

# Little faith: A pragmatic-linguistic perspective on Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' disciples

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This article argues that *fear* is central to the state of being of Jesus' disciples when their religious experience is characterised as 'little faith' in the Gospel of Matthew. A pragmatic-linguistic reading strategy is applied to that passage in the Gospel of Matthew where the implications of fear for the experiences of the disciples can be observed most clearly, namely Matthew 13:53–17:27. In this passage their state of being is described as 'little faith' and it is conveyed that the integrity of the disciples' commission would not be accepted by their hearers unless they overcome their fear.

**Kleingelooft: 'n Pragmaties-linguistiese perspektief op Jesus se dissipels.** Die artikel voer aan dat *vrees* sentraal in die eksistensiële belewenis van Jesus se dissipels staan wanneer hulle godsdienstige ervaring in die Evangelie van Matteus as *kleingelooft* gekarakteriseer word. 'n Pragmaties-linguistiese leesstrategie word op die betrokke gedeelte, Matteus 13:53–17:27, toegepas waar die implikasies van vrees in die dissipels se ervaring die duidelikste waargeneem kan word. Hulle eksistensiële belewenis word as *kleingelowig* beskryf en dit word duidelik gekommunikeer dat die integriteit van hulle opdrag om dissipels van ander mense te maak, nie deur die hoorders aanvaar sal word alvorens hulle hulle vrees oorwin het nie.

## Reading between the lines

The Gospel of Mark ended in fear (Mk 16:8). The additions to this ending called this fear 'disbelief'. Textual criticism has shown that two different endings were added to the conclusion of the Gospel of Mark in Codex Washington. These added conclusions were either partly or more completely known by Irenaeus and Jerome (Aland 1969:157–180; 1970:3–13; Metzger 1971:122–128), namely the so-called 'brief ending' (Mk 16:9–10) and the so-called 'longer ending' (Mk 16:11–20). The latter is also referred to as the 'Freer Logion' (Lane 1974:606–611, cf. Von Harnack 1908:168–170).

From a *wirkungsgeschichtliche* perspective (cf. Kelhoffer 2000), these additions, although in a particular sense of the word *apocryphal*, say much about early Christianity (cf. Smith 2014:1). Within the context of Mark's reception history, belief and disbelief are not cognitive states, but states of being (Mk 16:16). In these additions, *disbelief* is the key term (Lane 1974:606).<sup>1</sup> The disciples are portrayed as followers of Jesus who would possibly, because of disbelief, not proclaim the vision of Jesus.

In ancient Greek literature, the notion *faith*, in other words *to believe*, will semantically be studied by focusing on the *pistis*-group of words. These words form part of the semantic domain of 'to trust' and 'to rely on' (Louw & Nida 1988:376–379). The antonym is *apistia*. The object of the confidence, according to Louw and Nida (1988:377), should have the qualities of being trustworthy and dependable. For example, in Jesus' parable of the talents the slave is called *good* because he possesses such qualities (Mt 25:21): the state of being someone in whom complete confidence can be placed (Louw & Nida 1988:377). The quality of the person will assure the reliability of the message. In a few instances in the New Testament, the Greek term *bebaiois* is used to express 'pertaining to being able to be relied on or depended on' (Louw & Nida 1988:377). In the longer ending added to the Gospel of Mark (Mk 16:9–20), reference is made to the reliable message of the disciples during the post-Easter dispensation, stating that such reliability is based on miracles (*semeia*) that followed after their preaching (Mk 16:20).<sup>2</sup> Disbelief (*apistia*) is the refusal to regard this 'state of being' as reliable, which in turn leads to apathy towards the reliable message.

1. The word of association which first attracted the gloss appears to be "unbelief" (*apistia*), in Mark 16:14, "and he upbraided them for their unbelief (*tn apistian auton*)" ... And they made excuse saying: "The age of lawlessness and of unbelief (*tēs apistias*) ..."

2. This steadfastness is also expressed by other terms such as *edraios*, *edraïōma* and *themeliō* (cf. resp. 1 Tm 3:15 and Col 1:23) as 'pertaining to being firmly established in one's position or opinion' (Louw & Nida 1988:377–378).

