

# THE PORTRAYAL OF THE HARDENING OF THE DISCIPLES' HEARTS IN MARK 8:14-21

**Authors:**

Sug-Ho Lee<sup>1</sup>  
Jan G. Van der Watt<sup>2,3</sup>

**Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>New Testament  
Department, Korean Bible  
University, South Korea

<sup>2</sup>Radboud University,  
The Netherlands

<sup>3</sup>Department of New  
Testament Studies, Faculty  
of Theology, University of  
Pretoria, South Africa

**Correspondence to:**

Sug-Ho Lee

**e-mail:**

leesugho@yahoo.co.kr

**Postal address:**

Korean Bible University,  
205 Sanggye-1-Dong,  
Nowon-Ku, Seoul,  
South Korea

**Keywords:**

disciples; discipleship;  
Gospel of Mark; hardness  
of heart; disciples' rejection  
of Jesus

**Dates:**

Received: 27 Oct. 2008

Accepted: 19 Mar. 2009

Published: 23 July 2009

**How to cite this article:**

Lee, S. & Van der Watt, Jan  
G., 2009, 'The portrayal  
of the hardening of the  
disciples' hearts in Mark  
8:14-21', *HTS Teologiese  
Studies/Theological Studies*  
65(1), Art. #148, 5 pages.  
DOI:10.4102/hts.v65i1.148

**This article is available at:**

<http://www.hts.org.za>

**Note:**

This article is a reworked  
version of a section of  
Dr Sug-Ho Lee's PhD  
dissertation, written  
under the supervision of  
Prof. dr Jan G. van der  
Watt, Department of New  
Testament Studies, Faculty  
of Theology, University of  
Pretoria in 2006. Dr Lee is a  
lecturer at the Korean Bible  
University, Seoul, South  
Korea.

© 2009. The Authors.

Licensee: OpenJournals  
Publishing. This work  
is licensed under the  
Creative Commons  
Attribution License.

**ABSTRACT**

The goal of this article is to consider the literary-theological function of the hardening of the disciples' hearts in Mark 8:14-21. The disciples are remarkably characterised by faithlessness, which is associated with hardness of their hearts. Although Mark uses the same language, 'hardness of heart', at different points in his Gospel to describe both Jesus' opponents and the disciples, he nevertheless retains a distinction between the two groups. With regard to the opponents' unbelief, the language means a divine judgement for their unbelieving rejection (cf. Mark 3:5-6). By contrast, when the language is used in relation to the disciples, it warns them (or the Markan readers) to beware of falling into the opponents' unbelieving attitudes (6:52; 8:17-18).

**INTRODUCTION**

In his Gospel, Mark's portrayal of the disciples is complex. They are called by Jesus to be with Jesus in 3:13-19; they are identified as 'insiders' of the kingdom and Jesus' true family (3:20-35); they receive the special exhortation for understanding the kingdom (4:13-20, 33-34; 7:17-23; 8:27-13:37); and they have the privilege of sharing in Jesus' ministry as observers and as participants (6:7-13, 30-44; 8:1-9). Nevertheless, the disciples are frequently shown their faithlessness. The episode in Mark 4:35-41 is the first in a cycle of three related boat scenes in which the basic cause of the disciples' faithlessness reveals itself as a continuing, even deepening malaise (6:45-52; 8:14-21). In the third and climatic scene, the disciples who still have no faith in 4:40, still do not grasp who Jesus is (8:17, 21). Also, although Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah and understands certain aspects of his teaching (8:29), the disciples consistently misunderstand Jesus' mission (and therefore their own as well) and his message of the kingdom (and consequently their place in it). In 8:27 to 10:45 specifically, the disciples are inappropriately preoccupied with their own status within the coming kingdom, in contrast to Jesus' teaching on the nature of true discipleship. They do not progress in their faith and understanding in any significant way as the narrative moves toward its climax. But, more interestingly from a literary point of view, is that the disciples' lack of understanding (1:1-8:26) seems to increase, which leads them to misunderstanding (8:27-10:45), and then to denying Jesus (14-15).<sup>1</sup>

