**A Three-Dimensional Tapestry: The Dynamics of Orality and the Implications for Mark’s Characterization of the Disciples**

Marshall McLuhan, in an oft cited passage, sheds light on the dynamics of media. In the opening chapter of *Understanding Media*, he (in)famously asserts that “the medium is the message.”

Despite the totality of such a claim, McLuhan correctly observes that content is not merely a matter of information or data, but it is a product of the medium. The same information, presented in multiple mediums, functions differently and often conveys a different meaning. The medium itself, rather than the raw data, is what determines the meaning of the content.

Concerns over media have more recently risen to center stage in scholarship of the New Testament, especially on Mark, and these studies are now beginning to find serious traction. Drawing upon historical reconstructions of ancient rhetoric and literacy rates, as well as theoretical concerns such as communication and performance, interpreters have begun to reconsider media and its message, in particular how our understanding of media does/should affect our understanding of the earliest levels of composition and reception of NT texts.

One line of inquiry that arises from ancient media studies is related to how early Christians experienced the gospel narratives: 1) Did they hear the gospels, or read them? 2) If

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they did hear them, were they read aloud, or performed? 3) How might each of these mediums alter the message? Considerations of each of these questions lie at the heart of this paper, though primary attention will be given to the third. I will work under the following presuppositions: the early Christians most likely experienced the gospels in an aural medium, in a communal setting, read or performed in their entirety. Each of these suppositions seem to be widely (though by no means universally) accepted premises with little need to further substantiate them here. Due to the seemingly high valuation of orality in antiquity and estimations of literacy rates, it seems likely that the gospel of Mark was not only experienced by the first-century Christians in an aural medium, but give the oral ethos of the first-century, it was more than likely a product of orality, with the intention of being experienced aurally.

Starting with these premises, the following explores how considerations of an ancient performance might challenge and/or effect our understanding of the composition and reception of the Gospel of Mark, primarily how the medium of oral performance affects its message. If the earliest Christians’ primary (perhaps only) experience of the Gospel of Mark is aural and/or performed, the dynamics of orality should be taken into consideration in matters of interpretation. This approach is particular relevant to scholarship on Mark, as recent works have already shown the value of performance analysis for understanding this text. One area within performance criticism that begs further consideration is the representation of character within a performance.

As a means of highlighting the differences between narrative and performance criticism, the following will consider the characterization of the disciples in Mark’s Gospel. Scholarship on the disciples in Mark is both vast and diverse. Assessments of the disciples’ characterization range from definitively negative to primarily positive, with a myriad of nuance and variance between. In a series of essays from the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, Joanna Dewey highlights

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12 Whether the texts were read or performed from memory is more controversial. I maintain that either performed or read aloud, its impact to the following analysis is a matter of degree not of kind; performance dynamics can be present in both prepared readings and performance from memory. Cf. William D. Shills, Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

13 In Orality and Literacy, 151-155 W. Ong recognizes the need to differentiate between a narrative and oral hermeneutic of characterization: “The story of type characters and the complex ways they relate written fiction to oral tradition has not yet been told.” And again, “Such electronic-age characters would be inconceivable had narrative not gone through a ‘round’ character stage.” 154.

the need for a comprehensive exploration of Markan disciples in an oral/aural context. She suggests that the disciples would more than likely not be considered negative characters in a first-century telling of Mark. In each essay, Dewey moves us closer toward a first-century media consciousness of the Gospel of Mark, and highlights the need for a more detailed analysis of the disciples, characters that have been often maligned within literary approaches. Such an investigation is still warranted, especially in light of the recent interests and developments in ancient media studies and Mark, and the emerging discipline of performance criticism.

Drawing primarily from the insights of J. Dewey, W. Shiner, D. Rhoads, H. Hearon, and K. Iverson, the following attempts to consider how the medium of oral performance affects characterization in the Gospel of Mark. Appealing to performance critical notions of illocutionary force, subtext, and embodied characterization the following will examine ways in which these considerations of Mark’s text, in a performative setting, might resist a negative portrayal of the disciples. If anything, this should at least complicate a picture that has traditionally been one-sided.

Medium and its Implications for Meaning: Similarities and Differences in Narrative and Performance

Before discussing a performance characterization of the disciples in Mark, it will be helpful to highlight some of the key differences between literary and performance analyses of

16 Boomershine, Rhoads, and Shiner have each expressed similar observations concerning the disciples.
17 Proclaiming the Gospel.
18 See fn. 8.
21 The language of “complicating” rather than “clarifying” here derives from Johnathan Z. Smith’s oft cited distinction between the task of the philosopher and the historian in religion: “The historian's task is to complicate, not to clarify” (Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions. [Leiden, Brill. 1978]: 129). Perhaps this is the greatest strength of the performance critical model, that it does not necessarily “clarify” ancient performances of Mark (in a sense that we cannot speak of “definitive” first-century performances of Mark), but it does “complicate” traditionally chirographic notions of texts in light of the historical evidence concerning illiteracy and the oral ethos in early Christianity.
characterization.\textsuperscript{22} The purpose of this comparison will be to establish a conversation partner in terms of characterization, but also to highlight the distinctiveness of the two methods. While narrative-criticism is essential in illuminating the textual features of Mark, it can at times obscure the oral dynamics by which the first-century audience most likely experienced the gospel. Certain aspects of these distinct disciplines require far greater nuance than space allows for here. Acknowledging these necessary limitations, I will briefly delineate some of the ways in which a narrative analysis of characterization in Mark will vary from that of a performance analysis.

**Similarities and Differences:** There is considerable congruity between narrative-critical and performance-critical methods of characterization. Both disciplines engage the text within its final form, in its entirety. Both are aware of gaps within the text, and necessarily engage in the task of gap filling.\textsuperscript{23} Both seek to make sense of characters’ words, choices, relations, and decisions within the text. Both are concerned with understanding the function of characters, their relation to the plot, and how that relation impacts their portrayal throughout the narrative. For the most part, the two disciplines are indeed complementary rather than combative.

