

# NEW TESTAMENT GREEK TERMS AND MARK'S GOSPEL: HERMENEUTICAL INQUIRIES

Larry J. Perkins, PhD

Hermeneutics is all about meaning. Bible expositors attempt to understand and explain how language works, orally and textually, and especially how it communicates meaning. Precise discernment of meaning arises from a comprehensive knowledge of a language's<sup>1</sup> structures, i.e., the conventions developed to communicate meaning, as well as the cultural context within which that language functions. When texts, such as we find in the Bible written in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Hellenistic Greek, are imbued with unique religious significance, decoding and transferring their meaning across time and cultures arguably become critical competencies. In the case of Christianity the hermeneutical enterprise defines the very nature of the believing community. Individual and corporate behavior, identity, relationships, purpose, and sacrifice are encouraged or discouraged with reference to the meaning of the sacred text. With such weighty issues resting upon meaning, believers who engage in vocations of spiritual direction, organizational leadership, teaching, preaching, or counseling carry a heavy responsibility to make sure we are understanding the meaning of these biblical texts correctly. As Paul urges Timothy, we must work hard and diligently to ensure that we are “correctly handling the word of truth.”<sup>2</sup>

It is one thing to know that the meaning of the biblical text is the most important factor that sustains the health of the Christian movement, but quite another consciously to state clearly and rationally the procedures or methods by which we wrest this meaning from these ancient texts. Christian leaders to some degree must become competent in decoding language. This means being well-versed in using a set of well-defined principles that enable them to move from the multiplicity of sources in the New Testament Greek manuscript tradition, through the complexities of Greek grammar, syntax, semantics, and discourse structure to a full appreciation

---

<sup>1</sup> Several languages would be involved simultaneously in the intercultural context of biblical translation. As people seek to transfer accurately and with some literary quality a text from one language to another, they have to decode the meaning of the first language and re-code the meaning in the second. This is a complex process.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 2:5. Elsewhere Paul defines the church as “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). If Christian leaders cannot decode the church's sacred texts in a credible manner, how will they serve as conveyers of this truth? Whether or not Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles is debated. However, most scholars would still consider the ideas contained in them essentially Pauline.

of the literary skill which the original author employed and the historical-cultural situation of that text (as it relates to both author and audience). However, after all of this is done, we still have not arrived at a clear statement of a text's meaning. We must move across the gap between ancient Greco-Roman and/or Jewish culture and the 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural milieu in which we work and in which our audience lives. Diverse decisions still remain as we consider, for example, the tensions between literalism and dynamic equivalence as the best translation strategy. It is particularly at the semantic level that some of the greatest challenges exist for a Bible translator or communicator. Issues of interpretation necessarily involve methods associated with semantics, discourse structure<sup>3</sup> analysis, and identification of literary form/style.

Because it is impossible in the scope of a single paper to treat all aspects of the inter-relationship between the form of a biblical text and hermeneutics, we will focus upon the interface between semantics, literary form/style, and discourse structure. In particular, we will concentrate our attention upon the narrative of the second Gospel, Mark, and its use of language expressing religious stubbornness (i.e., πῶρωσις and its cognates and σκληροκαρδία). Using this material, we will try to demonstrate how attention paid to the details of semantics<sup>4</sup> (part of the theory and practice of biblical linguistics), in connection with careful evaluation of literary form/style and discourse patterns, assist us in discerning the meaning of the text intended by the author.<sup>5</sup> As we proceed, we will discuss various aspects of biblical exegesis and their relationship to hermeneutics. Through these exercises the task of explaining the meaning of a text should gain sharper precision.

The first three Gospels in the New Testament generally are assumed to have a literary inter-relationship of some kind. Defining this is the subject of the "Synoptic Problem," so-called. Various proposals as to which Gospel has chronological priority continue to be debated, but the most common assumption is that Mark's Gospel was written first, probably in the mid-sixties of the first century.<sup>6</sup> If this priority is used as

---

<sup>3</sup> I use this term to refer to the syntactical, logical and literary conventions Hellenistic Greek writers and speakers employed to mark segments within a text or discourse.

<sup>4</sup> By this term we refer to the processes used to establish the meaning of a word in context and also larger units of text.

<sup>5</sup> While we cannot prove that Mark, companion of Paul and Peter, wrote the second Gospel, evidence from within the Paul and Peter's epistles, as well as the writings of the early church fathers points in this direction and lends probability to his authorship.

<sup>6</sup> Many good summaries of the Synoptic problem and proposed solutions exist. One of the best is Robert Stein, *The Synoptic Problem. An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987). See also Craig A. Evans, "Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem: Why an Old Approach is Still Best," in *Reading the Gospels*

the basis for an evaluation of the literary relationship among the Gospels according to Mark, Matthew and Luke, then an examination of the language of religious stubbornness found in these respective compositions produces some interesting results.

