

MARKAN EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF INCOMPREHENSION

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Abstract: *Mark employs several cognitive terms in his narrative in the context of discussions concerning Jesus's identity, his authority, his parables, his deeds, and his teaching. More significantly, cognitive terminology is used to signal one of the main themes of Mark's account— incomprehension. The Gospel creates a distinction between those who are given the mystery of the Kingdom, and those on the outside, to whom everything is "in parables" (Mark 4:11–12). However, the insiders are often portrayed as dense and oblivious to Jesus. This conundrum leads to questions about Mark's epistemology. How does one acquire knowledge in Mark's narrative world? Where does knowledge come from? How is it appropriated? How does it relate to Jesus? This article argues that Mark's epistemology is derived from his preferred scriptural frameworks, Exodus and Isaiah, where knowledge is both revelatory and responsive.*

Key words: *Gospel of Mark, epistemology, incomprehension, religious authorities, disciples, Exodus, Isaiah, mighty deeds, revelation, response*

In Mark 4:11–13, Jesus makes a distinction between a group to whom the mystery of the kingdom of God is given, and a group of outsiders, to whom everything remains “in parables.” The distinction is established in epistemic terms. Those who are outsiders “do not understand” (μὴ συνιῶσιν). By implication, those who are given the mystery are supposed to understand. This dualistic logic, however, is immediately broken in the next verse, when Jesus asks his disciples, the insiders: “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” (Mark 4:13). This failure in relation to the parables proves to be a deeper epistemic failure in the experience of the disciples as characters in the narrative. From this point forward they will fail to understand nearly everything there is to know about Jesus—his identity, his cruciform mission, the significance of his miracles, and his teaching. This conundrum introduces questions about Mark's epistemology. How does one acquire knowledge in Mark's narrative world? Where does knowledge come from? How is it appropriated? How does it relate to Jesus?

Mark employs several cognitive terms in his narrative, used in the context of discussions concerning Jesus's identity, his authority, his parables, his deeds, and his teaching.¹ More significantly, cognitive terminology is used to signal one of the

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¹ Examples include γινώσκω, οἶδα, ἐπίσταμαι, συνιῆμι, νοέω, and διαλογίζομαι. See Mark 1:24, 34; 2:6, 8, 10; 4:12–13, 27; 6:52; 7:14, 18, 24; 8:16–17, 21; 9:6, 30, 33; 10:19, 38, 42; 11:31, 33; 12:12, 14, 24; 13:14, 28–29, 32–33, 35; 14:40, 68, 71.

main themes of Mark's account—incomprehension. Despite great interest in the subject of incomprehension in the Gospel, more specific treatments on Markan epistemology have been scant.² The reason is perhaps that the concept invites approaches that are consistent with modern theories of knowledge, which could be perceived as inadequate when applied to the recovery of the epistemology of ancient texts.³ Nevertheless, given the abundance of cognitive terminology in Mark and the focus on the subject of incomprehension, an investigation of the narrative's epistemic dynamics seems justified. In the present study, however, I do not wish to recover the philosophical principles undergirding Markan epistemology, but to evaluate its implicit narrative rationale—the way in which the concepts of “knowing” and “understanding” are developed within the Gospel's plot and discourse.

I argue that Mark's epistemology follows the dynamics of revelation and response inherited from the main scriptural paradigms employed in his narrative—Exodus and Isaiah—according to which, knowledge is essentially revelatory and responsive. Thus, “knowing” in Mark is construed as the result of divine intervention and at the same time subject to a response of faith. “Incomprehension,” by extension, constitutes a willful rejection of the premise of that revelation.

I. IS MARK'S EPISTEMOLOGY APOCALYPTIC?

Taken at face value, Mark 4:11–12 seems to advance the idea of esoteric knowledge, where only a select group is privy to secret revelation. The problem, of course, is the subsequent depiction of those who are supposedly insiders as people who fail to understand not only the parables, but the many ways in which Jesus instructs and reveals himself to them. The conundrum of incomprehension is then obvious. Those who are given the mystery are no more illuminated than those who do not possess it.

² Noteworthy treatments of incomprehension include: Joseph B. Tyson, “Blindness of the Disciples in Mark,” *JBL* 80.3 (1961): 261–68; Greg Fay, “Introduction to Incomprehension: The Literary Structure of Mark 4:1–34,” *CBQ* 51.1 (1989): 65–81; Frank J. Matera, “The Incomprehension of the Disciples and Peter's Confession (Mark 6:14–8:30),” *Bib* 70.2 (1989): 153–72; Suzanne Watts Henderson, “Concerning the Loaves: Comprehending Incomprehension in Mark 6.45–52,” *JSNT* 83 (2001): 3–26; C. M. Tuckett, “The Disciples and the Messianic Secret in Mark,” in *Fair Play: Diversity and Conflicts in Early Christianity*, NovTSup 103 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 131–49; J. Ted Blakley, “Incomprehension or Resistance? The Markan Disciples and the Narrative Logic of Mark 4:1–8:30” (PhD thesis, University of St. Andrews, 2008); Jin Young Choi, “The Misunderstanding of Jesus' Disciples in Mark: An Interpretation from a Community-Centered Perspective,” in *Mark*, ed. Nicole Wilkinson Duran, Teresa Okure, and Daniel Patte, *Texts@Contexts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 55–69; Michal Beth Dinkler, “Suffering, Misunderstanding, and Suffering Misunderstanding: The Markan Misunderstanding Motif as a Form of Jesus' Suffering,” *JSNT* 38.3 (2016): 316–38. Treatments of epistemology in Mark include: Seán Freyne, “The Disciples in Mark and the *Maskilim* in Daniel: A Comparison,” *JSNT* 16 (1982): 7–23; Joel Marcus, “Mark 4:10–12 and Marcan Epistemology,” *JBL* 103.4 (1984): 557–74; Andrew M. Johnson, “Error and Epistemological Process in the Pentateuch and Mark's Gospel: A Biblical Theology of Knowing from Foundational Texts” (PhD thesis, University of St. Andrews, 2011).

³ Johnson's dissertation, however, is a fine example of how biblical epistemology can be discussed within a philosophical framework. Johnson, “Error,” 180–210.

Prompted by the “mystery” terminology, scholars have suggested that this puzzle may be explained by locating Mark’s narrative in the context of a first-century apocalyptic worldview. In his treatment of Markan epistemology, Marcus insists that Mark shares in the same worldview as the Qumran community.⁴ In this context, the disciples’ failure is explained by two apocalyptic features. On the one hand, the apocalyptic worldview envisions the possibility of the children of light having their minds darkened by the Angel of Darkness, whose activity in the world is part of the mysteries of God in the present age.⁵ On the other hand, revelation in the “penultimate time” is, by its very nature, incomplete. Full understanding is reserved for a future time when the kingdom will no longer exist in a state of hiddenness.⁶ According to this reading, therefore, the disciples’ incomprehension during Jesus’s ministry reflects the inevitable nature of the penultimate age before the “renewal,” wherein “members of the elect group, as well as ‘those outside’, are subject to the blinding onslaughts of the forces of darkness,”⁷ and even insiders await a time of complete disclosure.

Although it is undeniable that Mark has elements characteristic of an apocalyptic mindset, this comparison with the Qumranic epistemology is only of limited value. First, in contrast to Qumran, Mark does not portray human agency as the result of an inner dualistic battle between the Spirits of Truth and Falsehood.⁸ Admittedly, there are demoniacs in the narrative, but their opposition is actualized as a direct confrontation between Jesus and the spirits themselves, who are submissive to him. The expressions of sin, rebellion, and failure in turn are understood as stemming from “the hearts of men” (7:21). Thus, the most blatant expression of opposition by the religious authorities is never qualified as satanic but is itself the result of allegiance to the commandments and tradition of men, which is tantamount to the rejection of the commandments of God (7:8). The only instance where opposition could be seen as somehow orchestrated by Satan is the case of Peter (8:33), where Jesus addresses Satan in his rebuke. However, even here, human agency is at least as firmly in focus as the satanic, since Jesus rebukes Peter directly (*ἐπετίμησεν Πέτρῳ*) while also addressing Satan.⁹ In fact, the contrast in the passage is not between the “things of God” and the “things of Satan.” Rather, Satan thinks the “things of men,” indicating an alliance between the satanic opposi-

⁴ I will focus on Marcus’s important article as representative of his view. Marcus draws the essentials of his reading from J. L. Martyn, “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages: 2 Corinthians 5:16,” in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 269–87. Other treatments along these lines include Freyne, “The Disciples,” and Susan R. Garrett, *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 63–66.