While there are certainly overlaps between the two disciplines, these should not obscure their differences. In narrative criticism, the “reader” typically engages the text individually, in a private setting; in performance, the “audience” hears and sees a “performer,” in a communal setting. In narrative, characters are “distant” and exist only in the imaginative story world;\textsuperscript{24} in performance characters are “present”, embodied by a performer.\textsuperscript{25} In narrative, characters can be ambiguous;\textsuperscript{26} in performance, ambiguity is always interpreted. In narrative, characters are (often) regarded as distinct from “real” people;\textsuperscript{27} in performance, characters are present in a three-dimensional and dynamic performance event.\textsuperscript{28} In narrative, characterization derives from the perspective of the implied author (primary), though the real reader (secondary) certainly makes decisions concerning the composite picture, especially in cases of ambiguity;\textsuperscript{29} in performance, characterization and meaning are negotiated in the dynamic interaction between composition and performer and audience.\textsuperscript{30} Narrative analyses are intended for other readers of the text, to make sense of the narrative for readers; thus, references are “citable.” Performance analyses are concerned with performers or storytellers, their audiences, and (re-) constructions of what was an

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Much of this section utilizes the work of D. Rhoads, H. Hearon, and K. Iverson.
\item Iverson, “Characters,” 51, 60.
\item For more on embodiment see: Rhoads, “Part 1,” 128; Iverson, “Characters,” 59-62.
\item Cf. Burnett’s helpful discussion of the “purist” and “realist” positions, and the question of how they relate to a reading of the gospels (“Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospels” *Semeia,* [1993]: pp.4-6). There are certainly complications on both sides of this issue when dealing with the gospels.
\item Rhoads “Biblical Performance Criticism” 181-82.
\item Burnett, “Characterization” 3-28.
\item For Rhoads, the “performance event” consists of performer, audience, and composition in dynamic relationship with one another. The “site” of interpretation is the interaction between these three. (“Part 1,” 127)
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ephemeral experience that occurred in real time. These differences, among others, demonstrate that while the goal for both disciplines is ultimately the interpretation of texts, the “site of the interpretation” differs.

**Narrative Criticism: Implicit, Explicit, and Comparative Characterization**

In a narrative model, characterization at its core is the assessment of characters within the world of the story. All information necessary for interpretation is internal, present within (or inferred from) the text. Characterization is thus a two-dimensional experience, something that emerges from words and pages and exists in the reader’s imagination. As a point of departure, it may be helpful to use the oft cited definition by Elizabeth Struthers Malbon. Malbon, arguably the most important author on Markan characterization, puts it quite helpfully: “[C]haracters are known by what they say and by what they do and by what others (the narrator and other characters) say and do to, about, or in relation to them.” While certainly not representative of every narrative-critical approach to characterization, Malbon here provides a concise yet thorough synthesis of the task. Characterization, essentially, derives from both implicit and explicit evidence within the text, and is often illuminated by one’s comparison to and relationships with other characters in the story.

**Implicit and Explicit Means of Characterization:** In terms of the biblical narrative, the most common means of characterization is that of implicit or indirect characterization. The narrative “shows” the reader something about a character, providing clues from which the reader is left to infer something about them. As all inference goes, there are times when inference is less in doubt and times when it is ambiguous. Actions, sayings, inner thoughts, and comparisons are part and parcel of an implicit characterization. Even though it is inferred, not explicit, the decisions that the reader makes in each case has great impact on the remainder of the text.

The criteria used in implicit characterization varies in its usefulness. For example, there are numerous “actions” within Mark where the implied characterization of the disciples infers a positive reading. The disciples follow Jesus when called, they travel/go with Jesus, they do...
the things Jesus does (even if at times they appear negative), they do the very things Jesus asks them to do. There are other times when the actions of the disciples imply (some would say, demand) a negative valuation. The disciples don’t always do what Jesus asks, and they don’t always go with Jesus. While the latter set of actions are far fewer in number, the locations of these “negative” valuations (the second half of Mark) and their oft-considered shocking nature generally weighs more heavily in terms of narrative characterization. Comparisons and relations are perhaps the most utilized component in narrative analyses of Mark, though these too are complex at times in the text, and as such deserve further attention below. Sayings and inner thoughts are both used in characterizations of the disciples in Mark (cf. 8:16, 9:6, 9:32, etc.), though their weight in interpretation also varies.

There are times in the narrative of Mark when an “indirect” characterization appears to be explicit, but actually requires an inference (of sorts) from within the text. For example, in Mark 2, the disciples eat with tax-collectors and sinners (2:15), do not fast when others do (2:18), and they pick heads of grain on the Sabbath (2:23). While each of these actions is perceived as negative by characters in Mark (2:16, 18b, 24), none of these actions demand a negative valuation from the implied reader. In each case, Jesus defends the actions of the disciples. Their “characterization” in terms of “doing” is corrected in terms of Jesus’ defense of their actions. Another example is found in Mark 7, where the disciples eat with unwashed hands (v.2). The action is perceived as wrong by the Pharisees and scribes (v.5), and yet the actions alone by no means demand a negative valuation of them. So “doing” and “other characters’ valuation” of that action in and of itself are not always indicative of one’s characterization. Rather, a certain amount of “implicitness” is necessary, conveying the importance of such actions.

The examples above illustrate that “actions” in and of themselves are not necessarily indicative of characterization in Mark. The previous two examples might be considered “low hanging fruit,” since in both examples Jesus’ words quickly clarify any potential ambiguity surrounding their actions. But what happens in cases where an action is narrated, but the context leaves the implications of that action/saying/inner thought/etc. ambiguous? One example occurs in Mark 4:35-41. In one of the more challenging scenes related to the disciples’ characterization,
one which we will return to throughout this paper, the disciples are in the boat with Jesus during a storm. The narrative goes beyond a simple telling to show that the scene itself is a terrifying scene. The disciples’ position in the boat, and their actions, are often compared to Jesus’. While the disciples are awake and anxious, Jesus sleeps and calms the storm. Whether the comparison is justified in this case might be questioned, but the heart of the matter lies in Jesus’s questions to the disciples: “Why are you so afraid? Do you not yet have faith?”