Among these Gospels, the word *πώρωσις* and its cognates occur exclusively in Mark's narrative.<sup>7</sup> The compound noun *σκληροκαρδία* occurs possibly twice in Mark and once in Matthew.<sup>8</sup> The second instance in Mark occurs in the disputed, longer ending (16:15). Along with these specific terms are lexemes such as *ἀπιστία*,<sup>9</sup> *ἀσύνετος*<sup>10</sup>, *πειράζω*<sup>11</sup>, and *ὑπόκρισις/ὑποκριτής*<sup>12</sup>. In the case of these terms, the distinctive usage among the respective Gospel is not so apparent, apart from Matthew's frequent uses of *ὑπόκρισις/ὑποκριτής*. Mark also describes religious stubbornness using the metaphors of blindness and deafness.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes Jesus accuses his disciples of "having eyes, but not seeing and having ears, but not hearing".<sup>14</sup> It is apparent that all three Gospels to greater or lesser degree recognize the religious stubbornness of the Jewish religious leaders, as well as the slow development of faith within Jesus' followers. Yet, the way in which the respective authors describe these divergent spiritual responses communicates a distinctive

---

Today, Stanley E. Porter, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004): 1-26. An older, shorter discussion arguing in favor of Markan priority can be found in G. M. Styler, "The Priority of Mark," in *The Birth of the New Testament* by C. F. D. Moule (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1962), 223-33.

<sup>7</sup> *Πώρωσις* (Mark 3:5; cf. Romans 11:25; Ephesians 4:18); *πωρόω* (Mark 6:52; 8:17; cf. John 12:40 = Isaiah 6:10; Romans 11:7-12; 2 Corinthians 3:14).

<sup>8</sup> Matthew uses the same term in the parallel passage (19:8 = Mark 10:5).

<sup>9</sup> *ἀπιστία* (unbelief): Mark 6:6 = Matthew 13:58; Mark 9:24; [16:14]. The verb *ἀπιστέω* occurs in Mark 16:11, 16 and Luke 24:11, 41. The phrase *ὁ γενεᾶ ἄπιστος* is used in the parallel passages Mark 9:19 = Matthew 17:17 = Luke 9:41 (cf. Luke 12:46; Acts 26:8; John 20:27).

<sup>10</sup> *ἀσύνετος* (uncomprehending): Mark 7:18 = Matthew 15:16 (cf. Romans 1:21, 31; 10:19).

<sup>11</sup> *πειράζω* (to test, tempt): this verb occurs in all three Gospels in reference to Satan's temptation or testing of Jesus (Mark 1:13; Matthew 4:1, 3; Luke 4:2). Elsewhere it describes the attitude of Jewish religious leaders in their questioning of Jesus (Mark 8:11 = Matthew 16:1; Luke 11:16; Mark 10:2 = Matthew 19:3; Mark 12:15 = Matthew 22:18 (Luke 20:22 uses the noun *πανουργίαν*, which connotes trickery, cunning)). Consider also John 6:6.

<sup>12</sup> Generally, these terms are "translated" as "hypocrisy/hypocrite." Mark 12:15; Matthew 23:28; Luke 12:1 (hypocrisy). Mark 7:6; Matthew 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 14, 15; 24:51; Luke 6:24; 12:56; 13:15 (hypocrite). Plainly for Matthew this term is particularly appropriate to describe the attitude of the Jewish religious leaders. It refers to a self-deluding blindness which creates behavior inconsistent with the values they claim to hold, i.e., loyalty to Yahweh's covenant. Why Matthew chooses this word group to emphasize this response is uncertain. Whereas Matthew uses this term almost exclusively to define the Jewish religious leaders' reaction to Jesus, Mark employs terms of religious stubbornness to define both the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus' own followers. The only exception might be Matthew 7:5 that could refer to Jesus' disciples too.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 8:18. This may reflect language used by Jeremiah (5:21) and Isaiah (6:9-10 = Mark 4:11-12).

<sup>14</sup> In the Matthean parallel (16:8), the compound noun *ὀλιγόπιστις* is used (cf. Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31). Matthew, however, does not use the metaphors of blindness and deafness in this setting. The disciples have "little faith," certainly a deficient faith in some sense. The Jewish religious leaders, in contrast, are "hypocrites," i.e., liars, not possessing any faith in the Messiah.

narratological and theological emphasis in their compositions. We will focus upon Mark's narrative and seek to understand what he is trying to say to his readers about the response of Jesus' contemporaries to his message through his choice of certain terms. What response does he seek from them to his presentation through his use of this terminology of religious stubbornness to describe deficient responses to the person and message of Jesus?

We will begin by focusing attention upon the Markan narrative units<sup>15</sup> in which *πῶρωσις* and its cognates occur (3:1-6; 6:45-52; 8:14-21). The first occurrence comes at the end of a cycle of short accounts referred to as "controversy stories"<sup>16</sup> (2:1-3:6). Joanna Dewey's study of this section identifies five controversy stories and demonstrates the literary coherence and careful structure within which the writer has embedded these units.<sup>17</sup> I see no reason to attribute this literary work to anyone other than Mark. I would also argue that its contents reflect essentially what Jesus said and did.<sup>18</sup> Through these five units the opposition to Jesus escalates and his response to this resistance becomes more agitated and vigorous.

The final unit (3:1-6) in this sequence is defined by several features. These include the initial *καὶ εἰσῆλθεν* indicating a change of scene, the introduction of a new character (*ἄνθρωπος ἐξηραμμένην ἔχων*), a new time (*τοῖς σάββασι*), and the final *ἐξελθόντες* in v. 6 marking the departure of the Pharisees and their decision to launch a conspiracy (imperfect tense form) to kill Jesus. By the time we read the final unit, Jesus is angry at these skeptics (*μετ' ὀργῆς* 3:5). Simultaneously, their refusal to acknowledge his power and teaching generates grief within him (*συλλυπούμενος* 3:5).<sup>19</sup> In Mark's words, Jesus is upset *ἐπὶ τῇ πωρώσει τῆς*

---

<sup>15</sup> The conventions used by the Markan author to define a "narrative unit" include change of scene, shift in characters, clauses describing necessary background for the reader to understand the action in the unit, use of certain particles, variations in verb tense forms, etc.