The expression *little faith* occurs four times in Matthew, namely in 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, and 16:8. Luke uses this concept once. Luke 12:28 (also Mt 6:30) is taken over from the Sayings Source Q (cf. Dunn 2009:120). The question is what the notion *little faith* would imply in Matthew's Gospel. In Luke (in all probability also in Q) the particular Jesus saying refers to an appeal for steadfast trust amidst the concerns of peasants living in a context of a subsistence economy (cf. Wolter 2008:455). In Matthew, however, where the concept is applied to the disposition of the disciples in particular, *little faith* predisposes something else. Dunn (2003:854) relates *little faith* with the disciples' doubt and he is of the opinion that Matthew, different than Luke and John, proffers no solution for this *doubt*. However, according to me, Dunn mistakes Matthew's intention. A clarification of this issue will not only enhance our understanding of the above-mentioned four verses in Matthew, but would contribute also to our understanding of a central aspect in Gospel research, namely the role of the disciples within the various plots of the Gospel narratives.

In this article I argue, from the perspective of a pragmatic-linguistic reading of the Gospel of Matthew, that disbelief equals fear in Mark and in Matthew disbelief is reinterpreted to imply little faith. Semantically, we have seen, is disbelief the antonym of belief. In my opinion, such an interpretation would be a misconception of Matthew's intention. A pragmatic reading of Matthew would be more accurate.

Pragmatics, however, does not exclude semantics (cf. Fetzer 2011:30). Although there are various schools of pragmatic linguistics, at the core it concerns with the implicature of expressions, rather than with their lexicographic meaning. A pragmatic-linguistic approach, however, does not disregard what words, sentences and texts could mean (Travis 1997:87–107). Apart from what words (lexicography) and sentences (syntaxis) may mean, pragmatics pertains to semiotics and is directed more towards the con-text and co-text within which a statement is made (Halliday 1985:28–29). It has to do with that which is being said between the lines, that which is created or omitted through conscious or unconscious gaps (Auer 1996:18–19), with the reason why a statement is made and with the effect achieved by the statement (cf. Reed 1997:189–218), in other words with what is intended with the interaction, but is not directly said or written down (cf. Bach 2002:284–292).

## Matthew's portrayal of the disciples

We know that Matthew used the Gospel of Mark as his main source. *Fear* is a key term in Mark. Fear is, as it was, Mark's last word (Mk 16:8). In their pioneering work on Mark's Gospel, David Rhoads and Donald Michie (1982) comment as follows on Mark's ending:

This abrupt ending, which aborts the hope that someone will proclaim the good news, cries out for the reader to provide the resolution to the story. The reader alone has remained faithful to the last and is now left with a decision, whether to flee in silence like the women or to proclaim boldly in spite of fear and death. (p. 140)

What about not believing could impede the *Sache Jesu*? Is disbelief based on something you know but do not accept as legitimate, or is it based on something you do not know and hence cannot believe? My argument is that the reference to disbelief in these early Christian writings added to Mark's Gospel (probably between 100 and 140 CE; cf. Bratcher & Nida 1961:506), does not pertain to neither a cognitive, nor a static disposition.

The unknown authors of the additional Markan endings had at their disposal the concluding paragraphs of both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The additional concluding sections to the Gospel of Mark deal with the beginnings of the Jesus movement and the circumstances in which his message was proclaimed. Matthew and Luke end their Jesus narratives (*gospels*) with respectively two different perspectives on one issue, namely how the followers of Jesus took the message further. Michael Wolter (2008:797) formulates the Lucan closure as follows: '*An die Stelle Jesu treten die Jünger, und das Ende der Jesusgeschichte wird an dieser Stelle zum Beginn der Jüngergeschichte*'. On the other hand, David Turner (2008:691) formulates the Matthean closure this way: 'When the restored disciples meet Jesus in Galilee (28:16–17), they worship him. Yet there is some hesitation. This is not surprising, since Matthew has already presented the disciples' weaknesses and foibles ...'. The additional ending added to Mark's Gospel indicates that the hearers could possibly doubt this message because the reliability and integrity of the messengers' actions could compromise the legitimacy of the message. The term *disbelief* is used to describe such doubt (Mk 16:13–14; Bratcher & Nida 1961:506).