This statement from Jesus seems evaluative; if he is asking about unbelief, it must be that they do not believe. Indeed, comments such as “Jesus accuses them of being cowards,” “the emotional reaction of the disciples already indicates failure to understand” and “Jesus rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith” are illustrative of many treatments of this text. The fact that the question goes unanswered creates a gap in the narrative and begs the audience to fill that gap. But notice that Mark’s text does not explicitly place this valuation on them. Jesus’ rebuke is of the wind, not the disciples. As Boring notes, “Mark does not tell his readers how to understand it [fear] here.” Boring doubles down by suggesting that the same ambiguity rests upon faith. What “lack” of faith did the disciples show? Was their lack of faith in Jesus’ “care” for them (he was asleep), or his ability to calm the storm (which they haven’t seen him do to this point in the narrative)? Fowler suggests that the reader is led to the following inferences: “the disciples do not trust Jesus, he thinks they are cowards and that they have no faith, and they do not know who he is.” Each of these (aside from timidity), however, are inferences from the readers, and are not “explicit” in Mark 4. Even their timidity is not exactly clarified. Where do these inferences come from? Can one read this text without such negative inferences on the disciples?

We will discuss this scene again from a performance perspective below, however, the point here is to demonstrate that inferences are necessary to understand this scene; they are numerous and work at multiple levels. Where one locates the force of this scene, is where their

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43 Tolbert and Moloney both point to the brevity of the scene (Sowing the Gospel, 165). Because the setting is established “briefly” the emphasis is placed on the dialogue. While admittedly the description is brief in terms of “length” it is still overly descriptive of the storm. This distinction is not to suggest that the dialogue is not the “force” of the scene, but rather to suggest that the setting influences how we should understand the dialogue.

44 There is considerable variance in translations, “timidity” “cowardess” or “afraid.” While “timidity” is often used, particularly in negative treatments of the disciples, what their “timidity” refers to is often not made clear. I have chosen to translate this as “afraid” as this more closely relates to the descriptive commentary of the scene. Jesus’s double question is the one element of the story that does not fit the pattern of miracle stories (Cf. J.P. Meier, A Marginal Jew, 2:925-928.), though the double question pattern fits Markan style.


49 Ibid. “Their ‘awesome’ fear has the same ambiguity as their ‘faith.’” Cf. Marcus, who suggests that there are two aspects of faith implied here: faith like Jesus in God’s provision, and faith in Jesus. In this story, Jesus moves from the example of faith to the object of it. (Joel Marcus, Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. [New York: Doubleday, 2000]: 334)

50 Fowler, Let the Reader Understand, 133.
interpretation will focus.\textsuperscript{52} How one understands Jesus’ question necessarily affects how one understands the disciples’ response. Things considered as “explicit” by some readers, are in fact implicit.\textsuperscript{53}

Finally, there is explicit characterization. At points throughout the narrative, the narrator “tells” the reader about characters in the story. Indeed, this type of characterization occurs less frequently, though it is not absent in Mark. For instance, in Mark 1:16, the narrator informs us that Simon and Andrew are fisherman. In Mark 3, we are provided explicit information about Simon, the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrays Jesus (vv.18-19). Of these three, the explicit characterization of Judas is perhaps the only one that affects the plot. There are other times in the narrative, where the narrator makes an explicit statement that effects the disciples’ characterization, but its implications are difficult to assess. For instance, in Mark 6:52 (cf. 8:17), the narrator says that the disciples “hearts were hardened,” and thus they were unable to understand Jesus’ teaching. While this is often compared with the hard hearts of the Pharisees in 3:5, the verb here is passive, which may (or may not) complicate their characterization. The point here is that, while at times “explicit” characterization is quite revealing, there are other times when it is perhaps less clear.

Comparative and Relational Characterization: In narrative-criticism, characters are often compared with other characters in the story. Comparison is part of the larger concept of “implicit” characterization, however, because of its importance to many narrative-readings of Mark, it deserves further discussion here. In the gospels, how one responds to Jesus, compared to how others respond to Jesus, becomes the standard by which all characters are assessed.

\textit{Prima facie} this criterion seems both correct and easy to distinguish. However, there are several times in the narrative of Mark when those criteria become more difficult to assess. For instance, what constitutes a correct/incorrect response to Jesus (cf. 1:45 and 9:10)? Is “understanding” who Jesus is implicit or explicit? Does each individual’s response to Jesus relativize the response of others (cf. 4:41 vs 5:33; 10:32 vs 14:3)? Do these responses constitute a binary (positive/negative) or do they play out on more of a spectrum (black/white/grey)?\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} This is true of performance, but not necessarily of narrative readings. Cf. Donahue and Harrington, who suggest that the thrust of the scene is the epiphany of Jesus as the one who calms the storm. However, the majority of their analysis of the scene is about the “rebuke” of the disciples. (\textit{Mark}, 160-61)

\textsuperscript{53} In many narrative readings of this scene, there is considerable irony in the “affective” dynamics. The disciples’ “failure” to “not yet” understand contributes to the audience’s understanding. While the audience understanding of who Jesus is continues to develop with the narrative, are they supposed to make negative inferences about the disciples’ inability to understand Jesus? The audience is indeed introduced to the Messiah and son of God in 1:1, but their understanding of these titles develops progressively throughout Mark’s narrative; and the disciples’ understanding is paralleled with theirs.

\textsuperscript{54} Burnett, “Characters” considers this question, and argues for “degrees of characterization” on a “continuum.”
Each narrative analysis will differ in how they answer these questions, which makes narrative characterization (for better or worse) a perpetually moving target.

For instance, in the story of the hemorrhaging woman (5:24-34) the woman comes to Jesus to be healed. This is not only an appropriate response to the power of Jesus (cf. 1:32-34, 40-45; 2:3-12), but she is rewarded for her “faith” and is healed (vv. 29, 34). In that same scene, the disciples ask what seems to be an innocuous yet relative question: “You see the people pressing against you, and you say, who touched me?” (v.31) While the saying itself is innocent enough, the location of the saying is in the midst of a story of a woman who recognizes Jesus’ power. For many readers of Mark, this juxtaposition of the disciples with the woman is a relativizing scene, one that shows her understanding of who Jesus is while simultaneously showing the disciples misunderstanding. Because narrative characterization is comparative, the comparison here is between the woman who understands and acts, and disciples who fail to comprehend Jesus’ power and question.