⁵ Marcus, “Mark 4,” 568.

⁶ Marcus, “Mark 4,” 570–72.

⁷ Marcus, “Mark 4,” 570–72.

⁸ 1QS 3:16–26.

⁹ The verb of rebuke always refers to the agent of opposition—in this case, Peter himself. Garrett, who adopts the same apocalyptic epistemology framework for Mark, sees the disciples’ testing of Jesus as diabolical. Thus “Satan is the cause of the disciples’ incomprehension.” Garrett, *Temptations*, 75. This reading seems to overlook the dynamics of rebuke in the narrative.

tion and the human hostility to the divine plan, and not, as Marcus puts it, simply the result of being under satanic influence.¹⁰ Moreover, the idea that the disciples' incomprehension is the inevitable outcome of the hiddenness of the Kingdom in the penultimate time renders Jesus's rebuke of their incomprehension incongruent. If they are not supposed to understand because of the intended partiality of the revelation,¹¹ why are they so sternly reprimanded for their hardness of heart (8:14–21)?

In light of these difficulties, an alternative framework seems necessary. It will be argued that the different expressions of resistance to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, including the disciples' "incomprehension," constitute a willful negative response to a plainly revealed reality about Jesus, which is made explicit through his authoritative deeds and teaching. As an alternative to the apocalyptic framework, we will situate Mark's depiction of Jesus's self-disclosure and people's consequent negative responses in the context of Mark's preferred scriptural frameworks—Exodus and Isaiah—where YHWH's mighty deeds and words are met with stubborn rebellion and obdurate incomprehension.¹²

II. REVELATION AND RESPONSE IN EXODUS AND ISAIAH

It has been commonly suggested that Mark's narrative draws from the imagery and theology of the Exodus and the Isaianic New Exodus.¹³ These two paradigms have in common a pattern of revelation and response, whereby YHWH's deeds of deliverance become the means by which he makes himself known to his people, on which basis the whole relationship between Israel and her God is predicated.

1. *Exodus*. The liberation narratives in Exodus 3–14 describe YHWH's mighty intervention, through which he makes himself known as the one true God—a revelation that becomes the foundation of his covenant relationship with Israel. In this context, YHWH's mighty deeds are depicted as the means by which he will make himself known to both Israel and Egypt, made evident with use of the self-disclosing formula "so that you may/then you shall know (למען תדע, ἵνα εἰδῆς) that I am YHWH." The formula is repeated several times to emphasize the intended

¹⁰ Marcus, "Mark 4," 562.

¹¹ Marcus, "Mark 4," 567–68.

¹² A similar approach is taken by Johnson, "Error." My reading here, although largely sympathetic to Johnson's, differs from it at important junctures, which will be pointed out.

¹³ The importance of the use of Scripture in the Gospel has been widely recognized. See Ulrich Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness: The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and Its Basis in the Biblical Tradition* (London: SCM, 1963); Howard Clark Kee, "The Function of Scriptural Quotations and Allusions in Mark 11–16," in *Jesus and Paulus: Festschrift für Werner Georg Kümmel zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. E. Earle Ellis and Erich Grässer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1975), 165–85; Willard Swartley, "The Structural Function of the Term 'Way' in Mark," in *The New Way of Jesus: Essays Presented to Howard Charles*, ed. William Klassen (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1980), 73–86; Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 12–47; Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark*, WUNT 2/88 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 53–90; Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

effect of the signs (8:10, 22; 9:14; 10:2; 7:17; 11:7; 14:4, 18).¹⁴ The content of revelation is the oneness of YHWH—"I am the Lord" (7:5, 17; 10:2; 14:18); "I am the Lord in the midst of the earth" (8:22); and "there is none like me in all the earth" (8:10; 9:14).

The formula is employed in two contexts. First, it is used in Moses's encounters with Pharaoh. In the first encounter, Pharaoh responds to YHWH's demands with a dismissive statement characterized by cognitive language: "I do not *know* the LORD" (5:2). After this failed interaction, there is a series of encounters where YHWH announces his acts of judgment in order to make himself known to the Egyptians, followed by Pharaoh's immediate obdurate response (cf. 7:17, 22; 8:10, 15, 22, 32; 9:29, 34).

However, the ultimate function of YHWH's terrifying activity is expressed in the use of the self-disclosing formula in relation to Israel.

"Say therefore to the people of Israel, ... *you shall know that I am the LORD your God*" (6:6-7).

"... that *you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson* how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, *that you may know that I am YHWH*" (10:1-2).

YHWH's self-disclosure has a dual function. It is a demonstration of his power to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, which is met with obduracy, and a disclosure of himself to his people, meant to elicit faith. In this context, Pharaoh's hardhearted resistance also has a two-level signification. On the one hand, it is the result of his failed cognitive appropriation of YHWH's self-disclosing acts. On the other, it heightens the magnitude of YHWH's deliverance in the eyes of the people "so that they may know" and believe him. Toward the end of the narrative, the deeds achieve their intended goal: "Israel *saw* the great power that YHWH used against the Egyptians, ... and they *believed* in YHWH" (14:31).

This duality seems to present an epistemological conundrum. Knowledge of YHWH is the intended result of the deeds for both Pharaoh and Israel. However, the result of the experience is very different in each case. Does Pharaoh achieve the "knowledge" envisioned in the formula? Or does YHWH's self-disclosure fall short of its intended goal when it comes to the pagan king?

Johnson distinguishes two orders of knowledge and error in order to explain the distinction between Pharaoh's knowing and Israel's knowing. Israel knows YHWH "internally" and Pharaoh "externally."¹⁵ The problem with this reading is that no such distinction is made in the application of the self-disclosing formula to both groups. The focus of revelation is the same—YHWH is the one God. The difference seems to be the opposite responses of "hardness of heart" and "believing."

¹⁴ The formula is articulated both as purpose statements (Exod 8:10, 22; 9:14; 11:7) and predictive statements (10:2; 14:4, 18).

¹⁵ Johnson, "Error," 91.

Throughout the narrative YHWH's sovereignty is asserted as an undeniable fact. Therefore, the predictive self-disclosure formula "you shall know" is expected to be taken as an authoritative statement, meant to be utterly accomplished. Thus, for example, when YHWH says prior to the Nile plague, "By this you shall know that I am YHWH" (7:17), the idea is that, independent of Pharaoh's response, the deed accomplishes its self-disclosing purpose. Through the deed, YHWH's dignity is made plainly known. Therefore, Pharaoh's hardheartedness and Israel's "believing" correspond to opposing responses to that revelation. Inevitably, both the Egyptians and Israel achieve "knowledge" of YHWH in some way by seeing his deeds, but while Pharaoh rejects the premise of revelation—that is, YHWH is the one true God—Israel accepts it, which inaugurates their covenant relationship with him. "Knowing" in this context has two dimensions: revelatory and responsive. As a revelatory experience, knowledge is the result elicited by the encounter with YHWH's open self-disclosure. But this knowledge demands a response, which itself determines the ultimate effect of the revelation. For hardhearted Pharaoh, it becomes the very means of his judgment. For believing Israel, it becomes the means of their liberation, and most importantly, the basis of their covenant with their God. In other words, YHWH always succeeds in making himself known at the level of people's encounter with his deeds, but this "knowledge" is itself subject to opposite responses.

