Chapter 6

Characterizing Jesus in Mark's Longer Ending

The Narrative Christological Trajectory of Mark 16:9–20

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In her 2009 volume, *Mark's Jesus*, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon introduces readers to five different ways in which the Gospel of Mark characterizes Jesus: (1) enacted christology (what Jesus does); (2) projected christology (what others say about Jesus); (3) deflected christology (what Jesus says in response); (4) refracted christology (what Jesus says instead); and (5) reflected christology (what others do).[1] In drawing out both the words and deeds of various characters and the text's explicit and implicit commentary, Malbon combines several areas of research with which she has become associated during her scholarly career. First, she continues her tradition of insightful narrative commentary on the Gospel of Mark,[2] while connecting that with her work on Markan characters and characterization—a subject on which she is the foremost authority among those currently working in Markan studies.[3] She then uses these two concerns to help

1. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Mark's Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009).

2. For a useful example of Malbon's narrative exegesis, see her book, *Hearing Mark: A Listener's Guide* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2002).

3. Her publications on this subject have been voluminous. See, in order of publication, "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 28 (1983), pp. 29–48; "The Jesus of Mark and the Sea of Galilee," *JBL* 103 (1984), pp. 363–77; "Disciples/Crowds/Whoever: Markan Characters and Readers," *NovT* 28 (1986), pp. 104–30; "The Jewish Leaders in the Gospel of Mark: A Literary Study of Marcan Characterization," *JBL* 108 (1989), pp. 259–81; "The Poor Widow in Mark and Her Poor Rich Readers," *CBQ* 53 (1991), pp. 589–604; "Text and Contexts: Interpreting the Disciples in Mark," *Semeia* 62 (1993), pp. 81–102; "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 (Sheffield and Harrisburg, PA: Sheffield University Press/Trinity Press,

readers understand how Mark functions as a narrative christology.[4] At the outset of her discussion, she explains that focusing on titles for Jesus in the gospel is an illegitimate way to establish the Markan presentation of Jesus, indicating that such an approach would yield a christology that is both incomplete and potentially incorrect. Too many works on New Testament christology focus on various titles and actions and generate an understanding of Jesus that is superficial at best.[5] Instead, in an effort to draw out Mark's christology, Malbon writes: "What leads to understanding is *engagement with the story*."[6] This one line beautifully sums up Malbon's work, both in that book and throughout her scholarly writings on the Gospel of Mark.[7]

In this essay, I want to combine those same three concerns—narrative exegesis, characterization, and christology—to examine an element of Mark's Gospel that has largely been ignored in Malbon's work. A survey of her publications on the Gospel of Mark reveals that Malbon never discusses the so-called Longer Ending (Mk 16:9–20) in any great detail. I would like to use this essay as an opportunity to interact with Malbon's work in the three aforementioned areas while examining a text to which she has devoted little attention. In what follows, I will first look briefly at the consensus position that the Longer Ending is a later addition to the Gospel of Mark, while also considering recent concerns about the notion of an "original text." Then, I will provide a short commentary on the Longer Ending in which I will apply the various narrative christological categories employed in *Mark's Jesus*. I will close by raising a few questions about the christological trajectory of the Longer Ending vis-à-vis the commonly accepted original ending (16:8).

1994), pp. 58–86. She also coedited, along with Adele Berlin, the volume *Characterization in Biblical Literature* (Semeia, 63; Atlanta: SBL, 1993) and edited *Between Author and Audience in Mark: Narration, Characterization, Interpretation* (NTM, 23; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009).

4. This term was first used by Robert Tannehill, "The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," *Semeia* 16 (1979), pp. 57–95. For a helpful overview of different narrative Christological approaches in recent Markan scholarship, see Gregg S. Morrison, *The Turning Point in the Gospel of Mark: A Study in Markan Christology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), pp. 197–213.

5. For a work focusing on the narrative behind each New Testament writing rather than titles and functions, see Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

6. Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, p. 16 (emphasis mine).

7. As her peers have noted, this book represents the culmination of a stellar career commenting on the Gospel of Mark. See sympathetic reviews in *Int* 68.1 (2012), pp. 91; *CBQ* 74.2 (2012), pp. 381–2; *WW* 31.4 (2011), pp. 432–4; *JETS* 54.1 (2011), pp. 161–4; *RBL* (July 2010): http://bookreviews.org/pdf/7522_8207.pdf.

The Longer Ending Is Not Original: A Brief Look at the Consensus

No one who has genuinely engaged the Gospel of Mark can escape the lure of deliberating over its difficult ending. The ending of Mark's Gospel has been called "the gravest textual problem in the NT,"[8] and surely ranks among the most consistently discussed New Testament text-critical issues.[9] Despite the level of interest in this difficult textual problem however, there is an overwhelming consensus among scholars that the Longer Ending is not original to the Gospel of Mark.[10] The following list represents the most salient concerns raised against the antiquity of Mark 16:9–20.