Mark's perspective on the continuation, or not, of the *Sache Jesu* is that fear (*fobos*) is the reason for stalling. Luke's perspective on the disciples' perseverance is that they were courageous, overcame fear and did not remain silent. They spoke with boldness, frankness, confidence (*parrēsia*). Thus, Acts 4:23–31 announces a prayer that the apostles should resist opposition and, like Jesus, not remain silent. However, this does not mean that they too, according to Luke, had not been prone to 'disbelief and distortion' (*apistos kai diestrammenē*; Lk 9:41). According to Luke, despite their initial disbelief, their message later turned out to be reliable. Like peasants who plough the land (Lk 9:62) and do not look back, they journeyed with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. Peter journeyed even further, from Jerusalem to Samaria and Syria. Paul journeyed all the way from Damascus to Rome, the seat of opposition and the source of fear (Ac 28:31). Loveday Alexander (1999:445), discussing the links between Luke's narrative in the Gospel and Luke's narrative in Acts, refers to the end of Acts as a beginning of another plot: 'In this sense Acts is indeed an open-ended narrative, opening out into a world where even the words of the apostles are the subject of doubt and debate.' In Luke, disbelief is regarded as a state of would-be believers (Lk 9:41) and the question is put to the fear-stricken disciples on the stormy sea: 'Where is your faith?' (Lk 8:25). However, they are not being described as scared and having little faith, as Matthew does in Matthew

8:26. Whereas Luke used fear and implied unbelief, Matthew linked fear with little faith.

We have seen that in early Christian literature the concept *little faith* is typical of Matthew's vocabulary with regard to the actions and attitude of the disciples. Louw and Nida (1988:378) refer to Matthew's narration (Mt 17:20) of the disciples who were not able to perform miracles and Jesus calling this inability 'little faith' (*oligipistia*) as 'the state of having little or insufficient faith'. So also, where the disciples were terrified on the stormy sea (Mt 8:26) Jesus described it as 'inadequate faith'. However, terms such as *inadequacy* and *insufficiency* do not really describe the quality of the disciples' and their hearers' state of being. Disbelief is Matthew's way of conveying that their fear had not been conquered. In Matthew *disbelief* equals *fear* in Mark. Little faith characterises the inadequacy not to put fear aside. Little faith as a stumbling block is specifically highlighted in one of the narrative discourses with which Matthew alternated the five didactical discourses in his Gospel (Barr 1976:354–355; Lohr 1961:427), namely Matthew 13:53–17:27 (cf. Van Aarde 1982).

The structure of Matthew's Gospel too is of pragmatic relevance. Matthew is probably the Gospel with the finest composition in the New Testament (Van Aarde 2013a). Ulrich Luz (1985:17) refers to 'the evangelist's deliberately intended structure'.<sup>3</sup> He also remarks that the understanding of a certain composition is not merely neutral, but offers important premises for a possible understanding of the Gospel (cf. Combrink 1983; Davies & Allison 2004a:58–63; Luz 1985:17–18; Nolland 2005:44–62 & Turner 2008:8–10).<sup>4</sup> The composition of Matthew 13:53–17:27 is of particular relevance for an understanding of the disciples as persons of little faith (cf. Nolland 2005:573). In this section Matthew does not only follow the narrative form of Mark's version but has through finely nuanced adaptations a peculiar pragmatic imprint on the structure of this passage.

In my opinion, Peter Ellis (1974:132) has identified the most functional co-text of Matthew 13:53–17:27 to date. He indicates that this narrative discourse comprises three main units, namely 13:53–14:33, 14:34–16:20 and 16:21–17:27 (cf. also Barr 1976:350). The closing pericope of each of the three units comprises a section in which Peter plays a significant role. What makes those three closing sections all the more remarkable is that they contain content which does not feature at all in any of Matthew's main sources, namely the Gospel of Mark and the Sayings Source Q. It is therefore unique to Matthew (*Sondergut*). The first of these sections tells of Peter walking on water, his doubt and his sinking (Mt 14:22–33). In the second, Jesus bestows a beatitude to Peter (Mt 16:13–20). The third passage narrates that Peter, of his own accord, paid the temple tax on behalf of Jesus and himself (Mt 17:24–27).

3.'Der Evangelist bewußt beabsichtigten Gliederung' (emphasis by Luz 1985:17).

4.'Prämissen für ein mögliches Verständnis des Evangeliums' Luz 1985:17).

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor (1975:369) too is convinced by Ellis' insight into the structural build-up of Matthew 13:53–17:27. This is because this narrative discourse connects in a logical way where the 'parable discourse' ends in Matthew 13, and in its turn, ends where the 'community discourse' starts in Matthew 18. His only objection is that this tripartite classification does not really explain how the three stories about Peter (walking on the water, being praised as the rock of the *ekklēsia*, and payer of the temple tax) show a climactic lead-up (Murphy-O'Connor 1975:371). In my judgement, my article, 'Matthew's portrayal of the disciples' (Van Aarde 1982) indeed illustrates such a climactic build-up (cf. Luz 1990:380–383).