After they leave Egypt, Israel has a different response to YHWH's continuous self-disclosure, and their knowledge of YHWH is affected accordingly. In the wilderness, although YHWH continues to perform his self-disclosing deeds in their sight, Israel betrays signs of the same cognitive obduracy that Pharaoh evidenced. When Israel grumbles amidst the dire circumstances in the wilderness, YHWH gives them manna (16:1–36), which becomes an important revelatory instrument. In fact, Israel's experience with the divine bread is supposed to be equivalent to "seeing YHWH's glory" (16:7). Thus, the bread is given "so that they may know" that YHWH is their God (16:12). Once again, we see the correlation between the sensory experience and the epistemic realization. "Seeing" YHWH at work should elicit knowledge of YHWH and ultimately obedience to his commands (16:4). Israel's encounter with the bread, however, is characterized by incomprehension. "When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was" (16:15). Since the bread comes as the direct fulfillment of YHWH's self-revelatory announcement, Israel's incomprehension entails an actual failure to acknowledge the miraculous feeding for what it is—a visible proof of YHWH's agency in their deliverance and provision. The narrative then gradually unfolds into one of conflict between YHWH and Israel, in which Israel quickly develops a tendency toward idolatry (32:1–8), acquiring the epithet "a stiff-necked people" (עַם־קָשָׁה־עֵרָף, 32:9; 33:4–5; 34:9). The root קָשָׁה is employed in the depiction of Pharaoh's hardness of heart (7:3; 13:15). Therefore, the qualification approximates both forms of resistance to YHWH, both articulated in relation to an epistemic failure.

In summary, the Exodus tradition develops a narrative of revelation and response, whereby YHWH reveals himself to his people in the process of their deliv-

erance through his deeds, which are met with stubborn rebellion. In this process, YHWH's self-disclosure is an open manifestation of his power, whose witnessing should elicit a response of faith. "Knowing" in this context is the result of this self-disclosing intervention. YHWH performs the deeds so that they may know he is the one God. In turn, the people who see his deeds should appropriate this knowledge in faith and obedience to his commandments.¹⁶

2. *Isaiah*. The same pattern of revelation and response undergirds the message of the book of Isaiah. The book begins with an injunction against the people's rebellion, conveyed in epistemic terms. "Israel does not know (יֵדָע לֹא יִשְׂרָאֵל, οὐκ ἔγνω), my people do not understand (לֹא הִתְבּוֹנֵן, οὐ συνήκαεν)" (1:3). This epistemic failure is not a mere cognitive impairment, since it is clearly qualified as a sinful despising of YHWH (1:4). Therefore, "incomprehension" is seen as part of a willful predisposition against YHWH. As the oracle unfolds, the object of their rejection is defined in epistemic terms. Their "lack of knowledge" of YHWH (מִבְּלִי-יָדַעַת, τὸ μὴ εἰδέναι αὐτοὺς τὸν κύριον) is the result of "not seeing/regarding" (לֹא יָבִיטוּ/לֹא רָאוּ, οὐκ ἐμβλέπουσιν/οὐ κατανοοῦσιν) his deeds (5:12–13). Thus, in Isaiah too, knowledge is predicated on the sensory experience of witnessing YHWH's mighty works, while lack of knowledge is the result of a willful disregard for them.

YHWH's response comes in the form of the oracle of 6:9–10, which functions as retributive judgment. While in 1–5 the people's lack of understanding is the expression of their willful stubbornness, in 6:9–10 such obduracy is turned against them as a punishment, impairing their ability to understand and preventing them from obtaining forgiveness.¹⁷ This, however, also seems to lead to the formation of a remnant, a holy seed that emerges out of YHWH's judgment (6:13).¹⁸

In chapter 29, after the judicial oracle is restated (29:10), YHWH announces his "new" intervention through wonderful deeds (29:14), which will at the same time confound the wisdom of the wise and reverse the epistemological blindness of the meek (29:18–19), whose children will "see" (רָאוּ, ὄρατω) the work of YHWH's hands and who will "know with understanding" (וִידְעוּ בִינָה, γνώσονται σύνεσιν) and accept his instructions (29:23–24). Therefore, in this first part of Isaiah (1–40), knowing is intrinsically linked to YHWH's mighty intervention. Israel's rebellious

¹⁶ Johnson argues that "listening" is prior to "seeing" in the epistemological process. Thus, in order to "know" YHWH, people have to "listen" to Moses so as to "see" the signs. Johnson, "Error," 80. In my reading, the announcement of the signs and their actual performance constitute one single and inseparable revelatory act. In fact, since YHWH has to authenticate Moses's authority through signs so that the people may listen to him, it seems that "seeing" is concurrent with "listening." The revelatory act then becomes the basis for listening and obeying.

¹⁷ Kenneth T. Aitken, "Hearing and Seeing: Metamorphoses of a Motif in Isaiah 1–39," in *Among the Prophets: Language, Image and Structure in the Prophetic Writings*, ed. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines, JSOTSS 144 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 26. See also Craig A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6.9–10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation*, JSOTSS 64 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 42.

¹⁸ On the remnant theology of Isaiah, see Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 36–40; Joseph Jensen, "Weal and Woe in Isaiah: Consistency and Continuity," *CBQ* 43.2 (1981): 167–87. Hasel has an extensive treatment on the relationship between judgment and the formation of a remnant. Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1972), 226–48.

lack of understanding is articulated as an obdurate obliviousness toward YHWH's deeds and words, while the promised restoration of their cognitive capacity is also understood in relation to their seeing the works of his hands and obeying his commands.

The themes of revelation and response continue throughout the second part of Isaiah. Here, the theme of divine self-disclosure becomes prominent in the recurrent expressions "I am he" (41:4; 43:10, 13; 46:4; 48:12; 52:6) and "I am YHWH" (41:4, 13, 17; 42:6, 8; 43:3, 15; 45:3, 5–8, 18–19, 21; 48:17; 49:23, 26). Furthermore, the section is permeated with allusions to revelation (40:5; 42:8; 48:6; 53:1) and variations of the Exodus self-disclosing formula "so that you may know" (41:20; 43:10; 45:3, 6; 49:23, 26; 52:6). The deeds of YHWH receive remarkable attention, as YHWH's new act of redemption is described in the colors of the exodus (40:3, 10; 41:18; 42:16; 43:16–17, 19–20; 48:14, 17, 20–21; 49:10; 50:2; 51:9–10, 15; 52:4, 10–12; 53:1).

Despite the display of YHWH's sovereignty and uniqueness, Israel turns out to be a blind and deaf servant (42:18–20; 43:8) who refuses to walk in YHWH's ways and obey his Torah (42:24; 48:18). They are an obstinate (קשה) people (48:4, 8), who fail to understand his "new deed" (43:19). In contrast, YHWH persists in their epistemic restoration, calling his "blind witnesses" to see and remember his deeds so that they may "know" (ידעו, γινώτε), "believe" (πιστεύουσιν, πιστεύετε) and "understand" (תבין, συνήτε) (43:10; cf. 42:16, 44:21; 45:4–5; 46:8). Hope arises as Israel's epistemic rebellion is to be healed by the work of the enigmatic figure of chapter 53, who will "see" and through whose "knowledge" "many will be accounted righteous" (53:11).¹⁹

Two features are worth highlighting in this implicit narrative of rebellion-judgment-restoration. First, the overall picture is of YHWH's mighty intervention, which accomplishes the revelation of himself. In a discourse characterized by pointed rhetorical questions, people are constantly challenged to "see," "hear," and ultimately respond to this plainly revealed reality (40:21, 27–28; 42:18–20; 43:19).²⁰ Similarly, YHWH announces he will perform his deeds so "they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of YHWH has done this" (41:20). Therefore, the overall sense is one of *open revelation*. When a connotation of mystery and hiddenness emerges, it is part of the dynamics of revelation and human response—the judgment imposed against the people's rejection (6:9–10; 29:9–11; 45:15). Finally, Israel's lack of understanding is articulated as failure to

¹⁹ On the different renderings of the verse see James M. Ward, "The Servant's Knowledge in Isaiah 40–50," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 128–29. Ward argues that the knowledge of the Servant is "the knowledge of God."

