



What's New in Markan Studies?

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When I began teaching New Testament at the seminary level thirty-five years ago, Mark's Gospel was a center of great controversy among the biblical scholars of the day. The focus of much of their attention was the community in and for which the Gospel was written, and the historical situation behind the Gospel. There were claims and counterclaims about the "divine man" christology and "theology of glory" being combated by the evangelist, the place and date of the Gospel's composition, and the conflicts that allegedly were dividing the Markan community. Those were lively and exciting times, and the debates about Mark at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Catholic Biblical Association were enlightening, engaging, and often heated.

But times change, even in New Testament studies. The focus in Markan research has shifted from the figures, situations, and events behind the text to the text itself and its readers. Likewise, the most striking development in biblical studies has been the proliferation of literary, social-scientific, and hermeneutical approaches to interpreting texts. In both developments Mark's Gospel has often served as a testing ground. In this brief survey of current Markan scholarship intended for preachers and teachers today, I want to highlight the significance of some recent publications that reflect the turn to the text and the reader as well as the use of "new" methods.

My recent book *What Are They Saying About Mark?* (New York: Paulist, 2004) appeared in the long-running WATSA series that provides surveys of schol-

Daniel Harrington's introduction to twenty-four recent volumes on Mark's Gospel will be of significant help to interpreters searching for greater insights for their own learning, preaching, and teaching.

arship in various areas of biblical studies and theology. The size is limited (25,000–30,000 words), and its scope is mainly English-language titles. My assignment was to take up where Frank J. Matera left off in his *What Are They Saying About Mark?* (New York: Paulist, 1987). Matera covered the period from the early 1960s to about 1985, treating the debates about the Gospel's date (before or after 70 C.E.?) and place (Galilee/southern Syria or Rome?), the divine man/theology of glory allegedly being criticized by Mark, the chief christological titles (Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man), the portrayal of Jesus' first disciples (polemical or pastoral?), and the evangelist's work (collector of traditions or skillful narrator?). Matera wrote at about the time when the focus of scholarly attention was beginning to move from the world behind the text to the text and its readers.

My recent contribution to the WATSA series takes the story of modern Markan scholarship (at least in English) from 1985 through 2003. It considers how Mark's Gospel has been approached from the perspectives of modern literary criticism, examines how its major theological themes have been treated, explores some efforts at clarifying the Gospel's historical setting, and discusses the "engaged" (feminist, political, and pastoral) readings that Mark's Gospel has generated in recent years.

In this brief article I want to draw attention to some books that I find representative of new trends in Markan scholarship and useful for preachers and teachers approaching another Year of Mark (Year B) in the lectionary cycle. Most of these books (and many more) are treated in more detail in my WATSA Mark book. Those bearing publication dates of 2004 and 2005 appeared after the book was completed.

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MARKAN STUDIES TODAY

We begin with two recent books that can provide a snapshot of current Markan study. In *Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), Francis J. Moloney first discusses what can be said about the author known as "Mark" and his role as a historian and theologian. Next he provides a narrative analysis (plot, characters, point of view, etc.) of Mark's Gospel, with particular attention to the evangelist's skills as a storyteller. Then he considers Mark as a creative interpreter of traditions about Jesus and the Christian community and assesses the ongoing relevance of Mark's contribution to Christian life in terms of challenge and encouragement. Moloney notes that Mark has provided the Christian tradition with a story that is a resounding affirmation of God's overcoming all imaginable failures through the action of Jesus the beloved Son.

In *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), David Rhoads provides a good introduction to some of the “new” interpretive methods being applied to Mark’s Gospel today. With this collection of eight essays, Rhoads sums up thirty years of research and oral performance of the Gospel. His first four essays treat narrative criticism in general and apply it to specific passages. Two more essays develop perspectives from cultural anthropology in order to illumine the social system of the Jesus movement in Mark and the dynamics of purity and defilement in Mark’s story world. Then drawing on his many oral renderings of Mark, Rhoads reflects on how the demands of performance have led him to a greater understanding of the text. Finally he discusses narrative criticism and inter-cultural criticism with reference to the emerging discipline of the ethics of reading.

