here.³⁵ Tan rightly identifies the primary aim: to separate the insiders from the outsiders.³⁶ This separation is based on rightly hearing the words of Jesus. Those who have “ears to hear” are insiders and receive the mystery of the

³³ I leave aside the opposition to Jesus from the spiritual realm.

³⁴ On the partnership between the Herodians and Pharisees, see N. H. Taylor, “Herodians and Pharisees: The Historical and Political Context of Mark 3:6; 8:15; 12:13–17,” *Neotestamentica* 34.2 (2000): 299–310.

³⁵ See the discussion in France, *Mark*, 193–201. See also Joachim Gnilka, *Die Verstockung Israels. Isaías 6:9–10 in der Theologie der Synoptiker* (Munich: Kösel, 1961) and Craig A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6:9–10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation*, JSOTSup 64 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

³⁶ Kim Huat Tan, *Mark: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 59.

kingdom. Those without such ears only hear parables. Of course, interpreters must maintain a balance between divine and human responsibility.³⁷ Nevertheless, it remains that the proper hearing of Jesus is the beginning of discipleship.

The explanation on the use of parables in 4:10–12 provides the hermeneutical key for evaluating the various responses to Jesus’s words and works. In the chapters following the explanation, Jesus continues to teach and to perform miracles, but many reject him. While often focused on the Jewish leadership, rejection of Jesus is not limited to this group. In the explanation of the parable of the sower, it is clear that the Twelve, while insiders, lack understanding and seem to toe the line between insiders and outsiders. Indeed, they will struggle to understand and sometimes even stand in opposition to Jesus.

Mark’s portrait of the Twelve includes many episodes of failure and misunderstanding. The sequence of stories in Mark 6 illustrates the point. In 6:7–8, Jesus sends the Twelve out to carry forward his ministry in new areas. He instructs them to take nothing but gives them “authority over unclean spirits.” Further, Jesus instructs them to leave any place that does not listen (ἀκούσωσιν) to them. After the flashback to the beheading of John (6:14–29), the Twelve return and report to Jesus. This leads directly into the feeding of the five thousand. Presumably, Mark wants readers to understand that Jesus provided for the needs of the Twelve while they were traveling. Nevertheless, they suggest that Jesus should dismiss the crowd so that they can find food. As Marcus notes, this “reflects the Twelve’s ignorance of Jesus’ power, as if they believed on the one hand that it was fine for him to be concerned about the edification of the masses but on the other hand that there was no alternative to letting the people fend for themselves when it came to important practical matters such as food.”³⁸ Having seen Jesus provide for them on their mission, they respond in disbelief to Jesus’s command to feed the crowd.

Following the Twelve’s failure to recognize Jesus’s power to feed the crowd, Jesus sends them across the sea, later joining them by walking on water (6:45–52). As Jesus approaches the boat, the Twelve are terrified and do not recognize him. However, rather than leaving them in their blundering, Jesus enters the boat and gives them another display of his power: the wind ceased. After Jesus enters the boat, Mark explains that the Twelve were “astounded (ἐξίσταντο), for they did not understand

³⁷ Benoit H. M. G. M. Standaert, *L’Evangile selon Marc: Composition et genre littéraire* (Nijmegen: Stichting Studentenpers, 1978), 213–18.

³⁸ Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 418.

about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (6:51–52).³⁹ Throughout Mark 6, the Twelve have seen the power of Jesus in providing for them, multiplying food to feed the crowd, and walking on water. In all three situations, they were invited to participate in Jesus’s mission. But, they fail to understand. Strikingly, Mark 7 immediately follows with a story of controversy with the Pharisees, which leaves the reader to wonder about the Twelve: are they insiders or outsiders? Are they with Jesus or a part of the resistance to him?

