

# An Evaluation of the Supposed Hebraism in Mark 8.12

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the final six words in the Greek text of Mark 8.12: εἰ δοθήσεται τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ σημεῖον. This partial conditional statement is typically translated as an emphatic negative oath based on the belief that a Hebraism is in use. For example, NRSV translates this part of the verse as, “no sign will be given to this generation,” instead of formally as a straightforward conditional. The thesis of this article is that Mark 8.12 should not be translated as an emphatic negative oath because no Hebraism is in use; instead, Jesus’ words should be translated according to the figure of speech known as aposiopesis: “if a sign will be given to this generation . . .”

## Keywords

Mark 8.12, Hebraism, Semitism, Hebrew language in the first century, oaths, New Testament, Gospel of Mark, translation technique

## Introduction

The focus of this article is the final six words in the Greek text of Mark 8.12: εἰ δοθήσεται τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ σημεῖον. This partial conditional statement is typically translated as an emphatic negative oath based on the belief that a Hebraism is in use. For example, NRSV translates the verse as, “And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, ‘Why does this generation

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ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.” This is typical of English, French, and German translations.<sup>1</sup>

The thesis of this article is that Mark 8.12 should not be translated as an emphatic negative oath because no Hebraism is in use; instead, Jesus’ words should be translated as the figure of speech known as *aposiopesis*:

### Mark 8.12

καὶ ἀναστενάξας τῷ πνεύματι αὐτοῦ λέγει· τί ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη ζητεῖ σημεῖον; ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, εἰ δοθήσεται τῇ γενεᾷ ταῦτη σημεῖον.

And sighing deeply in his spirit he said, “why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, if a sign will be given to this generation . . .” (translation mine)

First, I will discuss the explanation of the Hebraism provided by lexicographers, grammars, and commentaries. Second, I will describe *aposiopesis* and relate it to this particular Hebraism. Third, I will provide a critical evaluation of the Hebraism translation and show how *aposiopesis* is a better translation option based on the Greek grammar and context of Mark 8.12. Last, I will examine the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke to see if they provide help in how to read Mark 8.12.

## Explanation of the supposed Hebraism

A Hebraism or Semitism is helpfully defined by Max Wilcox:

A “Semitism” (or “Semiticism”) in the Greek text of the NT may be defined as an element of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, idiom or style, which (1) deviates from expected Greek usage, and in that deviation coincides with idiomatic Aramaic or Hebrew usage, or (2) although attested in Greek is relatively more frequent in the NT, possibly because it coincides with idiomatic Aramaic or Hebrew use. (Wilcox 2000, 1093)<sup>2</sup>

Thus, according to part (1) of the definition above, a Hebraism may be a Hebrew idiom which is brought into Greek and may not be understandable with the equivalent Hebrew meaning in Greek because it is not typical of Greek grammar and syntax.<sup>3</sup> In the instance of Mark 8.12, the supposed

<sup>1</sup> ESV, KJV, NASB, NET, NIV, NLT; FC (“c’est la vérité: aucun signe ne leur sera donné!”); and Lu (“Es wird diesem Geschlecht kein Zeichen gegeben werden!”), GuNB (“diese Generation bekommt nie und nimmer einen Beweis!”).

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, Wilcox observes that Semitisms are “the use of words, phrases, syntax and idiom which, although unexpected or even at times misleading in Greek may nevertheless reflect idiomatic Aramaic” (1984, 979).

<sup>3</sup> Jan Joosten (2010, 61) helpfully defines the word “idiom” and relates it to translation activity: “Idiomatic expressions can be defined with Eugene Nida as combinations of

Hebraism is that of an incomplete conditional statement which in Hebrew can be translated as an emphatic negative oath. An example of this particular Hebrew grammatical idiom is found in Ps 95.11:

(BHS) אָשָׁר־נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי בְאַפִּי אִם־יָבֹאוּן אֶל־מְנוּחָתִי:

Therefore I swore in my anger, that they should not enter my rest. (NRSV)

