Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect

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Abstract: The recent publication of a collection of essays that looks back to a founding text in the now widespread practice of narrative criticism (Rhoads and Michie, Mark as Story [1982]) raises questions concerning the future of literary (rather than historical) approaches to Gospel texts, and offers an opportunity to survey the current situation of such approaches. Ongoing narrative criticism, performance criticism, and postmodern criticism come under scrutiny. As always with "methodologies", no single approach to ancient biblical texts provides the complete answer to every interpretative possibility. The perennial challenge to some form of "objectivity" remains for some, while for others it is no longer important. New Testament literary scholarship, now some thirty years old, continues to deliver rich results, and to generate questions that both challenge interpreters and offer new insights to the many possible meanings of our Gospel narratives.

A RECENT COLLECTION OF ESSAYS, published to anticipate the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of David Rhoads and Donald Michie, Mark as Story,1 offers an opportunity to survey recent interpretative strategies.2 The essays present three distinct characteristics of current approaches to Gospel narratives: (1) further development of narrative critical readings, (2) the emerging importance of "performance criticism" and (3) a radical postmodern reading. The following article highlights some strengths and weaknesses of these emerging disciplines. Morna Hooker describes the current situation: "It is

2. An earlier form of the following study was delivered at the Annual General Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held in San Francisco, on 21 November 2011. The volume under review is Kelly V. Iverson and Christopher Skinner, Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect (SBT: Resources for Biblical Study 65; Atlanta: SBL, 2011).
difficult today to think back to the time when Mark was not regarded as "story."). The challenge issued to source criticism by the earliest quest for the historical Jesus, and the further challenges that came to that stage in New Testament scholarship by Form Criticism and Redaction Criticism have only led to further challenges. More reader-oriented approaches from our immediate past are being challenged by postmodern and ideologically inspired readings which focus more on a world in front of the narrative.

Narrative Criticism is well represented by this volume. There are fine essays by leading experts on the current state of narrative criticism itself (Mark Alan Powell), the role of characters in current narrative criticism (Elizabeth Struthers Malbon), the approach taken to write a narrative critical commentary (Francis J. Moloney), and two excellent exercises in narrative critical readings, one dedicated to a discrete passage in the Gospel of Mark (R. Alan Culpepper on Mark 6:17-29) and the other to the theme of Jesus Christ, the Son of God as Good News (Morna D. Hooker). The closing "Reflections" of the original authors of Mark as Story also point to further possibilities for a narrative critical approach to the Gospels. What follows will be limited to what I have come to regard as the strengths and weaknesses of narrative criticism, and raising a few questions concerning the suggested further directions that are proposed in this volume. In many ways, the weaknesses are not very different from those of the quest for the historical Jesus, Form Criticism and Redaction Criticism.

NARRATIVE CRITICISM AND THE MARKAN TEXT

Traditional narrative criticism applies contemporary literary theory to a Gospel, reading it as a unified utterance from beginning to end. Wolfgang Iser's insistence, that an author leads a reader through a story, and the reader strives "even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern," directs the reading process. The whole utterance of the Gospel of Mark made sense to someone who originally uttered it. It was the interpreter's responsibility to capture that sense without escaping into any theories of clumsy insertions that do not make sense in their present context, except where this could be justified on text-critical grounds. However, a responsible narrative critic can read a text written almost two thousand years ago without asking why the narrative was written in this way then and asking whether an answer to that question has anything to say to someone in front of the text now. These interpretative principles lead, necessarily, to an intense focus upon the Greek text, a process lamented by the performance critics. They point out that very few "read the text" in antiquity. They either had it read to them, or saw it performed in some fashion.

But narrative criticism traces various literary and narrative techniques uncovered by means of a careful scrutiny of the Greek text. A number of the essays in this volume single out the importance of the fact that the reader/listener/viewer of the Markan story knows the secret of Jesus, and his destiny. This is especially important in the essay by Kelly Iverson. With reference to Nils Alstrup Dahl, Iverson writes: "It may seem odd to suggest, that while secrecy is embedded within the narrative, there are no secrets for the audience of Mark's Gospel. Secrecy affects the way in which the story is experienced, but the truths of the Gospel are concealed only from the characters in the narrative. But how do we know this? How can we make such an important strategic claim for the reading/listening/viewing process of the Markan story?"