Perhaps the best-known instance of opposition from the Twelve is Peter’s rebuke of Jesus after hearing Jesus predict his suffering (8:32–33). Contextually, the story of Peter’s confession, his rebuke of Jesus, and his rebuke by Jesus follows the two-stage healing of a blind man (8:22–26), which I will discuss below. For now, it is important to note that Peter, most likely representing the Twelve, sees, but does not see clearly. The misunderstanding/disbelief of the Twelve continues as a motif throughout the second half of Mark. They fail to cast out a demon (9:18), argue about which of them is the greatest (9:33–37), reject others seeking to minister in Jesus’s name (9:38), send away children (10:13), ask for glory (10:37), and abandon Jesus (14:50); Judas betrays Jesus (14:43–46) and Peter denies him (14:66–72). Having walked with Jesus, heard his teaching, and witnessed his power, they continue as “blind witnesses.”⁴⁰

What role do the senses play in the disciples’ journey, and how does this feature illuminate Mark’s theology of discipleship? Throughout Mark, the Twelve see and hear everything Jesus does and says. Though not explicit in the narrative, it is reasonable to assume that they had touched and been touched by Jesus. These are his closest followers from beginning to end. Several points should be made in response to the question of the disciple’s failure. First, the portrait of the disciples is not altogether bleak. Upon initially hearing the call of Jesus, they left their possessions, vocations, and families to follow him (1:16–20; 3:13–17). They also obeyed when he sent them out with successful results (6:12–13).

Second, the failures of the Twelve, especially regarding the senses, is a picture of the process of discipleship. The story of the disciples cannot be reduced to mere negative foil against which to understand Jesus. Rather, the characterization of the Twelve as unable to rightly see and rightly hear Jesus functions “as a mirror in which the audience can view their own

³⁹ The precise nature of the misunderstanding is debated. See the discussion in Suzanne Watts Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 204–37.

⁴⁰ Josef Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (Regensburg: Prestet, 1981), 197.

foibles and failures as followers of Jesus.”⁴¹ Moreover, the failures of the disciples consistently point back to Jesus: he provides the bread for the crowds, he calms the storm, and he reminds Peter to follow behind him. He promised that he would rise from the dead and “go ahead of you” (14:28). Hurtado aptly summarizes the point: “Jesus’s promise of the restoration of the Twelve—even after their desertion and denial—is the message that Mark holds out to readers who, like Peter, may have failed under threats but may still experience forgiveness and restoration.”⁴²

Third, the failures function as a narrative warning to readers: the physical act of hearing the words of the Gospel is not sufficient. One must respond to become a disciple. Even Jesus’s closest associates sometimes see without perceiving and hear without understanding (4:12). Consequently, another narrative function of the Twelve is to provide an enacted warning that readers should take heed to Jesus’s repeated calls to “listen” and “watch.” Like the disciples, readers must consider their hearts and the type of “soil” therein. Following Jesus requires active, responsive listening to his words.

The Senses Restored by Jesus

Mark’s narrative often summarizes the miraculous healings of Jesus, simply noting that Jesus healed people of diseases and cast out demons (1:32–34; 3:10–11; 6:53–56). At other points in the story, Mark details the healings and exorcisms. Interestingly, healings of sight and hearing do not appear in the narrative until chapter 7. However, there are three prominent healings of the senses in chapters 7–10: the healing of the deaf man (7:31–37), the two-stage healing of a blind man (8:22–26), and the healing of Bartimaeus (10:46–52).

The healing of the deaf man in Mark 7:31–37 follows Jesus’s encounter with the Syrophenician woman. The pericope opens with a brief report on Jesus’s travels, indicating that he remains in largely Gentile territory.⁴³ In the story, Jesus opens the ears of a Gentile man so that he can hear clearly and therefore speak of the things he hears (7:35–36). The unique features within the narrative also draw special attention to the

⁴¹ David E. Garland, *A Theology of Mark’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 406.

⁴² 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: Eerdmans, 1996), 24–25.

⁴³ The route of travels is debated. See the discussion in Kelly Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark: “Even the Dogs Under the Table Eat the Children’s Crumbs”* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 57–59.

pericope. The method of healing is curious: Jesus puts his fingers in the man's ears and puts his own saliva on the man's tongue.⁴⁴ Mark also records the Aramaic word used by Jesus along with a translation.⁴⁵ Whatever the precise reasons for these peculiar elements, they certainly draw the reader's attention to the story.