Translated formally, this verse reads, “when I swore in my anger, if they will enter to my rest.” However, it is understood in Hebrew grammars, lexica, and commentaries that this construction should be translated as an emphatic negative oath (JM, §165a–k; *DCH*, s.v. “אם”).<sup>4</sup> אם (if) introduces the protasis of a conditional statement in which the apodosis (the “then” part of the conditional) is missing, left to be filled by the reader, usually as something self-maledictory like “may I be cursed” (Conklin 2011, 31–45).<sup>5</sup> Thus, if we were to fill out the verse with the elided phrase, then we would have “if they will enter into my rest, then may I be cursed!,” or more concisely, “they will never enter my rest!” Conklin provides several contextual clues to help identify this idiom in Hebrew: a missing apodosis in a conditional sentence; often, an introductory verb of swearing an oath; and, 90 percent of the time, an imperfective verb in the protasis (2011, 40–41).

New Testament Greek grammars identify two places in the New Testament where this Hebraism occurs: Mark 8.12 and Heb 3.11 (cf. 4.3, 5). For example, BDF (§372, pp. 189 and 190, respectively) states,

(4) εἰ in oaths and asseverations is a strong Hebraism = “certainly not” (Hebr. אם; aposiopesis): Mk 8:12 εἰ δοθήσεται. The complete sentence implied by this kind of aposiopesis appears e.g. LXX Ps 7:4ff. εἰ ἐποίησα τοῦτο εἰ . . . , καταδιώξαι ἄρα ὁ ἐχθρὸς τὴν ψυχὴν μου (the most frequent type of self-execration is τάδε ποιῆσαι μοι κύριος καὶ τάδε προσθεῖη).

...

words whose semantic and grammatical structures are radically different. Although they are constructed on normal syntactical patterns, the meaning of the whole is not simply the sum of the meanings of the parts. . . . Idiomatic expressions are usually limited to one single language and culture. For all these reasons idiomatic expressions are a translator’s nightmare.”

<sup>4</sup> Commentaries rarely discuss the grammatical idiom; however, they demonstrate their awareness of this idiom by translating it as a prohibitive oath. For example, see Howard 1997, 57 (who briefly discusses the idiom in Ps 95.11); Dahood 1970, 352; Hossfeld and Zenger 2005, 458; and Tate 1990, 496; for Hebrew lexicons, see BDB, s.v. “אם”; *HALOT*, s.v. “אם”; for other Hebrew grammars which discuss the idiom, see Waltke and O’Connor 1990, 678–80; GKC, §149. Segal observes that the same grammatical idiom was used in Mishnaic Hebrew, which would have been the Hebrew spoken during the first century (1958, 216–17). Modern translations also recognize the idiom: ESV, KJV, NASB, NET, NIV, NLT, FC, Lu, and GuNB.

<sup>5</sup> Conklin examines all seventy-four instances of this idiom in *BHS*.

(4) εἰ εἰσελεύσονται εἰς τὴν κατάπαυσίν μου H 3:11, 4:3,5 stems from the LXX Ps 94 (95):11.

Also, BDAG (s.v. “εἰ”) states,

4. marker of strong or solemn assertion, without apodosis (=in aposiopesis; B-D-F §482; Rob. 1203) εἰ ἔγνωσ *if you only knew* Lk 19:42. εἰ βούλει παρένεγκαί [sic] *if you would only let (this) pass* 22:42 v.l. (cp. the letter fr. IV BC in Dssm., LO 120, note 5 [LAE 149]). — Hebraistic in oaths, like οὐκ: *may this or that happen to me, if*. . . (cp. 2 Km 3:25; GBuchanan, HTR 58, '65, 319–24); this amounts to a strong negation *certainly not* (cp. Ps 7:4f; Gen 14:23) ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, εἰ δοθήσεται *truly, I tell you, it will not be given* Mk 8:12 (NColeman, JTS 28, 1927, 159–67 interprets this as strongly positive; against him FBurkitt, *ibid.* 274–76). εἰ εἰσελεύσονται *they shall certainly not enter* Hb 3:11; 4:3, 5 (all 3 Ps 94:11) B-D-F §372, 4; 454, 5; Mlt-H. 468f; Rob. 94; 1024.

