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# Mimetic Mediators in Mark: How Graeco-Roman Biographies Use Secondary Characters to Offer Multiple Patterns of Imitation

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## Abstract

Can the Markan disciples still be viewed as potential role models for the Gospel audience if Mark's writing is identified as a biography? This long-standing line of narrative interpretation has recently been rejected as anachronistic by Helen K. Bond, who maintains that in Graeco-Roman biographies, secondary characters are only included for what they bring to the portrait of the protagonist. In response, this paper demonstrates that ancient biographies regularly use followers of their main characters to provide multiple mimetic patterns that clarify, broaden, and mitigate what it means to imitate their heroes. In particular, Mark's cast of secondary characters offers three alternative patterns of behaviour for potential followers of Jesus: *apostles*, who emulate his itinerant lifestyle of preaching, healing, and exorcism; *hosts*, who provide apostles with food and shelter in their homes; and *supporters*, who serve the movement in other ways in accordance with their abilities and social status.

## Keywords

*Bioi*, *exempla*, *mimesis*, *narratology*, *paradeigmata*, *vitae*

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## Introduction

It is a well-established narratological tradition to regard the Markan disciples as potential role models for the Gospel audience, who can learn from these characters as they strive to imitate Jesus. And there is a growing number of scholars who acknowledge the significant affinities between the Gospel of Mark and Graeco-Roman biographies (*βίοι* or *vitae*) with their often-recognised aim to present behavioural paradigms for the audience to imitate. But are these two traditions compatible? In her excellent monograph *The First Biography of Jesus*, Helen K. Bond (2020: 193–96) maintains that secondary characters in ancient biographies have no other purpose than to contribute to the portrait of the central character. Although Mark may occasionally use minor characters to exemplify certain aspects of discipleship (Bond 2020: 167, 220; 2023: 147), it would therefore be inappropriate for a first-century audience to look to the Twelve as behavioural examples, and doing so ‘would be to misunderstand the nature of ancient biography’, Bond (2020: 196; 2023: 147) argues.<sup>1</sup>

There is no question that the disciples frequently contribute to Mark’s portrait of Jesus. They give him occasion to teach on a particular subject (Mk 2.23; 8.14; 9.10, 34, 38; 10.13, 35; 13.1, 4), to clarify himself (4.10; 7.17; 10.24, 26, 28, 41; 11.21; 14.19), and to perform a particular miracle (4.38; 5.31; 6.35–36, 45–48), and are regularly present to listen to him and witness his miracles (4.35–42; 8.1–9; 9.2–8; 11.12–14, 20; cf. Klauck 1982: 12–15).<sup>2</sup> As Bond (2020: 197, 200–209) argues, their presence establishes Jesus as an authoritative teacher, their ineptitude works as a pedagogical scheme to let Jesus explain his teachings,<sup>3</sup> and their eventual abandonment of their master serves to make his death all the more lonely and courageous. Viewing Mark’s portraits of secondary characters as subordinated to his characterisation of Jesus could also help explain why Peter, James, and John sometimes behave erratically or inconsistently (Bond 2020: 193–95; cf. de Campos 2021: 13–15).<sup>4</sup>

Still, by limiting the role of followers in ancient biographies to what they make of the biographee, Bond rejects a long scholarly tradition of viewing the

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1. LePort (2021) finds Bond’s claim ‘insightful, and paradigm challenging’. De Campos (2021: 13–16) finds it ‘provocative’, and forcing a single-focus schema that is difficult to sustain.
  2. Other characters make similar contributions (Malbon 2000: 43–45).
  3. Bond (2020: 190–92) rightfully rejects the view that Mark is portraying the apostles as inept to promote alternative early Christian leaders (cf. Tyson 1961; Weeden 1968; Tannehill 1977: 394; Telford 1999: 131–37; Black 2012: 154–55, 328–29; Sim 2014; de Campos 2021: 1–36).
  4. Secondary characters are all characters except the protagonist. The often used distinction between major and minor characters is less relevant for the present argument, which is more concerned with the ‘followers’ in Malbon’s (1989: 275–77) differentiation between friends, foes, and followers of Jesus, including those ‘minor characters’ that Williams (1994: 11–14) finds to appear from the crowd to follow Jesus.

disciples as potential role models for Mark's audience. Tannehill (1977: 392–93) famously argues that the Markan disciples make the audience evaluate their own attempts at discipleship. Danove (2005: 90–126), Rhoads, Michie, and Dewey (Rhoads et al. 2012: 123–30; Dewey 2019: 177) maintain that Mark's audience is led to identify with the disciples and learn from their failures. Hurtado (1996: 9) takes the portrayal of the Twelve to be 'meant to teach by example important points about following Jesus'. Malbon (2000: 70–71), Miller (2004: 166–68), and Aernie (2018: 34–43, 119–23) hold both male and female followers of Christ to be models of discipleship for Mark's community. De Campos (2021: 15–16, 217–24) finds the disciples to complement the portrayal of Jesus by teaching Mark's audience about the challenges of discipleship. Even BurrIDGE (2007: 182), who is no foreigner to viewing Mark as a *βίος*, declares that the disciples 'provide a further model for Mark's audience to learn from and emulate'.<sup>5</sup>

To give Bond's rejection of such readings the scrutiny it deserves, this paper will demonstrate that other ancient biographers use followers and associates of their main characters not only to characterise them, but also to illuminate what it means to imitate them.<sup>6</sup> Applying this insight to Mark, I will argue that Mark offers three alternative patterns of behaviour for potential followers of Jesus: *apostles*, who abandon their family and livelihood for an itinerant life of preaching and healing; *hosts*, who provide Jesus and other itinerant teachers with food and shelter; and *supporters*, who support the Jesus movement in other ways more suited to their varying circumstances.

## Genre, Biography, and Mimetic Mediators

How a writing is understood depends heavily on what expectations the reader brings to it (Hirsch 1967: 68–85). This is the basis of cognitive genre theory, where a genre is conceptualised as a set of expectations, informed by previous encounters with similar communication, that are used by writers and readers alike in the processes of expressing their thoughts and interpreting what has been written. This theory is less concerned with the categorisation of texts than with their interpretation and does not declare texts to *belong* to a particular genre, but to *participate*, to various extents, in one or more genres (Seitel 2003; Sheridan 2010: 293–96; Dinkler 2020).