Mark uses the language 'hardness of heart' which was applied to the Jewish religious leaders with a hostile meaning (3:5; 10:5), in order to indicate the disciples' faithlessness (6:52; 8:17-18). In the New Testament, the term *πώρωσις* expresses obduracy when linked with the word *καρδία* ('heart'). The term is always used figuratively in the New Testament. If the *καρδία* the seat of mental discernment and spiritual insight, is hardened, it cannot function properly to accept new insight (Robinson 1903:267-74). Jesus' critics are 'set in their ways' and in their insensitivity (or 'obdurate stupidity'). The language 'hardness of heart' is almost a stock expression in the New Testament for those who cannot will or will not perceive the truth, and is used most commonly with reference to Israel's failure to recognise Jesus as their Messiah (Rm 11:7, 25; 2 Cor 3:14; Jn 12:40, citing Is 6:10), but on two other occasions by Mark to describe the disciples' lack of understanding of the significance of Jesus' miracles (6:52; 8:17; France 2002:151).

In 3:5, the language identifies Pharisees and Herodians who consistently refuse to believe in Jesus as the Son of God and in his eschatological message (repentance and faith in 1:14-15), and implies God's impending judgement upon their unbelief (cf 12:1-12).<sup>2</sup> Does then the language 'hardness of heart' in 8:17-18 mean the disciples' rejection of Jesus and the same judicial implication for them? If not, what is the function of the language in relation to the disciples' unbelief? The purpose of this article is to consider the literary-theological function of the disciples' hardening in Mark 8:14-21.

**LITERARY COMPOSITION OF MARK 8:14-21**

The disciples have been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for the outsiders everything is in riddles without explanation (Mk 4:10-12; France 2002:269; Tolbert 1989:235; cf. Hollenbach 1983:316; Marcus 1984:559). Mark 4:13-34 informs us that, besides the privileged information that the disciples have received about the kingdom, Jesus explains his parables to them in private, presumably because they do not understand the parables and require explanation, despite their privileged knowledge (Beavis 1989:107).

The disciples' lack of understanding, introduced in Mark 4:13, is repeatedly displayed in the three sea scenes (4:35-41; 6:45-52; 8:14-21). In 4:35-41, Jesus' stilling of the storm leaves them wondering who he is (4:41), and Jesus suggests that their fear of the storm while in his presence is a sign of their continuing lack of faith (4:40). In 6:45-52 they do not recognise him when they see him walking on the sea and

1. As Theodore Weeden notes, the disciples' hardness of heart moves through three stages: imperceptiveness in 1:1-8:26; misconception of the nature of Jesus' messiahship in 8:27-10:52; and betrayal, abandonment and denial of Jesus in 14:10-72 (Weeden 1968:145-58; 1971:20-51).

2. Cf. Jesus' parable about the tenant farmers in 12:1-10, in which Jesus warns of divine judgement upon the opponents. In fact, this parable perhaps could be considered the paradigm of hard-heartedness toward God.

are terrified and when he identifies himself they are 'utterly astonished' (ἐξίσταντο; 6:51). And lest there be any doubt as to their lack of understanding, Mark concludes the story by telling his readers that the disciples' unbelief, which is demonstrated in their astonishment, is related to their failure to understand what he has done with the loaves in the preceding episode in Mark 6:30-44 (Petersen 1980: 205): their hearts are hardened (ἡ καρδία πεπωρωμένη) and therefore they do not understand Jesus' actions in either episode (6:52). In 8:14-21, a climax to all the boat scenes, the disciples once again show their faithlessness and blindness, and the 'hardening' language of his rebuke underscores their lack of understanding. When Jesus warns the disciples against the leaven of Pharisees and Herod, they worry about a lack of provisions (Painter 1997:121).

## EXEGETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON 'HARDNESS OF HEART'

### The leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod

In Mark 8:15, Jesus warns the disciples against the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod.<sup>3</sup> Leaven is used metaphorically in a number of ways. Leaven was to be maintained by keeping a small portion of leavened dough on hand in the household so that, when placed in a new batch of dough, it would leaven the whole for baking (e.g. Mtt 13:33; Hurtado 1989: 31-32). Its property of gradually pervading the dough serves as a negative here (e.g. 1 Cor 5:6-8; Gl 5:9), though more often as a positive (e.g. Mtt 13:33; Lk 13:31; Guelich 1993:422; France 2002:316; Edwards 2002:238). Leaven was a common metaphor in various contexts for a corrupting element (Mtt 16:6, 11, 12; Lk 12:1; 1 Cor 5:6, 7, 8<sup>4</sup>; Gl 5:9; in Greco-Roman authors such as Plutarch, *Quaestiones Romanae* 109, and Persius, *Satires*, 1. 24; Lane 1974:280; Guelich 1993:422; Witherington III 2001:236; France 2002:316; Edwards 2002:238; Donahue & Harrington 2002:252).

Its main metaphorical force in the New Testament seems to be in terms of powerful growth and influence. Here Jesus seems to be referring to the subtle corrupting influence of the Pharisees and Herod (Witherington III 2001:237). Jesus indicates that the influence of the Jewish religious leaders' unbelief, which is caused by their hardened hearts, penetrates the lives of the disciples. Jesus warns his disciples against the 'leaven' of both since it leads to unbelief in his deeds and a concomitant failure to recognise who he really is (Beavis 1989:111).

### The disciples' lack of understanding

Jesus warns the disciples to avoid the negative example of the Pharisees and Herod (8:15), and demands that they recognise the significance of the feeding miracles with spiritual perceptiveness (Hawkin 1972:495). Nevertheless, the disciples do not understand that Jesus is not really talking about literal loaves. Instead, they continue to discuss (διαλογίζοιτο)<sup>5</sup> with one another why they have no bread (8:16; Hurtado 1989:126). In Mark's Gospel, the verb *dialogizomai* ('to discuss' or 'argue') is used to describe the Jewish religious leaders' unbelieving rejection (2:6, 8; 11:31; Hooker 1991:195), whereas in Mark 9:33 it is used in order to describe the disciples' unbelieving failure to understand Jesus' life he is going to be a suffering and rejected person, tormented and killed but he will overcome death and rise after three days. This demonstrates that Mark has duplicated it here deliberately to indicate the kind of discussion that stems from unbelief (Hooker 1991:195). The statement of the disciples in 8:16 provides a basis

3. An intriguing parallel to the warning against 'the leaven of Herod' is provided by the late Targum 2 to Esth 3:8 'Just as we remove the leaven, so may the evil rule be removed from us, and may we be freed from this foolish king' (Jacobson 1983:129).

4. According to Jeremias, in the New Testament itself, 1 Cor 5:6-8 probably incorporates a tradition from a Jewish Christian Passover Haggadah in which leaven and its removal at Passover were symbols of the corruption of the last days and of God's final deliverance of his people from this corruption through Jesus, the Passover lamb (Jeremias 1966: 59-60).

5. This word renders the imperfect as durative action implying that the disciples simply ignored Jesus' warning in their concern about not having bread (Taylor 1966:366).

for their failure to understand Jesus' divine origin (cf 8:17). This description emphasises a perverse faithlessness among the disciples.

The disciples have repeatedly shown their lack of understanding (4:13; 6:52; 7:18), and Jesus' stern rebuke of them is therefore appropriate: 'Why are you talking (διαλογίζεσθε) about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?' (8:17-18). This rebuke is the harshest comment on the disciples' hardened hearts thus far in Mark's Gospel (cf. 4:13, 40; 6:52), and portrays them in language borrowed from the Old Testament, where rebellious Israel is condemned for disobedience to God's command and unwillingness to hear his prophetic word (e.g. Ps 95:8; Is 63:17; Marcus 2000:511).

