

BOOK REVIEW

Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011). vii + 302 pp. Pbk. US\$27.99.

In this commentary, Mary Ann Beavis attempts to provide further context for the composition of the Gospel of Mark. Beginning with a discussion of the Synoptic problem and various critical methodologies employed in recent history, Beavis moves to the question of whether Mark was written for a single community of believers, or whether Mark was meant to be circulated throughout all the churches in the empire. She concludes that, although the stories in Mark may reflect some actions of the historical Jesus, the historical Jesus is not the main subject. With this suggestion, Beavis makes clear that she aligns herself with those scholars who posit that Mark was written for a particular community.

Beavis provides various scholarly opinions concerning the author, date and setting of the Gospel, noting that Mark was a common Roman name, and that this name appears several times in the New Testament, but never in the Gospels. She cites the works of Eusebius and Papias, who propose that Mark was affiliated with the apostle Peter on some level, and points to the work of Brenda Deen Schildgen, which suggests that Mark accompanied Peter in Rome as his interpreter. Beavis questions the authenticity of this claim since it is largely based on 1 Pet. 5.13, a text regarded by contemporary scholars as being written not by Peter but by an admirer of Peter in the late first or second century. She notes some writers, such as John Chrysostom, who suggest that Mark may even have been composed in Alexandria.

The Gospel of Mark seems to reflect the experiences of a fearful community whose acceptance of Gentile believers reflects a tentative attitude toward Jewish practices. This raises the question of ‘audience’ (a term preferred over ‘reader’) and the genre of the Gospel. Beavis argues that Mark’s superscription does not refer to the genre of the book but to its content. Some suggest that the Gospels may be regarded

as Greek *bioi* (or biography), a classification made as early as the second century by Justin Martyr. Still others have suggested that the Gospel is reminiscent of Greek tragedy, though it may not be as ‘polished’ as one might expect from a Greek tragedy or novel.

While engaging several possibilities for structure, Beavis settles on the idea that Mark is divided into five ‘acts’. These ‘acts’ are to be thought of in terms of stages by which the story unfolds, each of which is concluded by an interlude. A prologue and an epilogue bracket these ‘acts’. In light of this structure, Beavis divides her commentary into six sections, each of which is further divided into ‘acts’ and ‘interludes’. The six sections are divided between the Prologue (1.1-13) and Transition (1.14-15); Act 1: Jesus in Galilee (1.16–3.35) and Interlude: Teaching and Parables (4.1-34); Act 2: Beyond Galilee (4.35–6.56) and Interlude: Teaching on Ritual and Moral Purity (7.1-23); Act 3: Mission in Gentile Regions (7.24–9.29); Act 4: Opposition in Jerusalem (11.1–12.44) and Interlude: Teaching on the End Times (13.1-37); Act 5: Passion Narrative (14.1–15.47) and Interlude: Women at the Empty Tomb (16.1-8).

Though Act 1 is lacking in detail, it provides important foreshadowing of the events in the second half of the Gospel. The arrest of John signifies that Jesus will undergo similar treatment as well as a rejection of his teachings. The act ends in 3.6 with mention that the Pharisees and Herodians plan to have Jesus executed, a theme furthered by the mention of Judas as betrayer in 3.19. Mark also develops a style, which Beavis calls ‘Markan sandwiches’, describing a story within a story: Jesus’ teachings in 1.21-22 and 27a surround an exorcism in vv. 23-26 and 27b. This style is characteristic of Mark, being utilized at various points throughout the Gospel.

Beavis describes the Interludes in Mark as being similar in function to that of the chorus in Greek drama. They elaborate on the narrative as it develops, focusing more intensely on the teachings of Jesus. Parable is the primary method of Jesus’ teachings. The term parable, as used in the LXX, is a translation of the Hebrew word *masal*, which has a much broader semantic range. Another connection is made with Greco-Roman tradition by introducing the concept of *chreia*. *Chreiai* are rhetorical devices that characterize much of what Jesus does (action *chreia*), says (saying *chreia*), or says and does (mixed *chreia*). Therefore, these *chreia* are reflections of a statement or action that are attributed to a character or something analogous to that character. Such

chreiai form Jesus' dialogue with the Pharisees in Mk 7.1-23, perhaps revealing the author's familiarity with Greco-Roman rhetoric. This is not to say that Mark was well educated, but that he may have been familiar with a concept that was meant to destabilize the views of the questioner, in this case the Pharisees, but also the reader.