²⁰ Kuntz argues that the rhetorical questions in Isaiah are meant to move the reader to the prophet's conclusion about YHWH's supremacy as the world's creator and ruler. J. Kenneth Kuntz, "The Form, Location, and Function of Rhetorical Questions in Deutero-Isaiah," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah, Vol. 1*, VTSup 70:1 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 134–35. In relation to the questions in chapter 40, Kuntz calls attention to both the disputational and rhetorical function of the interrogatives. It seems significant that most of the rhetorical questions in the section interweave the themes of YHWH's deeds and the revelation of YHWH's unique dignity.

acknowledge this plainly revealed reality. This, however, is not a mere disability to which they fall victim, but the result of their rebellious behavior (1:2–4; 40:18–20; 44:9–17).

This survey of the Exodus and Isaianic traditions finds a common dynamic of revelation and response. In both cases, YHWH's intervention on behalf of his people is the means by which he reveals himself to them as the one true God and the basis of his words of command. The emerging idea is that seeing what YHWH does leads to the knowledge of who he is, becoming the premise of the appeal to obey his words. In this context, incomprehension is ultimately an expression of rebellion. It is the refusal to accept the premise of what is being revealed and acknowledge YHWH's dignity made clear in his intervention.

If this reconstructed grammar should serve as the basis for analysis of the incipient epistemology of these writings, it may be asserted that “knowledge” is both revelatory and responsive, with these aspects functioning in dynamic interdependence. It is precisely because knowledge is the expected result of *open revelation* experienced with one's sensory capacities, that understanding can be articulated as a *willful response*. Israel's lack of understanding is qualified as rebellious because of their exposure to YHWH's self-disclosing deeds. Therefore, incomprehension is itself a response that arises from refusal to accept the premise of what is plainly revealed and experienced. Thus, “knowledge” is part of the same conceptual framework as “faith” and “hardness of heart,” which essentially convey people's response. “Knowing” YHWH by encountering his wondrous works is meant to elicit believing, while the stubborn resistance to acknowledge them reflects an obdurate condition.

III. KNOWLEDGE AS REVELATION AND RESPONSE IN MARK

I suggest that Mark's epistemological assumptions are fundamentally scriptural, exhibiting the same dynamics of revelation and response outlined above. Jesus's ministry is essentially characterized by self-disclosing mighty deeds, which are supposed to elicit the acknowledgment of his dignity and obedience to his authoritative teaching. Accordingly, negative responses to Jesus—from the crowds, religious authorities, and disciples—entail a resistance to accept the premise of that which is being revealed through his deeds and words, a “willful incomprehension.” We shall now explore how this dynamic can be observed in the narrative.

1. *Jesus's self-disclosure in Mark.* Mark depicts the story of Jesus as an act of divine eschatological intervention. The good news of Jesus is according to Isaiah's announcement of the eschatological coming of the *κύριος* on his “way in the wilderness” (Mark 1:1; Isa 40:3). In this context, Jesus is commonly identified as “the one who comes” (*ἔρχεται*, Mark 1:7–8; 1:14–15; 1:24; 2:17; 10:45; 11:9). More than a mere movement descriptor, the language has theological import. Jesus's “coming” coincides with and in fact brings about the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in the narrative. Hence his emergence is marked by the proclamation of the nearness and arrival of the Kingdom (1:15; 9:1; 11:10). Also part of this picture, 4:21–23 seems to interpret this eschatological intervention in revelatory terms. The parable

describes a lamp that “comes” (ἔρχεται) to be put on a stand, symbolizing the display of hidden realities (4:22), likely a commentary on the self-disclosing nature of Jesus’s eschatological ministry.²¹ Through his deeds of power and his authoritative teaching, the hidden realities of the Kingdom of God are made manifest.

If, as we suggest, Mark follows the paradigm of divine revelation outlined in Exodus and Isaiah, we should expect that the deeds also carry a self-disclosing potential. Scholars recognize that the miracle accounts function to produce a concerted focus on the identity of Jesus as the one in whom YHWH is at work.²² The concern with Jesus’s identity and authority pervasive in chapters 1–8, along with the emblematic question by Jesus regarding people’s perception of who he is (8:27–28) after an overwhelming series of deeds, seems to imply that seeing Jesus in action should elicit understanding his identity. For this reason, every time Jesus’s authority is emphasized, the issue of his identity is also raised (1:21–28; 1:32–34; 5:1–20; 6:1–6; 4:35–41).

Nowhere, however, is the self-disclosing nature of the deeds stated more clearly than in 2:1–12. To the scribes’ veiled challenge of his authority, Jesus answers with the self-disclosing formula “so that you may know” (ἵνα εἰδῆτε) coupled with reference to the Son of Man.²³ Significantly, while the Pharisee’s accusation is that Jesus threatens the oneness of YHWH (εἰς ὁ θεός, 2:7), Jesus, in response, employs the very formula that in Exodus is repeatedly used to affirm it. The formula, however, points back to himself as the authoritative Son of Man. The implication is that Jesus’s forgiveness of sins, instead of a blasphemous usurping of the divine prerogative, entails affirmation of YHWH’s unique authority now revealed in him. The miracle itself then comes as a corroborative statement of that affirmation. The

²¹ Hooker argues that 4:22 implies that “the light was in fact hidden during the ministry of Jesus” and that this corresponds to an anomaly of a temporary nature. Morna D. Hooker, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark*, BNTC (London: A. & C. Black, 1991), 133. However, the force of the ἵνα indicates that hiddenness is the very means of revelation—“nothing is secret except in order to (ἵνα) come (ἐλθῆ) to manifestation (εἰς φανερόν).” If the “light” is Jesus and his “coming” reflects his eschatological intervention, then it follows that his “coming” overcomes secrecy and makes reality fully manifested.

²² Edwin Keith Broadhead, *Teaching with Authority: Miracles and Christology in the Gospel of Mark*, JSNTSS 74 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 207; Graham Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 95.

²³ The debate on the title is extensive. Some have argued for a messianic sense with echoes from the Danielic oracles. See Morna D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: S.P.C.K., 1967); C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 11–22; Joel Marcus, “Authority to Forgive Sins upon the Earth: The Shema in the Gospel of Mark,” in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. Craig A. Evans and W. Richard Stegner, JSNTSS 104 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 196–211. Others argue that the expression is a mere circumlocution for “I” or a general reference to “man.” See, most prominently, Maurice Casey, *The Solution to the “Son of Man” Problem*, LNTS 343 (London: Bloomsbury, 2007). Within the series in question, the expression is clearly tied to the portrayal of Jesus’s unique authority and therefore carries a strong Christological significance. Even if the circumlocution option is favored, there is no question that the “I” here is referring to Jesus in a unique way and not to mankind in general. Noticeably when the first-person singular is used in the series (cf. ἦλθον in 2:17), the sense is still heavily Christological. The Danielic overtones of the title, however, are strong. See also Larry W. Hurtado and Paul L. Owen, eds., *“Who Is This Son of Man?”: The Latest Scholarship on a Puzzling Expression of the Historical Jesus*, LNTS 390 (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

same authenticating function is conveyed in 3:1–6, where Jesus heals the man with a withered hand while looking at (περιβλεψάμενος) hardhearted opponents, thus making a statement about his authority as the Lord of the Sabbath.²⁴

The whole interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees in the controversy series is somewhat reminiscent of the exodus. In a series of encounters with opponents, Jesus performs mighty deeds, employing a self-disclosing formula, which results in a hardhearted response by his enemies. Therefore, we have the same language and dynamics of revelation and response, whereby deeds are performed to elicit knowledge but are met with an obdurate response.