The question, 'Are your hearts hardened?' (πεπωρωμένην ἔχετε τὴν καρδίαν ὑμῶν;), echoes 3:5-6, in which the Pharisees' hardened hearts cause them to reject that Jesus is bringing in the eschatological Sabbath conditions, when there will be ongoing relief from death (Lee 2006:608). Just as heart-hardening causes Pharaoh to refuse to believe and obey God's message, so hardness of heart causes the Jewish religious leaders not to believe in Jesus as the Son of God, but rather to reject him. Just as Pharaoh's unbelieving rejection determines the plagues as a great judgement (Ex 7:3) and the catastrophe at the sea (Ex 14:4, 8, 14), in a similar way the rejection by the religious leaders would determine God's consequent judgement (cf. 12:1-12). Therefore, the concept 'hardness of heart' contains a significant element of judgement.

In Mark's Gospel, the language 'hardness of heart' is used as a polemic against the unbelievers (3:5; 10:5; 6:52; 8:17-18). Thus, when the language is used to attack the Jewish religious leaders who refuse to accept Jesus as the Son of God, it criticises their obdurate, faithless behaviour and warns of the imminent divine punishment (cf. Pharaoh's hardness of heart in Ex 4-14). In contrast, when the language is used with regard to the disciples who have already accepted Jesus' demands, it functions to prevent them from mimicking the unbelieving behaviour.

In 8:17-18, the disciples not only appear hard-hearted and faithless, like the Pharisees in 3:5-6, but they also are drawing closer to the image of Jesus' hard-hearted opponents, the Jewish religious leaders. Thus, the Markan Jesus, through the language 'hardness of heart' warns them to keep away from falling into the same rejection as the opponents and encourages their faithfulness. For these effects, unlike the Pharisees' hardened hearts in 3:5, the disciples' hardness of heart is described with rhetorical questions in 8:17. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus sometimes hurls the progressive double-step question revealing his surprise and irritation at the disciples' faithlessness (cf 4:40; 7:18; 8:17, 21). This phraseology has a pedagogical purpose, namely, to call the disciples to attention. In 4:13, Jesus uses the progressive double-step question ('Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?') in order to warn the disciples against falling into the same spiritual ignorance that afflicts 'those outside' (cf. 4:11-12; 7:18; 8:14-21; Marcus 2000:310-11). Also, in 4:40 Jesus uses rhetorical questions ('Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?') to warn them against copying the unbelief of the Jewish religious leaders. At this point, the hardening motif in 8:17 is used to warn the disciples against the unbelief of the Jewish religious leaders, rather than to identify them as Jesus' opponents. Consequently:

*[8:17] is indicative of an attempt by Jesus, by bombarding them with a series of rhetorical questions, to shock [to warn] his disciples and Mark's readers into appreciating the existential seriousness of their condition.*

(Marshall 1989:212)

### Allusion to Jeremiah 5:21

In 8:18, Jesus' rhetorical questions continue by moving more directly to the prophetic accusation. There are two main points

of contact between 8:17-18 and Jeremiah 5:21,<sup>6</sup> where rebellious Israel is condemned for disobedience to God and reluctance to hear his prophetic word. First, LXX Jeremiah 5:21 and 8:18 have the same basic vocabulary: the wording ὀφθαλμοὶ αὐτοῖς καὶ οὐ βλέπουσιν ὧτα αὐτοῖς καὶ οὐκ ἀκούουσιν of Jeremiah 5:21 is similar to the expression in 8:18 ὀφθαλμοὺς ἔχοντες οὐ βλέπετε καὶ ὧτα ἔχοντες οὐκ ἀκούετε; (Schneck 1994:206). Secondly, the final words of 8:17, 'Are your hearts hardened?' echo the theme of 'hardness of heart' of Jeremiah 5.

Jeremiah 5:21, a prophetic accusation of Israel, makes for most insightful reading alongside the current passage; it foretells the Lord's punishment upon Israel for failing to understand the Lord and mentions her wicked leaders, like the Jewish religious leaders in Mark's Gospel (Hurtado 1989:12). Through the intertextual allusion in this passage, Mark may intend his readers to recall Jeremiah 5:21-31 in order to understand what he is trying to say about the significance of Jesus' ministry and the seriousness of rejecting it.