LITERARY STUDIES

Two basic literary concerns in the study of Mark’s Gospel are its plot and characters. In *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), Jack Dean Kingsbury describes conflict as the force that drives the plot. As the central character, Jesus is at the core of the conflict. His struggles are both with Israel (the religious authorities and crowds) and with his own disciples. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon’s *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark’s Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) demonstrates how the interactions and inter-relations of the characters are basic to the plot. In a series of essays Malbon calls attention to the strengths and weaknesses of Jesus’ “fallible followers,” and observes how they can serve as realistic and encouraging models for hearers/readers in their own efforts at Christian discipleship.

In *A Preface to Mark: Notes on the Gospel in Its Literary and Cultural Settings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Christopher Bryan explores two literary questions: What kind of text is Mark’s Gospel? and Was it written to be read aloud? Bryan answers that Mark’s Gospel has most in common with Greco-Roman “biographies” (*bioi*) and would have been perceived by its ancient readers as a “life” of Jesus (though not as a biography in our modern sense). He contends that this Gospel was written in order to be read aloud or recited, since it was produced in an oral culture where written works were customarily read aloud or performed in communal settings.

In an attempt to recover the experience of an oral performance of Mark’s Gospel in antiquity, Whitney T. Shiner in *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003) considers the manner in which it would have been told, the nature of the performance, the voice and the mimicry, and the stimulus and response of the audience. He concludes that the oral performance of Mark’s Gospel makes Jesus powerfully present, allowing listeners to participate in his life and death; the story lifts them out of ordinary existence and transforms them.

Along with the turn to the text there has also been a turn to the hearers/read-

ers of the text. In *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), Robert M. Fowler deals not so much with what the Gospel says about Jesus as with how it says it and the effects or impact that its mode of discourse has on the reader. Fowler's conclusion is that "Mark's Gospel is designed to guide, direct, and illuminate the reader vigorously and authoritatively, but at the same time challenge, puzzle, and humble its reader. It pulls the reader strongly in opposite directions simultaneously" (220).

THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

In *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Christopher D. Marshall explores from the perspective of narrative criticism passages where Greek words for "faith" (*pistis*, *pisteuein*) appear. According to Marshall, the object of faith in Mark's Gospel is Jesus as the embodiment of God's saving action. The context of faith is human need and helplessness. The necessity of faith is manifest in the perceptive dependence that is capable of receiving Jesus' words and deeds as revelatory acts of God. The experience of faith involves individuals in crisis, their knowledge or perception, and their action (repentance, persistence, obedience). The origin of faith is the realization of God's kingdom in Jesus' words and deeds that engenders faith in others. Even though the Markan Jesus functions chiefly as the object of faith, he also shares the attitude of faith as "the one who actualises God's presence and power, and one who exemplifies the response sought from others to this reality" (240).

In *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), Joel Marcus shows how Mark retained a commitment to the Jewish Scriptures while reading them through the lens of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In analyzing examples of Mark's use of the Old Testament, Marcus develops four methodological principles: look at the larger biblical context; be sensitive to Mark's use of Jewish exegetical methods and interpretive traditions; recognize that Mark regarded Christ as the key to the Scriptures; and be aware that Mark used Scripture to address the needs of his community. What emerges from Marcus's investigation of Mark's christological exegesis is a "high" Son of God christology (with hints at Jesus' divinity) related to the kingdom of God, and placed in the framework of both "the way of the Lord" of Isaiah 40–55 and the mystery of the cross.

Combining comparative analysis and narrative criticism, Whitney T. Shiner in *Follow Me! Disciples in Markan Rhetoric* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995) argues that Mark's depiction of Jesus' disciples is subordinated to what the evangelist wishes to say about Jesus. Shiner first shows how Greek philosophical biographies used imperfect disciples to illumine the lifestyle, thought, and method of the philosophical hero, and to provide negative points of comparison for the sage's exemplary character. Then, with the help of rhetorical analysis, he shows how in Mark's Gospel the disciples bring out aspects of the person of Jesus (who is a kind of parable himself).

In their positive moments the disciples offer a sympathetic human perspective that is seriously engaged with Jesus and his significance. In their negative moments they illustrate how hard it is to comprehend the reality of Jesus, and their incomprehension serves as the occasion for Jesus to provide good example and wise instruction.

