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PART I

Introduction

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**JESUS' MISSION AND THEIRS:
 CHRISTOLOGY AND DISCIPLESHIP IN
 LIGHT OF MARK'S APOCALYPTIC GOSPEL**

As Etienne Trocmé has observed, “in Mark, more than any of the other gospels, Jesus is everywhere in the company of his disciples.”¹ Summoned at the outset of his ministry, those who “come after” Jesus repeatedly bear witness to activities that characterize his earthly mission. But they are also, in this gospel story, more than mere bystanders, as they benefit from Jesus’ private counsel and even participate actively in his demonstration of God’s dominion breaking into the human sphere. In light of their narrative significance, then, John Donahue goes so far as to claim that, while Mark “has an obvious Christological thrust . . . the story of the disciples occupies a strong second position.”²

Yet in addition to their narrative prominence, the disciples in Mark have garnered such vigorous exegetical interest partly due to another, and less salutary, Markan emphasis: the motif of the disciples’ incomprehension. Precisely the evangelist’s willingness to highlight the failures of those most closely aligned with Jesus has stimulated the imaginations of a

¹ Etienne Trocmé, *The Formation of the Gospel According to Mark*, trans. P. Gaughan (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 142.

² John R. Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1983), 2. Recent scholarship has devoted ample attention to Mark’s portrait of the disciples, producing a wide range of studies on topics including the following: the precise makeup of “the Twelve/disciples” (see Robert P. Meye, *Jesus and the Twelve: Discipleship and Revelation in Mark’s Gospel* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968] and Gunter Schmahl, *Die Zwölf im Markusevangelium* [Trier: Paulinus, 1974]); Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds (see Hans Dieter Betz, *Nachfolge und Nachahmung Jesu Christi im Neuen Testament*, BHT 37 [Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) 1967]; Martin Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, trans. J. Gieg, SNTW [New York: Crossroad, 1981]; Vernon K. Robbins, “Mark 1.14–20: An Interpretation at the Intersection of Jewish and Graeco-Roman Traditions,” *NTS* 28 [1982]: 220–36); and the implied relationship between the disciples in the gospel and Mark’s audience (see Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark’s Audience: The Literary and Social Setting of Mark 4.11–12*, JSNTSup 33 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989]; Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, JSNTSup 4 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981]; Robert C. Tannehill, “The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role,” *JR* 57 [1977]: 386–405; Joseph B. Tyson, “The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark,” *JBL* 80 [1961]: 261–8; Theodore J. Weeden, “The Heresy that Necessitated Mark’s Gospel,” *ZNW* 59 [1968]: 145–58).

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host of interpreters who have attempted to decipher Mark's increasingly negative portrayal of the disciples.

To propose yet another study of Markan discipleship – and the incomprehension motif in particular – may seem like the retracing of well-worn tracks along the path of NT research. The literature in the field is vast, yet, as I shall demonstrate, its findings remain unsatisfactory. This study thus returns to Mark's complex depiction of the disciples to inquire about the nature of their incomprehension. What is it that the disciples do not understand? On what grounds are they culpable? Rather than beginning with thematic interest in the disciples' failures, the approach here will be *first* to examine the intended relationship forged between Jesus and his followers from the story's outset and only *then* to assess the disciples' lapses according to the intended scope of that relationship.

As we shall see, Mark's Jesus forges a relationship with his followers that is characterized by both *presence* and *practice*. In the first place, they are summoned to remain in Jesus' presence as they bear witness to his Christological mission, which entails the proleptic demonstration of God's coming kingdom; what is more, through their physical and relational proximity to Jesus, these select followers receive privileged instruction concerning the nature of that kingdom.

Yet a frequently overlooked facet of their calling in Mark is Jesus' insistence that the disciples are meant to continue Jesus' *practice* of wielding the power associated with God's apocalyptic reign. In this sense, Jesus here authorizes them as collective participants in the Christological mission that characterizes his own purpose and destiny. Just as Mark's Jesus demonstrates the in-breaking dominion of God, he deliberately summons and equips his followers to carry this program forward. And while Mark's story frequently alludes obliquely to Jesus' messianic identity, the second evangelist clearly forges that identity within the fires of Jesus' messianic mission: to give advance notice of God's decisive victory over the powers of the present evil age.