External Evidence

While the sheer *volume* of manuscript evidence for the Longer Ending is impressive—one estimate has it appearing in roughly 99 percent of extant Greek manuscripts[11]—the *quality* of manuscripts lacking the Longer Ending raises serious questions about its antiquity. This observation goes back to the debate over the best way to evaluate external evidence. Those employing a strict documentary approach would have the majority of manuscripts ruling the day, while an eclectic approach considers the date and quality of the manuscripts and attempts to weigh their significance vis-à-vis other factors.[12] Some very important manuscripts are

8. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 497.

9. In 2007, an entire conference was devoted to the question of Mark's ending(s) at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. David Alan Black, Maurice Robinson, Daniel B. Wallace, and J. Keith Elliott gave papers and responded to one another on the subject. Out of that conference came the book, edited by Black, *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark: Four Views* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008). Of the four views represented in the book, Wallace and Elliott argue that the Longer Ending is not original, while Black and Robinson argue, against the consensus, for the antiquity of the Longer Ending.

10. Against the consensus, see N. Clayton Croy, *The Mutilation of Mark's Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), and the more recent work, Nicholas P. Lunn, *The Original Ending of Mark: A New Case for the Authenticity of Mark 16:9–20* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015).

11. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 292.

12. In drawing this contrast between documentary and eclectic approaches, I do not want to appear guilty of creating a false choice. While these have been the two major approaches employed throughout the history of recent text-critical research, there are other approaches. For example, J. K. Elliott is one of the most ardent defenders of the approach known as "thoroughgoing eclecticism," which focuses largely on internal evidence. Maurice

missing the Longer Ending, including the fourth century uncials, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, the Old Latin codex Bobiensis (it ^{k}), and the Sinaitic Syriac manuscript.[13] This evidence suggests, at least provisionally, that the Longer Ending is not original to Mark.

Transcriptional Probability

It is highly unlikely that a copyist would have intentionally omitted the Longer Ending if it were original to Mark. If we take into account the maxim, *lectio difficilior potior*, we must surely conclude that an ending at 16:8 is by far the more difficult reading, both literarily and theologically. Conversely, it is much easier to account for the addition of the Longer Ending, especially in light of the seemingly unsatisfying ending offered by 16:8.[14] In this context, arguments about a "lost leaf" or "missing ending" appear to be special pleading at best; still, such assertions can be found in the writings of prominent New Testament scholars.[15]

Vocabulary and Style

The Longer Ending introduces eighteen different terms that do not appear elsewhere in the Gospel of Mark. This number represents nearly 11 percent of the

Robinson, who argues in favor of the Longer Ending's inclusion, uses an approach called "Byzantine Priority." See his important book, complied and arranged with William G. Pierpont: *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform* (Southborough, MA: Chilton, 2005). A helpful primer for understanding the various positions within NT textual criticism is David Alan Black, ed., *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

13. It is sometimes argued that the blank spaces at the end of Mark in Vaticanus is large enough to have included the Longer Ending, suggesting the copyist knew of the ending but were conflicted about whether to include it. This is, at best, an argument from silence, to say nothing of the debate about whether or not the space is actually large enough to include the Longer Ending. Even if the space was large enough, such an argument actually works against the originality of verses 9–20. Uncertainty about whether to include those verses is an indication of conflict over the originality of the verses.

14. To be clear, I do not personally regard the ending as unsatisfying, though it seems clear that early Christians did not always appreciate Mark's subtle literary strategy. Early Christians were concerned with proclaiming the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and since an ending at 16:8 lacks an explicit resurrection with appearances to the disciples, many would have considered Mark incomplete.

15. For example, Ben Witherington III (*The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], p. 49) opines that, "The original ending of Mark must have been lost at a very early date. If this is even remotely close to correct, it then follows that we should not build vast theological and literary castles on the uncertain foundation that 16:8 *must have been* Mark's original intended ending" (italics in original).

whole unit—a strong indicator that the language of the Longer Ending is non-Markan. In addition to concerns of vocabulary, the style of the Longer Ending is more polished and differs significantly from the rough, paratactic discourse we find throughout the rest of the gospel. These two observations also strongly suggest that the Longer Ending is not Mark's original ending.

Lack of Attestation in Important Early Church Fathers

We do not see the Longer Ending cited by the most important early commentators on the text, including Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Cyril of Jerusalem. This is a likely indication that they were not aware of the Longer Ending, and their lack of awareness strongly suggests it was not original to Mark.

Similarity to Later Gospel Traditions

Another point that in my estimation is not emphasized enough in this discussion is the similarity of material in the Longer Ending to later gospel traditions.[16] The Longer Ending appears to be an amalgam drawn from sources that appeared after the Gospel of Mark. Verses 9–10 align with the events narrated in John 21:11–18; verses 11–13 echo the Emmaus Road story in Luke 24:11, 13–35, 41; the appearance to the gathered eleven disciples and Jesus' rebuke of them—both of which appear in verse 14—are reminiscent of material in Luke 24:36–49 and John 20:19–23; the commissioning in verse 15 appears to be based upon Matthew's so-called Great Commission (28:18–20); and Jesus' ascension in verse 19 is similar to that in Luke 24:50–51. In light of this evidence, France insightfully comments that "vv. 9–20 have something of a 'secondhand' flavor, and look like a pastiche of elements drawn from the other gospels and Acts."[17]

All of this evidence has led to a broad consensus among a generation of commentators that the Gospel of Mark originally ended at 16:8.[18] A question thus

16. On this issue, see the authoritative work of James A. Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark* (WUNT II/112. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

17. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 687. Nineham similarly notes: "With respect to the general character and purpose of the verses, they fit so awkwardly to 16^8 that they can hardly have been composed originally as a continuation of the Gospel; more probably they were compiled for catechetical use at a time when there was no other document giving a succinct account of all the known appearances of the risen Lord" (D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* [Pelican New Testament Commentary; New York: Penguin Books, 1963], p. 450).