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5. Cf. BurrIDGE (2007: 223): 'Of course, it was not necessarily only the central character in a biography who was a subject for *mimesis*: the other people could also give examples to follow or avoid. Therefore, the disciples, struggling with their "little faith", yet following Jesus, provide good material for the audience to imitate.'
  6. Since we are discussing a genre, the analysis will not be limited to works that the Markan author could have read personally but use well-known ancient works that give an understanding of what to expect from Graeco-Roman biography.

It is therefore highly significant that the scholarly majority has shifted from regarding Mark as a unique writing with no relevant literary predecessors to view it as participating in the genre of Graeco-Roman biography, or at least acknowledge that it has substantial affinities with this genre. Votaw (1915: 45–73, 217–49) was first to argue this view, Talbert (1977) reinitiated the debate, and BurrIDGE (2018 [1992]) turned the tide (Walton 2015: 86–88; Bond 2020: 29–37). Many have followed BurrIDGE,<sup>7</sup> and even those disagreeing with him tend to accept ancient βίοι as valid comparative material for Mark.<sup>8</sup>

When ancient audiences encountered a βίος, they expected it not only to commemorate a prominent individual, but also to depict him as a suitable role model—*παραδείγμα* or *exemplum*—for them to imitate (Momigliano 1993: 71–73; Hägg 2012: 30–35, 48, 295; Konstan and Walsh 2016: 30–32; Shively 2018: 286–87; Bond 2020: 45, 48). This expectation coheres with the prominent focus on imitation in Graeco-Roman education and learned culture (Marrou 1960; Criore 2001; Vegge 2006: 13–107), where students at all stages imitated literary style and moral content from the classics,<sup>9</sup> and orators provided their audiences with good examples to emulate and bad ones to avoid. Bond (2020: 46–49; 2023: 137) compares ancient biographies to such *exempla writ large*. Hägg (2012: 273–75) identifies a double process of *μίμησις* (‘representation’ or ‘imitation’) when the biographer first aims to represent the admirable traits of the biographee in writing, whereafter the audience strive to imitate them in their own lives.

This focus on imitation allowed ancient biographers to focus not on their most historically significant stories, but on those best illustrating their protagonist’s

7. Cf. Bryan (1993: 61–62), Witherington (2001: 1–9), France (2002: 4–6), Hägg (2012: 148–56), Bock (2015: 37), Tan (2016: 7–9), Licona (2017: 3–6), Bond (2020: 1–2), and John (2022: 1–8). See also the criticism of BurrIDGE’s analysis by Yarbrow Collins (2007: 29), Kelber (2020: 58–67, 74), and Shively (2020).

8. Fendler (1991: 77–80) finds many similarities between Mark and ancient biographies. Vines (2002: 22) acknowledges Mark’s biographical focus. Boring (2006: 6–7) identifies significant points of contact with βίοι. Yarbrow Collins (2007: 33) finds Mark, as an eschatological historical monograph, to be similar to a historical biography. Rose’s (2007: 70–77) argument that Mark is a *biographisch-theologischen Erzählung* implies a great deal of participation in the biographical genre. Baum (2013: 534–64) acknowledges Mark’s biographical form, but finds it to be closer to rabbinical than Graeco-Roman biographies. Breytenbach (2020) finds both similarities and differences between Mark and biographical writings, but does not accept a biographical genre before Plutarch. Even Byers (2023: 168, 172–174, 181, 184) who argues that the genre of Mark’s Gospel is ‘gospel’, repeatedly asserts that it also participates in the βίος genre.

9. Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.1.35–36 (LCL 124: 80), argues that children learning to write should not copy meaningless sentences but morally significant sayings of famous men.

virtues,<sup>10</sup> and to reduce historically important figures to caricatures whose sole function is to support the biographer's portrait of the protagonist (Pelling 1980; Licona 2017: 108–11). This is why Mark can reduce a Roman procurator to his role in Jesus's death (Mk 15.1–15, 43–45) and cut down a tetrarch to a dystopic syncritic counterpart to Jesus's kingship (6.14–29; Gelardini 2011; Bond 2020: 167–68, 178–89; Shedd 2021: 83–127).

But literary texts do not handle all expectations of their genres in the simplest possible way (Seitel 2003: 290–91; Sheridan 2010: 296; Shively 2018: 279–83; Dinkler 2020: 90–91). Some biographical writings may focus on vices rather than virtues,<sup>11</sup> on wittiness rather than action,<sup>12</sup> or on alternative ideals that question traditional values (Konstan and Walsh 2016: 32–39). Others may neglect to provide narrative closure (Shively 2018: 279–86). The same freedom pertained to the use of secondary characters. As we shall see, ancient biographers used secondary characters not only to build up their portrait of the central character, but also as complementary role models who illuminate what it may mean to imitate him. While the biographee embodies all of the biographer's high ideals, other characters emulate those to varying degrees of success, thereby mediating their mimetic ideals to make them more accessible for the audience. In philosophical biographies, disciples of the protagonist would be the natural choice for such supplementary *παραδείγματα*.

### Chrysantas in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*

Xenophon (ca. 430–355 BCE) introduces his *Cyropaedia* by declaring that the character and leadership skills of Cyrus the Great (ca. 600–530 BCE) inspired many people to obey him enthusiastically, even when large distances made it impossible for him to enforce his will.<sup>13</sup> He lauds how Cyrus makes every effort to be the perfect example to his subordinates:<sup>14</sup> always demonstrating self-control,<sup>15</sup> never showing anger,<sup>16</sup> always exercising before dinner,<sup>17</sup> and never

10. Plutarch, *Alex.* 1.1–3 (LCL 99: 224); *Nic.* 1.5 (LCL 65: 210; cf. Wardman 1971; Duff 1999: 14–22; Burridge 2018: 61–62; Konstan and Walsh 2016: 30–31).