While the story undoubtedly is about the woman’s faith, the question becomes, is this necessarily a story about the disciples’ misunderstanding? Can the disciples’ question not be legitimating? Could it not simply be a descriptive feature that further underscores the “crowdedness” of the scene (v.24)? In narrative criticism, one can uphold this comparative by reading the text multiple times, backwards and forwards. In performance, this is not as clear-cut, as the performance will be presented in a linear fashion, and the performer will most likely choose to highlight one over the other. Additionally, the narrative offers no “direct” means of critique toward the disciples, something that Mark does elsewhere. While there are undoubtedly situations in the text of Mark where the disciples either explicitly do not understand Jesus, or Jesus questions whether they understand (cf. 6:52; 7:18; 8:17; 9:32), this scene does not appear to be a case where their misunderstanding is part of the force of the story. If anything, their comment functions like a descriptive comment, more closely related to emphasizing Jesus’ acknowledgement of power lost, not to the disciples’ discredit.

Another example of this comparative conundrum appears in Mark 9. As Jesus, Peter, James, and John come down the mountain after the transfiguration they are greeted with a unique situation. A man, whose son is possessed by a spirit, brought his child to the disciples. The disciples are unable to drive the demon out, so Jesus is forced into action. For some readers, the disciples’ inability to drive out this demon undermines their ability to do so in earlier situations

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55 The frame of this scene is also cited as evidence of comparison. The disciples “fear” and “lack of faith” in the end of ch.4 is now juxtaposed with the “courage” and “faith” of the hemorrhaging woman.
56 Lane, Mark, 192-93; Marcus, Mark, 359-60; Donahue and Harrington, Mark, 175-76, 180; Moloney, Mark, 108-109.
57 This “comparative” is also seen in the parallel construction with the story of Jairus’ daughter. Those in the house say she is dead and “laugh” at Jesus, thus the disciples question must be “mocking” Jesus.
58 Camille Focant suggests that the disciples’ responses to Jesus in this scene, and others (4:40-41, 6:37; 8:4), might indeed constitute a positive response to the magnitude of the miracle. “The Disciples’ Blindness in Mark’s Gospel” TD 24 (1976), 260-64.
(cf. 3:15; 6:7, 13). In that case, the words of Jesus concerning an “unbelieving generation” are directed at the disciples, and their inability to drive the demon out. Some commentators note that this fits their continued failure within the narrative, as the disciples don’t do anything correctly after they return to Jesus from their initial mission.

This all may indeed be true (to a certain extent), however, is it necessary to see in this story a negative characterization of the disciples? Are the disciples the recipients of the “unbelieving generation” barb of Jesus? Earlier in the narrative of Mark, Jesus was unable (οὐκ ὑπόκαματι) to do certain miracles because of the unbelief (ἀπιστία) of others (6:5). Both of Jesus’ lines about “belief” here are in dialogue with the man who brought his son. While it is possible that the line concerning unbelief (v.19) is directed at the disciples’ inability to drive out the demon, Mark (potentially) edits in a reprieve (vv.28-29). The scene does not require this additional discussion between Jesus and the disciples if he intends to infer a negative valuation, as the action of the scene has already taken place. But Mark has provided additional descriptive commentary in vv.28-29 which may hint at the illocutionary force of the scene, that this exorcism was something that only Jesus could do.

The role of the disciples in both of these scenes need not necessarily be indicative of their characterization. What is said by them, about them, and to them is not nearly as important as how it is said. It is certainly true that these texts might be used to further marshal evidence against the disciples in a narrative-critical analysis, however, this must be inferred, imported from elsewhere in the narrative. Alternatively, the disciples’ role in each of these stories might also be mitigated in light of the force of the story. As the characters in the story come to life in an embodied performance, the illocutionary force and subtext of the story becomes clearer. The importance one ascribes to the disciples in these stories is not inherent within the text, but is rather realized only in performance.

**Performance Criticism: Illocutionary Force, Subtext, and Embodiment**

Having discussed, even if briefly, some of the features of narrative characterization, we will now shift to looking at features of performance that aid in characterization. While additional performance features could be included in a more exhaustive analysis, the following will consider how illocutionary force, subtext, and embodiment contribute to characterization and meaning in a performance event. What will hopefully be noticeable in each of these features is

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59 Lane, *Mark*, 332; Marcus, *Mark*, 653; Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 280-282. Tolbert suggests that it is aimed at everyone at the scene, including the disciples. *Sowing*, 188.
60 Moloney, *Mark*, 182-84.
61 Another explanation offered for this comment is that it functions at the level of the Markan community. Cf. Boring, *Mark*, 275.
how attention to an oral medium and the performance event shapes the meaning of Mark’s rhetoric.

The Performer and Illocutionary Force: In the examples above we noted the potential ambiguity in the text of Mark, that there are locations in the narrative where the force of a particular scene is unclear. The reason for such ambiguity is due to both the natural gaps that occur within all texts, but also to a medium limitation. The lack of clarity in the intended force, the illocution of a word or phrase, creates gaps within the narrative that must be filled-in by the performer/reader. The reason for such gaps is partially due to the limits of the written medium, which often lacks clarity in illocution.