2. *Deeds, authority, and identity.* But what about the apparent ambiguity in Jesus's identity self-claims? Aside from the obscure Son of Man references, Jesus never states his divine identity, except at the end of the Gospel (14:61–62). This has led a number of scholars to argue for a gradual revelation, whereby Jesus's identity is fully made known only in association with his death and resurrection.²⁵ Granted that there is a noticeable escalation in the revelation, the overlap between authority and identity points to an intended revelation right from the outset.

In Mark there is a sense of Jesus's identity, not merely as an ontological category, but as a concept related to the origin of his power and authority. In other words, who he is and where his authority comes from are blended together. Thus, questions of authority in Mark entail questions of identity. In this context, the perception of his identity is obtained not by direct announcement, but by inference.

This can be observed in the conspicuous use of interrogatives in the narrative. First, the rhetorical questions by Jesus's contemporaries (1:27; 2:7; 4:41; 6:2) reveal their puzzlement in trying to make sense of what Jesus's actions might entail. The repetitive pattern of inquiry is more than a stylistic feature; it points to the theme of pervasive incomprehension, which is at the very heart of the story (see below). Conversely, Jesus's rhetorical questions (2:8; 4:40; 8:17–18) highlight people's surprisingly inadequate reactions to his deeds, implying that what is conveyed through his actions ought to be appropriated. Therefore, while the people's questions reveal their incomprehension, Jesus's questions evaluate that incomprehension as an inadequate and unfounded response.

The self-disclosing nature of Jesus's deeds also emerges in the so-called "epiphanic" miracles (4:35–41; 5:1–20; 6:30–44; 6:45–52; 8:1–10). All of these have in common an exodus-type setting, and many have recognized the allusive description of Jesus in these episodes.²⁶ Particularly important are the pairs of sea and desert miracles, which Mark associates with the theme of the disciples' incomprehension. Mark's editorial comment in 6:52 and Jesus's own confrontation of their obduracy

²⁴ The miracle also seems to carry overtones of the exodus. See Kurt Queller, "Stretch out Your Hand!: Echo and Metalepsis in Mark's Sabbath Healing Controversy," *JBL* 129.4 (2010): 737–58.

²⁵ Hans Conzelmann, "History and Theology in the Passion Narratives of the Synoptic Gospels," *Int* 24.2 (1970): 181–82; C. M. Tuckett, ed., *The Messianic Secret*, Issues in Religion and Theology 1 (London: SPCK, 1983); Nils A. Dahl, "The Purpose of Mark's Gospel," in Tuckett, *The Messianic Secret*, 29–34.

²⁶ Examples include Edward Craig Hobbs, "The Gospel of Mark and the Exodus" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1958); Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 103–43; Swartley, "The Structural Function of the Term 'Way' in Mark."

in 8:17–21 imply that something the disciples ought to perceive is being revealed through these events.²⁷

But what is it that people should perceive? The fact that the rhetorical questions are directly associated with some reference to Jesus's authority and identity suggests that this is precisely the object of inference. In other words, one should be able to infer the reality about Jesus by making sense of the self-claims implicit in his actions, and not to arrive at this understanding is surprising. That Jesus does not state who he is does not mean he is intentionally concealing the truth about his identity. He comes proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God and performing demonstrative eschatological mighty deeds so that people will know he is the one who bears YHWH's unique authority. That much is publicly manifested and not at all hidden. Therefore, his identity does not need to be stated. The truth about his identity is to be grasped by those who are willing to acknowledge what his deeds reveal.

An objection to this reading might be raised based on Jesus's injunctions to silence, which were the springboard of W. Wrede's famous messianic secret theory.²⁸ If Jesus performs his deeds in order to reveal the reality about the Kingdom and himself, why does he silence the demons, the healed individuals, and the disciples? As Luz, Räisänen, and others have pointed out, Wrede's impulse to treat these different injunctions as subservient to the same overriding secrecy theme is probably mistaken.²⁹ The commands to the healed individuals (1:44; 7:36) are broken, thereby feeding the theme of Jesus's spreading fame. Therefore, if anything, these instances unexpectedly end up contributing to the portrayal of the Kingdom as an unstoppable reality in process of full disclosure (cf. 4:26–29). In an ironic way, the command to silence engenders fuller proclamation. As for the injunctions to disciples (8:30; 9:9), they are related to the portrayal of Jesus as a suffering Messiah—a reality the disciples are not willing to accept. Therefore, the injunctions in their case do not entail an intentional containing of revelation, but expose their incomprehension.

We are then left with the injunctions to demons, which are indeed the only ones that seem to effectively carry out a result of secrecy (1:25; 1:34; 3:12). When understood in the context of the narrative's dynamics of revelation and response, however, it seems that these injunctions are yet another way by which Mark highlights the irony of a plainly revealed and yet not understood reality. First, all of them happen in the context of Jesus's spreading fame. Therefore, as in the case of the healed individuals, the injunctions do not prevent the news about Jesus from becoming public. Second, in a plot where people oppose, reject, and misunderstand

²⁷ Watson comments, "If Mark does not intend the miracle stories to prove his claim that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God (1.1), then it is hard to see why he has made so much use of them." Francis Watson, "The Social Function of Mark's Secrecy Theme," *JSNT* 24 (1985): 52. See also J. D. Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 80–82.

²⁸ William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971), 34–36.

²⁹ Ulrich Luz, "The Secrecy Motif and the Markan Christology," in Tuckett, *The Messianic Secret*, 75–96; Heikki Räisänen, *The Messianic Secret in Mark's Gospel* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 144–94.

Jesus, the fact that even unclean spirits “know” who he is and fully submit to his authority heightens the irony of human incomprehension. Jesus’s injunctions to them sharpen this irony. Demons are not adequate witnesses or heralds of Jesus’s eschatological work. People are to respond to his self-disclosure and acknowledge his dignity by “seeing” and “believing.”

Therefore, besides their role as eschatological signs of the age of salvation,³⁰ the deeds indeed function as means of self-disclosure. Eschatological deliverance is not an end in itself, but means by which Jesus discloses himself in the eyes of the people, so that they will hear him. This two-edged function of the deeds seems to be aligned with YHWH’s pattern of salvific self-revelation found in Mark’s preferred scriptural frameworks. Thus, in the Exodus, YHWH’s mighty deeds are a response to the cry of the people for deliverance but are also given so that YHWH might be known. Similarly in Isaiah, YHWH’s acts of redemption are both means of liberation and pointers to YHWH’s uniqueness as the only God of Israel. Given Mark’s awareness of these salvific paradigms, his depiction of Jesus’s mighty deeds seems indeed to portray them as signs of the coming of YHWH’s kingdom, signaling the inauguration of the age of salvation, but beyond that, projecting Jesus as the one who brings the Kingdom to its fruition. Given their Christological tenor, they themselves become his ultimate revelatory statements, which although openly manifested, are ironically met with incomprehension.

IV. WILLFUL INCOMPREHENSION IN MARK

When it comes to the theme of incomprehension in Mark, the focus of attention in most scholarly treatments is on the disciples. Admittedly, the theme is more overtly developed in relation to Jesus’s followers, with cognitive terminology repeatedly applied to them in a negative sense (4:13; 6:52; 7:18; 8:17, 21; 9:6; 9:32; 10:38; 14:40). However, the typical cognitive terminology (οἶδα, γινώσκω, συνίημι, νοέω) is supplemented by the description of people’s debates (διαλογίζομαι, συζητέω) and by the number of inquiries arising from their encounters with Jesus. When the conceptual domain is thus expanded, we find that epistemic ideas—articulated either positively (knowledge/understanding) or negatively (puzzlement/incomprehension)—are pervasive in the story, affecting virtually all character groups. Here, I will explore representative passages involving the theme of incomprehension and the two main groups who display it—religious authorities and disciples.