The pragmatic relevance and implicature of this climactic structure is of great importance, especially when bearing in mind that almost the whole narrative (Mt 13:53–17:27) is based in its entirety on the structure and content of Mark 6:1–9:32. It is one of those sections in these two synoptic Gospels where Matthew's structure and content are very similar to that of Mark. Thus, those instances in those sections where Matthew deviates from Mark have pragmatic implications which should not be overlooked.

Mark 6–9 constitutes the central part of the Gospel of Mark (Via 1975:113–158). Mark's plot consists of two narrative sequences in the co-text that oppose one another. The first tells the success story that Jesus establishes in word and deed the immanence and reality of the kingdom of God amidst the empirical everyday struggle of people to survive. The disciples are positive and courageous agents. However, right in the centre (Mk 8:27–33), the success story takes a negative turn. Opposition against Jesus mounts, the blunder of the crowd who followed blindly is revealed, and the disciples are portrayed as people who simply cannot grasp what Jesus meant with his message about the establishment of God's kingdom amidst the reality of forthright rejection and the concealed arrogance of seeking one's own interest. They are increasingly being portrayed as people who either stall or project fear away from them by falling asleep in a time and context (the Gethsemane episode) in which Jesus is fighting for life and death. When Jesus is on the 'way of the cross', fear gets the better of them, and they run away. The narration about the empty tomb forms a denouement in this tense narrative. Whereas the men flee from death out of fear, women become witnesses of the rebirth and new life that follow after death. However, when the women are called by the risen Jesus to be messengers of his gospel, they run away from life, for they too became afraid. And here ends Mark's narration (Mk 16:8). Morna Hooker (2011) puts it as follows:

The story ends, then, with a total human failure. The religious authorities have failed to accept Jesus. Pontius Pilatus has caved in to pressure, the crowds have melted away, the disciples have run away. Judas has betrayed him, Peter has denied him, and at the end even the women – hitherto faithful – have failed him. In spite of the centurion's confession, the story appears to be a tragedy. Yet Mark introduced it as 'the beginning of good news', and now we realize that it is, only the beginning.



The very fact that the story is now being told means that the women must have overcome their fear and that the disciples did indeed obey the command to go to Galilee. There they had to learn all over again what discipleship meant: taking up the cross and following Jesus. The message entrusted to the women is a message of forgiveness. The disciples – even Peter – are being given a second chance. (p. 180)

Thus, having knowledge of episodes in Luke's and Matthew's gospels, early Christian authors added to Mark's abrupt ending by giving the followers of Jesus a second change (Lane 1974:606–611; Von Harnack 1908:168–170). Yet responding positively to the given second chance has not been accomplished too easily. Some of the added episodes pertain to the disbelief of the messengers, others to the disbelief of the audience of those messengers – be they male or female. What these early authors observed from the synoptic Gospels is that trust changed into disbelief. It is clear that what is at stake here has nothing to do with a cognitive state of consciousness, but with a psychology of fear. According to Craig Keener's interpretation of Matthew's vision, 'a life of faithful obedience to God invites martyrdom as well as God's power' (Keener 2009:442).

## Little faith as fear

'Little faith' is Matthew's version of Mark's version of the disciples who simultaneously believe whilst they are afraid. Mark revolves around to 'know' and 'not to know'; not in a cognitive sense, but as 'lived experience': it is to experience success and confidence (faith) and to be overcome by fear (cf. Petersen 1978:60). Matthew, however, does not take over Mark's opposing tensive narrative sequences (Meier 1979: 94–95), because he portrays the disciples' faith as little faith.