<sup>16</sup> A "controversy story" in Mark's Gospel describes an encounter between Jesus and various kinds of religious leaders in which a dispute about some matter arises. Usually it is an action by Jesus or his disciples that in the view of religious leaders contravenes Jewish scripture or tradition.

<sup>17</sup> Joanne Dewey, "The Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark 2:1-3:6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92(1973), 394-401. "These five stories have not merely been collected in one place because of similarities in form and content, but have been constructed in such a way to form a single literary unit with a tight and well-worked out concentric or chiasmic structure: A, B, C, B', A' (Mark 2:1-12, 13-17, 18-22, 23-8; 3:1-6" (394).

<sup>18</sup> Matthew's order is somewhat different in that 9:18-12:1 intervene, separating the last two stories in Mark's sequence from the first three. Luke adheres to Mark's order (Luke 5:17-6:11).

<sup>19</sup> Is it accidental that Jesus experiences the same response in Gethsemane (*περίλυπος* 14:34, quoting Psalm 42:6)? Perhaps in the garden as he prays prior to his trial he remains grieved at the response of

καρδίας αὐτῶν (3:5) “at their stubborn hearts” (NIV) or “at their hardness of heart” (ESV).

What actions or attitudes on the part of the Jewish religious leaders lead Jesus to respond with anger and grief? Earlier in this unit (3:2) Mark says that “some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him [the man with the withered hand] on the Sabbath.” We can trace their resistance to Jesus growing from the description of their initial internal attitude (3:2), then their silence in response to Jesus question (3:4), and finally their decision to launch a conspiracy to kill Jesus (3:6). Mark indicates that Jesus deliberately acts to heal this man on the Sabbath in their presence because he has observed their hardness of heart (3:5). Why does Mark in his editorial comments select this term to describe their attitude to Jesus?

We know from the *Rule of the Community* (1QS) used in the Qumran community that the concept of the “stubbornness of the heart” occurs in Second Temple Judaism. K. L. and M. A. Schmidt state that “πώρωσις τῆς καρδίας in Mark 3:5 and Ephesians 4:18 corresponds exactly, both in language and sense, to the very common Essene shriroth leb.”<sup>20</sup> Various warnings about the consequences of a stubborn heart are given to those seeking to enter the Qumran community:<sup>21</sup>

1:6 ...and to become attached to all good works; to bring about truth, justice and uprightness on earth and not to walk in the stubbornness of a guilty heart and of lecherous eyes performing every evil;...

2:11-14 ...cursed by the idols which his heart reveres whoever enters this covenant leaving his guilty obstacle in front of himself to fall over it. When he hears the words of this covenant, he will congratulate himself in his heart,

---

his fellow Israelites to God’s revelation in him, knowing the judgment that is coming (according to Mark 13) because of this opposition.

<sup>20</sup> 4Q266; 4Q287; 4Q390. G. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume V* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 1026. We should also note that this Hebrew phrase (שְׁרִירוֹת לֵב) “the stubbornness of the heart” occurs frequently in Jeremiah: 3:17; 7:24; 9:13; 11:8; 13:10; 16:12; 18:12; 23:17; cf. Deut. 29:18-19. Usually it occurs in the context of a declaration from God that his people are not listening or paying attention to his call for obedience and his call for them to repent and return to appropriate covenant living. The stubbornness of Pharaoh’s response to Yahweh in the plague narratives of Exodus also serves as important background to this concept.

<sup>21</sup> The translation is that of Florentino G. Martinez in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated. The Qumran Texts in English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 3-14.

saying: 'I will have peace in spite of my walking in the stubbornness of my heart.' However, his spirit will be obliterated,...

2:25 ...and anyone who declines to enter [the covenant of Go]ld in order to walk in the stubbornness of his heart shall not [enter the Com]munity of his truth,...

5:4-5 ...no one should walk in the stubbornness of his heart in order to go astray following his heart and his eyes and the musings of his inclination. Instead he should circumcise in the Community the foreskin of his tendency and of his stiff neck in order to lay a foundation of truth for Israel, for the Community of the eternal covenant.<sup>22</sup>

This usage within the Qumran documents defines members of the community or those seeking membership in the community, who personally reject the community's rules and regulations even while seeking to be part of it. Such individuals know the truth expressed by the community, but deliberately ignore it and go their own way. There is a certain duplicity inherent in their action. The context speaks of covenant responsibility that an individual chooses to forsake even though he has been taught its claims to truth and eternal life. The only explanation for such astonishing decisions is a stubborn, obtuse or calloused thinking process (i.e., heart). It is a moral decision to reject what the community claims to be God's truth. We discover the same linkages between God's revelation, covenant obedience, and stubbornness of heart in the prophecies of Jeremiah,<sup>23</sup> even though the Greek terminology used by Mark is not found in the Greek translation of Jeremiah.

We discover similar terminology in Paul's correspondence.<sup>24</sup> He describes the general rejection of Jesus as Messiah among the Jews and consequently the gospel message, as due to this hardening process (Romans 11:7, 25; 2 Corinthians 3:14). A remnant of Israel has responded to this message, but "others were hardened (ἐπωρώθησαν)." The use of the aorist passive tense form (Romans 11:7) probably implies the involvement of a divine agent. Although Israel bears responsibility for its failure to respond, their reaction is also within the boundaries of God's purposes.