The reader/listener/viewer can only enter the story without any doubts about Jesus' person and role if Mark 1:1-13 is identified as a "prologue" to the Gospel. This "prologue" is singled out by the use of evangeline as a kind of stepping stone that marks two "openings". It

3. Morna D. Hooker, "Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God", in Iverson and Skinner, Mark as Story, 165.
5. Form Criticism and Redaction Criticism are still practised in Europe, with rich results. The quest for the historical Jesus is alive and well. The recent innovative work of Dale A. Allison Jr., Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), is a sharp reminder of that. See the attention devoted to more traditional scholarship in the closing chapter of Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, Mark's Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 231-98.
7. On this, see Culpepper, "Mark 6:17-29", 144-68.
8. Scholars in the United States are increasingly convinced by the oral nature of communication in early Christianity, and the importance of performance. Not all agree. For example, while not excluding oral performance, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon's many studies of characterisation in the Gospel of Mark demand a constant careful reading and re-reading process in order to make sense. This is especially true of her recent Mark's Jesus (see also below, note 12). Similarly, Margaret Mitchell's studies of Pauline rhetoric (most recently, Paul, the Carthaginians, and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010]) require a highly skilled readership. The rhetorical subtleties she traces in the Pauline text would be lost on listeners.
opens the prologue in v. 1, associated with the word *archê*. It also opens the public ministry of Jesus, introduced by the indication of a change of direction in the narrative by means of the words *meta de*. In 1:1 it is on the lips of Jesus but in v. 15 on the lips of Jesus. However, between v. 1 and vv. 14-15, the prologue is “held together” by typical Markan parataxis: *egeto* (v. 4), *kai* (v. 6), *kai* (v. 7), *kai* (v. 7), *kai* (v. 11), *kai* (v. 10, v. 11), *kai* (v. 12), and *kai* (v. 13).

Internally, the prologue itself is unified by a steady repetition of the expression *erêmos* in vv. 3, 4, 12 and 13. By the time the reader comes to the end of v. 13, she already knows that this book is “good news” in the sense of God’s gracious gift to humankind in Jesus who is the Christ and the Son of God. The reader knows that the messianic messenger foretold by Isaiah (v. 2) will prepare a way for “the Lord” (v. 3). The messenger announces that the one who is to come is an *ischarôteros* (v. 7), one whose sandals strap he is not worthy to untie (v. 7), one who will baptise with the Spirit (v. 8). Indeed, at his baptism, the Spirit descends upon him (v. 10), and a voice from heaven announces, “You are my beloved Son: with you I am well pleased” (v. 11). Driven by the Spirit, he recaptures the original condition of humankind in Eden: tempted, he is comforted by angels, and the wild beasts are with him, as both angels and wild beasts were with Adam and Eve before the inbreach of sin. The reader now knows that the story she is about to read is *eugaion*; good news about the Messiah, the Son of God, the Lord, the Mightier One who has the Spirit and baptises with the Spirit, the Son in whom God, his Father, is well pleased. In Jesus, God’s original creative design, as described in the early chapters of Genesis, has been restored. By means of a subtle reference to Abraham and Isaac in the proclamation of Jesus as a “beloved son” in v. 11, Jesus’ death even enters the story in the prologue.10

With this information in hand, the reader is led into the narrative. Much of what I have sketched above might be missed by someone who, in a poor quality of a “telling” or in a lack of effectiveness in the “performing,” does not hear the allusions to the Old Testament, to the literary unity generated by the use of Greek parataxis, to the fourfold use of *erêmos*, the hints that link the passage with Genesis, and so much else that is found in the text. Only an intense experience of all that is involved in the prologue can place an audience in the privileged position described by Dahlgren and Iverson.12