Within speech-act theory, illocutionary force is what clarifies the intended impact of a locution (an utterance).\(^\text{62}\) If the gospel of Mark is a transcript of an oral performance\(^\text{63}\) or a work composed for performance,\(^\text{64}\) it is tempting to think that the text conveys words entire meaning. However, as David Olson has shown, transcription, even if representative of the “words” of the event, often fail to convey the full meaning of a saying.\(^\text{65}\) In communication, the meaning or force of a word or saying is often conveyed through non-verbal means; extralinguistic and paralinguistic features carry as much of the meaning of a word or phrase as does the word itself.\(^\text{66}\)

There are times in Mark where the author focuses the intended force of a saying by means of descriptive commentary. Two types of descriptive commentary in Mark are emotion and speech act terms.\(^\text{67}\) For instance, in 1:27, the crowd is “amazed” (θαμβέομαι) after Jesus’ drives out a demon. Their amazement clarifies that their questions are not expressing doubts about where he acquired his power (contra 3:22; 6:2-3), but rather to show that they are in awe of Jesus’ teaching and act. In Mark 10:21, Jesus’ words to the rich ruler are not mocking his attempt at keeping the commandments, but rather Mark clarifies them by stating Jesus’ “love” for him. The Pharisees’ questions at 8:11 and 10:2 are not about the acquisition of information, but rather about wanting to “trap” or “test” Jesus. In 12:13-ff. the Pharisees and Herodians try to “trap” Jesus, and again he “realizes” their intentions which effects his response. In these

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\(^{66}\) Plato notes the problems and instability with a written text, likening it to a painting who is unable to speak back (*Phaed.* 275e). Cicero notes how books fail to capture the “life” of the things being said (*Or. Brut.* 37.130). Pliny the younger speaks of the value of performance over reading a text, both in terms of clarifying intent and experiencing the force of what is written (*Ep. 2.3*). Additional examples from antiquity might be included here, but these few examples at least suggest that notions of written texts failing to convey illocution are not uniquely modern, and that understanding intent in a written text is best expressed in a performative event.

\(^{67}\) Olson, *World on Paper,* 92-97.
situations, Mark’s descriptive commentary functions as performance cues within the script to clarify the force of a given statement.

But what happens when markers of illocutionary force are absent? Earlier in this paper I discussed the ambiguity related to Mark 4 and Jesus’ statement of the disciples’ lack of belief. Part of this ambiguity is how the reader understands both the intended force of the scene and Mark’s descriptive commentary. In an ancient performance of Mark, emotion would be both embodied and emphasized. Emotion exists not only at the level of the characters, but also at the level of the audience. Additionally, the descriptive commentary within this scene drastically affects the characterization of the disciples, as well as the effect on the audience. It is likely, given the high valuation on orator’s ability to “transport” their audiences, that the performer would most likely wish to convey the reality of this scene.\(^\text{68}\) The goal of Mark 4 would be to transport the audience into the boat with Jesus.\(^\text{69}\) If the audience sees itself in the boat, and both the narrative details and emotion are emphasized, would the illocutionary force still fall upon the disciples’ response? Would the audience focus entirely on the disciples “fear” as a negative trait or would they empathize with it? In a singular performance, it would be difficult to emphasize the storm and Jesus’ miracle while simultaneously critiquing the disciples’ emotion in the scene, especially if the audience shares that emotion.

One could also look more specifically at Peter, and how the narrator uses descriptive commentary to establish a “sympathetic relationship” between his character and the audience.\(^\text{70}\) At Mark 9, the transfiguration, Peter makes what is often considered a completely asinine statement about erecting a memorial. The narrator, seems to confirm this, as he follows Peter’s statement with “he did not know what to say.”\(^\text{71}\) Rather than coming across as a scathing remark, however, it seems to be mitigated by the addition of fear. In Mark 14, after Peter’s denial, the narrator closes the scene by appealing to Peter’s immediate remorse, he remembered Jesus’ words, then weeps bitterly (v.72). While in both instances the narrative does not condone the actions of Peter, the impact on the audience is not a distancing from or a judgment of Peter, but rather it evokes sympathy for him. The force of these two passages are clarified by the addition of emotion and descriptive commentary.

There are other times within the narrative, however, where markers of illocutionary force are absent, and must be supplied. In another example related to Peter, we can look at his statement in 8:29. While there is nothing inextricably within the saying or episode that evokes a

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\(^{68}\) Longinus comments on the value of transporting the audience into the world of the story: “For the effect of genius is not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves.” Sublime, 1.3 (Cf. Sublime, 26.1 - “hearing into sight”)

\(^{69}\) Cf. Fowler, “In the Boat with Jesus: Imagining ourselves in Mark’s Story” in Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect: 233-258. While Fowler’s discussion is a reflection on teaching Mark, his student think about how to “film” the boat scenes, it is not incompatible with the way in which an audience hearing the gospel might ask similar questions. The different vantage points illuminate the story in ways unlike traditional literary approaches.

\(^{70}\) Boomershine, “Peter’s Denial as Polemic or Confession,” 55-60.

\(^{71}\) Moloney, Mark, 179-180.
“less than” proclamation, many readers suggest that Peter’s declaration about Jesus here is incorrect. Narrative readers often appeal to various textual support: the opening lines of Mark (1:1) reveal that Peter only “half” gets it right; the “repeated” failures of the disciples to this point in the narrative; the two stories that frame this episode, one a narrative of partial vision, the other a rebuke of Peter; as well as the “failures” of the disciples following this scene in Mark’s narrative. All of these narrative elements seem to suggest such a reading of “half-understanding.” The argument is not that Peter does not think that Jesus is the Messiah, but rather that he does not yet know what this means. This misunderstanding is made explicit in the following scene, where Peter rebukes Jesus for speaking about the suffering Son of Man.

These are all acceptable narrative-critical readings of the scene. I am by no means intending to suggest that Peter’s response is complete nor that he understands the entirety of who Jesus is at this point in Mark. My question, however, is related to the performance of this scene. How does one convey this complex idea of profession, but not really, in performance? How does a performer say “You are the Messiah,” without it conveying a sense of truthfulness and sincerity? Does he end Peter’s statement with a high vocal tone, indicating a question? Is it sarcastic? Does she wink at the audience? Even in a straight-forward reading of the text of Mark, without adding substantial commentary to fill in gaps, it is difficult to convey the idea that Peter proclaims correctly but does not understand.