11. Plutarch, *Crass.* 2.1 (LCL 65: 314); Suetonius, *Cal.* 22.1 (LCL 31: 446).

12. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.20 (LCL 16: 54); *Alexander Romance* 1.37–38 (Bergson 1965: 59–63).

13. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 1.1.3 (LCL 51: 4–6). Although the *Cyropaedia* contains more utopic didactic fiction than historical truth, Momigliano (1993: 55) calls it 'the most accomplished biography we have in classical Greek literature', and Hägg (2012: 10–66) uses it as his starting point for the development of the biographical genre.

14. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 8.1.26–29; 8.1.39 (LCL 52: 318–20, 322); cf. Nadon (2001: 131–32).

15. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 8.1.30 (LCL 52: 320).

16. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 8.1.33 (LCL 52: 320).

17. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 8.1.38; cf. 2.1.29 (LCL 52: 322; cf. 51: 152).

spitting or blowing his nose in public,<sup>18</sup> all in order to mould worthy men after his own image and build a lasting empire.<sup>19</sup>

The biographical narrator asserts that the whole court eagerly excelled in imitating Cyrus,<sup>20</sup> but especially emphasises Chrysantas, a nobleman he describes as *φρονήσει διαφέρων* ('discerning in wisdom').<sup>21</sup> The narrator lets Chrysantas introduce new topics for discussion,<sup>22</sup> pose perceptive questions,<sup>23</sup> and speak in support of his master.<sup>24</sup> Cyrus gives him command of his troops,<sup>25</sup> and praises his way of promptly carrying out his orders.<sup>26</sup> When Chrysantas asks his master to address the troops to prime them for battle (Gera 1993: 109–15; Nadon 2001: 144), Cyrus responds that no words of his can make them better than they already are, and if they forget their training in the heat of battle, the proper paradigm is already in place:

'For my part', he said, 'I would not have trusted even those we have trained ourselves to stand fast, if not for the presence of you, who will be examples (*παραδείγματα*) for them of what they need to be and can prompt them if they forget anything.'<sup>27</sup>

When Hystapas, another of Cyrus's trusted lieutenants, questions why Chrysantas has been given such an honourable position in the court, Cyrus explains that Chrysantas takes care to be available even before he is called, and uses his own initiative and discernment to serve his master's interest over and beyond his orders.<sup>28</sup> Hystapas happily declares: *κἀγὼ πειράσομαι ταῦτα ποιεῖν* ('I will also try to do that!').<sup>29</sup>

Even though Cyrus is presented as the best possible example of a leader, his elevated position at the pinnacle of the Persian empire makes it impossible for him to be a usable model of subordination and servitude (Nadon 2001: 131).

18. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 8.1.42 (LCL 52: 324).

19. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 8.1.43 (LCL 52: 324). Cf. 7.5.86 (LCL 52: 300), where Cyrus exhorts his hearers to be *βέλτιστα παραδείγματα* ('excellent examples') to their juniors.

20. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 8.1.39 (LCL 52: 322–324).

21. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 2.3.5; cf. 8.4.20 (LCL 51: 178; cf. 52: 384–86). Cf. Gera (1993: 167, 189).

22. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 2.2.17–18; 7.5.55–56 (LCL 51: 166; 52: 284–86). Cf. Gera (1993: 163–64).

23. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 7.1.6–8; 7.5.8 (LCL 52: 204–6, 264). Cf. Gera (1993: 105).

24. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 4.3.15–21; 6.2.21–22; 8.1.1–5 (LCL 51: 354–58; 52: 160–62; 52: 304–8). Gera (1993: 184) remarks that Chrysantas often serves as the enthusiastic 'seconded' of Cyrus's proposals.

25. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 2.4.22; 3.1.5; 5.3.36; 6.3.21; 7.3.15 (LCL 51: 208; 51: 218; 52: 58; 52: 184; 52: 356). Cf. Gera (1993: 79).

26. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 4.1.3 (LCL 51: 308–10).

27. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 3.3.55 (LCL 51: 296). Translations from Greek are my own.

28. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 7.4.10; cf. 7.4.5 (LCL 52: 380; cf. 376). Cf. Gera (1993: 132–33, 184).

29. Xenophon, *Cyr.* 8.4.12 (LCL 52: 382). Gera (1993: 185) suggests that his enthusiasm is feigned.

Chrysantas complements Cyrus by being the model subordinate, and is therefore being held up as a *παράδειγμα* for both fellow commanders and common soldiers. The practice of using an associate of the protagonist to complement him as a role model is thus established in Graeco-Roman biography as early as in Xenophon, and we should expect later biographers to follow suit.

### Plato in Plutarch's *Dion*

Plutarch (ca. 45–120 CE) introduces his various biographies by promising to focus on what reveals the character (*ἦθος*) of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE),<sup>30</sup> pledging to collect anecdotes that illuminate the character and manner (*τρόπος*) of Nikias (ca. 470–413 BCE),<sup>31</sup> and expressing his hope that his dedicatee's two sons will accept their noble ancestor Aratus (ca. 315–240 BCE) as a model (*παράδειγμα*) to mould their life after.<sup>32</sup> In *Pericles*, he declares his conviction that simply by observing the exemplary actions of his biographees, his audience will be given incentives to improve and the ability to choose the better way to act.<sup>33</sup>

In his biography of Dion of Syracuse (ca. 408–354 BCE), Plutarch introduces the Athenian philosopher Plato (ca. 429–347 BCE) as one of his secondary characters and presents him as a perfect *παράδειγμα*. Dion is presented as Plato's personal disciple,<sup>34</sup> and his elevated, magnanimous, and manly (*ὑψηλός, μεγαλόφρων, ἀνδρώδης*) character is said to be greatly enhanced by his swift grasp of the famous philosopher's teachings.<sup>35</sup> Thanks to his intellectual acuity, Dion advances to a position of the tyrant's most trusted envoy,<sup>36</sup> and when the throne is inherited by the young Dionysius II, Dion dazzles the new government with his perception and outspokenness.<sup>37</sup> His most important advice to the young ruler is to appoint Plato as his teacher and role model:

Dion saw that [Dionysius's] character was mutilated and deformed from lack of education, and urged him to turn to learning, to do his utmost to convince the foremost of all philosophers to come to Sicily, and to submit himself to him when he came, so

30. Plutarch, *Alex.* 1.1–3 (LCL 99: 224); cf. Wardman (1971: 254–61), Cox (1983: xi, xiii–xiv), Duff (1999: 14–22), Burrige (2018: 61–62), and Smith (2019: 80–85, 114). On Plutarch's use of fiction, see John (2022: 87–98).