A final illustration is Moule’s *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, which states,

xi. *Emphatic Denial expressed by Aposiopesis.* In Mark viii. 12 εἰ δοθήσεται comes to mean *there certainly shall not be given* . . . ; and in Heb. iii 11 (=Ps. xciv. [LXX xciv] 11) εἰ εἰσελεύσονται comes to mean *they certainly shall not enter* . . . This exactly corresponds to a familiar Hebrew construction whereby the particle οὐκ (which commonly means *if*) followed by a verb expresses vigorous denial. The construction, whether rightly or not, is usually explained as *aposiopesis*—that is, the silencing or suppressing of a part of the sentence; it is claimed that the full sentence would take the form of such actual examples as: III Reg. xxi. 10 (Heb. I Kings xx. 10) τάδε ποιῆσαι μοι ὁ θεὸς καὶ τάδε προσθήη, εἰ ἐκποιήσῃ . . . *God do thus to me, and more besides, if* . . . (just as *I’m damned if I will = I certainly will not*). (Moule 1975, 179)

It is clear from these reference works that the explanation of the Hebraism is used for Mark 8.12 and Heb 3.11; 4.3, 5.<sup>6</sup> The authors are also consistent in their explanation of the Hebraism; however, they differ in the amount of detail provided by which to identify the presence of the Hebrew idiom. It should be noted that all three conflate the Hebraism with *aposiopesis*. This will be discussed in more detail below.

In support of Mark 8.12 as an example of this Hebrew idiom in Greek words, one quickly notices the incomplete conditional sentence formally rendered, “if a sign will be given to this generation.” The protasis is provided, but the apodosis is missing. Commentaries and modern translations

<sup>6</sup> Although a full discussion of Heb 3.11 and 4.3, 5 is outside the scope of this article, it is important to note the significant differences between Mark 8.12 and Heb 3.11; 4.3, 5. These differences will be referenced where appropriate in the discussion of Mark 8.12.

follow the Greek lexicons and grammars in this passage and offer the explanation that Jesus is making a strong negative oath (BDAG, s.v. “εἰ”).<sup>7</sup> For example, James Edwards, in his commentary on Mark, states: “The last part of v. 12 is an unusual grammatical construction in Greek. It is a Semitic construction—which roots it in Jesus or the early church—implying categorical denial. It means: ‘If a sign shall be given to this generation, may I die!’” (2002, 236).

## Aposiopesis and its relation to the Hebraism

Sometimes aposiopesis is also used as part of the explanation of this construction (Black 2011, 104).<sup>8</sup> Aposiopesis is defined by E. W. Bullinger as “the sudden breaking off of what is being said (or written), so that the mind may be the more impressed by what is too wonderful, or solemn, or awful for words: or when a thing may be, as we sometimes say, ‘better imagined than described’” (1968, 151). Furthermore, Bullinger describes four categories based upon the character of the subject: promise, anger and threatening, grief and complaint, and enquiry and deprecation.<sup>9</sup> Thus, aposiopesis is a broader term, subsuming this particular Hebrew idiom, which fits under the category of “anger and threatening.” All examples of this Hebrew idiom are aposiopesis; however, not all examples of aposiopesis equate to this Hebrew idiom.

## Problems with reading Mark 8.12 as a Hebraism

Despite the similar formal construction (a conditional sentence which contains a protasis but lacks the apodosis), several significant reasons call into question whether Mark 8.12 is an example of this Hebraism. First, Mark 8.12 is not a citation of the LXX, which would be a translation of a Hebrew

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Edwards 2002, 236; Guelich 1989, 415; Stein 2008, 377; BDF, §372; BDAG, s.v. “εἰ”; and Moule 1975, 179. See also NIV, NKJV, NET, ESV, NRSV, and NASB.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see BDF, §372; Moule 1975, 179. Black does not label Mark 8.12 as aposiopesis; however, he does observe concerning the missing apodosis that “the consequences are literally unmentionable” (2011, 104). He labels this a Semitic circumlocution but is ambiguous as to whether this is an oath statement based on the Hebraism.