18. Van Iersel's appraisal of the situation is poignant: "If anyone wants to know what the Scriptures have to tell us about the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection, they had better consult the other three evangelists . . . The alternative to disregarding Mark 16:9–20, however, is not to close the book and give one's thoughts to something else, for that would

arises: if there is such an overwhelming consensus against the antiquity of the Longer Ending, can there be a good rationale for devoting an entire essay to discussing its contribution to Mark's narrative christology? While modern text-critical study of the New Testament has been obsessed with recovering the "original text," a more recent paradigm shift within New Testament studies has sought to emphasize the oral/aural dynamics of life in the ancient Mediterranean world. In particular, those working in the related areas of orality studies and performance criticism have looked suspiciously at the notion of an original text, at least as that notion has been envisioned by centuries of scholars steeped in the trappings of print culture. This emphasis has led to "a shift from treating biblical writings as modern printed texts toward treating them as scripts and *aides memoires* for oral performance in antiquity. This shift refocuses the object of study toward the orality of early Christianity, toward memory as the primary repository of tradition, toward writing as ancillary to orality and memory, and toward performance events of New Testament texts."[19] Against that backdrop, performance critics are quick to note that those hearing Mark in the first few centuries of Christian proclamation would not have shared our contemporary concern for an original written text. Such concerns are those of modern literate men and women educated largely in the western world.

In a well-known and oft-cited study, William Harris has argued that the vast majority of the ancient Roman world was illiterate, noting in particular that the "likely overall illiteracy level of the Roman empire under the principate is almost certain to have been above 90%."[20] Most modern individuals—including highly trained scholars—fail to consider how this strikingly different cultural context would have impacted the dissemination of the gospel materials. When we think of "reading" a "text" in our modern world, we usually conceive of sitting down to

be to disregard the signal contained in its open ending. A more appropriate response is to think about the unanswered and disturbing questions raised by Mark's narrative and read it again. A reader who chooses this alternative stays within the bounds of the text. The other alternative is to leave the confines of the text" (Bas M. F. van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary*, trans. W. H. Bisheroux [London: T&T Clark, 1998], pp. 507–8).

19. David Rhoads and Joanna Dewey, "Performance Criticism: A Paradigm Shift in New Testament Studies," in *From Text to Performance: Narrative and Performance Criticisms in Dialogue and Debate*, ed. Kelly R. Iverson (Biblical Performance Criticism 10; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), pp. 1–2.

20. William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 22. In his recent study, *Language and Literacy in Roman Judaea: A Study of the Bar Kokhba Documents* (AYBRL; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), Michael O. Wise criticizes Harris for his lack of precision in defining literacy and for failing to pursue more detailed research in Jewish sources, while essentially affirming Harris' assertion of majority illiteracy. The view of majority illiteracy was recently challenged by Udo Schnelle in his 2014 presidential address, subsequently published as "Das frühe Christentum und die Bildung," *NTS* 61.2 (2015), pp. 113–43.

read silently to ourselves. We have approached the entire enterprise on the basis of our own modern assumptions and with our own experiences in mind, referring to the authors of these texts as "the writers" and to the recipients as "readers." These categories would have been foreign to the experience of those living in the Roman world. Most early Christians had access to the gospel stories about Jesus *only* through preaching and public performances and the experience was nearly always communal rather than individual.[21] And since it is also the case that many, if not most Christians from the late second/early third century on heard the Gospel of Mark preached or performed with the Longer Ending (or some alternate ending)[22] in place, we must reflect further on what would have been considered "original" in such a context.[23]

In making this distinction between modern reading and ancient hearing, it is not my goal to undermine the legitimacy of the traditional text-critical enterprise, but rather to leaven and expand our primarily print-based reflections on the earliest dissemination of the gospels. On this point Rhoads and Dewey note, "It is important to observe that we are not setting up an oral/written divide or a binary opposition but a model that encompasses interrelationships of speech, memory, and sometimes writing. We are advocating a major shift in gravity to a focus on orality, memory, and writing that are actualized in performances."[24] Thus, a further consideration of the matter leads to a resounding "yes" in answer to my previous question. There does seem to be good reason to devote an entire chapter to discussing the narrative christological trajectory of Mark's Longer Ending. Such an examination has the potential to tell us something substantive about the shape of Christian proclamation as it developed in the late second/early third century Christian contexts and the assumptions—particularly about christology and resurrection—that attended early Christian interest in these stories. We can also learn about the ways in which Christians in the second and third centuries were uncomfortable with ambiguity as preaching about Jesus became more explicit and more "orthodox." We turn now to a brief narrative exegesis of the Longer Ending

21. For more insights on performance criticism vis-à-vis orality, aurality, and the textualization of the NT narratives, see Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church: Speaking, Writing, and the Gospel of Mark* (Biblical Performance Criticism 8; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013).