But the Christological “prologue” of 1:1-13 is only one issue among many in the Gospel of Mark, admittedly an important one. It is by reading that one can go back and forth in the text, notice the sandwich constructions, so important to Mark, sense the tension generated by the use of secrecy within the narrator, and notice the story as an “interwoven tapestry”. As Robert Fowler has shown, one cannot imagine a filmed version of the sea journeys of Mark 4:35-41, 6:45-52 and 8:14-21, without relating them to much that surrounds them. What does a viewer who has constructed a film of 6:45-52 make of the remarks from the narrator: “For they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (v. 52). The interwoven tapestries of what comes before, between, and after 6:31-44, 6:45-52 and 8:14-21 are essential to an audience’s understanding of 6:52. I take the expression “interwoven tapestry”, so essential for a narrative reading of Mark, from Joanna Dewey; but is it true that this tapestry can be most effectively appreciated by a “listening audience”, as Dewey insists?13 Surely a reader of the text is better equipped to catch these features of a well-written story.

Reading Mark as a unified narrative means that the reader must focus closely upon the text, something current critics are claiming is not opportune, in order to appreciate Robert Fowler’s warning: “What Mark the storyteller has joined together, let no filmmaker or biblical scholar put asunder.”14 In my experience, it is a close reading of the text that enables us to recognize “what Mark the storyteller has put together”. I am not sure that the endless number of oral communications possible, or performances possible, would do this.

THE REAL AND IMPLIED READER

Nevertheless, a severe limitation is generated by a narrative critical interpretation. Early narrative critics were strongly influenced by Wayne Booth, Seymour Chatman and Gerard Genette.15 At the heart of this theory of narrative communication is an exclusion of the real author and the real reader from the analysis, tracing a communication between an implied author and an implied reader that can be found in

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11. For an exegetical underpinning of this summary, see Moloney, Mark, 27-41.

12. This simple exercise repeats what was argued for a larger section of Mark’s story by Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Echoes and Foreshadowing in Mark 4:8. Reading and Rereading”, *Journal for Biblical Literature* 112 (1983), 211-230. She meticulously concludes: “The reader is more able to take up the task of the implied reader because the implied reader is already a reader” (p. 220).


15. Fowler, “In the Boat with Jesus”, 258.

the text. The search for what was being communicated by the narrative led to a focus on the impact (emotional, intellectual, ethical, etc.) that the implied author’s uses of the interplay of characters, spatial and temporal settings, etc., made upon the implied reader within the narrative. Theoretically, the claim was made that a good reading experience took place when the impact made upon the implied reader in the text and the real reader of the text were at one.18

Lurking behind this apparently logical and scientific identification of different readers, different literary techniques and different levels and quality of impact (emotional, intellectual, ethical, etc.) that could be communicated between an implied author and an implied reader was the danger that the interpreter became the implied reader. An attempt to avoid this could be made by locating the narrative within its original historical and literary setting. The implied reader was only allowed to have the characteristics, the experiences and the knowledge of a reader of that time, and in that setting.19 But the danger still lurked, especially when Christian scholars were reading and explaining texts that have nourished and inspired Christian faith and practice for almost two thousand years.20 The withering attack on the first quest for the historical Jesu by Albert Schweitzer laid bare the fact that each scholar created a Jesu in his own image, and this attack brought the first quest to an end.21 Exactly the same critique was made of the Form Critics whose identification of literary forms outside the biblical literature and the subsequent use of those forms to locate pericope im Leben Jesu or im Leben der Kirche, eventually fell under the critique that other agendas were running, especially but not only, the widespread existentialist readings that flowed from Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologisation program.22 The world of the interpreter was too much of a determining factor in the interpretation of the text. The same had to be said of Redaction Criticism. The theology of the Evangelist identified by the Redaction Critic was all-too-often determined by the theological perspective of the interpreter.23 Likewise, in my own work, and in the work of most narrative critics, whatever their skill and their use of increasingly complex theoretical pyrotechnics, the shadow of real reader (the interpreter) always lurks behind the implied reader (the heuristic device). This allegation could be made for a number of significant contemporary scholars. Joel Marcus, Richard Horsley, Rikki Watts and Warren Carter, to mention but a few.24

**Performance Criticism**

The danger that the narrative critic finds herself in the implied reader is always present, but what of performance critic? They are strongly advocated in a number of essays in this volume.25 The four essays in *Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect* are somewhat different in approach. Boersmeeen and Iverson use performance critical approaches to determine answers to traditional questions: the audience and the purpose of Mark (Boersmeeen) and the function of the use of secrecy in Mark (Iverson). Heeren and Fowler present ways (on stage or in film) the message of the Gospel of Mark can be better communicated to an audience who are seeing and hearing, rather than reading, the text.