---

<sup>22</sup> See also 3:3; 7:20, 24; 9:9-10. Examples also in CD 2:17; 3:5; 8:8, 18; 19:20, 32; 20:8.

<sup>23</sup> The Greek translator of Jeremiah used ἐνθύμημα as a frequent rendering for this expression (e.g., 3:17; 7:24). This would be translated "the reasoning of his heart." Whether this represents an attempt to soften the implications of the Hebrew text is uncertain.

<sup>24</sup> The noun πώρωσις occurs in Romans 11:25; Ephesians 4:18. Paul used the cognate verb πωρώω in Romans 11:7; 2 Corinthians 3:14.

Paul immediately follows this statement with a quotation from Isaiah 29:10 in which the prophet states that “God gave them a spirit of stupor....” In the other text (Romans 11:25) Paul argues that “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles come in.” Again, the implication is that this obtuseness fits God’s plans and purposes, even though from our human perspective it is a divine μυστήριον (11:25). In the context of Romans, however, we observe the same key themes of covenant, obedience/disobedience, and deliberate rejection of what God revealed, similar to that expressed in the Qumran documents and Mark’s Gospel. Israel has opportunity to respond, but chooses not to. In some way, God accomplishes his plans through Israel’s rejection.

The other passage (2 Corinthians 3:14) is equally explicit. Paul discusses the reasons why Israel is not responding to the gospel. Reaching back into episodes of Jewish history, Paul argues that a veil has prevented Israelites from seeing the truth, just as Moses’ radiant face had to be covered when he descended from Sinai and his conference with Yahweh. Paul states that “their minds<sup>25</sup> were made dull [ἐπωρώθη “were hardened”].” This prevents Israelites from discerning the fulfillment of the Old Covenant in the words and works of Jesus of Nazareth. Aorist passive tense forms can express passive relationships between subject and action or middle relationships. If Paul intends the verb form here to have a middle sense, then the Israelites are involved in this “hardening” to some degree. However, the meaning of the aorist passive tense form is ambiguous in this setting. Paul goes on to argue that it is the god of this age who “has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see<sup>26</sup> the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4). This commentary on 3:14 would perhaps tip the balance of interpretation for the verb in 3:14 to a passive meaning. In this case, the agent defined by Paul would be Satan. Note again the relationship between covenant, obedience, revelation, lack of response, and the hardening of the heart.

In Ephesians 4:18<sup>27</sup> Paul’s reference to hardness (διὰ τὴν πώρωσιν τῆς καρδίας αὐτῶν) describes non-Jewish response (τὰ ἔθνη v.17) to God’s revelation

---

<sup>25</sup> Paul uses the noun νοήματα, which means thought or mind. In this he parallels closely the Septuagint renderings found in the translation of Jeremiah (see footnote 20). Note also that the term καρδία in Greek refers to the decision-making capacity of a human, not to its emotional capacity.

<sup>26</sup> Perhaps this “blindness” motif coincides with that used in Mark 4 and 8.

<sup>27</sup> J. A. Robinson, *Commentary on Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1979(repr.)), 264-74, has an extended discussion of the meaning of πώρωσις and concludes that its primary sense is “blindness” rather than “hardness.” He sees the frequent connection of this term with the concept of blindness in many of the

of himself in the world. He uses several expressions in parallel to describe their pre-Christian state: darkened in their understanding, separated from the life of God, and ignorant due to the hardening of their hearts. The result is total alienation from God and lives marked by immorality and lawlessness. It is a failure to understand God's actions in Christ and only when God makes "them new in the attitude of their minds" are they able to put on the new self and relate properly to God, becoming "like God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:24). The non-Jews are in a similar position to the majority of Israel with respect to the gospel, but for a different reason. The Israelites have the covenant revelation from God and should be able to understand what is happening in the activity of Jesus of Nazareth. The non-Jews, however, live in ignorance, having no access to this covenantal information.<sup>28</sup> However, in the end, the result is the same – an obtuseness of mind that refuses to accept God's good news in Jesus Messiah.

If these texts in Paul<sup>29</sup> and Qumran indeed form a significant part of the conceptual background of the spiritual situation expressed in this language in Mark 3:5, then what conclusions should we draw as to his perception of the spiritual situation of these Jewish religious leaders? If "hardness of heart" is associated with issues of covenant, revelation, obedience/disobedience, and lack of response to

---

contexts in which it is found in the New Testament as a primary piece of evidence. Intellectual blindness is the best rendering. The concept of hardness, in his opinion, is better associated with cognates of σκληρός. Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 680, argues that "Contra J. A. Robinson..., and despite the tendency in the MSS tradition to confuse the two, πωρόω and πηρόω ("cause to be blind") were not synonymous in the NT period...." In his opinion, it is metaphorical in usage and refers to spiritual obduracy. The fact that these verbs were homonyms might have encouraged writers to reinforce the concept of obduracy by using the concepts of hardening and blindness in close relationship.

<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Romans 1:18-3:20.