While illocutionary force at times is obscured within the narrative, this does not mean that Mark does not have an intended meaning for a scene(s), nor that a text should be read free of its larger context. It also does not mean that a performer is “free” to determine characterization in all cases. The performer is still indebted to the script and the characterization within it. What this does mean, however, is that polyvalence and variation in characterization are likely within performances, as each performer seeks to determine Mark’s intended meaning on its own, but also in relation to their audience. These decisions are made from previous performances, the “whole” of the text, and they inform the individual scenes in performance. Additionally, performance illuminates the “progressive” nature of characterization. While the performer will perform scenes in lieu of what is to come, they must still navigate the linear progression of the narrative, and how the audience will come to know things.

How a performer decides to communicate lines in these situations goes a long way in determining “meaning” in the performance event. The performer must identify the force of a phrase or word, before they can conceptualize its manifestation in performance. Once the performer has determined the “force” of the text, they must now decide how to communicate that

72 Frank J. Matera, “The Incomprehension of the Disciples and Peter’s Confession (Mark 6:14-8:30)” Biblica, 70.2 (1989): 152-172. Matera’s argument here is the disciple’s incomprehension to this point in Mark serves Mark’s Christological purposes, and is not intended to highlight their failure.
73 Moloney, Mark, 166-67.
74 Lane, Mark, 291.
75 David Ball, “Sequential analysis of action is the door to the play and protection against misinterpretation.” (Backwards and Forwards, 14)
force in performance. How a performer communicates illocutionary force in performance is what we will call subtext.

The Performer and Subtext: Keys to Illocutionary Force

In each of the examples above, it is equally as important how something is said, as is what is actually said. Communication of the how in performance is often accomplished by means of subtext. Rhoads calls subtext the “most generative feature of performance.” This is not to suggest that words alone do not have meaning, but rather that it is only in their performed contexts that their force is fully realized. Because of this, subtext is not simply an “add-on” but “is integral to and determinative of the meaning of a text.” Illocutionary force is not always immediately recognizable in texts, but is made transparent within a performance event. The performer’s words, coupled with facial expressions, gestures, and vocal inflections are all subtexts that clarify the intent. The key take away is not simply what is said, but also (and perhaps more importantly) how it is said, and why it is said in that way.

While one could argue that every saying in the gospels is dependent upon subtext, and to some extent this is indeed true, there are locations where decisions of subtext are more diverse. A few of the more notable examples of this are related to Jesus’ words. For example, in Mark 7:28-30 Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophoneican woman raises a great many questions of subtext. These questions are primarily related to Jesus’ words, “It is not good to take the bread of the children and throw it to the dogs.” Just how exactly is Jesus responding to this woman’s request to heal her daughter: Is he testing her? Is he rejecting her? Is his rejection due to gender (contra 5:33-34)? Or race? Or is it something less? Does the scene have a “parabolic” function, and clarify the surrounding narrative? Does Jesus change his mind in this scene? What are the theological/Christological implications of either testing or Jesus’ change of mind? How are we to understand Jesus’ response in light of his characterization throughout the narrative?

Note that the text here does not answer any of these questions. Ultimately, how the performer chooses to communicate this scene will greatly affect the characterization of Jesus. A performer cannot leave the response of Jesus ambiguous, and how she utilizes voice, gestures, tone, etc. greatly impact the audience’s perception of Jesus for the entire gospel. A decision by

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76 Aristotle, *(Rhet. 3.1)* discusses the importance of knowing not only what to say, but also how to say it.
77 Rhoads, “Part 2,” 176.
79 Cf. Rhoads, *Reading Mark*, 186-200. In this chapter, Rhoads works through his process of preparing this scene for performance, and the questions that arise within the narrative that demand a decision concerning subtext.
80 Lane, *Mark*, 262
82 Immediately preceding this encounter, Jesus departs for Tyre, and wishes to remain in seclusion (v.24). This is not an unimportant point in the narrative, as it is possible for the reader/performer to use this information to assess Jesus initial resistance.
83 Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 237-238.
the performer is necessary, and that decision is informed by other performances, other features in the narrative, and by the collective memory at the location of the performance.\textsuperscript{85}

As is relates to the characterization of the disciples, subtext is equally important. Questions of subtext again arise primarily in the words of Jesus; how the “meaning” of his words contribute to characterization. For example, in both Mark 7 and 8, Jesus asks his disciples if they understand (7:18; 8:17; 8:21). Is Jesus’ question asked in “inquiry, patience, impatience, sarcasm, disappointment, disdain, resignation?”\textsuperscript{86} Is it the same motivation each time? Does the repeated question give us a hint at the impetus behind each iteration? And how do these questions serve the purpose of the scene? How the performer answers these questions, what she determines to be the purpose for Jesus’ question, makes a valutative statement upon the disciples. Several other examples of this have already been discussed (Mark 4:40; 9:29) or will be discussed below (Mark 14:27-52).

As a performer engages with the script, she is forced to make decisions on how the performance of a scene will convey meaning to the audience. To an aurally and visually attentive audience, how something is said is just as important as what is said. Throughout Mark, the illocutionary force of the words of Jesus to the disciples is not always specified, however, the interpretation of the subtext will necessarily be conveyed in a performance. Ancient orators were familiar with the importance of conveying the intentions of a text, and while the “indebtedness” of delivery to script was important, the meaning of a text was found in performance.\textsuperscript{87} “Meaning” was found in delivery and audience responses, both of which were clarified by the performers use of non-verbal gestures denoting subtext.\textsuperscript{88}

The Performer and Embodied Characterization: The final feature of performance that we will explore is that of embodiment. Rhoads has argued that within early Christianity there were no “un-embodied” experiences of the text.\textsuperscript{89} Despite the overstatement (clearly some people were reading texts, even if it’s only the performers), it is most likely true for the overwhelming majority of early Christians. In an oral performance of Mark, the performer or storyteller would necessarily personify the characters. This would take place in a variety of ways such as acting out the characters, changing voice while reading the text aloud, moving around the stage, etc., but each variation has effects on characterization.