In Jeremiah 5:21, the prophet is told to declare that blindness and deafness have prevented Israel from understanding her dangerous state. This kind of language is related to her rejection (v 23) in Isaiah 6:10 and to the idols in Ps 115:4-7 (Carroll 1986:187). Here, the language points out that Israel had become like the idols they worship, that is, senseless. Due to its hardness of heart, Israel does not see the supervision of God's almighty power in nature (v 22), or hear the voice of God in his words. And Israel has turned aside and gone astray, that is to say, Israel has rejected God's dominion (v 23).

In Jeremiah 5:25-28, the prophet describes what happens to the Israel who rejects God's authority because of the hardness of hearts (Buber 1952:34). The result is God's judgement. The cessation of rain is attributed to their sinfulness (v 25; Rendsburg 1983:357). Thus, the experience of drought (v 30) can be understood as the coming of divine judgement, but also as a heaven-sent warning (Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard 1991:96). The divine judgement is developed in verse 29. Echoing verse 5:9, this verse affirms God's wrath and the inevitability of judgement: 'Should I not punish them for this?' Consequently, through this hardening language, the prophet declares the Lord's judgement upon the Israelites who have stubborn and rebellious hearts (Brueggemann 1988:64).

As Myers indicates, Jesus' questions in 8:17-18 echo not only the passage in Jeremiah (and Isaiah and Ezekiel), but also Moses' words to Israel in Dt 29:2-4 LXX.

*You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great testing (πειρασμοὺς) that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great signs (σημεῖα). But to this day the LORD has not given you a mind to understand (καρδῶν εἰδέναι), or eyes to see (ὀφθαλμοὺς βλέπειν), or ears to hear (ὧτα ἀκούειν) – NRSV.*

(Myers 1988:225)

Here, we see the themes of the hardened heart, the blind eyes and deaf ear all in the same order in which they appear in 8:17-18, as well as the themes of testing and signs, which appear in the previous Markan passage (8:11-13). A bit later, in Dt 32:7, the word 'remember' in 8:18 also comes to the fore (Marcus 2000:513). If Mark is making a thoughtful allusion to these passages in Deuteronomy, then the prospect for the disciples is more hopeful than for the exegetes: 'to this day' they have not been granted perceptive hearts, eyes and ears, but they will in the end receive them (cf. Dt 30:1-8; Marcus 2000:513; cf. Guelich 1993:425).

The Markan Jesus is not saying that the disciples are equivalent to the Israelites, who rejected God's authority because of their hardened hearts. Rather, Mark's language indicates that the disciples were in danger of missing the vital point about Jesus

as the Son of God. As he may have reminded the disciples of the hardened Israelites in the past history, he also warns them against Israel's unbelieving attitude and he tries to encourage them to perceive more fully Jesus' divine identity (Hurtado 1989:126-27).

### Implication of Οὐπω

The adverb 'not yet' (οὐπω; 8:17; 8:21) implies that they eventually will see and understand, though it will not come easily (cf. Gibson 1986:32). Unlike the religious leaders, their problem is not that they refuse to see and believe, but rather that they cannot see and believe until after Jesus' death and resurrection (Garland 1996:312). Geddert correctly describes the disciples' situation in Mark's gospel:

*Followers, however dull and unfaithful, are patiently instructed. If they follow all along the way Jesus leads, they will eventually be transformed from mere "data-collectors" into "meaning-discerners". It all hinges on the decision for or against Jesus.*

(Geddert 1989:69)

If they continue to follow him along the way, Jesus will remove their hardened hearts so that they will believe in Jesus. However, if the disciples succumb to the unbelieving leaven of the Pharisees and Herod, they will never understand and believe in Jesus.

In the following section of the Gospel (8:22-10:52), Jesus will struggle to remove the hardening from the disciples, to cure them of their blindness and to pull them out of misunderstanding toward perceptiveness (Guelich 1993:426; Marcus 2000:515). 'This section, appropriately enough, will be inaugurated by a story of the healing of a blind man (8:22-26), and that narrative will underline both the distorted human vision and the sense of divine promise that are implicit in the concluding words of our passage, "Do you not yet understand?"' (v 8:21; Marcus 2000:515).

