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A Tale of Two Markan Characterizations

The Exemplary Woman Who Anointed Jesus’s Body for Burial (14:3–9) and the Silent Trio Who Fled the Empty Tomb (16:1–8)¹

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ἀμὴν δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, ὅπου ἐὰν κηρυχθῆ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον εἰς ὅλον τὸν κόσμον,
καὶ ὃ ἐποίησεν αὕτη λαληθήσεται εἰς μνημόσυνον αὐτῆς. (Mark 14:9)

καὶ οὐδενὶ οὐδὲν εἶπαν· ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ. (Mark 16:8b)

A. Introduction

As one honored to be among Adela Yarbro Collins’s first *Doktorkinder*, it is a great pleasure to contribute to a volume honoring her sixty-fifth birthday. I am deeply grateful for all she has taught me and the many ways she has helped me, both during our time together in Chicago and in the years since. She has also written such an engaging and thorough commentary on the Gospel of Mark, which scholarship will be digesting for many years to come.² In the meantime, it will remain an open question whether there will be much “new” – or in any case, worthwhile – to say about Mark. Nevertheless, it is my hope that the present paper can explore a theme to which the genre of a commentary may not readily lend itself.

This paper will develop two theses. The first is that the author of Mark offers the anonymous woman who anointed Jesus’s body for burial (14:3–9) as a laudatory example of discipleship in contrast to the twelve apostles and, in particular, to Judas Iscariot. The second is that with the women who discover the empty tomb at the end of this Gospel (16:1–8) Mark offers a negative, rather than a positive, example of discipleship. In the latter

¹ I am grateful for feedback from colleagues in Munich, especially Jörg Frey and David S. du Toit, where I was a visiting scholar while writing this essay. I would like to thank my friend and colleague Clare K. Rothschild for commenting on an earlier draft of this work.

² A. Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

passage the women's failure to report the message of the resurrection offers a narrative continuation of the Twelve's many failures earlier in Mark. Therefore, attempts by some scholars to construe the women at the end of Mark as a positive example of discipleship are mistaken.³ It will also be argued that with the negative examples of the Twelve and, at the end of Mark, these three women, Mark offers both encouragement and an implicit warning: his audience must (re)evaluate their commitment to following Jesus prior to the imminently anticipated Parousia.⁴ The title of this paper attempts to encapsulate these two main theses: "A Tale of Two Markan Characterizations: The Exemplary Woman Who Anointed Jesus's Body for Burial (14:3–9) and the Silent Trio Who Fled the Empty Tomb (16:1–8)." I first studied these two Markan passages, among others, in the context of my current monograph project, which traces in the NT the theme of persecution and enduring suffering as a corroboration of apostolic authority and a believer's standing as Jesus's follower.⁵ In particular, I examine claims to suffering and persecution as a form of corroboration, which several NT authors, including Mark, use to confirm authority, standing, or legitimacy inasmuch as fidelity to Jesus is demonstrated by virtue of suffering with, or for, him.

I bring to this study two prolegomena that I have argued elsewhere and cannot develop here.⁶ The first is that Mark's depiction of Jesus's twelve disciples is overwhelmingly negative, especially in the Gospel's middle portion (8:27–10:52) and in the passion narrative.⁷ At the beginning of

³ E.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1983), 320; Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (WBC 34B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 2:539.

⁴ Scholarship tends to emphasize the positive side of this Mark's exhortation but to undervalue its negative implications to those who may not heed it. On this point see Kelhoffer, "Readiness To Suffer as Confirmation of Standing as Jesus' Follower in the Gospel of Mark," in idem *Persecution, Persuasion and Power: Readiness to Withstand Hardship as a Corroboration of Legitimacy in the New Testament* (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming); Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 295–99 at 298–99 (emphasis original): "The problem posed . . . through the unfulfilled expectations raised by the named women is, If these followers will not go and tell, who will? In the end, Mark's Gospel purposely leaves each reader or hearer with the urgent and disturbing question: Will I go and tell?"

⁵ Kelhoffer, "Readiness To Suffer."