22. No doubt some heard Mark preached with the so-called shorter ending, while others would have heard the Freer Logion, preserved today only in *Codex Washingtonianus* (W).

23. Those working in orality studies and performance criticism recognize that the Gospel of Mark, even subsequent to its textualization, was not a static entity. Rather, we can liken ancient performances of the gospel to various modern performances of an Eric Clapton song. While Clapton has recorded a specific version of the song in question, a given audience is unlikely to hear that exact performance in a live concert since a great deal of Clapton's live performance is characterized by improvisation within the musical parameters of the recorded version.

24. Rhoads and Dewey, "Performance Criticism," pp. 7–8.

with specific attention to the narrative christological categories established by Malbon in *Mark's Jesus*.

Reading the Narrative: Mark 16:9–20[25]

By way of an open-ended and enigmatic conclusion (ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ[26]), Mark 16:8 has left the audience with a characteristically Markan sense of fear and uncertainty.[27] Now, in what appears to our modern sensibilities to be an incongruous turn in the narrative, verse 9 opens with an explicit reference to Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week (Ἀναστὰς δὲ πρωῒ πρώτῃ σαββάτου), followed by the mention of Mary Magdalene. Mary appears prominently here—the very first resurrection appearance—even though she has only just appeared for the first time in the story in 15:40, 47. Though Mary's appearance here might seem strange within the context of a modern narratological approach that is focused on (1) the final *written* form of the text, and (2) the Gospel of Mark without reference to other gospel traditions, it is easy to see how a late second/early third century audience would not have found this to be an odd detail. We have the same situation in the Gospel of John, where Mary Magdalene appears for the first time at the foot of the cross (John 19:25) and is then featured prominently in the Johannine resurrection narrative as the first person to whom the risen Jesus appears (John 20:11–18). Again, while this may appear odd within the context of our primarily narrative-critical and print culture considerations, it seems clear that second century audiences were well aware of the place of Mary Magdalene in Christian preaching and storytelling. It is also important to note that the same basic information provided here about Mary (παρ' ἧς ἐκβεβλήκει ἑπτὰ δαιμόνια) is found in Luke 8:2 (Μαρία ἡ καλουμένη Μαγδαληνή, ἀφ' ἧς δαιμόνια ἑπτὰ ἐξεληλύθει). Also in keeping with a broader resurrection account that second century Christians would likely have expected, Mary returns to proclaim the risen Jesus to those mourning his death, but they do not believe her (vv. 10–11).

Transitioning with an expression that is characteristic of both Lukan and Johannine writings (μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα),[28] the narrator next introduces a uniquely

25. It is important to note that the text of Longer Ending itself is fraught with corruptions. There is not space here in this chapter to discuss all the variants and deal with the question: "What exactly did they actually hear?" For this chapter, I am relying on *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2013).

26. On the suitability of using γάρ to conclude a narrative, see Kelly R. Iverson, "A Further Word on Final Γάρ (Mk 16:8)," *CBQ* 68 (2006), pp. 79–94.

27. For more on this theme in Mark, see Douglas Geyer, *Fear, Anomaly, and Uncertainty in the Gospel of Mark* (ATLA Monograph Series; Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2001).

28. A variation of the transitional phrase μετὰ ταῦτα appears eight times in the Fourth Gospel (3:22; 5:1, 14; 6:1; 7:1; 13:7; 19:38; 21:1) and nine times in Luke-Acts (Lk 5:27; 10:1; 12:4; 17:8; 18:4; Acts 7:7; 13:20; 15:16; 18:1), but nowhere else in Mark.

Lukan resurrection appearance, reporting that Jesus appears in "another form" (ἐν ἑτέρᾳ μορφῇ) to two individuals. Presumably, as in Luke 24:13–35, the so-called Emmaus Road story, these individuals are Jesus' disciples though the phrase used here is "two *of them*" (δυσὶν ἐξ αὐτῶν). As in verse 11, the narrative continues to build upon the theme of persistence in unbelief by those hearing about the resurrected Jesus but not seeing him directly (see v. 13); the scene reaches its climax in Jesus' stern rebuke of their unfaith and hardness of heart (τὴν ἀπιστίαν αὐτῶν καὶ σκληροκαρδίαν) to believe the proclamation of his resurrection. These two descriptors appear infrequently in the New Testament. The term ἀπιστία appears twice in Mark (6:6; 9:24) and once in the rest of the gospels (Mt 13:58), while σκληροκαρδία appears only two other times in the entire New Testament (Mk 10:5; 19:8). It is conceivable that the presence of these two terms elsewhere in the Second Gospel could be used as evidence against the argument that the language of the Longer Ending is largely non-Markan. However, since the number of occurrences of these two terms in Mark amounts to very little, it is hard to imagine such an argument carrying much weight. Further, of greater importance to our present concerns is that these two terms are used in the wider context of belief/unbelief in the proclaimed word, a theme that is unique to the Fourth Gospel.[29] By the late second/early third century, however, such a theme would have been part and parcel of Christian preaching about Jesus. Thus, it was unlikely to have struck such an audience as inconsistent with Mark's foregoing narrative emphases.