Most interpreters recognize that the story follows a parallel narrative pattern to the healing of the blind man in 8:22–26.⁴⁶ In both stories, people bring a man with an infirmity to Jesus and beg him to touch the man (7:32; 8:22); Jesus leads the man away from the crowd (7:33; 8:23); Jesus performs the healing by unique means (7:33–34; 8:23–25); and both men are commanded not to speak about the healing (7:36; 8:26). Between these two healings, Mark places Jesus's rebuke of the disciples in 8:17–21, centered on the charge "Do you have eyes and not see; do you have ears and not hear?" The two healing stories are closely connected and frame important teaching on discipleship.

The connection between the two stories is further strengthened by an allusion to Isa 35:5–6. The LXX reads,

τότε ἀνοιχθήσονται ὀφθαλμοὶ τυφλῶν, καὶ ὅσα κωφῶν ἀκούσονται. τότε ἀλεῖται ὡς ἔλαφος ὁ χυλός, καὶ τρανὴ ἔσται γλῶσσα μογιάλων, ὅτι ἐρράγη ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ὕδωρ καὶ φάραγξ ἐν γῇ διψώσῃ.

In the OT context, Yahweh promises return from exile with all the blessings of restoration included. The allusion in Mark is confirmed in at least two ways. First, Mark describes the deaf man's condition in 7:32 as κωφὸν καὶ μογιάλον ("deaf and unable to speak"), a unique combination in the NT. In fact, μογιάλος is found only here in the NT and only in Isa 35:6 in the LXX. Significantly, both terms are used in the LXX of Isa 35:5–6, making the allusion probable. Second, Mark 7:37 records the reaction of the crowd upon seeing the deaf man healed: "he makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." Again, these words closely resemble the text of Isa 35:5–6.

The import of this for discipleship lies in the affirmation that Yahweh is keeping his promises to restore his people in the life and ministry of

⁴⁴ For discussion of possible historical backgrounds, see Collins, *Mark*, 370–71.

⁴⁵ Similarly, Mark includes Aramaic with translation in the story of the raising of Jairus's daughter (5:41).

⁴⁶ See Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 476. In fact, some scholars believe the two stories were originally a single story, separated by Mark for his narrative/theological purposes. See Jean-François Baudoz, "Mc 7, 31–37 et Mc 8, 22–26 Géographie et Théologie," *Revue Biblique* 102.4 (1995): 560–69.

Jesus. In fact, as Hays notes, the Christological implication is that God himself is fulfilling the promise in the person and work of Jesus.⁴⁷ Further, the promise in Isaiah was the restoration of Israel, but this miracle and response takes place in Gentile lands. The Gentiles are included in Yahweh's promised restoration. Finally, the excited response comes not only from the healed man, but from the (Gentile) crowd. Iverson explains, "It is a corporate pronouncement articulated by the people from the region of Decapolis. The collective response is an indication that the Gentiles do have ears to hear."⁴⁸ The promised restoration has come, but only those who "hear" Jesus can participate in it.

The healing of the blind man in 8:22–26 continues the theme of sense restoration as symbolic of return from exile, again echoing Isa 35. Strangely, the healing takes place in two stages, which most interpreters understand as pointing to the disciples' inability to see clearly.⁴⁹ In the first stage, Jesus spits on the man's eyes and touches him with the result that the man can "see people, like trees walking" (8:24). Only after the second stage could he see "everything clearly" (8:25). Symbolically, the process of healing mirrors the process of discipleship for the Twelve. They see Jesus, but not clearly. As the narrative moves forward, the two-stage healing is followed immediately by Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah (8:29). When Jesus links the confession to his coming suffering, Peter rebukes him, indicating that he does not fully comprehend his own confession: he sees, but not clearly. Hooker summarizes:

This miracle and the parallel story of the blind man in 8:22–6 are apparently both understood symbolically by Mark: the physical restoration of the two men represents the ability to hear and see spiritually which is given to those who believe in Jesus. Jesus has taught the crowds many things (6:34), and urged the people to listen to his teaching (7:14–16); but even the disciples have failed to understand what they have heard (7:17f., cf. 6:52). Now a man without hearing is enabled to hear—and so to speak of what he has heard.⁵⁰

In these two accounts, the senses play an important role in Mark's theology of discipleship: those who would be Jesus's disciples must hear and see him clearly. Significantly, within Mark's story, only Jesus can grant such visual and aural astuteness.