Only within this broader horizon – the assertion of God's coming dominion – can we fully grasp not just Jesus' messiahship but also his deliberate involvement of followers in the regime change he institutes. As a result, this study will maintain that even the Markan motif of incomprehension must be examined within the context of this original design for discipleship, a design that features both presence and practice. Where the disciples fail in the second gospel, they have not trusted the power of God unleashed in their midst, preeminently in the person of Jesus but also, by extension, in their own authorization to implement his apocalyptic assertion of God's coming kingdom. Their incomprehension thus derives

from a failure to grasp both the apocalyptic nature of Jesus' power – he is more than a “divine man” – and its implications for those entrusted with that power.

To set the terms of the subsequent exegetical investigation, this opening chapter features several preliminary steps. First, a review of the dominant approach of Markan research over the past century will highlight the sharp Christological focus that has largely defined true discipleship in terms of correct appraisal of Jesus' messiahship. Second, a discussion of inherent weaknesses in such an unnecessarily circumscribed study of Markan discipleship will reveal a set of artificial dichotomies that have been imposed upon the text. A final step will chart the “way forward” proposed in this study, with attention to working assumptions, method, interpretive payoff, and exegetical focus.

State of the question

In many respects, William Wrede's monumental work *The Messianic Secret* laid the groundwork for Markan exegesis spanning the last century. In his study of the secrecy motif in the second gospel, Wrede not only detects doctrinal concerns underlying the evangelist's efforts but also focuses attention squarely on Jesus' messiahship as the motivating force behind the gospel. According to Wrede, “the idea of the secret arose at a time when as yet there was no knowledge of any messianic claim on the part of Jesus on earth.”³ In Wrede's view, Mark incorporates traditions about Jesus' injunctions to silence in order to reconcile post-resurrection views about his messiahship with an apparent ignorance of it in Jesus' own day. The second gospel's claim that Jesus “ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen [that is, the transfiguration], until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead” (Mk. 9:9), Wrede maintains, reveals Mark's notion of the “resurrection as the dividing-line between two periods.”⁴ Since Mark writes on this side of that dividing-line, Wrede finds that the evangelist's purpose is to enfold every aspect of Jesus' ministry and destiny within the framework of his suffering and vindicated messiahship, even as he attributes to Jesus a desire that that messiahship remain a “mystery” until the season of disclosure – the post-Easter epoch.⁵

³ William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. Grieg (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971; orig. 1901), 228.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 80. Wrede identifies Jesus' wonder-working and teaching, as well as his suffering, dying, and rising, as constituent parts of his messiahship.

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The impact of Wrede's approach on subsequent Markan scholarship can hardly be overstated. While many interpreters have taken issue with particular assertions about the scope and significance of the messianic-secrecy motif,⁶ the "Wredestrasse" has led to an undeniably dominant interest in Mark's Christology. Thus Joel Marcus can offer this late twentieth-century claim: "That Mark's Gospel was written primarily to establish a particular understanding of Jesus' identity is scarcely disputed."⁷ Further, William Telford claims, "The Gospel, as it now stands, invites the reader to view the Jesus of history (or at least of the tradition) in a certain light."⁸

Of course, the "certain light" to which Telford refers is the passion story, which casts long shadows over the rest of Mark's gospel, extending from the cross itself back into the gospel's central section, which is dominated by three predictions of Jesus' fate (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–4). It is this destiny, in the view of many scholars, that decisively shapes Mark's Christology, so that interpreters generally take for granted Ben Witherington's claim that "Mark makes evident that it was not until after Jesus' death, and by precisely reflecting on that death, that Jesus was seen to be who he really was."⁹ Even Robert Gundry, who overtly disavows the messianic-secrecy motif and disallows a Markan emphasis on Jesus' suffering messiahship, nonetheless maintains that the gospel serves a Christological purpose: to "make the passion itself a success-story."¹⁰ Under the sway of Wrede's work as well as in contentious reaction against it, then, interpreters have consistently probed the second gospel's depiction of Jesus' identity. Whether they infer Mark's dominant Christology to be defined by the term Son of God,¹¹ Davidic messiah,¹² or apocalyptic

⁶ Among those who have questioned the scope of the messianic-secret motif are Ulrich Luz, "Das Geheimnistmotiv und die markinische Christologie," *ZNW* 56 (1965): 9–30; Heikki Räisänen, *The "Messianic Secret" in Mark's Gospel*, trans. Christopher Tuckett, SNTW (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990); see also Trocmé, *Mark*, 124 n. 1.

⁷ Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 6.

⁸ William R. Telford, ed., *The Interpretation of Mark*, 2nd edn., IRT 7 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999; orig. 1977), 16.

⁹ Ben Witherington, III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 53.

¹⁰ Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 1–3.