In the context of this rebuke, little space is devoted to conversations between Jesus and the disciples about his resurrection or their response. Instead, the narrative turns immediately in verse 15 to the Markan version of the so-called Great Commission (cf. para Mt 28:18–20). Jesus instructs his disciples to go out into the world and preach the gospel to all creation (πάσῃ τῇ κτίσει; cf. Matthew's "all nations," πάντα τὰ ἔθνη), an emphasis that became of ever-increasing importance within the post 70 CE context of early Christianity. The earliest expressions of Christianity were no doubt explicitly eschatological, complete with the expectation that Jesus would return at any moment. Of course, the kingdom never arrived as expected and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE forced the church to come to terms with its disappointment and reckon with the delay of the *Parousia*.

One wonders what τὸ εὐαγγέλιον would have communicated in this context. Within the gospel itself there are at least two different meanings attached to the

29. Throughout the Gospel of John there is a distinction between those who come to follow Jesus as a result of specific signs they have witnessed and those who follow on the basis of Jesus' word. Those who believe because of Jesus' works either fall away or show that they do not fully understand Jesus' message, mission, and identity (e.g., Nicodemus in 3:1–12; the crowds in chapter 6). On the other hand, those who act on or believe in Jesus' word are the ultimate models of belief and faithfulness (see, e.g., the mother of Jesus in 2:1–11; the woman of Samaria in 4:39–42). This emphasis is perhaps best seen in Jesus' climactic announcement to Thomas in 20:29: "You believe because you have seen [= belief by works]. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe [= belief by the proclaimed word]."

term. At the outset of the narrative (1:10), "the Gospel" appears to be *about Jesus*, though when Jesus preaches for the first time in 1:15, "the Gospel" is *about God's coming kingdom*. Which meaning would have been intended here?[30]

Verses 16–18 rapidly begin to pick up broader themes that were increasingly emphasized within second century Christian circles: baptism, salvation for those who believe, condemnation for those who do not believe, and signs accompanying genuine faith. While casting out demons (v. 17b), speaking in new tongues (v. 17c) and the healing of sick people (v. 18b), especially as practiced by the original apostles and Paul, were all part of earliest Christian preaching, much has been made of the foreignness of both handling vipers (ὄφεις ἀροῦσιν, v. 18a) and drinking deadly poisons (θανάσιμόν τι πίωσιν, v. 18a). We have one similar example of snake handling in the New Testament; in Acts 28:1–6, Paul is bitten by a viper while moving a pile of brushwood. Those watching him expect him to die but he remains unharmed. Apart from this story, there are no other examples in the New Testament of believers handling poisonous snakes or drinking deadly poisons and surviving.

Verses 19–20 close with a high christological flourish, complete with a reference to Jesus as κύριος and his ascension into heaven to sit at God's right hand. Though we are not focusing primarily here on titles, we should note that the titles most commonly used for Jesus in Mark are Christ, Son of God, and Son of Man. This is the first time in the entire story that the narrator directly identifies Jesus as κύριος. These events lead directly to wide and indiscriminate preaching by the disciples (ἐκεῖνοι δὲ ἐξελθόντες ἐκήρυξαν πανταχοῦ), all of which is confirmed by Jesus, who is again called κύριος (v. 20).

With these final verses, the Longer Ending offers an exalted conclusion that second century Christians would have found both acceptable and commonplace. In it we see an explicit conclusion to an intentionally open-ended gospel that spells out the subtleties of Mark's original resurrection account in keeping with what early Christians had come to expect from stories about Jesus' death. Important for our examination here is material that fits into Malbon's narrative christological categories. Of the five categories presented in *Mark's Jesus*, four are found here:

1. Enacted christology (what Jesus does)
2. Projected christology (what others say about Jesus)
3. Deflected christology (what Jesus says in response)
4. Reflected christology (what others do)

30. In Mark's incipit we have what is likely an objective genitive (τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ; the gospel about Jesus Christ), but the focus of this "gospel," as least as Jesus preaches it, is rarely Jesus himself—a striking difference from the understanding of "gospel" that would have been held by some of Mark's earliest audiences. Instead Jesus' proclamation is about God and the nearness of God's kingdom. Especially in the first half of the Gospel (1:1–8:30), whenever Jesus is found preaching and teaching, the focus is on God rather than himself. This begins to change in the second half of the Gospel, especially in 8:31, 9:31, and 10:32–4, where Jesus predicts his coming betrayal, persecution, and death. Steadily in the

We will briefly consider how each of these contributes to the new trajectory in Mark's narrative christology.