<sup>9</sup> Smyth’s grammar lists several extrabiblical Greek examples: Demosthenes, *On the Crown*, 18.3, 22, 195; Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1289; Aristophanes, *Vespae.*, 1178 (1956, §3015). Demosthenes, *On the Crown*, 18.22, exclaims, “Why, you, you—but I can find no epithet bad enough for you” (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0072%3Aspeech%3D18%3Asection%3D22>). Robertson lists several biblical illustrations: Mark 11.32; Luke 13.9; 19.42; John 6.62 (1934, 1203). Bullinger’s list is more detailed; for example, under “Anger and Threatening” he includes Gen 3.22; 20.3; Jas 3.1 (1968, 152–53).

or Aramaic *Vorlage*.<sup>10</sup> This is in contrast to Heb 3.11; 4.3, 5, which are the only other passages mentioned by the grammars.<sup>11</sup> This significantly distinguishes Mark 8.12 from Heb 3.11; 4.3, 5. In order for Mark's quote of Jesus' words to be a Hebraism, Mark would need to render formally a Hebrew or Aramaic statement. Mark is not citing the LXX, nor is Jesus citing the LXX.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that Jesus originally made the statement in Hebrew or Aramaic, and that Mark is translating Jesus' words into Greek according to the form of the original statement. However, if this is the case, then one wonders why Mark, in light of his supposed Roman audience, would not translate according to the meaning of the statement instead of the form of the statement?<sup>13</sup> The omission of a clarifying statement by Mark becomes especially noteworthy when we realize that he regularly makes narrative asides to assist his listeners/readers with understanding Aramaic words. For example, Mark tells his audience the meaning of the Aramaic phrase in Mark 5.41: "'Talitha koum!' (which means, 'Little girl, I say to you, get up!')" (NIV).<sup>14</sup> Mark also translates the Aramaic in Mark 7.34: "'Ephphatha!' (which means, 'Be opened!')" (NIV). Last, Mark translates Jesus' final words on the cross, which were said in Aramaic: "'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (NIV). If Mark intended Jesus' statement in Mark 8.12 to be read as an emphatic negative oath, why did he not explain this Semitic idiom to his Greek speaking audience as he has consistently done throughout his Gospel?

<sup>10</sup> In this article, the abbreviation "LXX" is intended to refer to all parts of the Greek Old Testament. Often, scholars will refer to the Greek Pentateuch as the "LXX" and the other books as "Old Greek" (OG). This distinction helps to remind readers that the LXX and OG are not monolithic in their translation tendencies, nor were they all translated by the same group.

<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 3.11 is a citation of Ps 94.11 LXX (Ps 95.11 MT). Heb 4.3, 5 are further citations of Ps 94.11 LXX. This means that the author of Hebrews is citing a translation of a Hebrew text. Thus, translation technique becomes a very significant point of discussion. It is clear that the translator of Ps 95.11 MT into Greek followed a very formal, word-for-word methodology that does not communicate the meaning of the Hebrew idiom (i.e., emphatic negative) but does follow the form of the Hebrew text (the protasis of a conditional statement). Anwar Tjen states that the LXX's literal rendition of the Hebrew oath formula is a "clear case of bilingual interference" (2010, 226).

<sup>12</sup> The author of Hebrews is regularly characterized as using only Greek OT texts (Ellingworth 1993, 37), and several scholars have postulated that the author of Hebrews did not know the Hebrew language (for example, Karrer 2006, 339). Thus, he does not attempt to use the Hebrew OT to clarify any difficult Greek OT passages. In contrast, Mark offers frequent interpretational and clarifying comments throughout his Gospel for his presumably Gentile audience.

<sup>13</sup> The provenance of the second Gospel is unknown. However, Rome as a possible likely location is often noted. For example, see the discussion in Black 2011, 24–25; and Stein 2008, 9–12.

<sup>14</sup> See further discussion of these three illustrations in Gleaves 2015, 22–24.