Iverson does not speculate about how a performer might or might not do his or her job, and what impact that might have on an audience.

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17. This was also the case for Rhoads, Michie and Dewey in both editions of the original *Mark as Story*. For a “rewriting” of the first quest, see Malbon, *Mark’s Jesu*.


He focuses upon the all-pervading presence of a secrecy theme that impinges upon the way a performer must tell or enact this story. His acute reading of relevant secondary literature, and his insistence on the centrality of the secrecy theme, despite a century of post-Wedian rejection, and his association of the theme with Mark’s call to universal mission, are very satisfying. Iverson’s essay is marked by a thoroughgoing focus on what is in the Markan text as it would have been performed within its original setting, and asks how that should impinge upon any subsequent performance of the story.

Boomershine devotes attention to who is addressed in the Gospel of Mark, and by whom.26 His conclusion is helpful: “[t]he audiences of Mark were addressed as Jews and Gentiles who were invited to move from a position of opposition to Jesus to a position of identifying with Jesus’ disciples.... The primary purpose of the story was to move its listeners from opposition to Jesus to belief in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.”27 What is of concern, however, is the variety of ways a performance might take place, and who controls what impact is made between the text and the viewer, via the performance. We continue to face the already-mentioned difficulties that have been with us since the origins of the search for an objective interpretation of the Sacred Scripture. Some sample moments from this essay must suffice. As the performance of Mark 3:31-35 closes, “the storyteller addresses this saying to all those in the audience with a gesture of wide-open arms of inclusion.”28 As Jesus moves away from his public attack on a Jewish audience into a private place in 7:17, “his introduction was probably accompanied by some gesture, perhaps a simple movement to the side and sitting down.”29 But who determines what those gestures will be? In Boomershine’s view, Jesus’ exasperation with the disciples in the boat trip with the disciples recorded in 8:14-21 is a moment when a teacher faces his students who just don’t get it. Therefore, “[t]here is a real possibility that the storyteller smiled and even laughed at the delivery of this speech”.30 In Fowler’s attempt to render the same moment in the Gospel through the medium of an imagined film, there is no suggestion of laughter.31 What or who is driving the interpretation of the passage?

There is no call to indicate the same detail in Hearon’s rich comparison of the different ways in which a narrative critic and a performance critic represent setting, conflict, character and narrator; she does it herself. This essay is an excellent refutation of the sharply different interpretations that might emerge from the two approaches.

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27. Boomershine, “Audience Address”, 141.
31. See Fowler, “In the Boat with Jesus”, 233-56.

Hearon avails herself of representations that come from different performance critics: David Rhoads, Philip Ruge-Jones and, to a lesser extent, Tracy Radosievic.32 In none of the performances of the sample texts do the performers communicate the Markan message in the same fashion. Again, who or what is determining that message? Indeed, Hearon herself raises the question that troubles me: “To what degree do you play to the audience? At what point does playing to the audience compromise the values or beliefs that you are trying to communicate through performance?”33 Experiencing a performance of the Gospel of Mark is indeed a moving experience, but the emerging science of performance criticism must ensure that Mark is allowed to be Mark.

A POSTMODERN MARK

The question the very first critical biblical scholars asked in the nineteenth century, in the face of the post-Enlightenment and the English Deist attack on the biblical text, is still with us.34 If these texts have nourished the Christian life for almost two thousand years, do they have some inherent value that is worth salvaging? How relevant are our biblical texts, in their original language and forms, as we can best establish them?