<sup>29</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary. The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), 228, comments: "There is no need to see in the use of πεπωρωμένος here or in viii.17 the influence of Paul. It is intrinsically likely that Jesus pondered on such passages of the O. T. as Isa. Vi.9-10, Jer. V.21, Deut. Xxix.4, Xxxii.28. And as far as the apostles were concerned, how else could they regard their slowness to understand, when after the Resurrection and Pentecost they looked back on it, but with amazement and penitence?" He fails to note that in 6:52 this is the narrator's comment, not Jesus' evaluation. Further, the absence of the terminology in Matthew and Luke raises the question of why Mark retains it, but they do not. If Paul models the use of this terminology in the early church, surely we must evaluate whether or not it is a significant parallel, which precedes chronologically the writing of the Markan narrative. I am not necessarily arguing for Pauline influence. What I am suggesting is that Paul's usage requires us to evaluate the connotations of the terminology in his letters and then, if we discern similar connotations in Mark's usage, to ask what this may signify. Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981 (repr.)), 331, argues that "[w]ithout subscribing to the view that Mark is deeply influenced by 'Paulinism', one may infer the influence of Pauline teaching in these passages."

divine initiative, all resulting in divine judgment, then how are these elements involved in the controversy story of Mark 3:1-6? The religious and metaphorical associations of this term *πώρωσις* primarily are Jewish.<sup>30</sup>

The discussions between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders in Mark 2:1-3:6 center on various aspects of Jewish law and religious observance (e.g., fasting, observation of conventions regarding clean/unclean, Sabbath observance, etc.). These matters, in turn, relate directly to an understanding of the covenant that Jews believed they had with God and how this covenant relationship was to be expressed in life. When Jesus challenged these accepted practices and proposed divergent ways to worship God and demonstrate covenant loyalty to him, this generated discussion, criticism, and rejection. Issues of Sabbath observance were central to covenant life. If the Jewish religious leaders were to accept Jesus' interpretation of these matters, they must also accept his authority in the other matters that he was teaching. This they were not prepared to do. To claim to be "Lord of the Sabbath" (2:28) stretched their understanding to the breaking point. No matter what powerful miracles Jesus might do, they would not be sufficient to bring the minds of these leaders to acknowledge that Jesus possessed God's authority sufficiently to redraft and redesign the covenant and the vision of the people of God it expressed. When they characterized Jesus as a threat to the foundations of Judaism, they also demonstrated obtuseness of mind, a "hardness of heart," which put them at odds with God's new revelation and God's initiation of this next phase of Salvation History. So Mark expresses through this terminology in 3:5 ideas similar to its usage by the Qumran covenanters and Paul. It describes Jewish people who forsake the covenant of God and follow the dictates of their own, rebellious minds. They are calloused, hardened in their thinking, unwilling to learn.<sup>31</sup>

In making this claim Mark seeks to help his listeners appreciate the significance of Jesus. Rejecting Jesus puts one in conflict with God. Persistent opposition to Jesus and his message demonstrates an unrepentant and stubborn

---

<sup>30</sup> H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1966), 1561 show no religious or metaphorical uses of *πώρωσις* and its cognates other than in biblical contexts.

<sup>31</sup> It is important to remember that in Mark's narrative we still dealing with an inner Jewish controversy, i.e., Jewish people criticizing Jewish people, presuming that Mark, the partner of Paul and Peter, is the author of the Markan narrative. J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida in *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* Vol. 1, (New York: United Bible Societies, , 1989), 333 suggest that this verb expresses a "stubborn unwillingness to learn." The idea of "learning," however, is not part of the semantic range of this verb, but may in certain contexts colour the sense in which "the act of hardening" affects a person.

mind. Such a rejection of God leads ultimately to judgment from God, as Israel's history demonstrates.<sup>32</sup> We should also link this evaluation by Mark with Jesus' warning to the scribes from Jerusalem in 3:28-29. If they persist in regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus as in fact the work of Satan, they are guilty of "an eternal sin." This is the ultimate outcome of such cognitive 'hardness.' What is important to observe through Mark's narrative is that the obtuseness of these religious leaders never lifts! The conspiracy launched in 3:6 comes to fruition in 14:1ff, invigorated by Judas' defection. Controversy increases in intensity as Jesus moves his ministry to Jerusalem (Mark 11-13) and challenges the entire operation of the Temple and the concomitant authority of the high priest and Sanhedrin.

We must also consider the fact that author of Mark's narrative applies this same terminology to Jesus' disciples, in fact more frequently and accompanied by stronger language! These contexts follow the two occasions on which Jesus miraculously fed multitudes of people (6:30-52; 8:1-21). Both references specifically relate the disciples' "hardness" to their failure to grasp what these miracles reveal about the identity of Jesus.

After Jesus' disciples collect the food fragments from the feeding miracle described in Mark 6:35-44, Jesus compels his disciples to depart from the scene in a boat (6:45). There is a change of scene both for the disciples, the crowds, and Jesus (vv. 45-46). A time marker occurs in v. 47 (at sunset). These elements indicate a new text unit is starting. Within this unit Mark describes how the wind makes the disciples' attempt to cross over the lake difficult. After his prayers Jesus walks across the lake and the disciples observe some φάντασμα (v. 49) on the water and they become very scared, until Jesus climbs into the boat (v. 51) and the wind abates. Mark concludes the unit with two statements. The first describes the disciples' "great astonishment" (v. 51). The second comment, marked by γάρ, explains why they were fearful and then astonished (v. 52): οὐ γὰρ συνῆκαν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἄρτοις, ἀλλ' ἦν αὐτῶν ἡ καρδία πεπωρωμένη. The explanation marks the end of the text unit.