The most important theoretical distinction here is related to the position of the audience in/to the story. Instead of dealing with characters at a distance, as an outsider to the story world, in a two-dimensional relationship, the characters are “brought to life” in the performance event. Instead of characters existing in the imagination of an individual reader, they are physical

\textsuperscript{85} Additional examples can be found in Mark 15, in Jesus’ words at the cross (15:34) and the statement made by the centurion (15:39).
\textsuperscript{86} Rhoads, “Part 2,” 177.
\textsuperscript{87} For more on delivery see Shiner, Performing the Gospel, 77-101.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid. 127-142.
\textsuperscript{89} Rhoads, “PT 1,” 128; “Biblical Performance Criticism,” 165
representations, three-dimensional, embodied in a communal setting. By embodying characters, the medium of performance introduces a sympathetic element, a nearness that is not always realized in two-dimensional characterization. Because of this present-ness of performance, the audience is situated in a new relationship to the story; no longer as outsiders but now as active participants, even as characters in the story. Instead of imagining the scene at a distance, they become eye-witnesses to the scene as it plays out before them. How an audience would react/relate to characters depends greatly on their experience of the embodied characterization in performance.

By embodying the characters, the performer functions as both intermediary and agent between characters and audience. The performer enters the world of the story to understand the characters from all angles and bring life to those insights. What motivates the character? What drives them? What is the goal of what they do and what they say? How do these dynamics complicate and create characterization? Answers to these questions illuminate the force of individual scenes as well as the whole, and provide the subtext by which she will perform the story. All dimensions of the narrative, its rhetoric and characters, pass through the mind and body of the performer, and are conveyed to the audience through visual, aural, and emotional means. As Rhoads has suggested, the performer is the medium; the site of interpretation is the performance event. This site is not only in what the performer prepares, but is ultimately what the audience experiences.

So how does the notion of embodied performance help us to understand characterization of the disciples? Chapter 14 is perhaps the biggest obstacle to any positive representation of the disciples in Mark. For many narrative-critical readings, the monumental failure of the disciples here informs much of the earlier narrative of Mark. This section of Mark, however, is replete with performance cues, some more subtle than others. There are elements in the narrative that require a decision on behalf of the interpreter including where to locate the illocutionary force and how to embody subtext to communicate these cues. By embodying these narrative elements in a performance of Mark 14, the rhetorical effect seems to mitigate the disciples’ failure.

Following the Passover, and citing Zech. 13, Jesus informs the disciples of their upcoming abandonment (14:26-27). Despite this prophetic statement, the disciples do not wish to acknowledge it. In many readings of Mark there is a tendency to distinguish between the prophetic and the historical in this scene, but not others. For instance, once Jesus utters the passion/resurrection predictions (chs. 8-10), can there be any other outcome to the story? In Mark 11, when Jesus curses the fig tree, does the fig tree determine whether it will wither? When Jesus speaks of the disciples’ abandonment, is the audience surprised when they do? If the

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91 Cf. David Ball, Backwards and Forwards, 60-67.
92 Rhoads, Reading Mark, 182-183.
93 Several commentators have pointed out the echoes between much of this section (14:24-14:28) and Zechariah. Might the prophetic background, in addition to the text cited, give even more credence to the necessity of the disciple’s rejection? Cf. Marcus, Mark, 969.
audience is already predisposed to Jesus’ prophetic nature in Mark, the “shock”, and thus, the force of their abandonment might be abated to some degree. Immediately before they flee, their “stumbling”, as well as their reconciliation with Jesus in Galilee, becomes prophetic. The narrator has interwoven their abandonment and subsequent reconciliation to the characterization of Jesus, drawing on his credibility as a prophet.

Jesus’ prophecy, however, is not the only minimalizing aspect in this story. Mark uses descriptive commentary to show the utter rejection of this prophecy by the disciples. Why do the disciples reject Jesus’ prophecy? Their motive is not to question Jesus’ prophetic ability, but rather to emphasize their own devotion. Whether this devotion is “true” or not, considering their forthcoming abandonment, their devotion to Jesus, up to this point in the performance, is not in question. Peter’s denial of the initial prophecy, and even more “exceeding” (14:31) denial of the second, together with the addition of the other voices, has a rhetorical effect on the audience, reinforcing the disciples’ devotion to Jesus. A performance of this scene would undoubtedly demonstrate that devotion to Jesus, whether superficial or real, is their motive.94

The motives of both the disciples and Jesus are essential to understanding this scene. In Gethsemane, Mark again provides descriptive commentary to clarify force. Without approving of the disciples’ actions (an important distinction), there are several places where the narrator explains their action. In v. 38, Jesus recognizes their willingness or desire (πρόθυμος) to remain awake, but their body’s inability (ἀσθενής) to do so. Again in v. 40, the narrator clarifies through descriptive commentary that they are unable to remain awake because their eyes were heavy (οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ καταβαρυνόμενοι). Their failure to provide an answer to Jesus in v.40 could also be portrayed as a sense of “remorse.” Their desire is to please Jesus, but their failure is due to physical limitation, a disability. Each of these narrative features are performance cues, which could potentially serve to mitigate the disciples’ failure. While this does not mean that Mark approves of their actions, nor absolves them, the rhetorical effect is one of understanding and empathy, not judgment.

Much of the disciples’ characterization is determined not by their actions but by the illocutionary force of Jesus’ words to them. If Jesus’ words in vv.37-38 are sympathetic and understanding (despite the betrayal), the scene is not an indictment of the disciples, but remains a scene about Jesus’ mission. The scene is about Jesus’ wrestling with what is to come, and his own feelings of utter loneliness in his mission (which perhaps helps to describe the force of Jesus’ statement at the cross, 15:34). If his words are in judgment, then of course the audience shares Jesus’ judgment of them, and the scene becomes about their failure. Despite Mark’s use of descriptive commentary for the disciples’ actions, the words of Jesus are not given such clarity in this scene. The absence of speech act terms leaves Jesus’ response ambiguous. How the

94 For more on motive and its implications for characterization in performance see: David Ball, Backwards and Forwards, 60-67.
performer chooses to perform this scene, especially Jesus’ words, will clarify intent for the audience.