Enacted Christology in Mark's Longer Ending

Keeping in mind Malbon's earlier warning that titles and functions are not enough to provide us with a complete christology, we approach our task with an emphasis on the unfolding story. Malbon describes enacted christology as follows:

> At the most elemental level, what the Markan Jesus does is *preach* and *teach* (about the in-breaking of God's rule), and *insist on* and *practice service* to those with the least status in society and thus *suffer* persecution and death by the authorities of that society (as an exemplification of the implications of the in-breaking of God's rule in the present age).[31]

I am paying particular attention here to the verbs Malbon uses: *preach*, *teach*, *insist on service*, *practice service*, and *suffer*. These are the primary activities of Jesus throughout the Markan drama. If we focus on the verbs describing Jesus' actions in the Longer Ending, we end up with the most extensive data upon which to build our understanding of this altered narrative christological trajectory. In the Longer Ending, Jesus (1) *rises* on the first day of the week, (2) *appears* to various individuals and groups, (3) *rebukes* the disciples, (4) *instructs* the disciples, and (5) *ascends* into heaven. These are also the primary verbs of collective memory that make up the earliest Christian story,[32] as evidenced by the emphases of the first Christian creeds.[33] The Jesus who appears in the Longer Ending, while immediately recognizable to Christians in the late second and early third centuries, is somewhat bizarre to those who have paid careful attention to the Jesus constructed throughout Mark's original narrative. Thus, the enacted christology of Mark's Longer Ending comes into direct conflict with at least three elements of Mark's narrative christology.

First, through the consistent use of secrecy, the narrator has sought to veil Jesus' identity. Mark's chapter on parables (4:1–41) pictures Jesus giving explicit

latter chapters of Mark, Jesus' preaching becomes more and more about his mission, crucifixion, and resurrection.

31. Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, p. 21 (emphasis added).

32. I use "Christian story" here to refer to the larger conflated narrative about Jesus that moved us toward orthodoxy in contradistinction to "Mark's story" or any other autonomous narrative about Jesus that emerged in the first century.

33. With respect to Jesus, the earliest Christian creeds confess that Jesus suffered, was crucified, died, was buried, descended into hell, rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, and is seated at God's right hand. The verbs of Mark's Longer Ending already have us halfway to the ecumenical creeds and orthodox Christianity.

interpretations to his disciples, the ultimate "insiders," while the crowds are left wondering what these parables mean. To punctuate this state of affairs, the Markan Jesus proclaims to the Twelve: "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven'" (Mk 4:11–12, NRSV). Ironically, however, this is not what actually happens in the story. Instead, throughout the narrative Jesus' disciples remain perpetually in the dark while outsiders—often the most unlikely characters—come to comprehend Jesus' identity (cf., e.g., the Gerasene Demoniac in 5:1–20; the Syro-Phoenician woman in 7:24–30). The identity of Jesus, which lies at the heart of Mark's εὐαγγέλιον, is something hidden to be discovered. Here in the Longer Ending it is something explicit to be proclaimed.

Second, through the use ambiguity, the narrator has subtly demonstrated how the in-breaking of the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ actually works. In an insightful chapter entitled, "Moves of Greater Uncertainty," Robert Fowler discusses the modern discomfort with ambiguity and its connection to modern scholars' inability to account for opacity in the Markan drama.[34] This critique also proves true for second and third century Christians and their inability to tolerate anything ambiguous in the earliest texts about Jesus. One need only look at the history of New Testament textual transmission to see that the trend in copying was nearly always intentionally to make the text clearer and more explicit. However, Mark was quite at home with using ambiguity as a literary technique. For instance, Mark's presentation of the kingdom of God does not come with fanfare but rather starts out as something small and unexpected (like a mustard seed) and from this inchoate state grows into something enormous and pervasive (like a huge tree with its branches extended and in which birds can nest; cf. Mk 4:30–31). The ambiguity and cautiously incremental growth associated with the arrival of God's Kingdom is key to Mark's narrative christology. The kingdom emerges slowly and incipiently; here in the Longer Ending it has arrived all at once.

Third, through the use of fear and anxiety, the Gospel of Mark has consistently emphasized the alien nature of Jesus' presence in this world. At various turns this emphasis in manifested in the display of intense emotions (e.g., amazement, ἐκπλήσσω; astonishment, θαμβέω; fear, φοβέω) and penetrating gazes (Greek: διαβλέπω). Against this tendency, the Longer Ending redirects our focus on the women who, out of fear, refuse to proclaim the risen Jesus, and turns us in the direction of a more familiar and comfortable scenario in which all fear, anxiety, and misunderstanding are overcome and the disciples go out and "everywhere proclaim the good news" (16:20). Thus, in the Longer Ending these three characteristically Markan christological elements (secrecy, ambiguity, fear and anxiety)

34. Robert Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp. 195–227.

dissipate in the face of a growing early Christian emphasis on proclamation and discomfort with that which was vague or uncertain. The Jesus who rises, appears, rebukes, instructs, and ascends is the Jesus of early Christian proclamation but not necessarily the Jesus of Markan imagination.