31. Plutarch, *Nic.* 1.5 (LCL 65: 210); cf. Duff (1999: 22–24).

32. Plutarch, *Arat.* 1.3–4 (LCL 103: 2–4); cf. Duff (1999: 68).

33. Plutarch, *Per.* 1.3–4; 2.2–4 (LCL 65: 4–6); cf. Duff (1999: 34–51) and John (2022: 187–88).

34. Plutarch, *Dion* 1.1 (LCL 98: 2).

35. Plutarch, *Dion* 4.1–3 (LCL 98: 6–8).

36. Plutarch, *Dion* 5.4 (LCL 98: 10–12).

37. Plutarch, *Dion* 6.3 (LCL 98: 12–14).



that his character would be arranged according to the order of virtue, and made to resemble the best and most divine example (*παράδειγμα*) in existence.<sup>38</sup>

The young ruler initially complies, but soon prefers to emulate other role models, and eventually turns into a negative example for Plutarch's audience.<sup>39</sup>

Although Plato's great renown makes this an unusual case, it demonstrates that a secondary character can be upheld as even more exemplary than the protagonist. Dion's alleged ability to imitate Plato contributes greatly to his characterisation and to his utility as a biographical role model, but cannot even in his own biography threaten Plato's position as the ultimate *παράδειγμα*.

### Rogatianus in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*

Porphyry (ca. 234–305 CE) demonstrates his focus on imitation by opening his biography of Plotinus (ca 205–270 CE)<sup>40</sup> by portraying his protagonist's disdain for his physical body,<sup>41</sup> radical veganism,<sup>42</sup> and last moments,<sup>43</sup> before discussing such basic but inimitable data as Plotinus's birth date and teachers.<sup>44</sup> By naming no less than fourteen of Plotinus's disciples from a wide variety of backgrounds—senators, physicians, a poet, a banker, and several women<sup>45</sup>—he broadens the image of a Neoplatonist disciple, and makes it clear that men and women in any occupation are welcome to join the movement.

He also illuminates the benefits of the school's teachings by describing how one high-born disciple greatly improves his life by emulating Plotinus's radical asceticism:

There was also Rogatianus, a senator, who so radically turned from his former life that he gave up all his property, disbanded his whole household, and renounced his rank. When the lictors arrived, and he was to take office as a praetor, he neither appeared publicly nor took charge of the proceedings. He did not even opt to live in a house of his own, but went around to his friends and acquaintances, eating here and sleeping there, although he ate only every other day. By this abstinence and disregard of life he, who

38. Plutarch, *Dion* 10.2 (LCL 98: 20).

39. Smith (2019: 86) notes that Plutarch tends to avoid drawing unnecessary attention to the flaws of his biographees, but secondary characters are another matter.

40. Edwards (2000: 53) calls it 'a prime example' of late antique biography (cf. Kalligas 2014: 4–6; Emilsson 2017: 10–13, 19).

41. Plotinus refuses to have his portrait painted in Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 1 (LCL 440: 2–4).

42. Plotinus refuses medications based on animal flesh in Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 2 (LCL 440: 4).

43. A snake (*δράκωντος*) appearing near Plotinus's deathbed suggests divine endorsement in Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 2 (LCL 440: 6). Cf. Edwards (1991) and Kalligas (2014: 24–25).

44. Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 2, 3 (LCL 440: 6, 8) gives the year 205 CE, but no date, and names only Ammonius (ca. 175–242 CE).

45. Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 7–9 (LCL 440: 24–32); cf. Kalligas (2014: 41–46, 48) and Emilsson (2017: 14–15).

was so swollen that he had to be carried in a chair, regained his strength and the ability to use his hands, which he had been unable to stretch out, much easier than those who practice the manual crafts. Plotinus approved of him, kept him in the highest regard, and held him up as a good example (*ἀγαθὸν παράδειγμα*) for those practicing philosophy.<sup>46</sup>

Rogatianus's story suggests that followers of Plotinus should strive to emulate his ascetic lifestyle, which may improve a declining health considerably.<sup>47</sup> Plotinus's reported recommendation of Rogatianus as a good *παράδειγμα* for any practitioner of philosophy transcends the limitations of the narrative world, and presents Rogatianus as a secondary role model to Porphyry's audience, guiding them in how best to imitate Plotinus.

### Menippus in Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius*

Philostratus (ca. 170–250 CE) lauds his biographee Apollonius of Tyana (ca. 3–97 CE) as a master of genuine wisdom,<sup>48</sup> and portrays his most senior disciple, Damis,<sup>49</sup> as an intelligent and valuable companion,<sup>50</sup> who consistently poses insightful questions to his master<sup>51</sup> and engages him in many learned conversations.<sup>52</sup> But not all of Apollonius's disciples are as competent. Another follower, Menippus, is lured by a beautiful vampire (*ἔμπουσα*)<sup>53</sup> who wants to date him, marry him, and eventually eat him whole. Fortunately, Apollonius is able to rescue Menippus by revealing that the wedding table and servants are mere illu-

46. Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 7 (LCL 440: 26–28).

47. A third-century inscription commemorates an M. Julius Quintianus Flavius Rogatianus who donated an entire library to his home town, so Rogatianus may be a historical figure (Kalligas 2014: 46).

48. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.2 (LCL 16: 6–8). Hägg (2012: 320) notes that *Life of Apollonius* and the *Cyropaedia* are the two longest ancient biographies ever written. Koskeniemi (1994: 169–89) points to Philostratus's considerable time-gap to Apollonius, his use of questionable sources, and obvious inaccuracies in Apollonius's involvement in world politics to conclude that Philostratus's biography tells us more about the third century than the first. Archer (2022: 85–86) unconvincingly argues that Philostratus's work is too long to be counted as a biography. Yarbro Collins (2007: 166–67, 278–79) notes similarities between Apollonius's and Jesus's wonderworking abilities.