Furthermore, this Hebrew idiom does not have a parallel in Greek idiom. As N. D. Coleman observes concerning the oath formula using *ei* in the LXX, “in writing free Greek no one would use *ei* to express a negation. It would be surprising and unthinkable to discover such a foreign idiom in colloquial Greek papyri of any date” (1927, 160).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Robert Stein states concerning Mark’s audience that “we know it was a Greek-speaking audience that did not know Aramaic, as Mark’s explanations of Aramaic expressions indicate (3:17-22; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 9:43; 10:46; 14:36; 15:22, 34)” (2008, 9). Therefore, Mark’s Greek-speaking audience would most likely not have knowledge of the Hebrew language to recognize this idiom and to read this statement as an emphatic negative.<sup>16</sup>

Second, no introductory oath formula (i.e., a verb of swearing) or other contextual clue that Jesus utters an oath is present. This detail also distinguishes Mark 8.12 from Heb 3.11 (4.3, 5).<sup>17</sup> The Pharisees come to test (πειράζω) Jesus (Mark 8.11), and as a result Jesus “sighs deeply” (ἀναστενάζω; NIV, NET, ESV, NKJV, NASB, NRSV). These are the only potential clues which could point to Jesus making a strong negative oath.<sup>18</sup> However, to “sigh deeply” could also express other emotions besides exasperation, frustration, or anger at the Pharisees. Jeffrey Gibson argues that ἀναστενάζω expresses Jesus’ deep emotion at the test of his own faithfulness, and that it does not express frustration at the Pharisees (1996, 138–40). Coleman argues that the conditional *ei* could possibly be read as a strong affirmation (1927, 164). Even though F. C. Burkitt disagrees with Coleman and renders Mark 8.12 as a negative statement, he states,

<sup>15</sup> Muraoka’s *A Greek–English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (2009) places an asterisk (\*) by the relevant entry for *ei*. Entries marked with an asterisk signify that “the word is not attested earlier than the Septuagint” and “can be debatable” (xiii). Thus, although Jesus’ statement could have originally been in Hebrew, Mark’s translation of it into Greek does not render it according to its meaning as an emphatic oath (if we assume that Jesus’ Hebrew statement was an emphatic negative oath). If Jesus did speak this statement as an emphatic negative oath in Hebrew, then Mark is choosing to translate this into a Greek phrase that his presumably Greek audience would not be able to understand.

<sup>16</sup> Space does not permit a fuller argument demonstrating the lack of use of the Hebrew language outside of Judea. However, Jobes and Silva (2000, 82) provide a succinct statement in relation to the use of the Greek OT: “In the two centuries before Jesus, most Jews in the world spoke Greek, not Hebrew or Aramaic, just as most Jews today do not speak modern Hebrew, at least not as their native language. For them, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was the only Bible with which they could have been personally familiar.” Therefore, if the recipients of Mark’s Gospel were in Rome (or anywhere outside of Judea), then it would be very unlikely that this audience knew Hebrew. This is true whether the recipients are Jews or Gentiles.

<sup>17</sup> Hebrews 3.11 is clearly an oath statement with a verb of swearing: ὡς ὤμοσα ἐν τῇ ὄργῃ μου. Mark 8.12 is not clearly an oath statement and there is no verb of swearing.

<sup>18</sup> Buchanan posits that the word ἀμὴν points to an oath. The oath is supposedly made by a third party with whom Jesus agrees (1965, 324–26). His argument is not persuasive.

ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν εἰ . . . is not an “oath,” except to the Grammarian. It is no more of an oath than μὴ γένοιτο is a naming of the Name of God. The understood apodosis, for the Grammarians’s requirements, might just as well be “I am very much mistaken” as “God do so to me and more also,” or any similar clause. (Burkitt 1927, 275)

Regardless of the strength or direction of Jesus’ deep sigh, swearing an emphatic oath is not set up in the immediate context.<sup>19</sup> There is no reason to assume that Jesus’ statement must be an oath.