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Nearly everyone agrees that Jesus’ central teaching in Mark’s Gospel is the kingdom of God. In *Jesus’ Urgent Message for Today: The Kingdom of God in Mark’s Gospel* (New York: Continuum, 2004), Elliott C. Maloney, an American Benedictine who has spent much time in Latin America, contends that in reading Mark today Latinos and Latinas have an interpretive advantage in grasping the Gospel’s symbolic thinking, perception of time, and assumptions about human solidarity. In illumining Mark’s approach to Jesus’ promise of the kingdom of God, Maloney employs the fruit of conventional exegesis along with insights from social-science research and Latin American theology. He describes God’s kingdom as “the whole world gathered into communities of justice...the complete realization of the full potential of humanity” (136). He regards Jesus’ urgent message for today to be the conviction that God wants his kingdom to come through the witness of those who believe in the gospel. Maloney’s work can help North American readers understand some important and difficult Markan texts by adjusting their ways of thinking about symbolism, time, and human community.

HISTORICAL-POLITICAL, FEMINIST, AND PASTORAL READINGS

In *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), Ched Myers approaches Mark’s story of Jesus (written in Galilee in 69 C.E., in the ferment of events leading up to the First Jewish Revolt) as an ideological narrative, the manifesto of an early Christian discipleship community in its war of myths with the dominant social order and its political adversaries. Identifying himself with the Christian movement of “radical discipleship,” Myers contends that Mark presents Jesus as the champion of nonviolent resistance, and thus offers a perspective different from those of the Jewish ruling classes, the Roman imperial system, and Jewish religious reformers and militaristic rebels. Thus in Mark 3:27, with its reference to binding “the strong man,” the Markan Jesus places the scribes from Jerusalem on Satan’s side in the political struggle, and suggests that Jesus as “the stronger one” (see 1:8) will overthrow the reign of the strong man (Satan). Myers concludes that the household was the key institution for the Markan community, and that its revolutionary insight was that “the

powers that he could only be defeated by the power of what we today call ‘nonviolence’” (452).

In *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark’s Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), Richard A. Horsley interprets Mark’s Gospel, the early Jesus movement, and Jesus himself against the background of village life in first-century Galilee. He combines literary analysis, social history, and the social sciences, and so reads the theological elements in Mark from a fresh sociopolitical perspective. He contends that the dominant conflict in Mark’s story of Jesus was the political-religious opposition between Jesus and the Roman and Jewish leaders based in Jerusalem. He proposes that the original audience for Mark’s story consisted of village communities of a Jesus movement around Galilee, and that Mark aimed to give guidance and voice to these subject (“submerged”) people. In writing his “political” text, Mark, according to Horsley, hoped that with the coming of God’s kingdom the Romans would go back to where they had come from and Israel would come directly under God’s rule, freed from the oppressive rulers and institutions in its capital. Horsley interprets the exorcisms and the apocalyptic discourse in Mark 13 as symbolic ways of referring to the political struggle against the Roman oppressors and their Jewish collaborators. In the political plot of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus follows the biblical “scripts” of Moses, Elijah, and David, and appears as the agent for delivering God’s people from oppression by their rulers and for bringing about their restoration and renewal.

Using rhetorical-critical, social-science, and feminist approaches to key texts in Mark’s Gospel, Hisako Kinukawa in *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) examines the interactions between Jesus and women, with special attention to how boundary-breaking activity changes and enriches both. Kinukawa reads these texts in the context of the patriarchal and hierarchical societies of first-century Palestine and of her native Japan throughout the centuries. These two societies are honor and shame cultures, with a strong sense of group-oriented consciousness, dyadic personality, and gender role differences. She argues that the Markan interactions between women and Jesus are quite positive, and serve to reveal him as life-giving and his good news as liberating for women. Her emphasis on the mutual transformations undergone by both Jesus and the women brings out interesting perspectives on christology and discipleship in Mark’s Gospel.

In *Beyond Fear and Silence: A Feminist-Literary Reading of Mark* (New York: Continuum, 2001), Joan L. Mitchell argues that the fear and amazement shown by the women at the empty tomb in Mark 16:8 were not negative responses for Mark, and that the women’s silence was only temporary (otherwise the good news would not have gotten out). Employing a model of feminist critical biblical interpretation, Mitchell charges that Mark is guilty of covering over the active role played by Jesus’ women disciples during his public ministry. She observes that the message about Jesus’ empty tomb and resurrection did get out enough to bring the church

into existence, and that the women witnesses very likely played roles analogous or even equal to those of the male disciples.