⁶ Kelhoffer, "Readiness To Suffer."

⁷ See, e.g., Joseph B. Tyson, "The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark," *JBL* 80 (1961): 261–68; Ernst Best, "The Role of the Disciples in Mark," *NTS* 23 (1977): 377–401; Robert C. Tannehill, "The Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology," *Semeia* 16 (1979): 57–95 at 70; Jack D. Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 95–112.

Mark, however, several characterizations of the Twelve are quite positive: the Twelve accept Jesus's call to follow him (1:16–20; 2:13–14; cf. 10:28), are designated apostles (3:14), ostensibly receive the secrets of the Kingdom (cf. 4:12–13), and carry out a successful mission in Jesus's name (6:6b–13). Yet subsequent to Mark 6:30 when the Twelve return from their mission,⁸ Mark's depiction of them is overwhelmingly negative. This shift from initially positive characterizations followed by negative depictions informs my analysis of the three women in this Gospel's final pericopes, which likewise follow this pattern. The second prolegomenon is that in contrast to the Twelve's usually negative example Mark highlights several minor – and usually anonymous – characters,⁹ who recognize the importance of Jesus's death and identify with his suffering. The woman who anoints Jesus's body for burial offers a prime example of such a positively depicted minor character and, at present, receives our attention.

B. An Unnamed Woman Anoints Jesus for Burial (14:3–9)

The present section will highlight Mark's contrasting characterizations of an unnamed woman (14:3–9) and Judas Iscariot (14:10–11). The discussion of this contrast builds on the inference that 14:3–9 is a redactional insertion between 14:1–2 and 10–11.¹⁰ That is to say, Mark's source originally narrated without interruption Judas's agreement to betray Jesus to the Jewish priests.

In 14:3–4, subsequent to the woman's tardy and presumably uninvited arrival at the meal,¹¹ she is accused of wasting costly ointment on Jesus. Mark neither characterizes her as wealthy nor reveals the means by which she came to possess this ointment. What Mark does accentuate is that her

⁸ Indeed, the unflattering depictions of the Twelve begin already in Mark 4:40–41 and continue in passages, such as 6:45–52; 8:14–21, 31–33; 9:38–41; 10:28–31; and 10:35–40, culminating in their abandonment of Jesus in Gethsemane (14:50).

⁹ Cf. Mark 8:34b; 9:39–41; 10:29–31, 35–40; 13:13b; 14:3–9, 47; 15:21, 39.

¹⁰ With A. Y. Collins, *Mark*, 640 (on 14:3–9); C. A. Evans, *Mark*, 2:358; Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 80. Indeed, Mark's insertion of 14:3–9 invites the inference of an editorial contrast between an unnamed woman who valued Jesus's suffering and Judas who did not.

¹¹ So R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 551 (on 14:3), who notes that when she comes the meal has already begun (cf. Luke 7:37–38, 45; *pace* John 12:2–3).

expending this valuable possession results in others becoming indignant (ἀγανακτέω) and censuring (ἐμβριμάομαι) her action as inappropriate.¹²

Whereas the parallel passage in Matthew explicitly attributes this indignant response to Jesus's disciples (ἰδόντες δὲ οἱ μαθηταί, Matt 26:8), Mark 14:4 obliquely ascribes it to τινες ("some people"). The question thus arises whether in Mark the interpreter should distinguish the Twelve from τινες or identify ("some" of) them with those who became indignant. Craig Evans persuasively argues for the latter view, or that τινες pertains to "some" of the Twelve.¹³ Furthermore, as Étienne Trocmé notes, Mark does not indicate *who else* besides the Twelve was present at the house of Simon the leper (cf. 14:3) to register such a complaint.¹⁴

If the inference that Mark 14:4 points to "some" of the Twelve is persuasive, the characterization would be analogous to the Twelve's hindering the work of an unnamed exorcist whom Jesus approved (9:38–41) and, later, their rebuking those who were bringing children to Jesus (10:13–14). Like these previous two instances, the(ir) mistake again concerns incorrectly denying Jesus's favor toward those whose action he does indeed approve, whether exorcising demons in Jesus's name (9:38–41), bringing children to him (10:13–14), or anointing his "body beforehand for its burial" (14:8). As compared with hindering a single exorcist or keeping parents from bringing their children to Jesus, in Mark this last instance is arguably the worst of the three, since objecting to the anointing of Jesus's body implies a lack of recognition of Jesus's approaching passion. Instead, those implicated as τινες ἀγανακτοῦντες ("some who became indignant," 14:4) – most likely the Twelve or at any rate "some" of them – unnecessarily cause suffering for this woman while discounting the value that she attaches to Jesus's impending suffering and death.