¹¹ Rudolf Bultmann understands this title in terms of the Hellenistic "divine man" and believes it is central for Mark's Christology (*Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951–5], I:130–1). Representative of the view that the "Son of God" epithet conveys an obedient servant within a messianic Jewish framework is Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994; orig. 1983), 47–155.

¹² See, e.g., John R. Donahue, "Temple, Trial, and Royal Christology (Mark 14:53–65)," in *The Passion in Mark*, ed. Werner H. Kelber (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 72–8.

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Son of Man,¹³ most contemporary readers of the second gospel would agree that the key to understanding this εὐαγγέλιον Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ can be obtained only through determining Jesus' precise Christological identity.

This sharply Christological understanding of the second gospel has provided an almost universally accepted template for studies of the Markan disciples, so that the conduct of Jesus' followers has come to be assessed according to the accuracy of their Christology.¹⁴ For if the gospel narrative recounts the disclosure of Jesus' messiahship, it follows quite naturally that Mark's mixed review of the disciples would concern their own deficient Christology.¹⁵

But what faulty views does this motley band of followers represent? The variety of verdicts on the issue of failed discipleship mirrors the wide-ranging claims about Mark's Christology, as well as motives interpreters impute to the evangelist.¹⁶ Among pioneers addressing this topic, Theodore J. Weeden identifies the disciples as exponents of flawed views about Jesus' identity – and thus as objects of the evangelist's scathing review. Turning on its head Bultmann's benign assessment of the Hellenistic “divine man” type, Weeden argues vigorously that Jesus'

¹³ A host of interpreters have focused on “Son of Man” as the only title the evangelist finds adequate to convey Jesus' true identity. Chief among proponents of this view is Norman Perrin, “The Christology of Mark: A Study in Methodology,” in *A Modern Pilgrimage in New Testament Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 104–21; also M. Eugene Boring, “The Christology of Mark: Hermeneutical Issues for Systematic Theology,” *Semeia* 30 (1984): 131–3. Cf. Werner Kelber, *The Kingdom in Mark: A New Place and a New Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), *passim*, who finds that Mark was correcting a false Son of Man Christology associated with Jewish apocalyptic hopes.

Throughout this book I shall defer to the prevailing use of “Son of Man” to translate the phrase ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, despite the fact that this gender-specific language misrepresents the more inclusive thrust of the Greek. My exegetical observations, though, will attempt to promote a broader understanding of this term, which I translate “son of humanity.”

¹⁴ In his appendix called “Mark's Perspective on the Disciples,” Witherington writes, “Mark does want to leave us with the impression that at the end of the day, true discipleship, based on true understanding of Jesus and his mission, was only possible after Easter” (*Mark*, 441). Yet he acknowledges in the next paragraph that, in the gospel's opening chapters, “they are presented as responding for the most part in the right way, though their comprehension level is low.” It is just this inherent contradiction – that the disciples are able to function faithfully *even before* post-Easter Christological disclosure – that this study investigates.

¹⁵ But cf. Rikki Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), who notes the opposite: it is “not a matter of whether or not one fully understands but instead whether one repents, has faith, and follows Jesus” (207). Still, owing to his focused interest in Jesus' Christological role, Watts does not pursue the implications of this important observation for our understanding of the Markan portrait of the disciples.

¹⁶ C. Clifton Black has cited the variegated findings on this issue as evidence of the inherently subjective approach of redaction criticism. See *The Disciples According to Mark: Markan Redaction in Current Debate*, JSNTSup 27 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989). I would only add that the assumption of Mark's sharply Christological agenda has further skewed our understanding of the Markan disciples.

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followers in the second gospel represent those who have infiltrated Mark's community and are attempting to infuse it with a "theologia gloriae." In response, Weeden maintains, Mark crafts a story that charts in three stages (imperceptivity, misconception, rejection) the disciples' downward spiral; the nearer they come to the "theologia crucis," the more they resist, and ultimately turn away from, Jesus' suffering destiny.¹⁷ Thus Weeden understands the gospel's early emphasis on Jesus' miraculous powers as the platform against which Mark polemicizes.