If the disciples’ “failure” is mitigated in the early parts ch.14, how does this affect the latter portrait, the potentially more damning action of fleeing from Jesus (14:50)? Notice again Mark’s descriptive commentary. The crowd coming with Judas are armed with swords and clubs (v.43). While this may be “historical” or part of the tradition, it potentially serves a performance function. When they seize Jesus, one of those with Jesus fights back, despite presumably being out-armed (vv.46-47). Does this singular act of resistance, as feeble and temporary as it might have been, help to alleviate their abandonment? A textual feature that might also mitigate their culpability of abandonment is in relation to vv.26-27, and Jesus’ citation of Zech 13. I it is only after Jesus’ speaks about the fulfillment of scriptures do they flee (vv.49-50). What scriptures exactly are being fulfilled here? The disciples presumably hear Jesus say this; do they understand Jesus’ statement concerning the “fulfillment of scriptures” as an occasion for them to flee? If a performer were to enact their acknowledgment of this statement, might that serve as permission to leave? Admittedly, for a narrative-reading the additional description of the naked young man (vv.51-52) works in the favor of a reversal of 10:28, where the disciples left everything to follow Jesus and now leave (quite literally) everything to abandon Jesus, but does this place too fine a point for a performance of the text?

The purpose of the above paragraph is not to “demonstrate” that Mark absolves the disciples’ of their failure, but rather to complicate it. Indeed, this textual evidence may amount to some readers as nothing more than “special pleading”; this is perhaps fair, and I want to clarify that I do not think Mark fully absolves them. However, there appears to be some textual evidence to at least complicate any understanding of their abject failure. While the author does not “condone” the disciples’ actions, the script includes performance cues that potentially mitigates their failure by: 1) explaining their abandonment as the fulfillment of scriptures; 2) linking that fulfillment with their reinstatement in Galilee; 3) explaining their “sleepiness” is due to physical limitations not a lack of desire; and 4) emphasizing repeatedly their motive, which is the desire to be faithful to Jesus (despite their eventual flight). Regardless of whether they are “fully” absolved, if the disciples’ failures at Gethsemane are “lessened” in performance, the greater question is this: what affect does this have on the earlier scenes in Mark?

As it relates to Mark, embodiment is significant to notions of characterization. Because the performer is presenting an “interpreted” text of Mark, ambiguity is clarified in performance. The location of the audience as participants in the scene is important, and affects judgments of characters. They are eye-witnesses and are ultimately making judgments about the characters in real time. An embodied characterization of the disciples will present both the motive and emotive aspects in the story, which can be obscured within some narrative readings.
Embodiment facilitates notions of characterization by use of subtext, but equally importantly, it helps to clarify the illocutionary force of statements.95

**Conclusion: The Three-Dimensional Tapestry of Markan Discipleship**

In narrative characterization, the disciples are generally assessed by means of implicit and explicit details, as well as by comparison. Most often, the disciples’ characterization is intimately tied to their failure in Gethsemane, which is then imported back onto scenes throughout Mark. Theoretically this is justifiable, as the internal features of the text create a composite characterization. Thus, Mark is foreshadowing the disciples’ ultimate failure from the beginning. By inference, earlier scenes are reexamined in light of this failure, and additional evidence is marshalled in favor of that thesis. Narrative criticism indelibly aids our understanding of the text of Mark, but ultimately it is limited by medium, a distant and two-dimensional representation of its characters.

The goals of this paper were not primarily to assess what the text says, but rather to reconsider how characterization might work in performance. If most early Christians’ experience of the text was by means of oral performance, then consideration of the aural and performance dynamics of Mark should be considered in discussions of its rhetorical effect. For scenes at 4:34-41, 5:24-34, and 8:27-30 questions about illocutionary force were raised, asking whether the force of the scene necessitates a negative valuation on the disciples. At 7:24-30; 8:27-30, and 9:19-28 inquiries about subtext were explored, concluding that how something is said in each scene is equally or more important than what is said. Additionally, it was proposed, that the embodiment of characters in performance introduces a dynamic that differs from primarily chirographic assessments of the text, mainly a sympathetic relationship that emerges from the three-dimensional character. This was tested in relation to Mark 14:27-52, and it was proposed that the performance cues within this scene lend themselves towards a “mitigating” (not absolving) performance of the disciples’ flight. Examining the motive and tone of Jesus’ words (his prophecy, and whether his words in Gethsemane are sympathetic or judgmental) together with the motives of the disciples, (their devotion to Jesus—whether real or synthetic), it was suggested that a performance would likely evoke empathy rather than judgment from the audience.

Insights from a performance analysis of Mark 14:27-52 are crucial for assessments of Mark’s disciples. If the disciples’ flight evokes empathy rather than judgment in performance, this will necessarily effect their characterization throughout Mark. By complicating various scenes earlier in Mark, we noted that much of the “negative” valuation comes by means of inference, not explicit characterization. If the rhetorical effect on the audience in Gethsemane is

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95 The idea of embodied characterization does not lead us to a “definitive” notion of characterization, but rather to the polyvalence of interpretation. David Bell refers to characterization in script as “bones” that are in need of flesh and blood (Backwards and Forwards, 61). Similarly, David Rhoads has referred to the text of Mark as a “fossil” of first-century live performances, in need of flesh and blood (“Part 1,” 123). The embodied performer is a vital part in the reconstruction of that DNA strand.
empathy rather than judgment, this fundamentally changes how the performer would convey earlier scenes. It would not be an overstatement to say that as one’s understanding of Gethsemane goes, so goes the disciples’ characterization. If this is the case, it seems likely that the disciples’ characterization is not polemic nor overtly negative, but rather it evokes empathy of/for them, which casts their characterization in a positive light, inviting the audience to follow Jesus with the same devotion as the disciples (though not exactly as they did).

Ultimately, perhaps ironically, the conclusions of this performance analysis resemble narrative readings of the disciples (cf. Tannehill, Malbon, et al). Consideration of additional performance features or further engagement with classics or theater studies might have led to more nuanced distinctions, or at the very least more developed analytical lenses. Whether problematizing these narrative readings gets us closer to first-century performances or not, it should at the very least complicate narrative characterizations that emphasize the disciples’ “abject” failure.