An additional parallel in Mark's narrative to 14:3–9 is the meal scene in 2:15–17 at which "the scribes of the Pharisees" object to Jesus's disciples

¹² Mark 14:4–5; cf. 10:22. Collins, *Mark*, 642 (on 14:4–5) suggests plausibly that such a response may have been justified in light of Jesus's teaching to the rich man (cf. Mark 10:21).

¹³ Evans, *Mark*, 2:360 (on Mark 14:4): "But the words of vv 6–9 make the most sense if they are addressed to the Twelve (Cranfield, 415–16). Earlier Jesus had been indignant at his disciples for discouraging the children to come to him (10:14), while later the disciples themselves had become indignant at James and John over their request to sit at Jesus' right and left (10:41)." So also France, *Mark*, 553 (on 14:4–5) and (apparently) Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 321. Against Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, ²1966), 532; Joachim Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (EKK II.1.2; Neukirchen: Neukirchener, ⁴1994), 2:224 (on 14:4–5).

¹⁴ Trocmé, *L'Évangile selon Saint Marc* (CNT 2.2; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2000), 337 (on 14:4) notes the uncharacteristic complete absence of the Twelve in this pericope if they are not implicated in Mark 14:4.

about the company Jesus was keeping.¹⁵ In the present pericope it is apparently the Twelve who make such an unwarranted judgment against this unnamed woman. In both instances Jesus defends those who are deemed unwelcome, whether the “many tax collectors and sinners” (2:15) or the woman (14:6–9). Moreover, in both pericopes the depictions of the accusers – “the scribes of the Pharisees” or, apparently here, “some” of the Twelve – are patently unflattering. Therefore, like other unnamed followers of Jesus depicted in this Gospel (cf. 8:34b; 9:38–41; 10:29–31, 40; 13:13b), the woman in 14:3–9 offers a positive example of discipleship in that she not only recognizes Jesus’s suffering but also suffers disdain from others for what she offered to Jesus. Her resolve to honor Jesus’s death despite objections from others is the reason why her deed will be remembered “wherever the good news (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) is proclaimed” (14:9).

Contrasting with this unnamed woman is the following pericope – or, as noted above, the continuation of the pre-Markan pericope of 14:1–2, 10–11 – concerning the disciple Judas who “betrayed” Jesus (14:10–11; cf. 3:19). Given Mark’s numerous depictions of the Twelve’s shortcomings and misunderstandings, accompanied by precious few successes subsequent to their return from a mission (6:30), it is not particularly surprising that one of them betrays Jesus.¹⁶ In Mark 14:1–11 both Judas and the unnamed woman are aware that Jesus will suffer. One of them prepares Jesus’s body for burial, and the other’s betrayal leads to Jesus’s arrest and passion.

C. The Women at the Empty Tomb as Continuation of the Persona and Failures of the Twelve (15:40–16:8)

We now turn to another passage in Mark, also concerned with women, but as I shall argue, one that offers a strikingly contrasting characterization. After the crucifixion, with none of the Twelve to be found, Mark mentions for the first time at this very late point in his narrative women who observe from a distance Jesus’s suffering and place of burial and who later discover the empty tomb.¹⁷ Since ultimately their failure is every bit as spectac-

¹⁵ Cf. Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus* (KEK 1.2; ed. Gerhard Saß; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, ⁸1967), 292 (on 14:3).

¹⁶ With Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 319: “The misunderstanding and incomprehension of suffering discipleship exemplified by the twelve turns into betrayal and denial in the passion narrative.”