49. Damis is putatively Philostratus's main source. Cf. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.3 (LCL 16: 8–10), 8.29 (LCL 17: 398); and Koskeniemi (1994: 173–74).

50. He is, however, incompetent in deciphering dreams. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.3, 19, 23 (LCL 16: 8–10, 50–54, 66–68).

51. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.22, 1.26, 1.30, 3.2, 4.15, 5.21 (LCL 16: 62–64, 78, 84–86, 234–36, 375, 508).

52. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.33–34, 2.5, 2.11, 2.14–15, 2.22, 3.34, 5.7 (LCL 16: 94–100, 124–28, 140–44, 152–60, 172–78, 306–8, 474–80). Bond (2020: 203–4) notes that Damis frequently prompts Apollonius to explain further.

53. She is also called *ὄφις* ('snake'), *λαμία* (a child-eating monster), *μορμολυκία* ('bogeyman'), and *φάσμα* ('phantom').

sions.<sup>54</sup> Thereby, he gains a disciple who can run errands for his master,<sup>55</sup> prompt him to express his views,<sup>56</sup> and overreact in order to let Apollonius demonstrate restraint.<sup>57</sup> Menippus eventually grows into one of Apollonius's most prominent disciples,<sup>58</sup> and his ascending narrative arc makes him an excellent role model for aspiring philosophers.

The contrast between Menippus and Damis also gives the biographer a choice between two levels of philosophical aptitude in his dialogues. For many advanced topics, the insightful Damis is Apollonius's preferred conversation partner, but when initiating a discourse on whether myths or fables are best suited to convey moral principles,<sup>59</sup> Philostratus lets Menippus express the popular opinion that his master will disprove:

[Apollonius asked:] 'Which kind of tales convey wisdom?' 'Those by the poets', [Menippus] said, 'since they praise it the way it happened'. 'And what about those of Aesop?' 'Frogs', he said, 'and donkeys, and garbage, suitable only for old ladies and small children'. 'But to my mind', said Apollonius, 'Aesop's tales are the ones more suitable for wisdom'.<sup>60</sup>

This is an example of a particular narrative utility of an incompetent follower. To have Damis express this view, and then be gainsaid by his master, would undermine his characterisation as competent. Philostratus could have had Damis report popular opinion (cf. Mk 8.27–30), but using Menippus supports the inept disciple's character development as slowly growing into competence, and teaches the audience that being corrected by one's master is part of learning philosophy. In this way, Philostratus presents his audience with a range of increasingly challenging role models, inspiring them to aspire to proceed from the fumbling Menippus, via the more competent Damis, to the accomplished Apollonius.

## Disciples of Philosophers in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

Diogenes Laertius (third century CE) regularly elevates his biographees by depicting their disciples as highly competent philosophers in their own right.<sup>61</sup>

54. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 4.25; cf. 4.38 (LCL 16: 402–8; cf. 436).

55. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 4.46 (LCL 16: 458–60); cf. Mk 8.6; 11.1–3.

56. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 4.40; 5.7 (LCL 16: 442, 474–80); cf. Mk 4.10; 9.28; 10.35–37; 13.3–4.

57. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 4.44 (LCL 16: 452–4); cf. Mk 8.31–33; 9.38–41; 14.47–49.

58. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 4.38 (LCL 16: 436).

59. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 5.14–15 (LCL 16: 490–98). The argument may be a veiled defence for his own use of fiction.

60. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 5.14 (LCL 16: 492).

61. Yarbro Collins (2007: 74–75, 158–60) points out similarities in how Mark's and Diogenes' protagonists often take the initiative in recruiting followers, in contrast to the early Jewish tradition of waiting for the would-be disciple to approach the master (cf. Klauck 1982: 9–10; Stowasser 2023: 122–23).

For example, Epicurus's (ca. 341–270 BCE) disciple Metrodorus (ca. 330–277 BCE) never leaves his master's side, constantly exhibits his own excellence, and proves to be undaunted in the face of death—thereby illustrating a successful imitation of his master.<sup>62</sup>

Other followers demonstrate considerable creativity in seeking a philosophical life. Diogenes of Sinope's (ca. 404–323 BCE) disciple Monimus (fourth century BCE) demonstrates his philosophical aptitude by playing mad in front of his employer, a banker, literally throwing out money from the banker's table until he is dismissed from his position, and thereby gains the desired freedom to live a philosopher's life.<sup>63</sup> Crates's (ca. 365–285 BCE) disciple Hipparchia (around 300 BCE),<sup>64</sup> who has the limited agency of an unmarried young woman, uses her considerable willpower to gain a better position from which to study phi-los-o-phy:

She fell in love with Crates, with his teachings and his way of life, and turned away from all her suitors with their money, their nobility, and their beauty. Crates was everything for her, and she even threatened her parents that she would do away with herself unless she was given to him in marriage.<sup>65</sup>

As Crates's wife, Hipparchia has unrestricted access to his tutorship. The narrator rewards her creativity by describing her work on a par with her male counterparts, and combines the masculine genitive φιλοσόφου with the feminine article τῆς to properly designate her a philosopher.<sup>66</sup> Hipparchia is certainly depicted as more competent than her brother Metrocles (ca. 350–280 BCE) who embarrasses himself completely by breaking wind in public, and in his shame decides to go home and starve himself to death. Crates prepares himself by eating a suitable meal, visits Metrocles, repeats the offensive deed in his presence, and manages to gain another follower who in time grows into a competent philosopher.<sup>67</sup>

62. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.1 Epicurus (22–23, cf. 124–26) (LCL 185: 550, cf. 650–52).

63. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.3 Monimus (82) (LCL 185: 84).