According to William Reiser in *Jesus in Solidarity with His People: A Theologian Looks at Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), what holds together Mark's many narrative pieces is his unswerving sense of the presence of the risen Jesus. It is from the perspective of Jesus' death and resurrection that Mark portrays Jesus in solidarity with his people, especially with the "throwaways." Neither a commentary nor a full reading of the Gospel, this book consists of twelve essays that explore key features of Markan spirituality in the light of biblical exegesis, theological insights, and pastoral sensitivity. It gives particular attention to the theme of Jesus' suffering in solidarity with God's people and what this might mean for those who seek to follow him.

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In *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), Brian K. Blount draws parallels between Mark's message and his own African American church heritage of undergoing slavery and oppression, while Gary W. Charles struggles with how to make Mark's disturbing Gospel into "good news" for well-educated white suburbanites living in the Washington area. The theme that unifies their exegeses and sermons is the boundary-breaking character of Mark's Gospel. Boundary-breaking in its own right, this imaginative book shows that biblical exegesis and actualization (in this case preaching) need not be kept separate. It also illustrates nicely how the interpreter's social location can affect how a text is read and how it may speak differently to different audiences or congregations.

COMMENTARIES

In her introduction to *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), Morna D. Hooker traces how the Markan commentator's task has evolved over the past fifty years from source criticism and historical context, through form criticism and early church life, to redaction criticism and the distinctive contributions made by the evangelist. While not ignoring the concerns of earlier commentators, Hooker, a great Markan expert, looks at the finished product that we call Mark's Gospel and tries to discern what the evangelist was trying to convey to his readers. In a two-volume exposition entitled *The Beginning of the Gospel: Introducing the Gospel according to Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), Eugene LaVerdiere describes Mark's Gospel as an act of proclamation that made Jesus, the one who was crucified and raised from the dead, present to Mark's readers and listeners. Using literary and rhetorical analysis, LaVerdiere shows how Mark applied the story of Jesus and his first disciples to the early church

in his own day, and indicates how this story might be applied to the church at the beginning of the third millennium.

In *Mark 1–8* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), the first volume in his Anchor Bible commentary, Joel Marcus gives special attention to reading Mark's Gospel in the historical context of first-century Judaism and to the implications of the events of 70 C.E. for Jewish Christians in the eastern Mediterranean world (Syria); he argues that Mark's narrative promotes an apocalyptic cosmology in which Jesus' mission is to liberate humans from the cosmic powers that oppress them. In *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), Francis J. Moloney brings together traditional historical scholarship and narrative analysis. His focus is what Mark's story of Jesus as the suffering Messiah and his failing disciples might say not only to an early Christian community perplexed by failure and suffering but also to Christians today. The approach taken by John R. Donahue and me in *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003) is characterized as "an intratextual and intertextual reading." By "intratextual" we mean reading Mark "as Mark and by Mark." So we focus on the Gospel's present form and its words and images, literary devices and genres, structure, characters, and plot. By "intertextual" we mean noting the links of Mark's Gospel to other ancient texts (especially the Old Testament) and to the life of the Markan community and of Christian communities today.

THE ENDING

Mark's Gospel seems to end on a disturbing note at 16:7–8, with the women fleeing from Jesus' tomb in fear and silence. The late Donald H. Juel (1942–2003) viewed the Gospel's open-endedness as powerfully unsettling for readers who try to tame and predict God's actions. The memorial volume entitled *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God*, edited by Beverly R. Gaventa and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), presents Juel's essay on Mark 16:1–8 ("A Disquieting Silence: The Matter of the Ending," previously published in Donald H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994] 107–121), and twelve papers by friends and colleagues that reflect on the intersections between Juel's interpretation and their own work. Juel's words about the ending offer good advice for another Year of Mark: "Jesus has promised an end. That end is not yet, but the story gives good reasons to remain hopeful even in the face of disappointment. The possibilities of essential enlightenment for the reader remain in the hands of the divine actor who will not be shut in—or out" (11). ☩

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