Mark's statement in v. 52 provides an explanation for the astonishment of the disciples at Jesus' ability to walk the waves, enter their boat, and bring them safely to shore.<sup>33</sup> The comment expresses the narrator's negative evaluation of the disciples'

---

<sup>32</sup> Consider Jesus' warnings to the Jewish religious leaders in Mark 12:1-12 and 13:38-40 — "such people will be punished most severely."

<sup>33</sup> It is also possible that the explanation is intended to explain the disciples' reaction to the entire episode — their failure to recognize Jesus, their fear, as well as their concluding astonishment. However, the

reaction to Jesus. It indicates some disapproval and perhaps surprise on his part, for the wording leads to the expectation that they should have understood what was going on. The narrator explicitly connects their lack of understanding with ἐπὶ τοῖς ἄρτοις.<sup>34</sup> Mark suggests by this reference that they did not fully perceive how significant Jesus' multiplication of these five loaves truly was, even to the extent that there was more food left over at the end than when this feeding began, even after all the people were satisfied. Did the narrator expect that the disciples would connect Jesus' actions with those occasions in the Old Testament when Yahweh provided food for Israel, particularly manna and quail in the wilderness?<sup>35</sup> The underlying logic seems to be this: if Jesus could create new matter, i.e., multiply five loaves into thousands of loaves, then why is it so surprising to discover him walking unharmed over the waves of the Galilean sea? It was their failure truly to discern the significance of the first feeding miracle for a proper understanding of Jesus that led to their failure to understand the significance of the second miracle, i.e., walking on the water.

“...[B]ut their heart<sup>36</sup> was hardened” expresses the writer’s assessment. Porter states that “no elements may intervene between the auxiliary verb and the participle except for those which complete or directly modify the participle (not the verb εἰμί.”<sup>37</sup> Rather the participle functions as a predicate adjective, with the sense “their heart was in a hardened condition” (perfect passive participle tense form).<sup>38</sup> However,

---

explanatory clause follows directly the statement of the disciples’ astonishment and this would seem to be the primary referent for the explanation. We should also note the textual variant at the end of v. 51 which creates a compound expression – ἐξίσταντο καὶ ἐθαύμαζον, two imperfect tense forms.

<sup>34</sup> Quentin Quesnell, *The Mind of Mark. Interpretation and Method Through the Exegesis of Mark 6, 52* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 257ff, argues that the reference to “breads” in Mark 6-8 is significant and has Eucharistic connotations. I do not think the contexts require this interpretation and that the simplest rendering is probably “loaves” with a reference back to 6:37-41 and the πέντε ἄρτοι that Jesus multiplied.

<sup>35</sup> Consider the way Psalm 78 treats the theme of the wilderness food provisions and Israel’s rejection of God’s word.

<sup>36</sup> The term καρδία primarily refers to the intellectual and decision-making center of a human person.

<sup>37</sup> S. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Biblical Languages; Greek 2; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999 (repr.)), 45-46. “Hence...these are not periphrastic constructions, since in each case the grammatical subject is placed between the auxiliary verb and the participle.” R. J. Decker, *Mark 1-8 A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2014), 177, however, classifies πεπωρωμένη here as “stative periphrastic, functionally equivalent to a pluperfect finite form.”

<sup>38</sup> Stan Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 45 states that “In determining whether a given instance of εἰμι and a participle is periphrastic it is useful to keep in mind that no element may intervene between the auxiliary verb and the participle except for those which

some scholars interpret this construction (ἦν...πεπωρωμένη) as an example of a periphrastic construction.<sup>39</sup> If it is the equivalent of a stative pluperfect, we might render it as “their heart had become hardened.” It describes a condition of mind that refuses to adjust to new information.

What is the cause of this mental obduracy? If the participle is passive (it possibly could be a middle form<sup>40</sup>), this requires us to ask who the agent might be? Is this God or should we propose some other personality such as Satan? In the explanation of the parable of the four soils (Mark 4:1-20), Jesus indicates the aggressive action of Satan to prevent people from responding to his message, i.e., the seed sown (4:15). However, other hindrances emerge in Jesus’ interpretation, namely the deceptiveness of wealth and the discouragement of persecution. Because Mark does not define the agent, presumably we as readers should take our cue from previous explanations for human failure to respond to Jesus (i.e., Mark 4:13-19). Mark does not make God explicitly responsible for this stubbornness. Rather God seems to be making every effort to open their closed minds.<sup>41</sup>

The second instance of this terminology in reference to Jesus’ disciples occurs in 8:17 – πεπωρωμένην<sup>42</sup> ἔχετε τὴν καρδίαν ὑμῶν; Jesus is in dialogue with his disciples. The text unit seems to be 8:13-21. After engaging with the Pharisees, Jesus embarks in a boat with his disciples (v. 13), marking a change of scene. A new discussion ensues, generated by the disciples’ failure to bring bread with them (v. 14). In v. 22 they arrive at Bethsaida where Jesus heals a blind person. In the prior episode (8:11-12) the Pharisees have approached “seeking/asking for a sign from heaven,” so that he demonstrates beyond doubt his authority and status. Mark tells us their motive is to test or tempt (πειράζοντες) Jesus. With a strong emotional response Jesus rejects their request and leaves them. The next unit begins with Jesus

---

complete or directly modify the participle (and not the verb εἶμι).” The substantive ἡ καρδία is the subject of ἦν in Mark 6:5.