Third, the Hebrew grammatical idiom discussed in this article is not identical to the literary device of aposiopesis. Aposiopesis is a broad literary device which can encompass several different idioms. The Hebraic oath idiom fits within the broad definition of aposiopesis; however, not every aposiopesis is the Hebraic oath idiom—it is merely one of many examples of the literary device. In other words, that a statement breaks off abruptly due to the emotion of the speaker does broadly encompass the Hebrew idiom of a protasis which omits an apodosis in an oath statement. But this does not mean that every aposiopesis is intended to communicate a negative oath.<sup>20</sup> Jesus’ statement could be understood in terms of aposiopesis without having to claim that it is also a Hebraistic oath formulation. These two options should be distinguished so that aposiopesis is the broad category of which the Hebrew idiom is a subcategory. So, if Jesus trails off in his words due to emotion, then he is not necessarily making an emphatic oath at the same time. In fact, the opposite could easily be understood; Mark may have Jesus trail off in his words to show a strong emotion of exasperation or foreboding because his focus is on his greatest sign which is to come: his suffering, death, and resurrection.

A. T. Robertson tersely comments on Mark 8.12, stating that “εἰ = οὐ does not mean οὐ as in εἰ δοθήσεται σημεῖον (Mk 8:12), but is *aposiopesis*, the apodosis not being expressed” (1934, 94).<sup>21</sup> He comments on the amount of influence that the Hebrew language has had on the New

<sup>19</sup> Contrary to Stein (2008, 377), who states that Jesus is making a self-maledictory oath.

<sup>20</sup> This is illustrated well by Bullinger’s description of subcategories under the heading of aposiopesis (1968, 151–54). That the subcategory “anger and threatening” is clearly distinct from “promise” demonstrates that aposiopesis is not always this Hebrew idiom; however, the Hebrew idiom fits nicely under aposiopesis in the category of “anger and threatening.”

<sup>21</sup> Robertson’s succinct discussion allows for some ambiguity in understanding his argument. Even though the above-cited portions of Robertson seem to point away from reading Mark 8.12 as a Hebraism, his other comments seem to label Mark 8.12 as such: “In the same way (suppression of apodosis) is to be explained [by] the use of εἰ like οὐ in the sense of ‘not,’ in solemn oaths or questions. The apodosis is wanting. So εἰ δοθήσεται σημεῖον (Mk. 8:12). So, Heb. 3:11 (4:3, 5) εἰ εἰσελεύσονται (Ps. 94–95:11). This is aposiopesis. The full expression is seen in Gen. 14:23; Num. 14:30; 1 Sam. 14:45. It is an apparent imitation of the Hebrew idiom, though not un-Greek in itself” (1934, 1023–24).

Testament. He argues against the view that the New Testament is a Hebrew set of writings in Greek garb. The subtitle of this section in his grammar is “Little Direct Hebrew Influence.” Thus, for Robertson it appears that Jesus’ statement is aposiopesis and not the Hebrew grammatical idiom of an emphatic negative oath.

It seems possible, then, that Jesus’ conditional sentence could be a legitimate case of the broader category of aposiopesis. Therefore, a translation of “truly I say to you, if a sign will be given . . .” is possible. The apodosis could be left out, which would signal readers to locate a fitting conclusion in the immediate context. In other words, the ellipsis would be signaled grammatically by the correct punctuation in the translation.

Fourth, the broader context of Mark 8.12 provides evidence against a strong oath and supports an open-ended conditional statement of aposiopesis. The series of pericopes surrounding Mark 8.12 builds upon Jesus’ interaction with the Pharisees in Mark 8.11-13. First, Jesus feeds the 4,000 by multiplying the bread and fish (Mark 8.1-10). Second, the Pharisees test Jesus by asking for a sign (Mark 8.11-13). Third, Jesus warns his disciples about the “yeast” of the Pharisees, at which point they interpret his words to be in regard to physical bread; Jesus challenges them in regard to seeing and hearing, i.e., understanding his words (Mark 8.14-21). Fourth, Jesus heals a blind man and causes him to physically see (Mark 8.22-26). Fifth, Peter demonstrates his spiritual sight when he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, wherein Jesus immediately begins to teach his disciples that he must suffer, die, and ultimately rise again from the dead (Mark 8.27-38). Sixth, Jesus physically reveals himself as Messiah/King at the transfiguration and connects this to his resurrection from the dead (Mark 9.1-13). Last, Jesus demonstrates the power of the kingdom of God and his authority by casting out a demon from a young boy (Mark 9.14-29).