¹⁷ Mark 15:40–41, 47; 16:1–8. Concerning the possible historicity of the women’s visit, Evans, *Mark*, 2:531 invokes “the criterion of embarrassment,” maintaining that Mark 16:1–8 “reflects that the early church knew what actually happened.” Against this is the utter unavailability of the Twelve to perform this role and thus Mark’s need of a substitute to offer a link from the crucifixion to the resurrection. In this instance the criterion

lar as those of the Twelve, I shall argue that, like the Twelve, these women are to be distinguished from the (usually) anonymous individuals whose examples the Gospel of Mark lauds.¹⁸ That is to say, different from the woman who anointed Jesus's body for burial and Simon of Cyrene (14:3–9; 15:20b–24), among others, Mark ultimately does not offer these three (named) women depicted in 15:40–16:8 as positive models of discipleship.

At the start of this section, however, Mark does offer affirming characterizations of these women who had “followed” Jesus and “served” (ἀκολουθέω, διακονέω, 15:41) as his benefactors in Galilee.¹⁹ Such initially positive attributes merit comparison with the Twelve, who likewise toward the beginning of Mark had received Jesus's call to “follow” him (ἀκολουθέω, 1:17; 2:14; cf. 8:34; 10:21) prior to their numerous blunders. Yet at the end of Mark's narrative the women entrusted with the message of Jesus's resurrection and imminent appearance in Galilee²⁰ fail to announce it (16:6–8), just as the Twelve had fallen short many times earlier in Mark. Terrified and amazed, the three women are silent (16:8b).

This culmination of Mark's narrative invites the inference that, at least in Mark's account, these women cannot serve as a “bridge” from the risen Jesus to the Twelve,²¹ who stumbled only temporarily in Gethsemane before being quickly restored by Jesus shortly after the resurrection.²² Rather

of embarrassment is at best inconclusive. Cf. Collins, *Mark*, 779 (on 15:47), who regards 15:40–41, 47 as “composed by Mark in order to prepare for the empty tomb story.”

¹⁸ See Mark 8:34b; 9:38a, 39–41; 10:29–31, 40; 13:13b; 14:3–9; 14:47; 15:39. With Luise Schottroff, “Mary Magdalene and the Women at Jesus' Tomb” (1982), in eadem *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Feminist Perspectives on the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 185, who notes that “Mark 16:1–8 is a last account of the disciples' failure, which is of great importance in the Gospel of Mark.”

¹⁹ Additionally, two of the women see where Jesus's body is laid (Mark 15:47), and the three of them visit the tomb to care for the body (16:1).

²⁰ For an argument that Mark 16:7 refers to a post-resurrection appearance rather than the Parousia, see, e.g., Andrew T. Lincoln, “The Promise and the Failure: Mark 16:7, 8,” *JBL* 108 (1989): 285.

²¹ Concerning the need to roll away the stone (Mark 16:3), Evans, *Mark*, 2:539 notes, “It is ironic that not one of Jesus' male disciples is available to offer this assistance.”

²² It is noteworthy that Matt 28:6–10, Luke 24:5b–12, John 20:1–3, 20:18, Mark's Shorter Ending (it^k) and Mark's Longer Ending (Mark 16:9–11), each in their own way, employ one or more of these women for precisely this purpose. The distinctiveness of Mark 16:1–8 – with only a portion of such a “bridge” – over and against these five (among other) witnesses is therefore noteworthy. The origin of such accounts connecting the disciples to the resurrected Jesus thus most likely predates these other three NT Gospels, not to mention the two secondary endings to Mark. Moreover, although these other witnesses are later than Mark, the origin of a tradition in which one or more women serve as a “bridge” from Jesus to the reinstated disciples most likely also predates Mark. The hypothesis that Mark also knew such a tradition about the disciples' reunion with Jesus

than leading directly to a reunion with, let alone a reinstatement of, the Eleven, Mark's empty tomb scene presents the angelic²³ young man whom the women met there as distinguishing between the (now) ten disciples and Peter (ὑπάγετε εἴθατε τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ καὶ τῷ Πέτρῳ, 16:7a).²⁴ This distinction in effect absolves Peter of his earlier calling to "follow" Jesus (1:16–17), unless at some future point he should start acting like a true disciple along the lines reported in 1 Cor 15:5 and John 21:15–19 but not in Mark. As Morna Hooker notes concerning Mark 16:7, "This is no mere rendezvous, but a call to the disciples to follow Jesus once again."²⁵

