Book of the Month

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BOOK OF THE MONTH

Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville, KY/London/Leiden: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. £20. pp. 296. ISBN 0-664-22275-7 pbk).

IT is not unusual to read claims that a certain book is strikingly original and effectively determines the direction of future research, at least in its area. It is much less common to find a book that arguably lives up to the hype. To be sure, Richard Horsley's book does not come as a bolt from the blue. Unlike Melchizedek, its ancestry may be traced. It is recognizably part of the modern scene, whether in relation to socio-cultural emphases or previous work on 'the story of Mark'. But its single-minded concentration on Mark as oral communication and its clarity, directness and persuasiveness mark it out as a work of real consequence. It is also provocative. The author writes as one who has found the pearl of great price and refuses to countenance competitors' valuations.

A Critique of Common Approaches to Mark's Gospel

In arguing for a holistic approach – 'taking the Gospel whole' – Horsley is prepared to be iconoclastic. So many approaches lead to the fragmentation of the story. The layout of our translations is one factor – numbered chapters and verses, paragraphs with separate headings and so on. Preachers expound selected texts; lectionaries line up extracts; theologians or evangelists cite 'proof texts'; scholars even talk of 'pericopes'. Everything seems to conspire against understanding the whole story.

Other trends in scholarship have diverted attention elsewhere. If traditional scholarship plundered the Gospel in search of eternal truths, *source criticism* was programmed to treat Mark as a historical source for the life of Jesus, rather than as a story in its own right. The effect was to distance the reader from what Mark was actually saying. *Form criticism* was a recipe for fragmentation, with its view of the Gospels as loosely assorted pearls on a string. The *redaction critics* get a better press. 'By looking at "Mark" as an independent thinker . . . they prepared the way for recognition of Mark as a sustained story' (p. 6). But they were led astray by their fatal attraction for the 'theology' or 'christology' of Mark, or for selected themes such as 'discipleship', which (they claimed) informed the work of the redactor. Thus their feeling for the wholeness of the story was lost.

Perhaps surprisingly, the author is highly critical of some literary approaches, such as *narrative criticism* and *reader-response criticism*. Literary criticism assumed that Mark could be read like a novel or short story, where the author is in the driving seat (to mix the metaphor!). So far, so good! But Mark was working with traditional materials, to which he had to be true. He did not spin his material out of virgin stuff! Besides, novels have usually a suspenseful plot, but Mark gives the game away almost from the start. Modern writers are fascinated by 'character', but Mark's characters are secondary to 'plot' and do not develop as character studies. Horsley therefore directs us away from modern literary criticism, with its 'overbearing methodology' (p. 7). The 'New Criticism' in the mid-twentieth century 'insisted on interpreting literature in quarantined isolation from its historical and cultural context' (p. 9). Since the consequence was 'to exalt the text with mystical authority', biblical scholars seized it with enthusiasm! Religion, having been banned from the public sphere of industry and capital, found a new soul mate in literary criticism and thereby lost contact with what Amos Wilder called 'the public arena of significant action'. But Mark's Gospel does not exhibit this alienation from the public arena. On the contrary, its entire content and direction are located in the area of the political, economic and institutional life of the communities Jesus addressed, whether in peasant villages or Temple courtyard. Thus to read Mark's story in social and political perspective is not to import some alien element nor is it an optional extra. It is the essential horizon of the whole work. *Narrative criticism* erred in being too 'religious': that is, it conditions the reader to relate the narrative to the ethereal world of theology rather than the 'real world' where people live, work and

suffer. *Reader-response criticism* was over-influenced by the culture of print and thus 'simply perpetuates the modern Western individualism of the subjective private reader' (p. 8).

This comprehensive combat is stimulating but overdone. Many of the above approaches have their value if sensibly used. But Horsley's critique raises questions about them that their proponents require to answer. The point remains that, corporately and individually, these approaches have not been conducive to a radical appreciation of Mark as story.

A Submerged People's History

In spite of the author's criticism of biblical–historical studies as distancing the reader from the text, there is a historical distancing that is essential to the appreciation of Mark's story. Modern socio-political science offers a lens, or a set of lenses, which help us to make sense of the distant scene. The story is set in ancient Palestine, which the author takes to be the equivalent of modern Iran or Afghanistan. It is set in a third-world country, colonized by a succession of super powers, most recently by Rome. Historical records normally tell the story from the point of view of the powerful, the winners, or the elite. Mark's story tells of Jesus leading a popular renewal movement in Galilee, addressing the history of a submerged people, 'a history previously buried from historical view' (p. 37). It focused on God's kingdom and covenant rather than the rule of the established authorities and was inevitably set on a collision course with the latter. This led to Jesus' martyrdom but, according to 'the remarkable open ending of the story' (p. 42), the movement continued after his death, apparently in the rural backwater that was Galilee. Most subject cultures eventually fuse with the dominant ideology and lose their identity. Yet in that backwater Mark locates a movement that is seen as the fulfilment of Israel's history and tradition. Exceptional in being literate in an oral culture, Mark gave voice in popular Greek to a submerged community which, through Jesus, was put in touch again with its own history and tradition as opposed to those imposed by the world power and its submissive agents in Jerusalem.