1. *Religious authorities.* The first controversy series (2:1–3:6) outlines the essentials of the conflict between Jesus and the authorities of Israel. Arranged in chiasmic fashion, the series has three focus points: the two bracketing healing stories (2:1–12;

³⁰ This sense is obvious in the association of miracles with the theme of the Kingdom of God and has as a close parallel the so-called Messianic Apocalypse (4Q521). On an approach to miracles from this angle, see Alan Richardson, *The Miracle-Stories of the Gospels* (London: SCM Press, 1959); James Kallas, *Significance of the Synoptic Miracles* (Greenwich, CT: Seabury, 1962). On miracles in 4Q521, see Eric Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus’ Miracles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

3:1–6) and the central saying about old and new (2:21–22).³¹ The arrangement displays escalation in conflict, moving from cognitive deliberation to murderous intent.

Mark's first controversy introduces the scribes' unvoiced judgment (2:6–7), reflecting introspective reasoning.³² The verb *διαλογίζομαι*—denoting “calculation,” “consideration,” or “discussion”—is often used with a negative connotation in the LXX and NT, usually qualified with associated negative terms. Mark employs the noun *διαλογισμός* negatively in 7:21, identifying the evil (*κακοί*) thoughts coming from men's hearts (*καρδίας*), followed by a sin list. The verb *διαλογίζομαι* is employed three times in relation to the authorities (2:8; 11:31) and three times for the disciples (8:16; 8:17; 9:33)—all in negative contexts. The association with *καρδία* in 2:8 and 7:21 confirms its cognitive sense.³³ Since the hearts of men are also affected by obduracy in the narrative, the verb conveys the idea of a deliberative cognitive process corrupted by evil predispositions.

The initial picture in 2:1–12, however, is not one of unqualified hostility. The authorities are sitting (*καθήμενοι*) and *διαλογιζόμενοι ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν*. The phrase lacks a judgment qualification of the sort in 7:15 and on its own does not denote an evil design, as if at this point the leaders were trying to find grounds to condemn Jesus. If anything, their physical posture suggests that they were listening to his teaching. The description of their deliberation, articulated in a series of rhetorical questions, highlights the process of cognitive assessment that leads them to their conclusion about the blasphemous implications of Jesus's words. They seek to make sense of Jesus's claims and reach a verdict: “If he does that, he blasphemes.”

Moreover, their question entails a cognitive attempt to fit Jesus's declaration within the categories available to them. Since there were other cultic paradigms for dealing with sins, their immediate association of his act with the usurping of YHWH's unique prerogatives, implies that Jesus's action did not fit those paradigms or any other, for God alone is “able” to forgive. The verb *δύναται* reflects a sense of effective power (1:40; 3:23, 27; 5:3; 9:22–23, 28). As Jesus's demonstrative healing makes clear, his power to heal testifies to his authority to forgive. Saying that he has authority to forgive is equivalent to saying that he has the actual power to do so, which triggers the association with YHWH.³⁴ The logic behind the authorities' “calculations” may well have been: “If this one proclaims forgiveness of sins outside the temple, then he does not act as a priest. Therefore, he claims some other level of authority/power to do it, which only YHWH himself possesses,

³¹ Joanna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1–3:6*, SBLDS 48 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), 110.

³² See Hooker, *St. Mark*, 107.

³³ J. Behm, “*καρδία*,” TDNT 3:608.

³⁴ See Otfried Hofius, “Vergebungszuspruch und Vollmachtsfrage: Mk 2, 1–12 und das Problem priesterlicher Absolution im antiken Judentum,” in *Wenn Nicht Jetzt, Wann Dann?: Aufsätze für Hans Joachim Kraus zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. H. G. Geyer et al. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1983), 115–27. See also J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, PNIC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 79.

which cannot be possible. This implies a negation of the oneness of YHWH and is therefore tantamount to blasphemy.”³⁵

In a subtle but clear way, Mark shows the origins and development of the authorities’ resistance. It is not the case that they arrive in the house with the intent of incriminating Jesus. Rather, they are exposed to Jesus’s authority claims and to his authenticating deeds and make a decision about what it means. As the series develops, the opposition intensifies, and the result is rejection of his claims and the plot to destroy him. Thus, a development from cognitive reasoning to intentional plotting is established, with the two demonstrative deeds functioning as catalysts in the process.

The development is meaningful. First, it shows that the leaders’ opposition does not stem from an *a priori* divinely imposed obduracy. Divine agency will surely play a part in the dynamics later on, but at this point it develops from a cognitive deliberation and the rejection of the premise of Jesus’s self-disclosure. Second, this cognitive failure is not mere denseness, as if they were prevented from understanding what was disclosed. Their deliberation makes it patent that they clearly understand the implications of Jesus’s action, namely, his claims to be the bearer of YHWH’s unique authority. Therefore, it is not the case that they cannot understand his claims, but that *even though* they do understand his claims and witness the authenticating deeds that substantiate them, this does not fit acceptably their preconceived notions of authority. In other words, it is not mere ignorance, but a *willful incomprehension*; not the kind that says, “What is this?,” but instead, “This cannot be.” It is still *incomprehension*, since it does not make sense for them, but the reason it does not make sense, is their *willful* rejection of the premise of revelation.

The center of the chiasmic structure (2:18–22) fits this picture. The parabolic sayings about the old and the new (2:21–22) stand as a paradigmatic explanation for the whole series, indeed, the whole narrative.³⁶ The “new”—which Mark associates with Jesus’s authority in 1:27—implies a new reality that requires a new frame of mind;³⁷ the old mindset will not accommodate the new eschatological reality he brings. Therefore, the authorities’ opposition shows their resistance to YHWH’s “new” intervention in Jesus, resulting from a willful cognitive rejection of his claims. This rejection, in their case, quickly assumes an irreversibly hostile character.

In 3:22 the leaders directly reject Jesus’s self-disclosure by attributing his deeds to the work of demons. This elicits the turning point where the Isaianic ob-

³⁵ On the charge of blasphemy as related to a threat to the unity of God, see Charles P. Anderson, “The Trial of Jesus as Jewish-Christian Polarization: Blasphemy and Polemic in Mark’s Gospel,” in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, vol. 1: *Paul and the Gospels*, ed. Peter Richardson with David Granskou (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1986), 118; Robert Horton Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 117–18; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 185; Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 77–79.

³⁶ William R. G. Loader, *Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels*, WUNT 2/97 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 32.

³⁷ See Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 273 (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 238–39.

duracy oracle is applied to them (4:12).³⁸ As in Isaiah, the oracle constitutes a retributive judgment that turns their existing willful incomprehension into an imposed epistemic inability—they will not understand (*μὴ συνιῶσιν*) and consequently will not turn (*ἐπιστρέψωσιν*) and be forgiven (*ἀφεθῆῃ*). Although Mark sometimes employs different cognitive terminology interchangeably, his use of *συνίημι* seems reserved for a sense of “understanding” that leads to faith, normally identifying the disciples’ lack of understanding (6:52; 7:14; 8:17, 21). Therefore, the preclusion of “understanding” does not reflect complete ignorance or denseness, but the fact that, having consciously rejected Jesus’s claims, they will not attain a position of faith and be forgiven.³⁹ Like YHWH, Jesus makes himself known, but that knowledge is subject to a response. In the case of the religious authorities, that response is negative, which locks them up in epistemic failure.

2. *Disciples*. How does this dynamic of revelation and response work in relation to the disciples’ storyline? Following the parables chapter comes a section (4:35–8:21) where the disciples’ incomprehension assumes center stage. It contains two cycles of revelation structured with sea and desert epiphanic events.

- 4:35–41 – First Epiphanic Episode on the Sea
 - 5:1–6:29 – First Revelatory Cycle
- 6:30–44 – First Epiphanic Episode in the Desert

- 6:45–52 – Second Epiphanic Episode on the Sea
 - 6:53–7:37 – Second Revelatory Cycle
- 8:1–9 – Second Epiphanic Episode in the Desert

Both cycles are triggered by the disciples’ incomprehension. The first revelatory cycle begins with the disciples’ confusion regarding Jesus’s identity (4:35–41), which leads to the first sequence of deeds and resistance. The next revelatory cycle begins with another instance of the disciples’ incomprehension regarding Jesus’s identity (6:45–52), which sets them back on a new revelatory itinerary.⁴⁰

The section as a whole contains bookending rhetorical questions by Jesus, highlighting the disciples’ incomprehension:

4:40 - οὐπω ἔχετε πίστιν;

8:21 - οὐπω συνίετε;

³⁸ The oracle is directed at “those on the outside,” which in context also includes Jesus’s family (cf. 3:20–30).