Other interpreters have adopted Weeden's basic construal concerning Markan polemic even as they have detected a different Christological emphasis the evangelist intends to supplant. For instance, Joseph Tyson thinks Mark espouses a gentile Christian perspective and so means to subvert, through his portrait of the disciples, the kind of Son of David Christology that would have characterized the Jerusalem church.¹⁸ In a similar vein, Werner Kelber detects within the gospel a tension between a northern (Galilean) and southern (Jerusalem-based) tradition; it is their failure to grasp the true nature of God's kingdom – a kingdom aligned with Galilee – that leads the Jerusalem contingent to the tragedy of the Jewish War, where their mistaken "[k]ingdom hopes . . . had gone up in the flames of the temple."¹⁹

Notably, even scholars who commend a more pastoral reading of the Markan disciples have not abandoned this tendency to lay heavy interpretive weight on the "way of the cross" discipleship teachings as the authoritative window into Mark's Christology. Ernest Best introduces his study on Markan discipleship with the claim that, in this gospel, "the nature of discipleship becomes apparent only in light of the cross, and not in the light of Jesus' mighty acts."²⁰ To demonstrate the pivotal importance of the gospel's central section (Mk. 8:27–10:45), Best launches his investigation *in medias res*, as it were, focusing his hermeneutical gaze squarely on the gospel's presentation of the Danielic Son of Man as a suffering messiah.

While his methodological approach differs from Best's in that it follows the gospel's own narrative development, Robert C. Tannehill arrives at much the same conclusion: Mark has constructed the gospel account so as to lure those who are readily impressed with Jesus' deeds of power into a narrative snare where they must face head-on Jesus' "cost of discipleship" teachings.²¹ For Cilliers Breytenbach, too, though other aspects

¹⁷ This view was originally advanced in Weeden, "Heresy," and developed more fully in his *Mark – Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

¹⁸ Tyson, "Blindness," 261–8.

¹⁹ Kelber, *Kingdom*, 138.

²⁰ Best, *Following Jesus*, 13–14.

²¹ Tannehill, "Disciples," *passim*.

of discipleship are important for Mark's community, it is preeminently the motif of self-sacrifice modeled in the initial call but crystallized in the way of the cross that reflects the essence of following Jesus; moreover, the disciples cannot understand Jesus prior to the resurrection.²² Despite their differing approaches, then, even scholars inclined toward a more pastoral reading of Mark's gospel agree with those who view the work as sheer polemic on this point: the gospel's first half serves a decidedly subordinate role in Mark's portrait of Christology, and thus of discipleship.

Put simply, a broad consensus of scholarship maintains that only in light of the cross do the disciples (and thus the readers) gain full disclosure of Jesus' identity, which is that of a crucified and raised messiah. Taken a step further, scholars generally agree that it is only when Jesus' followers have endorsed this proper Christological understanding that they are fully enabled to serve as Jesus' disciples.²³ In this view, not only does Mark's gospel itself primarily intend to advocate "Christological correctness," but it also assesses the disciples' faithfulness according to their grasp of who this Jesus really is.

Splitting Mark open: the problem of false dichotomies

The intent here is not to supplant either a Christological reading of Mark's gospel or an interpretive emphasis on the cost of discipleship. Mark *does* tell the story of Jesus in a manner that underscores God's special designation of this "beloved son" (Mk. 1:9; 9:7), and the path of suffering and death *is* one that cannot be circumvented, in Mark's view, by either the Christ or his followers. Yet recent scholarship has focused so narrowly on the gospel's depiction of Jesus as suffering messiah that it has failed to account adequately for several complementary features found in the narrative. A brief summary of the weaknesses of such a sharply Christological approach will lay the foundation for this study, which intends to expand Christological inquiry beyond the question of Jesus' messianic identity *per se*. As we shall see, interpreters who assume that Mark's overarching

²² Cilliers Breytenbach, *Nachfolge und Zukunftserwartung nach Markus: Eine methodenkritische Studie*, ATANT 71 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1984), 335–8.

²³ Other interpreters who maintain that Mark employs the discipleship theme as a pastoral attempt to promote correct Christology, albeit with differing emphases, include Karl-Georg Reploh, *Markus – Lehrer der Gemeinde: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Studie zu den Jüngerperikopen des Markus-Evangeliums*, SBM 9 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969); Klemens Stock, *Boten aus dem Mit-Ihm-Sein: Das Verhältnis zwischen Jesus und den Zwölf nach Markus*, AnBib 70 (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1975); and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 29–48.

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interest lies in portraying Jesus' suffering messiahship repeatedly impose artificial dichotomies that in turn make the gospel's depiction of the disciples less, rather than more, comprehensible.

Mark's two "halves"

First, such an interpretive emphasis on the suffering messiah, combined with a post-Enlightenment disdain for miracles and the demonic sphere, has led many modern readers of Mark's gospel to detect in the first eight chapters a blurry vision (at best) of Jesus' nature and purpose.²⁴ As noted above, some interpreters find in the gospel's first half a portrait of Jesus as "divine man" that functions as a foil to the emerging portrait of Jesus as suffering messiah; others view the wonder-working of the first half as a merely preparatory, and wholly insufficient, rendering of Jesus the Christ. In either case, interpreters have identified Mk. 8:27 as the turning point at which the possibility of seeing clearly begins in earnest.