In such an ominous context, the prediction that Peter and the Ten will "see" the risen Jesus in the Galilee (16:7b) could just as easily bespeak the disciples' judgment by Jesus, rather than their reconciliation with him, should they choose to meet him there. The earlier, and parallel, statement by Jesus himself (14:28; cf. 16:7) that after the resurrection he will be in Galilee does not denote that any of the Twelve will, in fact, actually "see" him.²⁶ This initial prediction occurs before the disciples abandon Jesus in Gethsemane and Peter's denials. Between 14:28 and 16:7, Mark has in effect taken the succession narrative of 1:14a – after John the Baptist's arrest, Jesus arrives – and, when the time comes for Jesus to be succeeded, concluded instead with a rhetorical question mark. That is, Mark is silent about *how* a transition to the preaching of the apostles took place: after the resurrection the apostles *do not necessarily* immediately pick up where Jesus left off.

Yet as Mark concludes his narrative, it is a moot point whether the Eleven's could choose to face Jesus, since the women never convey to the

after the resurrection stemming directly from these women's report of the resurrection would correlate with the author's desire to refute it in Mark 16:1–8.

²³ With Collins, *Mark*, 795–96 at 795 (on 16:5–6): "the young man is a character in the narrative best defined as an angel." So also Schottroff, "Mary Magdalene and the Women at Jesus' Tomb," 185–86; Carolyn Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?" *Hervormde Teologische Studies* 53 (1997): 105.

²⁴ Cf. already in Mark 8:33 for a subtle distinction between Peter and the other disciples, when Jesus, after receiving Peter's rebuke (8:31–32), turns and looks at the other disciples (8:33). As Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 433 (on 8:34–38) notes, "The turning around and seeing them [cf. ἰδὼν τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ, 8:33] . . . was to differentiate Peter from the disciples."

²⁵ M. D. Hooker, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 2003 [1981]), 385 (on 16:7).

²⁶ Cf. Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark*, WUNT 2.112 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 114. Consider also the similar syntactical constructions in Mark 1:14a (μετὰ δὲ τὸ παραδοθῆναι τὸν Ἰωάννην ἦλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν) and 14:28 (μετὰ τὸ ἐγερθῆναι με κτλ.).

Eleven Jesus's invitation and promise that they will "see" him.²⁷ At Mark's conclusion what endures from Jesus's associations with the Twelve is an empty tomb, the women's silence, and the imminent expectation of the Son of Man's appearance (cf. 8:34–9:1; 13:26; 14:62). Until the manifestation of this anticipated end,²⁸ the Markan community must be prepared to suffer as Jesus's faithful followers (cf. 13:14–37).²⁹

The present essay therefore calls into question Craig Evans's conclusion that after 16:8 "the mission of the disciples, chosen and commissioned earlier in the ministry, may now continue with renewed vigor and vision."³⁰ At the very least, one would have to replace the word "continue" with "recommence" or something to signify the utter break in the disciples' consistently inept behavior between Mark 6:30 (after they return from their mission; cf. 6:6b–13) and 14:50 (abandoning Jesus at his arrest). Yet as discussed further below, Mark 13:9–13a assumes that in a later post-resurrection context at least four of the Twelve act as messengers of the good news.³¹ Mark's concluding pericope (16:1–8) curiously offers neither a smooth nor a self-evident transition to such a recommencement, however.

In addition to the fate of the Eleven following 16:8, Mark's characterization of the three women toward the end of his narrative has likewise been the subject of considerable scholarly debate. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, construes Mark 15:40 as indicating four,³² rather than three, women and draws a parallel to Jesus's initial call of four male disciples in 1:16–20. On this basis, she states that these four women and four men are "preeminent," respectively among Jesus's female and male disci-

²⁷ Cf. Werner H. Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 86–87.