⁴⁷ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco: Baylor, 2016), 74.

⁴⁸ Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark*, 67.

⁴⁹ France, *Mark*, 322–23.

⁵⁰ Hooker, *Mark*, 184.

Along with the two-stage healing of the blind man in 8:22–26, the healing of Bartimaeus in 10:46–52 frames the journey to Jerusalem. As such, the story of Bartimaeus is narratively connected to the two stories analyzed above. It is important to note that between the two healings of blind men, the narrative includes Jesus's three passion predictions. The movement to Jerusalem is swift in the Bartimaeus narrative as 10:46 reports both arrival to and departure from Jericho. The pericope adds a few important points to our discussion of the senses and discipleship. First, as Bauckham notes, the story is told from Bartimaeus's point of view: "vocally, not visually, as it would do for a blind man."⁵¹ Mark 10:47 emphasizes that Bartimaeus began to call out "when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth" (ἀκούσας ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζαρηνός ἐστίν). When he cries, the crowd attempts to quiet him, but he cries all the more. Hearing that Jesus has called him, he jumps up and sprints to him.

Second, Bartimaeus's confession of Jesus as Son of David, repeated in verses 47 and 48 draws special interest from the attentive reader. In Mark's narrative to this point, Jesus is called the Son of God (1:1, 11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7), Son of Man (2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45), Messiah (1:1; 8:29), teacher (4:38; 5:35; 9:17, 38; 10:17, 20, 35), and Lord (5:19; 7:28). However, this is the first time in Mark that a character has explicitly called Jesus "Son of David."⁵² Son of David is a messianic title, indicating Bartimaeus's faith in Jesus as the Messiah who is able to heal him.⁵³ Of course, faith played a role in the other healings as those who brought the deaf man and the blind man to Jesus believed he could heal them. Nevertheless, the confession in 10:47–48 comes directly from the lips of Bartimaeus.

Finally, and crucially for Mark's theology of discipleship, once healed, Bartimaeus follows Jesus "on the way" (ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ). "The way" is an important motif in Mark's story, linking together several important developments in the plot.⁵⁴ Within the larger narrative, Bartimaeus is similar to Peter as they are the only two characters to explicitly confess Jesus

as the Messiah. However, "In contrast to Peter, who had confessed Jesus as the Messiah, but had refused the cross, Bartimaeus joins a messianic confession (Son of David) with the acceptance of his master's way."⁵⁵ As such, Bartimaeus becomes a model of discipleship: hearing that Jesus is coming, he confesses him to be the Messiah, comes to him for healing, receives his sight, and follows Jesus. Fritzen nicely summarizes the significance for discipleship:

The story of Bartimaeus illuminates Mark's teaching on discipleship by use of the sense of sight. Jesus restored Bartimaeus's eyes so that he could see. Symbolically, his eyes were fully opened to recognize the true identity of Jesus. Like Bartimaeus, readers of Mark's Gospel can see Jesus clearly through the narrative and should follow Jesus on the way.⁵⁶

As noted above, it is no coincidence that the second major teaching discourse in the Gospel (Mark 13) repeats the command to "watch out." This observation further supports the symbolic nature of the healings. As Bartimaeus received his sight and followed Jesus, so all disciples are to see Jesus clearly, heed his words, and so live faithfully.