Projected Christology in Mark's Longer Ending

At the outset of her chapter on projected christology, Malbon writes:

> What others in the narrative say to and about Jesus is naturally of great importance to a Markan narrative christology, but it is not to be given priority or dominance. Projected christology, that is, the view of Jesus that is projected onto him by the narrator and the characters internal to the story, is one of several aspects of narrative christology. Care is taken to note who says what to or about Jesus and under what circumstances in the narrative.[35]

She identifies two different sources of projected christology in the narrative—what the narrator affirms about Jesus and what given characters say about him. This material extends to things implied about Jesus as well as things that are explicitly stated. The Longer Ending provides fewer examples of projected christology than what we saw in our previous discussion of enacted christology. In the Longer Ending we have two examples: (1) what the narrator affirms about the risen Jesus, and (2) what Mary Magdalene proclaims about him.[36]

In the narrator's description of Jesus' activity (see the verbs above in our discussion of enacted christology), we see the strong implications of Jesus' now exalted status. He rises from the dead, appears in a different form, and even ascends into heaven. The Longer Ending also has the narrator twice referring to Jesus as "Lord" (vv. 19, 20). As mentioned above, the title κύριος, while essential to second century (and later) constructions of christology, is not part of Mark's suffering Son of Man. There are implications throughout the narrative that Mark's Jesus is to be understood as an exalted figure, but these hints emerge in signs and shadows. In other words, Mark never announces Jesus' exalted status on a neon billboard and picking up this theme requires that one pay careful attention to the subtle movements

35. Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, p. 57.

36. I deliberated here about the place of doubt as it relates to projected christology, but ultimately decided to exclude it from my discussion. Doubt about the resurrection is reported among Jesus' followers in verses 11, 13. While there is no direct statement indicating that, "Jesus has not been raised," the doubt expressed in these verses ultimately amounts to an *implication about Jesus*, which Malbon includes in her discussion of projected christology. However, as it stands, the doubt expressed in verses 11, 13 implies more about the followers' frame of mind that it does about Jesus' actual state. Still, I am left to wonder where doubt might fit within Malbon's narrative Christological categories.

of the story. However, in the Longer Ending, the narrator twice refers to Jesus as "Lord" in passing, as if such a title has been commonplace all along. An audience attuned to the nuances of Mark's christological presentation will sense that something is amiss here.

The Longer Ending also provides an evangelistic voice even if we hear no specific proclamation. Verse 11 provides the substance of Mary's report—Jesus is alive and she has seen him. The substance of this proclamation is in keeping with the evangelistic voice of the young men in the tomb, though unlike Mary's report we are privy to their specific preaching:

> Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you. (Mk 16:6–7, NRSV)

Mary's report then merely summarizes the two most fundamental points of post-resurrection preaching: (1) Jesus is alive, and (2) I have seen him. Once again we see that the risen and exalted Jesus of the Longer Ending moves away from the narrative subtleties associated with Mark's original conclusion and invites the audience to eschew the potential darkness associated with ambiguity. We turn now to the move for Jesus to clarify both his mission and identity in crystal clear terms.

Deflected Christology in Mark's Longer Ending

In dealing with deflected christology, Malbon looks at how the Markan Jesus responds to what others say about him.[37] In the Longer Ending we do not have Jesus responding directly to *what others have said* about him. Instead, we have one instance of Jesus responding to *what others have thought* about him and how they have behaved in light of their doubts. The followers of Jesus, denoted by the phrases, "those who were mourning and weeping" (v. 10) and "the rest" (v. 13) experience doubt over the report that he has been raised. When he finally makes his appearance to the gathered eleven, Jesus rebukes them for their unfaith and hardness of heart. This rebuke does not include direct discourse from Jesus to others about himself. It does seem to imply, however, that he is exalted and that the message of the εὐαγγέλιον (v. 15) is now focused on Jesus, rather than on the coming Kingdom of God. Earlier in the narrative, the proclamation of the gospel was πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ (1:15). Now, presumably, Jesus, rather than the coming kingdom, is to be the focus of their preaching. His resurrection is apparently now the centerpiece of the εὐαγγέλιον. As was

37. See this discussion in Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, pp. 129–94.

mentioned above, the presence of the phrase "Gospel of/about Jesus Christ" in Mark's incipit suggests that within Mark's *Sitz im Leben*, there has already been a move to identify Jesus rather than the kingdom as the locus of "gospel preaching."[38] Thus this element of deflected christology in the Longer Ending does not appear to contribute much to the altered narrative christological trajectory we have been tracing.

Reflected Christology in Mark's Longer Ending

The final element in our consideration of the narrative christology of Mark's Longer Ending is what Malbon calls reflected christology, "that is, christology reflected in what some characters other than Jesus in the Markan narrative do that reflects what the Markan Jesus says and does."[39] There is really only one example of reflected christology in the Longer Ending and it comes about mainly in response to Jesus' rebuke of the eleven. As discussed above, the followers of Jesus display doubt on several occasions as to his resurrection. When he finally appears to them he rebukes them for their hardness of heart and unwillingness to believe. Consequently, they go out and preach about Jesus everywhere (v. 20). While the scene represented by this verse is a very small piece of the Longer Ending, it might serve to illuminate the greatest contrast between the narrative christological trajectory of the Longer Ending and that of the original gospel.