²⁸ With Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon 1969 [21959]), 111–16 at 113 (cf. 186) that Mark "all but eliminates the interval between the" resurrection and imminent Parousia and in 16:7 identifies the Parousia with Jesus's predicted appearance in Galilee.

²⁹ Although at one point Mark recognizes that two of the Twelve – James and John – will suffer like Jesus (10:39), their legacy as reported in Mark is the exception rather than the rule to the shoddy examples of Jesus's earthly disciples, especially Peter.

³⁰ Evans, *Mark*, 2:540.

³¹ Cf. Collins, *Mark*, 671 (on 14:29) concerning Jesus's prediction that the Twelve will take offense and abandon him: "Their failure is not definitive, however. . . . The instruction given to the women by the 'young man' in Mark 16:7 implies that 'the disciples and Peter' will have a second chance." Collins further refers to 10:38–40 and 13:9–13 to support the inference that (some of) the Twelve will eventually be in proper relation to Jesus in the post-Easter period. Cf. eadem, *Mark*, 797 (on 16:7).

³² Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 320. So also, e.g., Schottroff, "Mary Magdalene and the Women at Jesus' Tomb," 173–74. More persuasively, however, Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb," 105 traces the construal of four women to Codex Vaticanus rather than the original author of Mark.

ples.³³ Moreover, Schüssler Fiorenza maintains that by virtue of their courage these four women disciples supercede their cowardly male counterparts.³⁴ Craig Evans similarly construes the characters in 15:40 as “three brave women.”³⁵ Evans also draws a contrast between Joseph of Arimathea, who buried Jesus and “is no devoted disciple” since he did this “with dispatch . . . but not with devotion,” and “[t]he women, who were devoted to Jesus [and] now hope to complete the process.”³⁶

Yet even if one were to construe these women as initially “brave,” it is not at all clear that, for the author of Mark,³⁷ they constituted unambiguously positive models of discipleship. It is likewise uncertain how positing such an unqualified characterization of their role as laudable could be reconciled with their later reaction of becoming overwhelmed with astonishment (ἐκθαμβέω, 16:5b–6a) and ultimately remaining silent although commanded to report that Jesus is raised (16:8). Indeed, Victoria Philips in her essay for the volume, *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, calls attention to

³³ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 320. Already Martin Hengel, “Maria Magdalena und die Frauen als Zeugen,” in *Abraham unser Vater: Juden und Christen im Gespräch über die Bibel*, Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Spätjudentums und Urchristentums 5 (ed. Otto Betz et al.; FS Otto Michel; Leiden: Brill, 1963), 256 (cf. 250–51), who attributes to such women “eine gewisse Rangfolge” and compares Peter’s status with that of Mary Magdalene. Similarly Luise Schottroff, “Women as Followers of Jesus in New Testament Times: An Exercise in Social-historical Exegesis of the Bible,” in *Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (ed. Norman K. Gottwald; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis/London: SPCK, 1993), 418–27, esp. 419–23.

³⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 320: “Though the twelve have forsaken Jesus, betrayed and denied him, the women disciples, by contrast, are found under the cross, risking their own lives and safety.” Similarly Joseph A. Grassi, “The Secret Heroine of Mark’s Drama,” *BTB* 18 (1988): 10–15, esp. 13–14.

³⁵ Evans, *Mark*, 2:539. Yet even this positive construal of these women is open to question, since crucifixions were typically carried out in public places, and any number of people could witness an execution – especially “from a distance” (ἀπὸ μακρόθεν, 15:40) – without fear of reprisal.

³⁶ Evans, *Mark*, 2:534 (on 16:1). This judgment too is unconvincing because it does not take into account gender specific patterns for burial in the ancient world. As Osiek, “Women at the Tomb,” 111 notes, “In many traditional societies including those of the eastern Mediterranean, it is women who prepare a body for burial, while men actually convey the body into the tomb.” Against Evans, therefore, it is highly questionable that Mark portrays these women as either “brave” or in any way more devout than Joseph of Arimathea (cf. 15:40–47).