<sup>39</sup> For example, James W. Voelz, *Mark 1:1-8:26*. Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 437. This is “a periphrastic construction with πεπωρωμένη, forming a pluperfect.”

<sup>40</sup> If it is middle, then the “heart” of the disciples in some sense is involved in this action with the resulting consequences.

<sup>41</sup> Consider Jesus’ comments in 8:31-33.

<sup>42</sup> The participle in this context is adverbial because it lacks an article but is related to the arthrous καρδίαν. This text may add further evidence that the same participle in 6:52 is not part of a periphrastic structure. Porter denies that the verb ἔχω in the New Testament is used in periphrastic constructions (Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*. Studies in Biblical Greek, Vol. 1. D. A. Carson ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993): 489-91.

leaving that location in a boat with his disciples. When he is in the boat with his disciples, he warns them about “the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (8:15). The disciples had forgotten to take loaves along with them and so they misunderstand Jesus’ statement, thinking that he is referring in some way to their lack of bread. Jesus rebukes them with a series of rhetorical questions:

“Why are you having this discussion?

Do you not yet comprehend<sup>43</sup> or understand (συνίετε)?

Do you have your hearts hardened (πεπωρωμένην ἔχετε τὴν καρδίαν ὑμῶν)?

Having eyes do you not see and having ears do you not hear?

And do you not remember when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of fragments you took?” They say to him, “Twelve.”

“When [I broke] the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of fragments did you take?” And they say to him, “Seven.”

And he says to them, “Do you not yet understand (συνίετε)?”

Jesus speaks parabolically about the “leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” The failure of the disciples to discern this parable and thus miss the deeper meaning or metaphorical meaning of his statement indicates that they still have not progressed much beyond the state of the Pharisees. The reference to lack of sight and hearing takes us back to Mark 4:10-12 where Jesus uses ideas previously formulated by Isaiah<sup>44</sup> to describe the mental obduracy of his contemporaries. The result is an inability to respond to the message he conveys from God.

When Jesus tests their memory of the two feeding miracles and the results of these actions, they know precisely how much food was left over, but the significance of this surplus for discerning the identity of Jesus did not register in their minds, as

---

<sup>43</sup> NIV translates: “Do you still not see or understand (οὐπω νοεῖτε οὐδὲ συνίετε;)?” “See” does reflect the sense of νοέω very well.

<sup>44</sup> Isaiah 6:9-10. Whether Jesus actually quotes Isaiah in Mark 4:12 remains debated. There is no quotation formula and the wording is not exactly similar to the Greek text of Isaiah. Perhaps Jesus is paraphrasing Isaiah here and altering the wording in order to highlight his own meaning. Similarly, in 8:18 the wording is similar to that found in Jeremiah 5:21, but it is a paraphrase, not a quotation.

God intended. Again the writer of this narrative attributes this lack of perception to this fact: “you have your heart in a hardened condition.” This time, however, it is included in the discourse of Jesus. Jesus’ rebuke of Peter in 8:33 would lead us to read the participle as a passive with an implied agent.

Of course, this example of the disciples’ ignorance only mirrors previous situations where Jesus has told parables, but the disciples have not understood them. In fact, it is quite normal for the disciples not to understand Jesus’ parables, but rather be compelled to ask him to explain what he was trying to teach them (cf. 4:10-12, 7:17, etc.). Many commentators consider the unusual two-stage healing of the blind man that follows in 8:22-26 as representative in some way of the difficulty that the disciples have in understanding and accepting the fundamental message of Jesus.

Although Peter’s identification of Jesus as Messiah 8:27-30 seems to be a spiritual breakthrough, little changes in the subsequent narrative when Jesus accuses him of representing Satan’s ideas. The three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration do not know what is going on. As Jesus turns his steps towards Jerusalem (8:31-10:52) and begins to foretell his death and resurrection, despite repeating this four times, the disciples do not understand. When they arrive in Jerusalem, Judas, perhaps because he *does* grasp the meaning of Jesus’ prophecies, i.e., that Jesus is going to be arrested and executed - something that would disqualify Jesus from being Messiah - decides to betray him. As well, Peter denies association with Jesus and all the remaining apostles desert Jesus. Mental obduracy seems to continue through to the very end of the narrative. The words of the angelic messenger to the women at the tomb (16:7) hold promise of Jesus’ further interaction with the disciples, but no assurance that the unwillingness to learn will be remedied.<sup>45</sup>

What can we conclude about Mark’s characterization of the disciples through his use of this terminology specifically in his narrative? Plainly Jewish religious leaders and disciples of Jesus struggled with the same problem — mental obduracy. If the associations of this terminology in Qumran and Paul relate to the rejection of

---

<sup>45</sup> In fact, without the longer ending and its treatment of this theme of obduracy, there is no satisfactory resolution to this issue in the narrative. Without the resurrection appearances of Jesus and his stern rebukes, we have no indication that the disciples ever broke through their “hardness of heart.” I do not think this fact has been considered sufficiently in discussions about the ending of this gospel narrative. While it might be argued that the readers of this narrative or those who heard it read would know through other means that the disciples were in fact restored, could the author have in fact counted on this occurring? Would he have left such important information unstated?

covenant, obedience, and revelation, does Mark use this terminology to characterize Jesus' disciples in a similar way? The issue of revelation through Jesus is present, as well as the inability or unwillingness of the disciples to grasp it. Following 8:21 and the confession by Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus begins to explain what obedient discipleship is all about. Yet the disciples fail in their faith and their following. Jesus does in the end talk about "my blood of the covenant violently poured out" (14:24), but his disciples certainly do not understand his meaning. As well, this terminology indicates, from the writer's point of view, as well as that of the primary character in the narrative, Jesus, that the Jewish religious leaders are rejecting God's fulfillment of covenant promises in and through Jesus.