Mark as Oral Performance

Central to Horsley's presentation is the emphasis on Mark's Gospel as written for oral performance. Very few Palestinians outside the educated elite could read or write. Estimates put it as low as 3 per cent of the population. Reference to scrolls can be misleading. They too were heard; their message remembered as a whole. Mark's Gospel was derived from oral sources and designed for oral presentation to listening communities. Oral presentation involves memorization, not the reading of the text in the modern way. Each presentation would be subtly different from its predecessor, yet faithful to the whole story. Hearers took their cue from the communication context. Water crossings and wilderness feedings recall the exodus stories; casting out a demon called legion would connect with the legions of Romans in their land. The people's anger against James and John for their presumption in trying to reserve the leading places in the kingdom is typical of the reaction of a village community against locals who are getting above themselves. The people recognize the registers in which the narrator and Jesus speak – for example, an Israelite prophetic register, or a controversy register. To be sure, Mark's story is episodic. While various devices of oral presentation link the episodes, they are 'plotted' in a particular sequence to tell a complete patterned story (p. 68). To appreciate Mark as oral performance thus involves focusing on the story as a whole.

Horsley maintains (almost protesting too much) that oral performance breaks the grip of theological interpretation, which imposes an alien and abstract schema on the living narrative. 'Whereas theology tends to abstract us into a strictly religious and spiritual level, oral narrative keeps us busily engaged in the real world of political conflict, between the people and their rulers and, in Mark's world, also between God and the "unclean spirits"' (p. 75). In particular, Horsley protests against the selection of a theme such as 'discipleship' to characterize Mark's Gospel. In fact, although the calling of the disciples has a prominent place at the beginning of Jesus' mission, the disciples' failure to comprehend and to remain faithful predominates in the later stages. Yet by the time Mark told his story, these disciples had become pillars of the church in Jerusalem. It is not surprising, Horsley claims, that 'Mark's story deploys the disciples as foils for Jesus' insistence that his movement be egalitarian, with no heads who enjoy veneration, power and privilege' (p. 96). It is the women who emerge as the true paradigms of discipleship (p. 205). The dominant plot is the renewal of Israel in its villages through Jesus' ministry

and in opposition to its rulers, whether local, religious or imperial. The controversy over the nature of the renewal and of the Israelite tradition which underpins it is fuelled by scribes and Pharisees and resolves itself into a clash between Jerusalem-based Torah and popular Israelite tradition, which Jesus reaffirms as the basis of covenant community (pp. 156–176). 'Mark's story presses the hearers to move beyond power-relations in which some dominate and others are powerless to use their newly gained empowerment in service of a movement that can sustain resistance to that dominant order' (p. 229). And, as the women discover in fear and trembling, not even Jesus' death can stop such a dynamic.

Theological Diversions

Two theological diversions elicit the author's derision. One relates to the interpretation of Scripture. Scholars tend to recreate Mark in their own image. They picture Mark as literate in several languages and surrounded by his library of scrolls, which he consults frequently. Thus he eruditely derives the beginning of his Gospel from three different sources – Exodus 23:20; Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3,3:1.

> Mark is imagined as a scriptural scholar engaged in a task so complex that he could realistically have accomplished it only if he were working on a high-capacity computer loaded with multi-lingual files of multiple versions of the scriptures in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, along with Jewish Pseudepigrapha, Targums and Talmuds (p. 232).

But an oral culture was allusive, bringing together relatively free renderings of diverse parts of scripture to interpret the persons or events in question. To dissect them with surgical precision is a futile operation. The other object of Horsley's ire is the theological obsession with christological titles and messianic expectations supposedly imputed to Jesus by Mark. Scholars seize upon them with all the relish of gourmets savouring their favourite dishes. All this is a diversion from the dynamics of Mark's story in an oral culture, where the total thrust of the story was much more important than individual sayings, episodes or 'titles'.

Two Recurring Scripts

Two recurring patterns or 'scripts' are evident in Mark's story. One is that of the popular prophet (Moses, Joshua, Elijah), on which Qumran supplies valuable commentary. The prophet could be a very disturbing figure. The other, the popular messiah martyred for the kingdom of God, is more ambivalent. The messianic tradition had complex origins in kingship in Israel. It could take the form of an imperial monarchic tradition (as in Isa. 92–97), and of a more enduring tradition of popular kingship which resurfaced in various movements before and after Jesus. The interaction of these 'scripts' could be dramatic indeed! In Mark's story, the Caesarea Philippi episode illustrates their inherent ambivalence. The popular imputation of 'prophet' passes without comment, but Jesus qualifies the term 'messiah'. A similar ambivalence is evident in the Passion story. Horsley's comment on the 'messianic secret' in Mark is that 'Jesus is not very messianic – or is messianic only in a highly qualified and ironic sense' (p. 253). Mark's story presents Jesus' 'script' as harnessing the tradition of a subject people as the basis for renewing the dynamic of Israel's covenant community. The messianic 'script' cohered with the notion of power and was seized by various groups, religious and political, with an eye to power. It was also anathema to those who were in power! Jesus had to tread very warily in dealing with this concept, which could explode in his face at any point and frustrate his purpose. Mark's story brings out the tensions, ambiguities and pitfalls.

In Conclusion

(1) This book is a 'must' for all interested in the study of Mark. Its single-minded concern for the oral nature of the culture shared by Jesus and Mark is a much-needed correction to Markan studies.

(2) The book is overly, though enjoyably, polemical. It is highly critical of many aspects of literary and theological interpretation, yet socio-historical and sociological procedures are accepted without question. Theological and literary critics are not alone in making assumptions! What is lacking is the acknowledgement that, even in the case of Mark's story, there are implicit theological concerns that require unpacking. Can the story be reactivated as a transforming power today within 'the public arena of significant action'? That is the most pressing question of all.

THE EDITOR