Yet, as Tannehill has pointed out, such a reading "cannot explain the positive aspects of the Marcan portrayal of the disciples,"²⁵ nor does it account for the fact that Mark repeatedly casts Jesus' proclamation and wonder-working in a positive light. Even Weeden himself concedes that Mark's inclusion of this material means it must not have been "completely offensive to him."²⁶ Moreover, Jesus' deeds of power continue more or less unabated into the gospel's second half, where, among other things, Jesus rids a boy of an unclean spirit (Mk. 9:14–29), heals blind Bartimaeus (Mk. 10:46–52) and curses a fig tree, with supernatural results (Mk. 11:12–14; 20–2).

Together, these observations compel us to pursue a reading of Mark's narrative that finds coherence, rather than competing claims, in Jesus' office of wonder-worker and his foreboding destiny. For if the second gospel was deliberately crafted as a "passion narrative with extended introduction,"²⁷ our interpretive challenge may well be to detect the evangelist's sense of continuity between Jesus' ministry (all of it) and his death. The first aim of this study, then, will be to read Mark's gospel

²⁴ A commonplace interpretation of the two-stage healing found in Mk. 8:22–6 finds the miracle story to serve as a "hinge" from the obscured portrait of Jesus in the gospel's first half to the clearer depiction of him in the ensuing stories of sacrifice and death. See, e.g., Frank J. Matera, "The Incomprehension of the Disciples and Peter's Confession," *Bib 70* (1989): 163–71, for a representative example of this reading.

²⁵ Tannehill, "Disciples," 141. ²⁶ Weeden, "Heresy," 153.

²⁷ Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964; orig. 1892), 80, n. 11.

as a unified message that makes sense of both miracle and passion as interwoven strands of Jesus' mission.²⁸

Pre- and post-Easter Christologies

A second vulnerability of the current view, in my estimation, stems from the very paradox Wrede attempted to address: if Mark tells this story for the purpose of disclosing Jesus' messianic identity, why does Jesus emerge as an enigmatic figure who often evades efforts to identify him – and even silences those who recognize his Christological status (e.g. Mk. 1:34; 3:11)? Even as he conceals his own identity, moreover, Mark's Jesus does reveal an impulse toward revelation, as he freely proclaims the new age of God's dominion and deliberately demonstrates its powers unleashed in the world. Indeed, a fundamental problem with Wrede's proposed reconstruction is that the emphasis on pre-Easter hiddenness flies in the face of passages Mark includes, such as the command for the healed leper to "show yourself to the priest" (Mk. 1:44) and Jesus' parabolic instruction to show forth God's kingdom (Mk. 4:21–5).²⁹

To be sure, Christological innuendo does suggest itself throughout the Markan narrative. In the disciples' inquiry about Jesus' identity after the stilling of the first storm at sea ("Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?," Mk. 4:41), the reader catches the evangelist's wink in the direction of Jesus' God-like command over natural forces; in conversation with his disciples ("Who do people say that I am?," Mk. 8:27), Jesus takes apparent delight in the street talk about his identity, even as he manifests a desire to set the record straight; and when asked point-blank by the High Priest, "Are you the Χριστός, the son of the Blessed One?" (Mk. 14:61), Jesus delivers a response that is startling and, to his inquisitor, blasphemous: "I am." In each case, the evangelist does seem to presuppose a level of Christological affirmation on the reader's part that lends a twist of irony to the gospel story.

Yet despite these implicit claims about Jesus' messianic identity, we should also note that the second gospel devotes much greater attention

²⁸ The goal is similar to Breytenbach's search for a global theme that unites Mark's compositional efforts; for a discussion of narrative theory underlying this pursuit, see *Nachfolge*, 85–132. His view of the evangelist's "Zukunftsperspektive" seems helpful as far as it goes – clearly there is an eschatological impulse here – but his limited choice of focus texts does not take into full account the role of miraculous deeds within an eschatological framework.

²⁹ Wrede himself acknowledges this tension and explains it by appeal to Mark's redactional approach: the "evangelist has taken over traditional material in which the idea of the secret messiahship was not present" (*Messianic Secret*, 125). This "conservative redactor" view, though, undermines Wrede's own claims about Mark's dogmatic interests.