Each of these narrative scenes moves fluidly from one to the other, with several themes connecting them together.<sup>22</sup> Jesus’ warning against the “yeast” of the Pharisees builds upon his multiplication of the bread, thus drawing together the scene of the multiplication of bread and the scene of the Pharisees’ blindness. Jesus’ restoration of the physical sight of the blind man builds upon Jesus’ challenge to his disciples to see and to hear him and not to be like the Pharisees. Immediately after this healing, Peter demonstrates that he partially “sees” by confessing Jesus as the Messiah. Furthermore, Jesus continues to provide “sight” by explaining the future role of the Messiah: to suffer, to die, and to rise again. It is this

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<sup>22</sup> The above scene delimitations are organized generally around the paragraph divisions of NA28, with some scenes forming a larger discourse of multiple paragraphs. Each scene is connected by the coordinating conjunction *καὶ* until Mark 9.30, where *κακείθεν* is used.

scene of the discourse wherein Jesus provides “sight” to his disciples and foretells his greatest sign. Therefore, the overall context provides a warning not to be like the Pharisees who were blind to the sign of the feeding of the 4,000, and who could not see beyond what was clearly already in front of them. Instead, Jesus is able to “open the eyes” not only of the physically blind but also the spiritually blind. Jesus’ challenge to his disciples is to see him as he is (i.e., the Messiah) and to understand his mission to suffer, die, and rise again. The next scene allows a few disciples to see exactly this as Jesus is transfigured before them, and Jesus continues to attach his death and resurrection to his rule in God’s kingdom. The final scene demonstrates Jesus’ authority in God’s kingdom over the current rulers of this world.

It seems odd that Mark would have Jesus make a self-maledictory oath against the performance of another sign, “if a sign will be given to you [protasis], then may I die [elided apodosis],” and then further in the immediate narrative discuss the future greatest sign to his messiahship of his death and resurrection. However, if Mark 8.12 is intended to be apopiopsis, then Jesus is trailing off in his sentence due to the distress of the situation. He is acknowledging that another, greater sign will be given; it will be his suffering, death, and resurrection. This translation makes the best sense of the grammar, syntax, and context of the passage.

## Matthew and Luke’s parallel to Mark 8.12

The parallel passages of Mark 8.12 in Matt 16.4 and Luke 11.29 may help to clarify the meaning of Mark 8.12:

### Matt 16.4<sup>23</sup>

Γενεὰ πονηρὰ καὶ μοιχαλὶς σημεῖον ἐπιζητεῖ, καὶ σημεῖον οὐ δοθήσεται αὐτῇ εἰ μὴ τὸ σημεῖον Ἰωνᾶ.

An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, and a sign will not be given to them except the sign of Jonah. (translation mine)

### Luke 11.29

Τῶν δὲ ὄχλων ἐπαθροισομένων ἤρξατο λέγειν, Ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη γενεὰ πονηρὰ ἐστίν· σημεῖον ζητεῖ, καὶ σημεῖον οὐ δοθήσεται αὐτῇ εἰ μὴ τὸ σημεῖον Ἰωνᾶ.

And as the crowd increased he began to say, “This generation is an evil generation. It seeks a sign and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” (translation mine)

<sup>23</sup> Another option is Matt 12.39, which is identical in wording to Matt 16.4 except for the additional phrase τοῦ προφήτου at the end of the sentence. However, the context of Matt 16.4 is similar to Mark 8.12, which makes it the more likely parallel passage.

Both Matthew's and Luke's wording are identical in regard to the point in question (καὶ σημεῖον οὐ δοθήσεται αὐτῇ). Three significant differences between them and Mark's statement are immediately apparent. First, they explicitly add the negative by the addition of οὐ. Second, both Matthew and Luke add the caveat of Jesus' final sign of death and resurrection, i.e., the sign of Jonah. Third, neither Matthew nor Luke renders Jesus' words as an oath. The scholarly discussion of source criticism in regard to the Gospels is complex and still ongoing. However, if we assume that Mark wrote first and Matthew and Luke used Mark, then it could point to their understanding Jesus' statement as a negative oath. However, their second addition counters the argument that they understood Jesus to be making an emphatic oath because they add the exception of Jesus' greatest sign: his death and resurrection. If they understood Mark's quote of Jesus as a self-maledictory oath, then why would they also understand Jesus to be breaking that oath by adding the statement about the sign of his death and resurrection?