³⁷ The questions of Mark’s depictions and those of his source materials need to be distinguished. The present discussion focuses on Mark’s portrayals of these women and their similarities to the Twelve, leaving open the question to what extent Mark’s sources may have attested to prominent female disciples.

this “blind spot” in what she nonetheless acknowledges as an “important feminist strategy” for interpreting Mark.³⁸

In Mark 16:5b–6a the verb ἐκθαμβέω could portray a range of emotional reactions, including being overwhelmed, alarmed, distressed,³⁹ troubled – or any combination of these. From these two occurrences of this verb (16:5b–6a) it is not clear that any one of these options should be taken to exclude the others. An analogy to Jesus in Gethsemane (ἤρξατο ἐκθαμβεῖσθαι καὶ ἀδημονεῖν, 14:33b; cf. 9:15) could suggest that the women despaired upon realizing something horrible had transpired – that is, not having found Jesus’s body and perhaps despairing over the possibility that it had not been buried properly or even had been stolen. In stating that “terror and amazement had seized them,” Mark 16:8b corroborates this construal of ἐκθαμβέω in 16:5b–6a: the women were so distraught that they ignore not only the message of the resurrection (16:6b) but also the command to tell the remaining ten “disciples and Peter” about it.⁴⁰

Attempting to mitigate this difficulty that Mark’s concluding verses pose to her interpretation,⁴¹ Schüssler Fiorenza differentiates between these women’s failure and those of Jesus’s male disciples because in her view “[t]he women’s fear was well founded.”⁴² This distinction, however, is arguably a case of special pleading, since the Twelve likewise had reason to fear, for example, when Jesus – and they – were approaching Jerusalem (cf. ἐθαμβοῦντο οἱ δὲ ἀκολουθοῦντες ἐφοβοῦντο, Mark 10:32).⁴³ Nor is it persuasive to construe positively the women’s silence, as David R. Catchpole argues, in terms of an “awe-inspired reaction to a heavenly

³⁸ Philips, “The Failure of the Women Who Followed Jesus in the Gospel of Mark,” in *A Feminist Companion to Mark* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 222.

³⁹ Cf. BDAG, 303 (s.v. ἐκθαμβέω). Cf. W. C. Allen, “St. Mark XVI. 8: ‘They were afraid.’ Why?” *JTS* 47 (1946): 47.

⁴⁰ Mark 16:7, 8c. At 16:8c the double negative οὐδὲν οὐδὲν accentuates their silence; cf. Evans, *Mark*, 2:538 (on 16:8).

⁴¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 321–22.

⁴² Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 322; so also Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 292–3. This is not to deny, however, that upon being surprised by the angelic young man (Mark 16:5–6) “[t]he women’s fear was well founded” (Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 322).

⁴³ See further Allen, “St. Mark XVI. 8,” 47–48, who makes a similar comparison between Mark 16:8 and the reaction of the Twelve in 9:2–16. Cf. idem, “‘Fear’ in St. Mark,” *JTS* 48 (1947): 202; Jean Delorme, “The Resurrection and Jesus’ Tomb: Mark 16,1–8 in the Gospel Tradition” (1969), in *The Resurrection and Modern Biblical Thought* (ed. P. de Surgy; New York/Cleveland: Corpus Books, 1970), 77; David R. Catchpole, “The Fearful Silence of the Women at the Tomb: A Study in Markan Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 18 (1977): 8–10.

epiphany.”⁴⁴ A reaction that may be typically human but that nonetheless falls short of a divine command – in this case, delivered by the angelic young man to “go, tell his disciples and Peter” (16:7) – by no means corroborates a positive Markan characterization of these three women.⁴⁵