In the end, what is the difference in response to Jesus on the part of the Jewish religious leaders and the disciples? Perhaps, as Christopher Marshall suggests,<sup>46</sup> the disciples do believe Jesus' Kingdom message and accept to some degree his authority. They exercise enough faith to follow, even though that faith does not reach a level of complete understanding. They sense God, not Satan, at work in Jesus. They stumble along in the path of Jesus, uncertain, afraid, uncomprehending, clinging stubbornly to their traditional Messiah expectations, but still they follow Jesus. At some level, a commitment has been made to Jesus. Whether this loyalty will yield its intended fruit must await the results of the resurrection. Jesus has confidence that Satan's attempts to blind and deafen their minds ultimately will fail, because he prophesies that his disciples will be his witnesses and the gospel will be proclaimed among the nations (13:10). In some way the disciples recognize that Jesus is "the stone the builders rejected" and that God has made him "the head of the corner" (12:10-11). The Jewish religious leaders, on the contrary, regarded Jesus to the end as a blasphemer and false messiah.

What do we learn through this study of the relationship between semantics, literary form, and discourse structure about the impact that Mark intended to achieve upon his readers or listeners?

1. Text in context is critical for discerning the meaning of terms and seeking to understand why the narrator has chosen to use particular terminology. The original context includes not only the text-linguistic makeup of the

---

<sup>46</sup> Christopher Marshall, *Faith As a Theme in Mark's Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 224-25. See also Larry Perkins (assisted by Eric Fehr), "Mark's Use of the Verb Σκανδαλίζεσθαι and The Interpretation Of Jesus' Visit to Nazareth," *Canadian Theological Review* 1(2012): 23-36.

- narrative, but also the historical/social context of the writer and audience, as well the “time” and “geography” in which the narrative is set.
2. The text includes the whole narrative and we must evaluate not just the specific terminology, but related expressions or ideas used in the narrative.
  3. The context will include in some sense the whole of the New Testament record because of the concept of ‘canon’. While we cannot assume that one author knows another it is in many cases likely given the circumstances of the early church. We should seek to determine whether the use of terminology by one author has the same sense and connotation in another.
  4. What, in fact, does this πῶρωσις terminology and related concepts mean? Is it a stubbornness which makes a person unwilling to learn or unable to learn? Is it produced by some external agent or is it generated from within the person? There is a lack of consensus in the literature about this question. It needs to be resolved if we are properly to assess Mark’s literary intent. The data in Mark seems to suggest an external agent, and probably Satan is involved, but human responsibility still exists. The data points to a Jewish religious context for this terminology and we have to interpret its sense in this religious framework because the writer places the narrative in this setting.
  5. The Markan author applies this terminology both to Jesus’ disciples and to his opponents. This data requires us to question the writer’s intent in doing so. It influences our understanding of discipleship, as well as the dynamics of evangelism.
  6. The literary style and forms in which the narrator embeds the story also contribute to meaning. We must ask, for example, in the material studied in this paper, why the applications of the “hardness” terminology to the disciples occurs in the literary context of the feeding miracles. In one context it is embedded in an editorial comment by the narrator (6:52), but in another it is part of Jesus’ speech (8:17). In addition to the issue of historicity, we must also explore the reasons why the disciples did not discern the strategic implications of these miracles.
  7. The narrator’s description of the phenomenal world, with all of his literary skill and historical credibility, does create a story world that requires careful interpretation at the textual level. We cannot jump into the story partway and expect to understand accurately and fully what the author is

trying to say. We must attempt to grasp the whole in order to discern the meaning of the parts.

8. While the grammar, syntax and semantics are critical building blocks for discerning and communicating the meaning of this ancient text, we must move to a literary level to discern the narrator's whole meaning. We must contextualize ourselves to his story to the best of our ability. As we do this and discern meaning, we then have the opportunity to shift this meaning across time and space into our cultural context or that of our intended audience.

Those engaged in the hermeneutical task of interpreting this Gospel must include methods associated with semantics, literary analysis, and discourse structure analysis in their tool-kit. If this is not done, the resulting interpretation will only reveal part of the message the original author intended and this partial truth may in fact distort that message because it is only partial.

Larry J. Perkins is Professor Emeritus in Biblical Studies and President Emeritus of Northwest Baptist Seminary. He has been teaching for forty years in Greek language, biblical studies, Septuagint Studies, and Leadership at masters and doctoral level. He is the author of *The Pastoral Letters. A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Text, 2017) and is preparing to publish *The Art of Kubernēsis (1 Corinthians 12:28): Leading as the Church Board Chairperson*. He also contributed *Exodus*, in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under that Title*, ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin Wright (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Author copyright. Please use the following citation.

Perkins, Larry. "New Testament Greek Terms and Mark's Gospel: Hermeneutic Inquiries." Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. [www.nimer.ca](http://www.nimer.ca) (retrieved Date Accessed). Peer reviewed.