64. Yarbro Collins (2007: 479–80, 693) counts Crates, who sold his property for 200 talents that he distributed among his fellow citizens, as a counterpart of the rich young man in Mk 10.17–22, and his way of dressing in a linen sheet (σινδῶνα) as a parallel to the naked young man of Mk 14.51–52. Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.5 Crates (87, 90) (LCL 185: 90, 94). Crates's prioritisation of honoured citizens before those actually in need is well in line with Graeco-Roman culture (Longenecker 2010: 74–87; Horst and Robinson 2021: 312–18).

65. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.7 Hipparchia (96) (LCL 185: 98–100).

66. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.7 Hipparchia (98) (LCL 185: 100).

67. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.6 Metrocles (94) (LCL 185: 96–98).

## Followers of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

So far, we can conclude that using secondary characters as supplementary role models is common practice in Graeco-Roman biography. By describing how followers successfully imitate the biographee's learning, asceticism, and self-control, ancient biographers clarify that their audiences should strive to do the same. By depicting how men and women from widely different circumstances take up a philosophical way of life, biographers broaden the idea of who can become a philosopher. And by portraying fumbling disciples as well as competent ones, biographers offer a path to imitation that is accessible to mere mortals. Thus, associates and followers are recurrently used as mimetic mediators who mediate the high ideal of the central character to the audience. Ancient audiences sufficiently versed in this genre of literature should expect similar literary practices in Mark's Gospel.

Mark lets Jesus attract followers from at least three different backgrounds—fishing (Mk 1.16–29), tax-collection (2.14), and wealth (10.17–22)—thereby broadening the idea of who can become a Christian disciple (cf. Malbon 2000: 72–78). He describes at least one instance (6.13, 20) where the disciples successfully imitate what they have seen their master do, indicating that the audience should strive to do the same. And he certainly depicts imperfect disciples who are more approachable role models than his formidable protagonist.

But while Philostratus and Diogenes Laertius create a contrast between more and less competent followers of Apollonius and Crates, Mark portrays the followers of Jesus as more or less universally fumbling (cf. Mk 8.17, 21; 9.18, 32; 10.13–16, 38; 14.50; 16.8). Even Peter, the most senior disciple, is twice criticised in front of the others, once for rebuking Jesus for teaching about his death and resurrection (8.33) and once for falling asleep under prayer (14.37; Danove 2005: 100, 107–8; cf. Stowasser 2023: 128). In the former scene, there is a hint that the criticism is grounded in a concern for the other disciples:

He began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be killed, and after three days rise again. He said this openly, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But after turning to look at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said: 'Get behind me, Satan, for you are not thinking about what is from God, but about what is from people.' (Mk 8.31–33)

Jesus's glance at the other disciples suggests that he is criticising Peter because he, as the senior disciple, sets a *παράδειγμα* for Jesus's other followers, and might lead their thinking along the wrong path. In both scenes, Jesus's criticism may be motivated by Peter's position as an intermediary role model (Wiarda 1999: 29–32). In contrast, those whose behaviour the Markan Jesus lauds as exemplary are anonymous walk-on characters such as the woman donating her last two

coins (12.43–44) and the woman anointing Jesus with a fortune in pure nard (14.6–9; Malbon 2000: 53–57; Miller 2004: 112–44; Kelhoffer 2010: 85–89).

This egalitarian streak where the last are encouraged and the first put down (cf. Mk 10.31) permits Mark to present all kinds of secondary characters as potential *παραδείγματα*, thereby giving the audience a number of alternative role models from which to choose. Without denying the rich complexity of his cast of characters, most of these examples can be sorted into one of three main behavioural patterns: *apostles*, who emulate Jesus's itinerant lifestyle, *hosts*, who receive the apostles in their homes, and *supporters*, who support the movement in other ways.

### Apostles

When we first encounter Simon, Andrew, James, John, and Levi (Mk 1.16–20; 2.13–14), they are quick to leave their boats, fishing equipment, and taxation posts in order to follow Jesus.<sup>68</sup> Much like Monimus's feigned madness in Diogenes Laertius, this surely depicts Jesus as an attractive teacher (Bond 2020: 200–202), but also suggests that a life as a Christian philosopher is preferable to the audience's present livelihood, no matter what that may be (cf. Theissen 1973: 251). The same point is repeated with emphasis when Jesus challenges a man to give all of his many possessions to the destitute (*πτωχοί*; 10.17–22), and thus asserts that following Jesus is preferable even to a life of leisure.<sup>69</sup> Mark could have made the same point by emphasising how Jesus himself abandoned his work as a carpenter (cf. 1.12–15; 6.3; Theissen 1977b: 166), but opts instead to use his first followers as mimetic mediators (BurrIDGE 2007: 166–69, 175–77; Theissen 1973: 261–62; 1977b: 195).

James and John also leave their father Zebedee behind (Mk 1.20), which suggests that the fellowship of disciples takes precedence over traditional family loyalty. This is confirmed when Jesus declares that anyone performing God's will is his brother, sister, and mother (3.31–35; Theissen 1977a: 17–18; Painter 1999: 511–12; Miller 2004: 203; BurrIDGE 2007: 173; Rhoads et al. 2012: 125; Moloney 2012: 84; Sim 2014: 88–89; Aernie 2018: 30–31; de Campos 2021: 105–6). When Peter asks for assurance that his own abandonment of work and family has not been in vain, Jesus declares that any Christian follower leaving his old life behind will be compensated hundredfold (10.28–30), thus reemphasising that a true disciple should abandon work and family to imitate Jesus's

68. The initially positive characterisation of the disciples encourages the audience to identify with them (Danove 2005: 125–26; Kelhoffer 2010: 86–87).