Perhaps we can navigate these two options by tentatively positing that both Matthew and Luke provide a clarifying reading of Mark's statement. As argued above, Jesus' response to the Pharisees was to make a statement concerning this sign which trails off due to extreme emotion, i.e., aposiopesis. Also, as argued above, Mark's series of scenes culminates in Jesus revealing that he must suffer and die in Jerusalem (Mark 8.31-32). This is his greatest sign to demonstrate that he is the Messiah. Therefore, Mark separates in the narrative Jesus' incomplete sentence (Mark 8.12) from Jesus' clarification as to what his greatest sign will be. In light of this, both Matthew and Luke join these two narrative pieces together so that they are clearly read together. Both authors intentionally reveal that Jesus' sign will be the "sign of Jonah," which for Matthew points to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection (Matt 12.39-40) and to Jesus' prophetic role (Matt 12.41), and for Luke points to Jesus' prophetic role (Luke 11.32). Both authors appear to want their readers to look forward to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection as Jesus' greatest sign pointing to his identity.

So, what can be concluded about these parallel passages? It is difficult to come to a firm conclusion because the relationship of dependency among the Synoptic Gospels is still an open discussion. If Matthew and Luke used Mark, or if one Gospel writer used Mark and the other Gospel (e.g., Luke used Mark and Matthew), then they apparently understand Jesus as limiting his future signs to his death and resurrection. This corresponds well to the immediate context of Mark discussed above. It also means that they do not understand Jesus to be making an emphatic oath by a denial of any future signs, even though they have inserted a negative particle within the statement.

## Conclusion

If we read Mark synchronically within the context of Mark's Gospel and the immediate discourse of this passage, then several hurdles appear to hinder reading Mark 8.12 as an oath. Mark's Greek-speaking readers would not know the Hebraism and would most likely read it as a more familiar type of aposiopesis. The context provides enough clues to make a coherent reading of the sentence as aposiopesis. The distress or foreboding caused by the need for Jesus' final sign is a plausible explanation for Jesus' sentence trailing off. Thus, a translation of the verse should not reflect an emphatic negative oath ("no sign will be given to this generation!"); instead, an ellipsis should be grammatically evident in the translation to express Jesus' emotional unfinished sentence because of the testing of the Pharisees, that is, "if a sign will be given to this generation . . ." The import of the whole would be, "If a sign will be given to this generation, it will only be the sign of my death and resurrection."

If we read Mark 8.12 diachronically in the context of the other Synoptic Gospels and their possible use of Mark as a source, then determining how Matthew and Luke read Mark 8.12 seems to rely on their interest in highlighting Jesus' death and resurrection as the sign which will reveal his identity. Both Gospels insert a negative particle and point to a future sign. It is significant that neither Matthew nor Luke portrays Jesus' statement as an oath.

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## Abbreviations

BDAG	Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich 2000 (in References)
BDB	Brown, Driver, and Briggs 2005 (in References)
BDF	Blass and Debrunner 1961 (in References)
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> (1997)
DCH	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> (Clines 1993–2011, in References)
ESV	English Standard Version (2001, 2016)
FC	Bible en français courant (1982, 1997)
GKC	Gesenius, Kautzsch, and Cowley 2017 (in References)
GuNB	Gute Nachricht Bibel (2000)
HALOT	<i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Köhler et al. 2001, in References)
JM	Joüon and Muraoka 2009 (in References)
KJV	King James Version (1611)
Lu	Revised Luther Bible (1984)
LXX	Septuagint
NA28	Nestle-Aland <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , 28th revised edition
NASB	New American Standard Bible (1971, 1995)
NET	NET Bible (New English Translation; 2001)
NIV	New International Version (1978, 2011)
NKJV	New King James Version (1982)
NLT	New Living Translation (1996)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)