³⁹ In 12:12, the authorities are said to “understand” (*ἔγνωσαν*) the parable, which has led some to argue for a temporary lifting of their obduracy. However, they still do not “understand” (*συνίημι*) with the kind of understanding that reflects faith and leads to forgiveness. For this reason, despite their “recognition” of the parable, their perception only actualizes their ultimate rejection of the Son, resulting in judgment.

⁴⁰ See Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “The Jesus of Mark and the Sea of Galilee,” *JBL* 103.3 (1984): 368.

The two questions complement each other. The first introduces the revelation cycles, while the second reflects back on them, both highlighting the disciples' obtuseness. The adverb *οὕτω* conveys a sense of surprise.⁴¹ Given what they have witnessed, the disciples should have arrived at a proper understanding of Jesus, and yet they have not. After this point, miracles are more scant. Therefore, the cycles are the last sequence of self-disclosing deeds, after which a proper understanding should be obtained. Given the sea/boat parallelism of the episodes, it is likely that Jesus's bracketing questions are also parallel. "Understanding" is not merely a cognitive faculty, but a response of faith. The reason they "do not yet understand" is precisely because they "do not yet believe."

In all three instances where incomprehension is highlighted in the section, it emerges as a reaction to Jesus's exodus-like deeds.⁴² Therefore, the whole sequence seems to convey an ironic portrayal of those who have been given the mystery of the Kingdom of God, missing the significance of the very deeds by which it is being manifested in the person of Jesus. But what is the nature of this incomprehension?

The disciples' question (4:41) has a similar rhetorical structure to two other previous questions—one by the crowds and one by the leaders—reflecting on the authority and identity of Jesus.

1:27: Question: τί ἐστὶν τοῦτο;

Conclusion: διδαχὴ καινὴ κατ' ἐξουσίαν.

Grounds: καὶ τοῖς πνεύμασι τοῖς ἀκαθάρτοις ἐπιτάσσει, καὶ ὑπακούουσιν αὐτῷ.

2:7: Question: τί οὗτος οὕτως λαλεῖ;

Conclusion: βλασφημεῖ.

Grounds: τίς δύναται ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας εἰ μὴ εἶς ὁ θεός;

4:41: Question: τίς ἄρα οὗτός ἐστιν

Conclusion: ?

Grounds: ὅτι καὶ ὁ ἄνεμος καὶ ἡ θάλασσα ὑπακούει αὐτῷ;

The questions imply a common inferential process, with the distinction that while crowds and authorities verbalize their conclusions, the disciples do not. Their inquiry remains ambiguously in between the positive assessment of the crowds and

⁴¹ Van Iersel and Linmans assert that the use of the adverb at the beginning of interrogative sentences is distinctively Markan. B. M. F. van Iersel and A. J. M. Linmans, "The Storm on the Lake: Mk 4:35–41 and Mt 8:18–27 in the Light of Form-Criticism, 'Redaktionsgeschichte' and Structural Analysis," in *Miscellanea Neotestamentica*, ed. Tjitze Baarda, Albertus F. J. Klijn, and Willem Cornelis van Unnik, 2 vols., NovTSup 47–48 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 2:19.

⁴² The allusive elements of these stories have been pointed out by several scholars. The resulting Christological implications are not the focus of the present article. It will suffice to say that the exodus allusions present Jesus as, at the very least, the one who brings about YHWH's promised new exodus deliverance.

the negative assessment of the opponents. The inferential particle ἄρα and the emphatic καί in 4:41 set the question in the context of all preceding revelation. Up to this point we have no hint that the disciples are grappling with the significance of Jesus's deeds. Now, however, they face an unprecedented aspect of his self-disclosure, which sets them in their own deliberative process. But is this a case of legitimate denseness, fearful astonishment, or willful incomprehension?

The evaluation of their attitude is put forward in Jesus's rebuke, which is aimed at their lack of faith and fear (4:40). Rather than a normal reaction in the face of an epiphany, fear in Mark has a negative connotation, being one of the chief reactions associated with misunderstanding and rejection of Jesus (cf. 5:15; 6:50; 9:32; 10:32; 11:18; 16:8). In this context, the disciples' cowardice is the result of unbelief (cf. also 5:36), which is reflected in their confusion regarding Jesus's identity. In other words, the reason they fear perishing is that they do not believe in Jesus, and their unbelief is articulated in reference to their incomprehension regarding his identity.

However, this incomprehension is in fact a failed response, for their question presupposes a known answer. Like the scribes, who knew there was only one paradigm of authority for Jesus's forgiveness of sins, the disciples' question takes for granted that "commanding the sea and the waves" reflects YHWH's unique authority over the forces of nature. This is why their "incomprehension" becomes the target of Jesus's rebuke, being evaluated as unbelief. As in the case of the religious authorities in 2:1–12, the disciples' confusion is not a case of simple misunderstanding, but *willful incomprehension*. Again the question is not a neutral "What does this mean?" but one that, arising from lack of faith, entails the conclusion "This cannot be." Just like the leaders, they too find themselves in a process that involves seeing the deeds, willful incomprehension, and hardness of heart with a potential for rejection.

This sense of willful incomprehension also emerges in the scriptural tone of Jesus's rebuke in 8:14–21. The sensory and cognitive terminology in Jesus's address is thoroughly employed in the Isaianic oracles.⁴³ Also noticeable, the references to the "leaven of the Pharisees" and "hardness of heart" approximate the disciples and the religious authorities. Within the immediate literary context, the "leaven" of the Pharisees links with their testing by demanding a sign from heaven (8:10–13).⁴⁴ Since their "testing" comes right after Jesus's feeding of the multitudes, their demand effectively negates the legitimacy of Jesus's miraculous feeding as a legitimate sign of his authority. The warning about the "leaven" in this context can hardly be coincidental. Twice the disciples had seen Jesus's YHWH-like feedings; if they could not remember and understand what they had seen, their hearts would then be showing signs of the "leaven"—namely, the same obduracy that led Jesus's opponents to effectively deny his self-disclosure. Sure enough, the disciples mistake

⁴³ Cf. ὁράω / βλέπω / ὀφθαλμός (LXX Isa 6:9–10); συνίημι (1:3; 6:9–10; 43:10; 52:13, 15); νοέω (32:6; 44:18; 47:7).

⁴⁴ See Mateus F. de Campos, "The 'Sign from Heaven' and the 'Bread from Heaven' (Mark 8,10–13)," *Bib* 98.2 (2017): 234–56.

Jesus's warning for a mundane sustenance problem, failing to acknowledge the true significance of the feedings. Therefore, the narrative affords a comparison of the disciples' incomprehension with the authorities' opposition. Although the expressions of resistance are different, the trajectory is the same. The authorities see Jesus's self-disclosing deeds and after "questioning his authority in their hearts," reject the premise of his self-disclosure with a hardened heart, ultimately rejecting him. The disciples also see Jesus's self-disclosing deeds and yet fail to acknowledge him even after two cycles of revelation, ending up with a hardened heart, which will eventually prevent them from accepting the premise of his mission and lead to their desertion.