Beavis also points out an overarching theme in the Gospel: faith. First mentioned in the prologue (1.15), faith in contrast to fear and unbelief is developed most extensively in Act 2. Readers are prompted to have faith *like that of Jesus* and not necessarily *in Jesus*; this dichotomy challenges the audience to claim a confidence in God's power that goes beyond the cowardice of the disciples (cf. Mk 4.40).

Perhaps one of the more interesting features of Beavis's commentary is her treatment of two narrative parables: The Sower (Mk 4.1-34) and the Vineyard Tenants (12.1-12). Beavis likens the function of the Sower parable to the role of a Greek chorus that elaborates on the narrative as it develops. She further equates this parable, and the one in Mark 12, with Greek rhetoric—a point not explained in detail. She asserts that the narrative parables have historically been interpreted allegorically, something she calls 'the key to the meaning of the parable'. I agree with Beavis's assertion of an allegorical meaning in Mk 4.1-9, but in doing so she seems to jump to several conclusions. For example, Beavis mentions the seed as being identified as 'the word' (*ho logos*), and assumes that it refers to an expression referring to missionary preaching (cf. Mk 2.2; Gal. 6.6; 1 Cor. 15.2; Rom. 10.8; Jas 1.21-23; Acts 6.4; 8.4; 14.25; 16.6). This point is well taken, but little discussion is given to the meaning of *logos* within the tradition of allegorical interpretation that she advocates here. As for the Parable of the Tenants (12.1-12), Beavis argues that it is 'patently an allegory' (p. 174). Commonly used as a metaphor for Israel in the Jewish Scriptures, the vineyard in Mark 12 seems to symbolize Israel and its various kings with reference to the Temple vis-à-vis the tower (cf. Ps. 80.8-18; Jer. 2.21; Hos. 10.1). Beavis concludes that the 'key' to the parable is not the owner's forbearance but rather the tenants' foolishness. The result of such foolishness is stated by Jesus in v. 9 that they will be destroyed by the owner of the vineyard. If such a conclusion is ascertained through means of allegorical interpretation, it is a warning against all Jewish leaders that their authority is forfeit by their neglect of sacred obligations and failure to heed the warnings of the prophets (cf. 12.12). Given that Mark provides reference to Ps. 118.22-23, this allegorically

interpreted text follows a Jewish style of *masal* (parable-proper) followed by *nimshal* (application).

What is confusing about Beavis's application is how she presents the criteria for what a parable is and how that definition applies to the two aforementioned parables. For example, she points out that the parables of the Sower and Tenants follow a Greek rhetorical style and separates these from the other parables that reflect a Jewish sense of *masal*. However, when discussing the Tenants parable, she describes it as a form of *masal*. While the Tenants parable may reflect elements of both Greek rhetoric and Jewish *masal/nimshal* techniques, the case is not clearly stated.

Another feature of this commentary that is perhaps lacking is the explanation of certain themes within Mark. For example, she briefly mentions the young man that escapes without clothes at Jesus' arrest and explains his appearance as symbolism of the disciples' failure. The young man appears again in 16.5 and Beavis provides little explanation, except that the young man in v. 5 represents Jesus' resurrection. One cannot help but feel disappointed with such a description of a rather conspicuous character; more should be made of Mark's symbolism since attention is given to it. The question remains as to why Mark uses a similar character on two separate occasions. Instead, one might reread the transfiguration of Jesus, on whom dazzling white clothes appeared. When this is compared to the young man at the empty tomb, there seems to be a connection in that both Jesus and the young man are wearing white clothes. When this is compared to the image of clothes being removed at Jesus' arrest, it is tempting to consider an allusive connection among these three passages, centering on the clothing worn, not necessarily on the ones who are wearing them.

I find Beavis's commentary to be helpful, though it does not always express original ideas. While this may not necessarily be negative, a reader may expect a new commentary to make a unique contribution in certain areas. Beavis's reliance on Collins's work is frequent; she often uses it to fill in the blanks, so to speak. Having said that, I find Beavis's references to both Greek and Jewish literature to be a refreshing element in a commentary on Mark. I recommend this work, though it may be lacking for those seeking an extensive exegetical commentary.

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