Jesus wants to eliminate unbelieving attitudes from the disciples. But, like Judas, if they persist in unbelief, they will be rejected from God (14:21). Judas acts of his own volition to betray Jesus. He stands with the Jewish religious leaders to arrest and kill Jesus (14:43-47). About him, Jesus says 'Woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born' (14:21). In the Old Testament, the word 'woe' (ὠαί) was the prophets' message to announce impending judgement (Is 3:11; Mic 2:11). In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' pronouncement of woe upon the betrayer is one of two appearances of ὠαί, (13:7; cf. Mt 11:21; 23:13, 15-16, 23, 25, 27, 29; Lk 10:13; 11:42-44, 46-47, 52). And the second part of Jesus' pronouncement, 'it would be better if he had not never been born', is used in other Jewish texts to express the Messiah's judgement of the betrayer, e.g. 'when the Righteous One shall appear ... it would have been better for them [i.e. those who denied the name of the Lord] not to have been born' (1 Enoch 38:2; cf. 2 Enoch 41:2; m Hag 2:1; Evans 2001:378). God's judgement is coming upon the rebellion of Judas (cf. Mt 27:3-10).

Similarly, throughout Mark's Gospel, Peter shows his misunderstanding, which is associated with 'hardness of heart', in spite of Jesus' continual warning (8:17). When Jesus predicts his death, Peter rejects the idea of Jesus' suffering (8:32). He also thinks human thoughts rather than the thoughts of God (8:33), and falls into the temptation of Satan (14:32-38). This misunderstanding becomes acute in his denial of Jesus in the passion narrative (14:30; 66-72). However, he is not hostile to Jesus like Judas, but he is afraid and lacks understanding. As soon as the rooster crows, he remembers Jesus' prediction that 'Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times', and he repents of his sin (14:72). Although he denies Jesus, it is because of his fear, not because of rebellion. Thus Jesus will forgive him and heal his hardness in the new commission at Galilee (14:28; 16:7).<sup>7</sup>

6. It appears closer to Jr 5:21 and also to Ezk 12:2, but as a question it is closest in context to Is 42:18-20.

7. Cf. 8:38: 'Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

## LITERARY-THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE HARDENING OF THE DISCIPLES' HEARTS

### Warning against faithlessness

In the larger Jewish context in the first century, the Jewish authors who disputed with each other used the conventional hardening language of their day. The concept 'hardness of heart' is used in early Judaism to distinguish one particular community from another and to separate, within the same community, the faithful from the unfaithful. The language of hardening robustly attacks opponents and thoroughly defends the community's faithfulness. When the concept is used to attack the wicked, it contains the threat of divine punishment for their disobedience (Ex 4:14; Cairo-Damascus Document [A] 3:5-9; Sirach 16:15-16). In contrast, when the concept is used for the godly, it has the function of warning and exhortation to prevent them from copying the unbelieving attitude, which characterises the wicked (1QIsaiah<sup>a</sup> 6:9-10; Damascus Document [B] 2:9-10; 1QS 7:26).

Its conventional usage in early Judaism provides the appropriate context for properly assessing the usage of 'hardness of heart' in Mark's gospel. When the language is used for Jesus' opponents, it means a divine judgement on their unbelieving rejection (3:5-6). On the other hand, when the language is used for the Twelve and the believers, it functions as a warning and exhortation to prevent them from falling into the unbelieving condition of the opponents (8:17-18; cf. 6:52).

Mark shows a particular interest in the hardening of the disciples, but Matthew and Luke omit references to it (cf. Mt 14:25-33 with Mk 6:48-52; Mt 16:5-12 with Mk 8:17-21; Lk 24:25, 45-47). Mark actually interrupts a speech (on hardness of heart) being given by Jesus to the disciples to speak directly to the reader (Powell 1993:343). Mark uses the theme of the disciples' hardening to shock his readers into appreciating the existential seriousness of their condition, and to challenge them with the full demands and reality of discipleship. Through the portrayal of the disciples' faithlessness which is associated with the hardness of their hearts (8:17), Mark forces the readers to distance themselves from the disciples' unbelieving actions (fear, lack of understanding, and misunderstanding) and calls on them to respond differently through the appropriate understanding of Jesus and by following him with persistent faith. In this way, the disciples' negative portrayal works as a foil in the Gospel, challenging the reader to follow Jesus more faithfully than did the disciples. One way to think of the faithless disciples', then, is as an incentive to the readers to become true disciples who follow Jesus consistently with faith.<sup>8</sup>