The brilliant essay by Stephen Moore raises that question most pointedly.35 Recourse to the theory of the novel and posthuman animality studies enables him to level telling criticisms against Rhoads and Michie’s slipperier approach to characterisation within the literary form of the Gospel of Mark as short story, brief novel or modern novel.36 The apparently innocuous use of the category of “round character” to describe the evolving presentation of Jesus understood as a character in a modern novel is seen to be “sinister”, because: “The central modern philosophical category, the human, has been shown to be defective because it is based on a conceptual subjection of the animal.”37

Other characters fare no better. A brief investigation of the term “the Son of Man”, along with a glance at the animal-like Gerasene

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32. Hearon, “From Narrative to Performance”, 211-32. For the details of the Rhoads, Ruge-Jones and Radosievic performances, see p. 212.
36. Moore’s essay attends, largely, to the first edition (see p. 71 n. 1).
demoniac and the “little dog” Syrophoenician woman, show that
“Mark is a prehuman text.”

Moore’s essay raises a serious question for all involved in biblical
interpretation. Postmodern readings view the text “against itself,” and
are happy to allow many contrasting interpretations, some of them
very negative, stand side-by-side without a final decision as to which
is “the best,” much less “the correct,” interpretation. There is no
“correct” interpretation, as the traditional biblical sources and
approaches to those sources must be relativised in our pluralist
western cultures. This is a healthy (although very “western”) approach
that criticises a Christian culture still heavily, and for some negatively,
influenced by biblical traditions and beliefs that are meaningless in
today’s world. Indeed, some have proved to be oppressive. Although
foreign to most New Testament interpreters, Moore’s conclusion that
the Gospel of Mark is a “pre-human” text is an example of this
uncomfortable interpretative approach.

CONCLUSION

Biblical interpretation is alive and well. The collection of essays
surveyed above, and the remarks generated, indicate that textual
criticism, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, narrative
criticism, reader-response criticism, performance criticism, and more
radically determined cultural criticisms, loosely classified as
postmodern, are all being practised by today’s New Testament
scholars. Although this volume devotes insufficient space to the more
traditional approaches, it has served to heighten our awareness of the
richness that is still available when the biblical texts are approached
critically. We need to be grateful to Kelly Iverson and Christopher
Skinner for initiating this project and seeing it to a successful end.

The fact that postmodern criticism questions the relevance of the
biblical text makes it important. In brief, may I suggest an ongoing
search to rediscover the experience that gave birth to biblical texts, and
the possible reappropriation of that experience in a contemporary
encounter with them, may be the measure of their ongoing
usefulness. On a personal note, in the light of the increasing

conservatism of many Christian communities, I rejoice in these new
directions that are moving further and further away from wie es
eigentlich geschehen war (“what actually happened”), to what impact is
made on me (us) today. I am always surprised at the animosity
directed against the alleged destruction of faith in the post-
Enlightenment era by those who are themselves committed to a post-
Enlightenment agenda. They eschew critical scholarship, but attempt
to show that Christian faith can be historically proven. I would like to
make my own the words of Dale Allison: “If my deathbed finds me
alert and not overly racked with pain, I will then be preoccupied with
how I have witnessed and embodied faith, hope, and charity. I will not
be fretting over the historicity of this or that part of the Bible.”

38. Ibid., 93. On the Son of Man and the other characters, see pp. 85-93. For a classical
interpretation of the Markan use of “Son of Man”, see Morna D. Hooker, The Son of Man
a narrative reading, see Malbon, Mark’s Jesus, 198-210.
39. See David Tracy’s description of a “classic text,” in my opinion a description that
fits a story that has been read for almost two thousand years: “The classic text’s real
disclosure is its claim to attention on the ground that the event of understanding proper
to finite human beings has here found expression” (David Tracy, The Analytical
Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism [New York: Crossroad, 1981],
102). For other (mainly ethical) suggestions why we should continue to read Mark, see
Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, “Reflections”, 274-82. See also my closing citation from Dale
Allison.
40. Allison, Constructing Jesus, 462.