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, the disciples are the most persistent in their inability to grasp the truth, respond appropriately to Jesus, and follow him as they should. This is what Joseph Tyson classically referred to as the "blindness" of the disciples.[40] He looked at their inability to understand, among other things, the calming of the sea (4:41), the feeding of the five thousand men (6:52), and the first two passion predictions (8:31–3; 9:30–32) and concluded that Mark's view of discipleship was different than that of Jesus' earliest disciples. Tyson thus saw the characteristically "blind" disciples as a vehicle for Mark to illustrate an improper understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus. Commentators have long recognized to the problematic role played by the Twelve throughout the story and have placed the disciples at the very center of deliberations on Markan christology and discipleship for decades.

At the end of the day, the reflected christology of the Longer Ending shows the disciples behaving as the heroic preachers of the risen Jesus they became in the collective memory of the early church rather than the problematic fools they often are in Mark's Gospel. This element of the Longer Ending, perhaps more than anything else, demonstrates a deliberately altered narrative trajectory.

38. See the discussion in n. 28.

39. Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, p. 219.

40. Joseph B. Tyson, "The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark," *JBL* 80 (1961), pp. 261–8.

Re-envisioning Jesus and Rereading Mark

As I have tried to note throughout my treatment of Mark 16:9–20, the originally subtle ending of Mark's narrative has been expanded to reflect a more specific second century christology. This type of orthodox filling-in-the-gaps in an otherwise open-ended narrative is indicative of one of the most pervasive, unquestioned, and (to my mind) pernicious elements of a distinctly "Christian" approach to reading the New Testament. Too many readers of the New Testament approach the Gospel of Mark with knowledge of the mosaic that is ultimately a "Christian" story of Jesus. They enter with unquestioned certainty about what the story has to say and impose upon Mark's Jesus something that may not even be present. Many contemporary audiences approach the gospels in a manner similar to those who appended the Longer Ending. Such audiences are attuned the broader movements of the "Christian" story and are less skilled (and very often less interested) in paying attention to the nuances of a given account. In short, throughout much of Christian history, those devoted to the Christian message—and this is true for contemporary Christians and for those responsible for Mark's Longer Ending—have simply not learned how to read the narrative on its own terms.

One of the true values of Elizabeth Malbon's narrative work on the Gospel of Mark is that it teases out the treasures that can only be found by paying attention to the nuances of the unfolding story. Only through engaging with the narrative can we discover Mark's narrative christology, and only then can we ask how Mark contributes to the broader narrative of the New Testament. Contemporary audiences must first engage the story or they will walk away from the Second Gospel with nothing but what they carried in to begin with.

Malbon concludes *Mark's Jesus* with these words:

> It is not the Markan Jesus' point of view or the Markan narrator's point of view that is the point of view of Mark's Gospel. It is the implied author's point of view as this is received by the implied audience. Thus the *tension* between the narrator and Jesus is not a problem to be resolved, not a *gap to be filled in*, but a narrative christological confession offered by the implied author to the implied audience as a *challenge* and a *mystery*.[41]

She uses several key words here to describe the experience of reading Mark: *tension*, *gap*, *challenge*, *mystery*. We have seen that the Longer Ending resolves the tensions, fills in the gaps, alleviates the challenges, and explicates the mysteries. The Longer Ending removes the Markan ellipsis from 16:8 and instead stamps the narrative with the exclamation point of verses 9–20. In this way, the narrative christological trajectory of the Longer Ending bypasses the unexpected gift of Mark's silent conclusion and instead produces an orthodox misappropriation of Mark's understated and enigmatic Jesus.

41. Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*, p. 258 (emphasis added).

Postscript

Outside of the professors with whom I studied directly, there is no scholar who has so influenced my thinking and scholarship as Elizabeth Struthers Malbon. She has mentored me from afar with her writings and been very gracious to me up close in other ways. Her collection of essays *In the Company of Jesus* was one of the first books I reviewed for an academic journal, and it was one of the works that sparked my own interest in character studies.[42] On at least three occasions Elizabeth graciously agreed to read and comment on things I was writing, and she twice agreed to contribute to volumes I was editing.[43] During these latter experiences, I was both surprised and encouraged by how often our conversations about editorial matters drifted into conversations about our children and the more important issues of seeing to the needs of family while pursuing a career in academia. In all of my engagements with Elizabeth, she has displayed an uncommon warmth and generosity. I am honored to contribute to her festschrift and I wish her a rich and rewarding retirement from formal academic life.

42. See Christopher W. Skinner, review of Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), in *RevExp* 103 (2006), pp. 627–9.

43. See her articles, "Characters in Mark's Story: Changing Perspectives on the Narrative Process," in *Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Kelly R. Iverson and Christopher W. Skinner (SBLRBS 65; Atlanta: SBL, 2011), pp. 45–70; and "History, Theology, Story: Re-Contextualizing Mark's 'Messianic Secret' as Characterization," in *Character Studies and the Gospel of Mark*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner and Matthew Ryan Hauge (LNTS 483; London: T&T Clark, 2014), pp. 35–56.