69. Bond (2020: 159) argues that followers of Jesus 'might renounce a life of wealth and luxury, and like their master adopt a modest demeanor'.

ascetic lifestyle (Theissen 1973: 249–50; 1977b: 161; Burrige 2007: 174; Kelhoffer 2014: 108–10).<sup>70</sup>

What disciples should do instead of working is clarified when Jesus dispatches the Twelve (cf. 3.14–15) to preach, heal, and exorcise:

He summoned the twelve and began to send them out, two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He instructed them to bring nothing for the journey but a staff—no food, no bag, no copper coins in their belts—but to put on sandals, and not to wear two tunics. He said to them: ‘Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place rejects you and refuses to listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them.’ They went out and preached repentance, cast out many demons, and anointed many who were sick with oil, and healed them. (Mk 6.7–13)

This passage clarifies how radically followers of Jesus are supposed to emulate his ascetic lifestyle (Theissen 1973: 258–60; Cuvillier 1996: 144–46; Crossan 1997: 11–12; Painter 1999: 500). The prohibitions against luggage, purses, and provisions make the disciples effectively destitute and entirely dependent on the generosity of their hosts even for basic necessities. The prohibition against going from house to house ensures that they move on to the next village rather than turn to begging. Instead of describing how Jesus himself gained housing for him and his followers, Mark lets him prescribe the same rules to his followers.

The passage has no instruction on what to do once accommodation is arranged (Cuvillier 1996: 143), but none is needed. Jesus has been teaching,<sup>71</sup> healing, and exorcising, and the disciples preach repentance (Mk 6.12; cf. 1.15), heal the ailing (6.13; cf. 1.30–31),<sup>72</sup> and cast out demons (6.13; cf. 1.23–26),<sup>73</sup> thereby imitating Jesus in word and deed (Theissen 1973: 253; Crossan 1997: 1–10; Dewey 2019: 178–80). The narrative function of these *ἀπόστολοι* (‘envoys’, ‘ambassadors’, or ‘apostles’), as they are called in 6.30,<sup>74</sup> is to clarify that following Jesus

70. The prohibition against divorce (Mk 10.1–12) indicates that some family responsibilities are intact even though children are included among the “abandonable” categories in 10.29.

71. Although Mark records surprisingly little of Jesus’s teachings, the many summary passages where Jesus teaches (Mk 1.14, 39; 4.1; 6.6, 34) as well as the many instances where he is called *διδάσκαλος* (4.38; 5.35; 9.17, 38; 10.17, 20, 35; 12.14, 19, 32; 13.1) or *ῥαββί* (9.5; 10.51; 11.21; 14.45) ensures that teaching was one of his main activities beside healing and exorcism (Malbon 2000: 82; Burrige 2007: 162).

72. The oil in 6.13 is more likely to be an aid in cleaning wounds than a praying aid.

73. This does not seem to be a one-time occurrence, since the disciples are later asked, but unable, to cast out a *πνεῦμα ἄλαλον* (‘speechless spirit’; Mk 9.14–18).

74. Although Mark never uses *ἀπόστολοι* beyond the Twelve, there seems to be nothing honorific about it in 6.30, and in principle nothing to limit its use for others who are sent out—as happens in Paul’s self-identification, the seventy-two in Lk. 10.1–12, and those fleeing Jerusalem in Acts 8.1 (Theissen 1973: 253; 1977b: 163–65; Moloney 2012: 119). Cf. the broad definition of an apostle in Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 32.17/200, 204 (GCS 10, 453.16–17, 27–30).

implies abandoning your family and livelihood for a life as a destitute itinerant preacher, healer, and exorcist. This is what Jesus is doing, this is what the disciples are called to do, and this is the way of life that Mark prescribes to his audience.

### Hosts

However, the narrated lifestyle of an apostle would be impossible without the hospitality of house-owners supplying food and housing (Theissen 1977a: 14; Crossan 1997: 24; Painter 1999: 513), which is another behavioural pattern embodied by Markan secondary characters. Right after their visit to the synagogue in Capernaum, Peter and Andrew invite Jesus and the other disciples for a meal in their home (Mk 1.29–31). The parallel between 1.33, where a large crowd gathers by the door (*πρὸς τὴν θύραν*), and 2.2, where the area *πρὸς τὴν θύραν* can no longer accommodate the growing audience, implies that the *οἶκος* ('house') mentioned in 2.1 and the *οἰκία* in 9.33 are identical to the one introduced in 1.29,<sup>75</sup> and that Peter regularly provides the group with food and housing when they are in Capernaum.<sup>76</sup>

This pattern of hospitality is repeated in other locations. As soon as Levi is called, at an unspecified location along the shore of the Sea of Galilee (Mk 2.13–14), he receives Jesus and his disciples in his house (2.15).<sup>77</sup> Unspecified houses in Gennesaret (7.17; cf. 6.53), in the region of Tyre (7.24),<sup>78</sup> in the area of Caesarea Philippi (9.28; cf. 8.27), and in Judea east of Jordan (10.10; cf. 10.1) also seem to welcome the group (Painter 1999: 500). In Bethany on the Mount of Olives, they eat in Simon the leper's house (14.3), and since they repeatedly return for the night from Jerusalem to Bethany or the Mount of Olives (11.1–12, 19–20; 13.3; 14.26), the narrator may be suggesting that Simon hosts them for the duration of Jesus's teaching in Jerusalem (Theissen 1977a: 21–23; Rhoads et al. 2012: 134).

This hospitality pattern is in tension with the apostle paradigm, as followers of Jesus cannot use their houses and money to provide food and shelter to itinerant preachers once they have sold everything they own, given the money to the destitute, abandoned their families, and went out without even carrying an extra

75. The houses in Mk 3.20; 7.17; and 9.28, where no town is named, may also be understood as Peter's home in Capernaum. If the house in 9.33 is Peter's, it is also likely that the child in 9.36 is his (Painter 1999: 499, 502).

76. With Asumang (2009: 12). The possibility that Jesus arranged other accommodation upon arriving in Capernaum (1.21), and relocated there between 1.31 and 1.32, is less likely.

77. Although *τῆς οἰκίας αὐτοῦ* in Mk 2.15 could be either Levi's or Jesus's house, as argued by Malbon (1985), the flow of the narrative from 2.14 favours the interpretation that the house is Levi's, the reading also followed by Lk. 5.29 (Asumang 2009: 15; Painter 1999: 499–500).

78. Jesus enters the house in Tyre to hide rather than to preach, but the need for food and shelter would still be there.



tunic. Yet the hosts, who either reject itinerant apostleship altogether or compromise by leaving servants or family members in charge of their property at home, are not criticised for their negligence to follow the prescribed behavioural pattern. The *exempla* of the hosts thus mitigate those of the apostles, and present an alternative, less radical way of following Jesus.

