

Discourse and Verbal Aspect  
In mark 8:11-21

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(plain text=Present form; *italic text*=Aorist form; Underlined text=Imperfect form; **Bold text**=Perfect form; Times font=Future form)

Unmodified text taken from: The Bible Gateway  
Mark 8:11-21 (English-RSV)

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- 11 The Pharisees *came and began* to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven, to test him.
- 12 And he *sighed* deeply in his spirit, and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation."
- 13 And he *left* them, and *getting into* the boat again he *departed* to the other side.
- 14 Now they *had forgotten* to bring bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat.
- 15 And he cautioned them, saying, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."
- 16 And they discussed it with one another, saying, "We have no bread."
- 17 And *being aware* of it, Jesus said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? **Are** your hearts **hardened**?"
- 18 Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?
- 19 When I *broke* the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces *did you take up*?" They said to him, "Twelve."
- 20 "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces *did you take up*?" And they said to him, "Seven."
- 21 And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

In this study of discourse and verbal aspect, the pericope in Mark 8:11-21 is reformed and recounted with the significance of the verbal forms in mind. Based on the work that Stanley Porter has done<sup>1</sup>, the aorist form is generally used to give the story line or the background information of the event. This is what the story looks like based on a rough aorist form structure:

8:11 The Pharisees came and began

8:12 Jesus sighed

8:13 Jesus left them, and got into the boat and departed to the other side

8:14 They forgot to bring bread

8:17 Jesus was aware of their arguing

The other aorist forms not listed here occurred in the discourse by Jesus and were references to when he broke the bread (vs. 19, 20) and what the disciples picked up (a previous event).

In this pericope, it generally stands that the majority of discourse is done in present forms. The imperfect form does appear four times in this passage, and seems to surround the main focus of this scenario. One could say the imperfect functions as parentheses around Mark's purpose for including this pericope. Only one perfect form appears  $\mu$  in a participle form of adjectival use modifying the disciples' heart. According to Porter the perfect form is the most marked or most exegetically significant (usually).<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Mark uses this same word and form in 6:52 in a similar context of boat, bread and stiff heart. No doubt the recurrence of the same idea and grammatical structure work together to inform the reader concerning Mark's point in using those forms in that context.

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<sup>1</sup>Porter Stanley. *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* Sheffield Academic Press, England; 1994. Note in particular his treatment of verbal aspect, pp. 20-25.

<sup>2</sup>The exception would be the words that only appear in the perfect form. Thus the perfect would be perfect by default, and not necessarily due to exegetical significance. Porter states in his book that stative aspect (perfect or pluperfect forms) is the most significant, p. 22.

The significance of the present form (which is the prevalent form employed here by Mark) is not to be ignored. Almost all of what Jesus said was recorded in the present form (imperfective aspect). It is noteworthy that several factors would place the stress on what Jesus said as compared to just the aorist forms' painting the backdrop of what he did. Not only do the grammatical forms stress the importance of what Jesus was saying to the Pharisees as well as to the disciples, but also the context and abundance of words that are quite nigh unto synonymous if not semantically touching reiterate a weight to the statements of Jesus. The perfect participle should be understood as the focal point of this pericope, and the crux of what Jesus was saying to the disciples. The imperfects seem to lead up to it, surrounded by present forms that keep hinting at something wrong with what the disciples had seen and witnessed but not processed or grasped. Chronologically it was not long since they had witnessed the feedings of the multitudes, thus Jesus asks them  $\mu\ \mu$  , having eyes  $\mu$  and having ears  $\mu$  , and  $\mu\ \mu$  , and 8:21 ? All these present forms of not understanding or comprehending point to the perfect  $\mu$  .

The imperfect forms appear to convey an imperfective aspect in 8:14 and 8:16, that they had no bread (except one loaf) and they were arguing about not having bread. Contrastingly, Jesus warned them about the leaven of the Pharisees (  $\mu$  is imperfect 8:15), but this use makes sense with an aoristic flavor to it. There doesn't seem to be any textual indicators that it was continuous. However,  $\mu$  (8:16) should be understood as a process because the disciples did it among each other, and Jesus knew what they were discussing (8:17). The final imperfect form in 8:21 seems to make sense with an aoristic flavor that Jesus said to the disciples (non-process), "do you understand yet?" So the imperfect seems to add slight additional 'props' to the story to accomplish the author's purpose.

In the broader context of Mark 8:1-27 the following chart of verbal forms gives an idea of the aspectual flow:

- aorists: 44
- imperfects: 12
- presents: 46
- futures: 3
- perfects: 2

The presents dominate due to their heavy usage in discourse and even their function in historical present usage, where they function in translation as past tense. The aorists are the second most used form due to their usage in telling narratives. In this pericope it appears that the aorist forms tell the events of the story for the most part, and the presents carry the conversation.

Porter's theory on verbal aspect is convincing to this writer based on the evidence from this pericope. The process of identifying verbal forms, highlighting them, and observing the forms used resulted in a flow of idea that pointed to the main point of this pericope being a confrontation with the disciples by Jesus over their hardened hearts. It would not be impossible to arrive at the conclusion of this study that the issue at stake is a hardened heart after seeing and witnessing the miracles of feeding. Due to the heavy usage of interrelated words concerning the interrogation of the disciples in 8:17-20, one could notice this based on the English text. But the verbs in English will not indicate the aspectual flow as the Greek text will.

In conclusion, this theory is valid. The usage of the perfect participle in this pericope is not the default usage of ἵσταναι because in 2 Cor. 3:14 a different form of the word is used, and Mark 6:52 employs the same form as 8:17.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>BAGD. University of Chicago Press, Chicago; 1979. See p. 732 for the entry of the lexical form of