### Spiritual perceptiveness as a prerequisite for discipleship

The language of 'hardness of heart' described by Jesus' rhetorical questions in 8:17 warns the disciples against the danger of falling into the same spiritual ignorance that afflicts the Jewish religious leaders, and encourages them to respond through an appropriate understanding of Jesus with spiritual perceptiveness. To stress the importance of spiritual perceptiveness, in 8:14-21 Mark repeatedly uses the key words βλέπω ('to see'), ἀκούω ('to hear'), and νοέω ('to understand'), as they appeared in 4:12 (Boobyer 1961:63).<sup>9</sup> According to Geddert, every usage of these terms in Mark's Gospel appears intended by the author to contribute to a carefully devised call for discernment concerning realities that lie beyond the observations of physical sense data (Geddert 1989:60). Mark uses these words to push for an understanding

8. Here I draw upon the distinction between 'true disciples' (as described in Jesus' teaching) and 'actual disciples' (the twelve as they are actually described in the narrative).

9. Mark 8:17 differs from 4:12, which is a quotation from Isaiah 6:9-10, in one verb. The verb for understanding that is related to seeing in 4:12 is a form of the verb to see, μὴ ἴδωσιν, which is parallel to mh. suniwsin (the understanding associated with hearing. In 8:17, συνίημι ('understanding') is accompanied by νοέω ('perceiving').

of the allusive meaning of miracles beyond visible things. The healing of the deaf-mute (7:31-37) and the healing of the blind man (8:22-26), bracket 8:14-21 with its emphasis on seeing, hearing, perceiving and understanding (8:18, 21). Not only are the characters physically blind, deaf, and mute in Mark's Gospel, but Jesus takes up blindness, deafness, and hardness of heart as metaphors for intellectual and spiritual ignorance, mainly of the disciples and the Markan readers (Fowler 1991:212).

Similarly, the healing of a blind man (8:22-26) and of Bartimaeus (10:46-52) sandwich Jesus' instruction of discipleship (8:27-10:45) in order to emphasise the importance of spiritual perceptiveness (insight) as a prerequisite for discipleship. At this point, the two-stage healing of the blind man of Bethsaida (8:22-26) denotes the gradual healing of spiritual blindness, i.e. the disciples' progress toward spiritual perceptiveness. The healing of Bartimaeus (10:46-52) not only typifies the fruitfulness of faith, but also the faithfulness of the ideal follower of Jesus. In the example of the healing of two blind men, Mark demands that the readers keep away from the spiritual ignorance caused by spiritual blindness (or hardness of heart), and follow him with spiritual perceptiveness and faith, like Bartimaeus.

## CONCLUSION

Although the language, 'hardness of heart', which is associated with Jesus' opponents, is also attributed to the disciples, the use of this term is not meant to suggest that the disciples have sided with the opponents of Jesus. Rather, it is indicative of an attempt to shock his disciples (and the Markan readers), who are in mortal danger of succumbing to the same unbelief that has afflicted the opponents. In Mark's Gospel, despite the continuous manifestation of Jesus' messiahship in the presence of the disciples, as in countless healings,<sup>10</sup> exorcisms,<sup>11</sup> and nature miracles,<sup>12</sup> the disciples remain amazingly obtuse and obdurate in spite of their involvement in the messianic drama (Weeden 1971:26-27). The negative characterisation of the disciples does not support their function as the criterion for Markan discipleship either. Rather, the disciples function to illuminate aspects of the Markan discipleship by providing, at times, a negative example of (a foil to) discipleship for the reader. The portrayal of the disciples in a negative light functions as just one part of the larger composite of Markan discipleship, which includes Mark's use of other characters as examples of discipleship,<sup>13</sup> and Jesus himself as a model for it.