This portrayal becomes clear when the climactic build-up of the three subsections of Matthew 13:53–17:27 is noticed. In Mark's structure, an alteration occurred in Mark 8:27–33. Jesus went forth from Galilee to Jerusalem; Peter is the obstacle (stumbling block = *skandalon*) in his way. The positive narrative line alters into a negative one. In Matthew's case, this alteration occurs in a different manner. In Matthew's co-text one narrative line does not alter by metamorphosing into another, as is the case with Mark. In Matthew's Gospel, the alteration takes place in the *experience* of the character of Peter as mouthpiece of the disciples (cf. Kingsbury 1979:72). This experience is described as 'little faith' (*oligopistia*). Unlike Mark's alteration of the characterisation of the disciples from believing to disbelieving, Matthew does not create a radical break between Matthew 16:20 and 16:21. Peter's *confession* ('Jesus is the Son of the living God' – Mt 16:16) and his *anathematisation* ('Peter is like Satan, a stumbling block for Jesus' – Mt 16:23) represent two sides of the same face, that is, a two-face hypocritical. This is described as 'little faith'. David Garland (1979:38) formulates this observation as follows:

While on the one hand the disciples in Matthew's gospel comprehend who Jesus really is, they are yet, on the other hand, inclined to make common cause with the Jewish leaders, the

opponents of Jesus. The disciples as leaders are susceptible to the same cataracts that blinded the scribes and Pharisees.

As endings to the three sections of Matthew 13:53–17:27, the three Peter pericopes give expression to this *hypocrisy*. Each of these pericopes states that the disciples were fully aware of who Jesus was (Son of God) and of who they were (faithful apostles). What exactly this *hypocrisy* entails becomes increasingly apparent in the co-text as Matthew 13:53–14:33 is followed by 14:34–16:20, and proceeds into 16:21–17:27. The preceding 'parable discourse' ended with an assertive confirmation that the disciples understood the nature of the kingdom of God, as expressed in the parables (Mt 13:51). Jesus asks: 'Do you understand these things?' (*sunekate tauta panta?*). They answer: 'Yes!' (*legousin auto, Nai*). They acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God (Mt 14:28–33; Wiarda 2000:91–93). The experience then changes. Peter walks on the water with Jesus, fear sets in, and he sinks. The disciples are described as being of 'little faith'. This observation repeats itself in the next subdivision. Peter confesses that Jesus is the Son of the living God, after which he is praised in a beatitude and is called the rock of the *ekklesia*. The experience then changes. Peter becomes afraid of the way of the cross. The rock is called a 'stumbling block' (*skandalon*). Once again, the same observation of the pattern, *belief-disbelief*, is replicated. In Matthew 17:17 it is described precisely as such: *apistos kai diestrammenē* ['unfaithful and distorted']. This experience changes in the episode dealing with the payment of temple tax. This experience even transcends the two preceding ones. Peter's consciousness anticipates that of Jesus and together with Jesus they exposed the loveless and exploiting temple cult (Daube 1972:13; 1987:39–58; Montefiore 1964–1965:62–63; cf. Heemstra 2010:189). At the height of the climax Peter, like Jesus, is called 'son of God' (Wiarda 2000:94). W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison (2004b:745) describes this remarkable Matthean *Sondergut* with a phrase such as 'Jesus and his disciples are, as members of Israel, sons of God'. This story about voluntary payment of temple tax implies a rejection of the temple cult (Davies & Allison 2004b:746). This narrative is a prescience of the cleansing of the temple (Mt 21:12–17).

The experience of having little faith occurs again in the last prepassion announcement (Mt 20:17–19; 20:20–25) and culminates in the passion of Jesus (Mt 26:8, 14–16, 40–41, 43, 56–57, 69–75). Jeannine Brown (2002) puts it as follows:

For Matthew, the 'little faith' of the disciples is an insufficient trust that Jesus' authority extends to the provision of their own safety and care (8:26; 14:32; 6:30; 16:8), as well as to their role as Jesus' ministry helpers (17:20; cf. the delegation of authority to them at 10:1). Their 'little faith' is evidenced by anxiety for daily needs (6:30); fear and timidity (8:26); hesitation (14:31); and inadequate understanding (16:8). They still exhibit this 'little faith' after the resurrection, when they both hesitate and worship in response to the risen Christ. (p. 119)

This doubt in the risen Jesus is again encountered as last observation about the disciples (Mt 28:17): *idontes auton proskunesan, hoi de edistanan* = seeing him they worshipped him, but also doubted. This *alteration* between 'faithful

recognition' (*proskunesan* = 'bending of the knees' as metaphor for *worshipping* Jesus as the Son of God) and 'doubt' (*edistasan*) is a repetition and back flash to the *verba sentiendi* on *worship*, *little faith*, and *doubt* in the narrative about the stormy sea (Mt 14:31–33). The final outcome (Mt 28:17) is *terrified people of little faith!*

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