### Supporters

A third category of Christian followers is revealed at the very end of the narrative, when it is disclosed that many women have been following and supporting Jesus throughout his ministry (Malbon 2000: 57–59, 62; Corley 2001; Miller 2004: 158–59, 194; Asumang 2009: 17; Aernie 2018: 103, 113; Stowasser 2023: 130–35).

There were also women watching from afar. Among those were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome, who had been following (ἠκολούθουν) him and supporting (διηκόνουν) him when he was in Galilee, as well as many other women, who had come up to Jerusalem with him. (Mk 15.40–41)

Both ἀκολουθέω and διακονέω are commonly recognised as verbs used by Mark to describe activities of disciples (Malbon 2000: 75–77; Miller 2004: 22–25, 161–66, 193–94; Danove 2005: 128–29; Boring 2006: 66; Asumang 2009: 3–5; Kelhoffer 2014: 120; Aernie 2018: 52–55, 105–17; El Jawich 2019: 99–100; Stowasser 2023: 131–33). The first verb is used by Jesus in the imperative (ἀκολουθεῖ μοι!) when calling Levi (1.14), and by the narrator about Simon and Andrew (1.18), about James and John (1.20), and about the disciples as a group (6.1; 10.28). Its use here implies that the women have been fulfilling the duties of a disciple in parallel to Jesus's more visible male followers. The second verb is used by the narrator to describe what angels (1.13) and Simon's mother-in-law (1.31) do for Jesus, and by Jesus himself to summarise the stipulated activities of him and his followers (10.43–45). It is also used to describe the services of food preparation (Mk 1.31; Lk. 10.40; 12.37; 17.8; 22.26; Jn 2.2; Acts 6.2) and delivery of letters (2 Cor. 3.3), and could as easily be used of providing a boat (Mk 3.9), handing out food (6.41), bringing supplies (8.14), fetching donkeys (11.1–7), or preparing for the Pesach meal (14.12–16)—activities that the male disciples have been performing for Jesus (John 2022: 186). These women are thus introduced with a characterisation similar to that of the male apostles (Danove 2005: 136–37; Kelhoffer 2010: 89–90, 95–96; Stowasser 2023: 123–26).<sup>79</sup>

79. The narrator's prioritisation of male disciples up to this point seems not to be intended to convey a general differentiation of discipleship tasks between men and women, but to create a surprise effect when Jesus's female followers are revealed after all the males have abandoned him (14.50; Malbon 2000: 59–61; El Jawich 2019: 100).

These women are disciples, presented as possible role models for the audience (Danove 2005: 139; Rhoads et al. 2012: 132; Stowasser 2023: 130–39), but their supportive role fits neither the radical pattern of an itinerant apostle, nor the role of a host providing food and shelter. They have left their homes to follow Jesus, but are not described as actively preaching, healing, or exorcising. Rather, they establish a third pattern of behaviour that, in Mark's eyes, also constitutes following Jesus: supporting Christian apostles without receiving them in their homes.

This third mimetic pattern is less specific than the previous two,<sup>80</sup> which makes it adaptable to various social circumstances and abilities among early followers of Jesus. A first-century woman would not have been able to travel as an apostle without male company, neither slaves nor free breadwinners could easily abandon their daily duties, and far from everyone owned a house in which to host itinerant preachers (Corley 2001; Stowasser 2023: 124–25). But Mark's third mimetic pattern extends his vision of Christian discipleship to include less specific supportive roles that would have been accessible for a larger portion of his audience. Mark's depiction of the supporters thus suggests that the act of following Jesus can be adapted to varying social circumstances and abilities, and renders everyone in his audience into a potential imitator of Christ.

## Conclusion

This paper has questioned the notion that the long-standing narratological practice of viewing the Markan disciples as potential role models from which Gospel audiences may learn how to follow Christ would be incompatible with viewing Mark as participating in the Graeco-Roman genre of biography. In response to Bond's (2020: 196; 2023: 147) claim that looking beyond the central character for behavioural examples would be to misunderstand the nature of ancient biography, I have presented several instances where Graeco-Roman biographers use secondary characters to complement the *παραδείγματα* provided by their protagonists. Xenophon uses Cyrus's lieutenant Chrysantas as a model of subordination and servitude, virtues that the king cannot plausibly embody. Plutarch brings in the arch-philosopher Plato as the best possible *πράδειγμα* for the young Dionysius II, even better than the protagonist Dion. Porphyry lifts up Plotinus's disciple Rogatianus, a senator who discarded his privileges, as an *exemplum* of how to let Plotinus's asceticism improve your health. Philostratus depicts Apollonius's follower Menippus as a maturing philosophical student, whose imperfections do not block his path to competence. And Diogenes Laertius introduces a multitude of disciples of his biographees to demonstrate how people from widely different

80. Cf. Asumang (2009) who conflates the activities of hospitality and support.

backgrounds can use their creativity to ascend on a path towards a philosophical life.

Applying these insights into how ancient biographers use secondary characters to broaden, clarify, and mitigate the ideals of their central characters to Mark's narrative, I have found him to present three distinct behavioural patterns for followers of Christ: *apostles*, who emulate Jesus's radically ascetic lifestyle in an itinerant life of preaching, healing, and exorcising; *hosts*, who support the apostles by providing them with food and shelter in their homes, and *supporters*, who serve the apostles and hosts in other ways, according to their varying abilities. By including disciples from various strands of life—four fishermen, a toll-collector, and several women—Mark explains that people of many different backgrounds can become followers of Christ. By presenting disciples who successfully copy Jesus's life as an itinerant teacher and healer, Mark declares that such a radical life is not supposed to be unique to the founder of the Christian philosophy but emulated by his followers, who should preach, care for the ailing, and cast out demons. And by presenting three different behavioural patterns for followers of Jesus, all of which support the overall goal of spreading the message about the kingdom of God, Mark mediates these radical ideals of the Christian philosophy to the limitations of his audience.

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