To say that the disciples' incomprehension is "a situation over which they do not have complete control" ignores the force of this comparative characterization.⁴⁵ The incomprehension does not entail a mere cognitive impairment, as if the implications of Jesus's acts were beyond their grasp. Rather, as the austerity of the rebuke conveys, it reflects the refusal to accept the premise of what is being revealed. That, of course, still reflects incomprehension, since the revelatory acts do not "make sense" within their cognitive categories. However, that is precisely the point. This is a "new thing," the new thing envisioned in the Isaianic eschatological promise (Isa 42:9). A new teaching with authority (Mark 1:27); the new wine that requires new wineskins (2:22). In Mark, epistemic failure occurs precisely when people reject Jesus's self-disclosure after trying to make sense of it according to their presupposed categories. This is what leads Pharisees to ask, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (2:7) and to associate him with demons. It is what leads the crowds in Nazareth to find offence in him and to ask, "How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" (6:2–3). And it is not different with the disciples. Failing to find a category within which to fit what they experience with their eyes and ears, they ask, "Who is this?" In order to make sense of it, they have to accept the newness and category-shattering nature of the revelation, which they struggle to do. Thus, their problem is not cognitive incompetence, but *willful incomprehension*—the kind that says, "This cannot be!"⁴⁶

V. THE MYSTERY GIVEN AND THE DISCIPLES' INCOMPREHENSION

If the resulting picture of the disciples is one of incomprehension, how does the "giving of the mystery" (4:11–12) fit this narrative of epistemic failure? Arranged in antithetical parallelism, the saying sets a contrast between the giving of the mystery and "having everything in parables," which is qualified with the Isaianic obduracy oracle. The reference to τὰ πάντα seems to imply that the subject is not

⁴⁵ Matera, "Incomprehension," 162.

⁴⁶ Johnson argues that the disciples' error is a second order of error—failing to enact Jesus's instructions—while the error of other groups is a first-order error—failing to recognize the authentication of Jesus as a prophet. Johnson, "Error," 155. Since both types of resistance carry the double focus on authority and identity, it seems that no such distinction exists. For the disciples, however, there is the continued trajectory of willful incomprehension, whereby they refuse to accept the premise of Jesus's cruciform mission.

only the mode of speech itself, but the whole reality, which is obscure to those on the outside. Conversely, the “revelation” given seems to encompass not only the understanding of the parabolic teaching of Jesus, but the whole reality about the Kingdom of God, being manifested through his ministry.⁴⁷ However, the language of “lack of understanding” (μὴ συνιῶσιν) articulated negatively in relation to outsiders in the saying, is subsequently employed *exclusively* to describe the incomprehension of the disciples. We have then an ironic portrayal, whereby those who receive access to the mystery fail to understand “everything”—the parables, the bread, Jesus’s identity, Jesus’s suffering and resurrection—reproducing the same epistemic failure displayed by those on the outside.

Does this mean then that the giving of the mystery is not effective? Or as advocates of the apocalyptic reading insist, that it is only partially revealed?⁴⁸ Jesus’s subsequent rebuke of the disciples seems to suggest otherwise. Mark 4:12 would seamlessly connect with the parable’s private explanation. However, Mark 4:13 comes as an unexpected twist. If the explanation is part of the privilege of those who have been given the mystery, why does Jesus rebuke his followers for not understanding the parables? The rebuke implies that the explanation should not be necessary.⁴⁹ Those who possess the mystery should be able to grasp the parable, especially because the parable deals with one’s disposition to hear the word and accept it (4:20).

Therefore, the mystery has indeed been given. But the giving of the mystery is an act of revelation, which, as expected in the dynamic discussed so far, requires a response of faith that entails the acceptance of the premise of revelation, despite its “newness.” Thus, the mystery given entails a legitimate disclosure, whereby access to further understanding is given. However, the appropriation of this revelation is subject to response and further revelation. This idea is enhanced in the two subsequent parables of the lamp and the measures. The “lamp comes” so that what is hidden may become manifest (4:21–22)—a commentary on what is happening in the very ministry of Jesus. But those who have access to this reality are warned about their responsibility to act in accordance with their privilege: “For to the one who has, more will be given (δοθήσεται, cf. the mystery “given” in 4:11), and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (4:25). The first parable

⁴⁷ See M. A. Beavis, *Mark’s Audience: The Literary and Social Setting of Mark 4.11–12*, JSNTSup 33 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 147; Joachim Gnilka, *Die Verstockung Israels: Isaias 6:9–10 in der Theologie der Synoptiker*, SNT 3 (Munich: Kösel, 1961), 31; George Henry Boobyer, “Redaction of Mark 4:1–34,” NTS 8.1 (1961): 63.

⁴⁸ An example of this line of argumentation is Garrett’s assessment of the passage. For her, Jesus “tries” to give the disciples eyes to see, but he is unable to do so because of the satanic influence. Garrett, *Temptations*, 71.

⁴⁹ The major objection to this interpretation is that of C. F. D. Moule, “Mark 4:1–20 Yet Once More,” in *Neotestamentica et Semitica: Studies in Honour of Matthew Black*, ed. E. Earle Ellis and Max Wilcox (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969), 101–2, who thinks that vv. 10–12 is a generalizing statement and that the explanations were normally offered as a natural means of teaching. This however does not account properly for the rebuke, which is also repeated in 7:18.

is about revelation, the latter about response. Therefore, “knowledge” is progressively revealed in tandem with the response of faith.

In light of this dynamic of revelation and response, it seems that the mysterious character of the revelation relates to the responses themselves. The reality of God’s dominion is a mystery because it is only perceived by those who acknowledge Jesus as YHWH’s authoritative agent. For this reason, those who shut themselves on the outside by rejecting his authority have their will turned against themselves and are prevented from realizing the true significance of the events they witness. In contrast, those who are “with Jesus” and “do the will of God” are granted fuller access to the means by which YHWH’s dominion is expressed. The problem, as we come to realize, is that despite this privileged access, they too resist.

Why then does Mark use the “mystery” terminology to refer to realities plainly revealed? As Kelber points out, although Mark’s language does bear the marks of esoteric knowledge, the narrative itself subverts this notion by continuously breaking the secrecy and heading towards full disclosure.⁵⁰ Accordingly, through the depiction of the disciples’ incomprehension, “the notion of a distinct group of insiders in possession of confidential information has been turned inside out. In this sense, the Gospel does not at all present itself as a patron of secrecy, but rather as an ardent demythologiser of the myth of esoteric secrecy.”⁵¹ The notion of mystery only highlights the ultimate revelatory purpose of the Gospel. The very point of there being a mystery is that it is ultimately revealed.

Therefore, I suggest that the disciples’ failure to understand is not simply the result of the partial nature of revelation in the penultimate age. Rather, like the other expressions of resistance to Jesus, it is a *willful incomprehension*—an obdurate refusal to accept the premise of what is being plainly revealed to them.

VI. CONCLUSION

If the reading I have set forth in this essay is correct, then the following assertion can be made about Markan epistemology. Following the dynamics of revelation and response implicit in his preferred scriptural framework, Mark envisions knowledge as the result of one’s sensory and cognitive encounter with Jesus’s self-disclosing deeds. Modeled upon YHWH’s interventions in Exodus and Isaiah, Jesus’s eschatological work effects both eschatological deliverance and, above all, the manifestation of himself as the one who bears YHWH’s unique authority and through whom the reality of YHWH’s dominion is made manifest. As in Exodus and Isaiah, Jesus’s deeds carry a revelatory import, being performed so that people may “know.” In turn, people should accept in faith what is being revealed, despite its “newness.” Therefore, the process involves a response of faith. It is faith that unlocks understanding, not the other way around. Just as in the Exodus, the expected result is that people will “see” and “believe.” Conversely, incomprehension

⁵⁰ Werner H. Kelber, “Narrative and Disclosure: Mechanisms of Concealing, Revealing, and Revealing,” *Semeia* 43 (1988): 8, 10.

⁵¹ Kelber, “Narrative and Disclosure,” 11.

is not merely callow ignorance, but is tantamount to a negative response to that which is being revealed. To be sure, Mark envisions a time after the resurrection where the disciples will finally “see” and “understand” (Mark 14:21–28; 16:7). But if they do not achieve knowledge by “seeing” Jesus in action, it is not because they are prevented from doing so by divine decree, or because they are blinded by satanic influence, or even because things are not yet fully revealed. The “mystery” has been given and their incomprehension is, like that of the outsiders, an obdurate response.