## REFERENCES

- Beavis, M.A., 1989, *Mark's audience: The literary and social setting of Mark 4:11-12*, Sheffield Academic, Sheffield.
- Boobyer, G.H., 1961, 'The redaction of Mark IV. 1-34', *New Testament Studies* 8, 59-70.
- Brueggemann, W., 1988, *Jeremiah 1-25: To pluck up, to tear down*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Buber, M., 1952, *Right and wrong*, SCM, London.
- Carroll, R.P., 1986, *Jeremiah*, Westminster, Philadelphia.
- Craigie, P.C., Kelley, P. H. & Drinkard, J.H., 1991, *Jeremiah 1-25*, Word Book, Dallas.
- Donahue, J.R. & Harrington, D.J., 2002, *The Gospel of Mark*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville.
- Edwards, J.R., 2002, *The Gospel according to Mark*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Evans, C.A., 2001, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville.
- Fowler, R.M., 1991, *Let the reader understand: Reader-response criticism and the Gospel of Mark*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.
10. Cf. 1:29-32, 32-34, 40-45; 2:1-12; 3:1-5, 9-10; 5:21-43; 6:1-6, 53-56; 7:31-37; 8:22-26.
11. Cf. 1:21-28, 32-34, 39; 3:11; 5:1-20; 7:24-30.
12. Cf. 4:35-41; 6:35-44, 45-52; 8:1-10.
13. Jairus (5:21-24, 35-43), haemorrhaging woman (5:25-34), Syrophenician woman (7:24-30), Bartimaeus (10:46-52), etc.

- France, R.T., 2002, *The Gospel of Mark: A commentary on the Greek text*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Garland, D.E., 1996, *Mark*, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids.
- Geddert, T.J., 1989, *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan eschatology*, Sheffield Academic, Sheffield.
- Gibson, J.B., 1986, 'The rebuke of the disciples', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, 31–47.
- Guelich, R.A., 1993, *Mark 1:1–8:26*, Word Books, Dallas.
- Hawkin, D.J., 1972, 'The incomprehension of the disciples in the Marcan redaction', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, 491–500.
- Hollenbach, B., 1983, 'Lest they should turn and be forgiven: Irony', *The Bible Translator* 34, 313–321.
- Hooker, M.D., 1991, *The Gospel according to St Mark*, A & C Black, London.
- Hurtado, L.W., 1989, *Mark*, Hendrickson, Peabody.
- Jacobson, H., 1983, *The Exagoge of Ezekiel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Jeremias, J., 1966, *The eucharistic words of Jesus*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia.
- Lane, W.L., 1974, *The Gospel of Mark*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Lee, S.H., 2006, 'An exegetical-theological consideration of the hardening of the Jewish religious leader's hearts in Mark 3:10–6', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 27(2), 596–613.
- Marcus, J., 1984, 'Mark 4:10-12 and Marcan epistemology', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, 557–574.
- Marcus, J., 2000, *Mark 1-8*, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday.
- Marshall, C.D., 1989, *Faith as a theme in Mark's narrative*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Myers, C., 1988, *Binding the strong man: A political reading of Mark's story of Jesus*, Orbis, New York.
- Painter, J., 1997, *Mark's Gospel*, Routledge, London.
- Petersen, N.R., 1980, 'The composition of Mark 4:1–8:26', *Harvard Theological Review* 73, 185–217.
- Powell, M.A., 1993, 'Toward a narrative-critical understanding of Mark', *Interpretation* 47, 341–346.
- Rendsburg, G., 1983, 'Hebrew RHM—"rain"', *Vetus Testamentum* 33, 357–362.
- Robinson, J.A., 1903, *St Paul's epistle to the Ephesians*, Macmillan, London.
- Schneck, R., 1994, *Isaiah in the Gospel of Mark I-VIII*, Bibal Press, Villejo.
- Taylor, V., 1966, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, Macmillan, London.
- Tolbert, M.A., 1989, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's world in literary-historical perspective*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.
- Weeden, T.J., 1968, 'The heresy that necessitated Mark's gospel', *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 59, 145–168.
- Weeden, T.J., 1971, *Mark-traditions in conflict*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia.
- Witherington III, B., 2001, *The Gospel of Mark: A social-rhetorical commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.