D. Conclusion: Discipleship and Gender in Mark

Whereas Schüssler Fiorenza draws a contrast between Jesus’s male disciples and the female disciples depicted in Mark 15:40–16:8, I have argued that the similarities between these characters are considerably more striking: both groups, despite initially favorable characterizations, ultimately fail.⁴⁶ Mark leaves neither group with grounds for boasting their superior standing relative to each other or, for that matter, anyone else. Against Schüssler Fiorenza, therefore, I side rather with Elisabeth Struthers Malbon, who argues that Jesus’s “fallible followers” – both women and men – illustrate “a twofold message” that whereas “anyone can be a follower [of Jesus], no one finds it easy.”⁴⁷ Up to a point one can also agree with Victoria Philips that the greater failure belongs to the Twelve, who had promised to Jesus their loyalty.⁴⁸ Yet differing with both Schüssler Fiorenza (markedly) and Philips (slightly), I maintain that the failures of both

⁴⁴ Catchpole, “Fearful Silence of the Women at the Tomb,” 3, in response to Theodore Weeden, *Mark – Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 48, 50. So also O’Collins, “Fearful Silence of Three Women,” 501–3.

⁴⁵ With Osiek, “Women at the Tomb,” 113–14 (cf. 105), who argues that Mark takes away the women’s credibility by silencing them. So also A. T. Lincoln, “Promise and the Failure: Mark 16:7, 8,” 285–87 (cf. 290–91). See further Susan Miller, “‘They Said Nothing to Anyone’: The Fear and Silence of the Women at the Empty Tomb (Mk 16.1–8),” *Feminist Theology* 13 (2004): 77–90 at 89. Cf. Philips, “The Failure of the Women,” 234: “Thus, Mark presents a complex characterization of the women. Their emotions are understandable; their actions – flight and the decision to be silent – are wrong.” Offering an ideological critique of the author, moreover, Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, 142 takes issue with Mark’s negative depiction, unpersuasively alleging that Mark was unwilling to portray women more positively than Jesus’s male disciples and thus offers a witness to “repatriarchalization” in the emerging Jesus movement.

⁴⁶ With Schottroff, “Mary Magdalene and the Women at Jesus’ Tomb,” 187, who compares the women’s flight from the empty tomb with the disciples’ flight from Gethsemane (cf. 14:50).

⁴⁷ Struthers Malbon, “Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark,” *Semeia* 28 (1983): 29. Moreover, Malbon opposes the notion “that the female characters of Mark are to be viewed as models of discipleship” (32; cf. 40–46). Similarly Lincoln, “Promise and the Failure: Mark 16:7, 8,” 293–96.

⁴⁸ Philips, “The Failure of the Women,” 223–96.

groups are in proportion to their roles in Mark – whether as major or minor characters – and thus above all bind them together.

It therefore does not stand to reason, as R. T. France argues, that the appearance of these three women in the narrative “marks a remarkable shift in the Gospel’s emphasis.”⁴⁹ Really the only thing that has changed is the characters’ gender, since the Twelve and the women at the end of Mark belong to the *same* group of faithless disciples. Therefore, in 15:40–16:8 the question of their gender is, from the standpoint of exegesis, irrelevant. Since the result of failure remains the same, one could in a sense regard these women as the continuation of the persona of Jesus’s male disciples, who likewise fell short.

What then shall we say about the interpretation of some scholars that these women offer a positive model of discipleship? As compared with the Twelve, the three women at the end of Mark are neither better nor worse. Like the Twelve, they are selected for a divinely sanctioned commission, and also like the Twelve they fail. I have argued elsewhere that, generally speaking, in Mark the Twelve do not constitute a positive model of discipleship.⁵⁰ Instead, Mark tends to hail the faithfulness of minor, usually anonymous characters in contradistinction to the Twelve. This point holds concerning the three (named) women at the end of Mark, who should be distinguished from Mark’s laudatory examples, including the anonymous woman who had already⁵¹ prepared Jesus’s body for burial in 14:3–9.

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⁴⁹ France, *Mark*, 661.

⁵⁰ Kelhoffer, “Readiness To Suffer.”

⁵¹ Cf. Osiek, “Women at the Tomb,” 111: “The reason for their return [in 16:1], the unfinished anointing of the body, is highly suspect. . . . In Mark, the end of the passion narrative offers no explanation why they could not finish the task on Friday, so that their reason for returning seems artificial.” See further Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 291.

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