Conclusion: The Senses and Discipleship

The analysis above of Mark's use of the senses in his teaching on discipleship illuminates four theological threads. First, discipleship begins with hearing and responding to the words of Jesus. Close reading of Mark's narrative reveals a pattern for discipleship: all who come to Jesus do so in response to either hearing about Jesus or hearing his words. The Twelve follow Jesus because they heard his call. People bring the sick, lame, demon-possessed, and disabled to Jesus because they have heard of his mighty works. Moreover, Mark includes a repeated call from Jesus for people to "listen," particularly in the first major teaching section in Mark 4. Indeed, each of the four types of soil are evaluated on the way they "hear" the word. For Mark's purposes, the point is clear: "Jesus's original challenge to his disciples becomes, in Mark's narrative, a resounding challenge to Mark's much-later audiences: Listen to the word of God's

⁵¹ Richard Bauckham, "Eyewitnesses and Healing Miracles in the Gospel of Mark," *The Biblical Annals* 10.3 (2020): 351.

⁵² However, see Max Botner, *Jesus Christ and the Son of David in the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁵³ See Eduard Lohse, "υἱὸς Δαυίδ," in *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 8:478–88.

⁵⁴ For example, in 1:2–3, the voice in the wilderness prepares "the way" (τὴν ὁδόν); in 8:27, Peter's confession takes place "on the way" (ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ); and in 10:52, Bartimaeus joins Jesus "on the way" (ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ). The way, of course, is the way to Jerusalem and to the cross.

⁵⁵ Juan Carlos Ossandón, "Bartimaeus' Faith: Plot and Point of View in Mark 10:46–52," *Biblica* 93.3 (2012): 384.

⁵⁶ Wolfgang Fritzen, "Die bedrängten Christen und ihr verborgener Gott: Ein neuer Blick auf die theologische Erzählkommunikation des Markus-evangeliums," *Theologie und Philosophie* 83.2 (2008): 176.

good news ‘sown’ by Jesus and respond appropriately: repent and obey.”⁵⁷

Second, the physical touch of Jesus in the healing miracles vividly illuminates the intimacy of disciples with their master. Though such physical touch is not possible for readers of Mark, there is a corresponding relational intimacy available to followers of Jesus. As Jesus drew near to touch those he healed, so he promised to be with his followers by the Holy Spirit (13:11). The sense of touch in the healing miracles heightens the reality of relational intimacy, both with Jesus and with the community of faith. Such an understanding fits with Jesus’s use of familial language to describe his group of followers (3:33–35).

Third, Mark consistently reports that seeing the mighty works of Jesus elicits awe and wonder in those watching. As noted above, the narrative is saturated with descriptors of amazement. While sometimes the feeling of astonishment or fear reflects a lack of understanding (6:51–52), such a response is often a natural first step in following Jesus. As Dwyer puts it, “wonder in Mark is a response to the divine intervention of the breaking-in of the kingdom or rule of God in power to save and restore the creation.”⁵⁸ As such, amazement is altogether appropriate for the characters in the story. For readers or hearers of Mark’s Gospel, the same is true: the story of Jesus evokes awe in those with eyes to see.

Finally, the stories of Jesus restoring the sight and hearing emphasize the role of faith in Mark’s theology of discipleship. Indeed, it could be said that true sight and true hearing are on the basis of faith. In Mark’s theology of discipleship, faith-empowered senses are always focused on the same object: Jesus, the Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, Messiah. Fundamentally, the senses relate not only to Mark’s theology of discipleship, but also to Mark’s central theological theme: the identity of Jesus. Those who come to see his identity as Messiah follow him in faith. Like Bartimaeus, readers are called to join Jesus on the way and carry on his mission. So, “for Mark, to ‘understand’ Jesus entails more than acknowledging Jesus’ status as God’s suffering messiah; it is to be caught up in his apocalyptic gospel mission, to be enlisted in his vivid demonstration of God’s rule, which is encroaching on the world.”⁵⁹

Mark’s brilliant narrative utilizes a variety of literary tools and motifs to proclaim Jesus as the promised Messiah-King and to call on readers to follow him in faith. The senses play a strategic role in Mark’s theology of discipleship: following Jesus is embodied as readers rightly hear and respond, see in wonder, draw near in faith, and join Jesus on the way.

⁵⁷ Paul Borgman and Kelly James Clark, *Written to Be Heard: Recovering the Messages of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 23–24.

⁵⁸ Dwyer, *The Motif of Wonder*, 198.

⁵⁹ Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship*, 209.