Book Review: A Lion with Wings

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Jesus, most frequently and importantly the twelve disciples, who evidence the same inauthentic responses. "It may be significant for Mark that both groups, even those who choose evil from the outset, appear to be very religious" (p. 101).

Minor’s exegesis of Mark and her conclusions are sound but not very original. Originality is not necessarily a virtue, especially in Biblical exegesis, but we find pretty standard fare in the heart of the book, squarely in the mainstream of Markan scholarship and sounding still “dissertationese.”

The place where Minor could have been most helpful and potentially original she correctly identifies as her main point, namely, the application of Mark’s spirituality to today. That discussion, however, comes last (perhaps appropriately) and is brief (not as appropriately). To her credit, she admits that her conclusions are inescapably shaped (both as to possibilities and limitations) “by the fact that I am a white, middle-class, North American woman who is an academic, an ordained Cumberland Presbyterian minister, and a feminist” (p. 133, n. 7). Unfortunately, the gap between Mark’s authentic spirituality and her appropriation is too wide.

Why Latin American liberation theologians, black theologians and feminist theologians are presented uncritically and almost exclusively as “prophetic voices which are more clearly than ever calling the church to renew its community practices according to the teachings of Jesus, including his teachings in Mark” (p. 107), demands more explanation. She may be right, but she fails to make her case.

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The gospel of Mark is a narrative, the narration of a story or series of events. It is a historical narrative but a narrative nonetheless. In recent years, the narrative features of Mark have received greater attention by NT scholars, and Smith’s A Lion with Wings serves as a useful guide to such narrative-critical studies. As a detailed introduction, Smith’s book does a good job of filling the gap between popular works on the subject and more technical studies concerning a particular aspect of Mark’s narrative.

The first chapter of the book deals with the historical developments that led to the use of literary methods like narrative criticism and reader-response criticism. Smith explains the basic principles and terms of these approaches, paying close attention to the concepts of implied author and implied reader. According to Smith, narrative criticism addresses the “what” and “how” of Mark’s story. The content (“what”) of the story has to do with characters, plot and settings, issues addressed by Smith in the next three chapters. Narrative criticism also examines how the story is told, that is, the rhetorical strategies of the narrator and their effect upon the implied reader. Smith deals with topics related to narrative techniques in the last two chapters of the book.

The chapter on characterization covers all the significant individuals and character groups in Mark’s gospel, analyzing them sometimes according to their traits and sometimes according to their role within the plot. Smith views Mark’s plot primarily in terms of conflict and shows how Jesus’ divine mission results in struggles with the
Smith attempts to demonstrate that Mark's narrative conforms to a tragic plot structure. He notes the difficulty that the resurrection causes for viewing Mark as tragedy and seeks to avoid the problem by arguing that, while the resurrection is part of the story, it should be excluded from the plot. Smith examines the settings of Mark's gospel in terms of both time and place. He includes a helpful discussion of the OT background to settings in Mark.

In the final chapters, Smith highlights two narrative techniques: point of view and irony. The emphasis in these chapters is on identifying certain narrative features and showing how they work, with less attention given to the purpose for which Mark used them. What message was Mark trying to convey and what response was he hoping to produce in the reader? Smith has little to say about the intended effect on the reader. He states little about the message of the narrative beyond Mark's identification of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Yet certainly the narrative techniques most crucial to Mark's gospel are those that are meant to do something, to drive home a message or to move the reader toward an appropriate response to Jesus. My own conclusion is that narrative-critical approaches to Mark's gospel are most effective when they uncover the rhetorical impact of the story and its narrative features. The potential power of Mark's story is a subject worthy of investigation.

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Kinman's slightly revised dissertation from the University of Cambridge (1993, supervised by M. Hooker) attempts to analyze both the context and content of Jesus' entry in Jerusalem in Luke's gospel (Luke 19:28–48). His contention is that Luke depoliticizes the event so that Jesus' entry has little if no specific political implications for the ruling Roman empire.

Kinman unfolds his thesis as follows: Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the purpose of this study, which is to demonstrate that “Luke has moulded both the context and content of his triumphal entry/Temple cleansing accounts so as to highlight those features by which his audience would come to see Jesus' entry as a parousia gone awry and to distance Jesus from Jewish nationalists” (p. 4). Chapter 2 (“Charismatic Jewish Leaders and the Lukan Dilemma”) argues that although charismatic Jewish leaders were generally perceived as anti-Roman, Luke intentionally presents Jesus so as not to arouse political concerns. Chapter 3 (“Triumphal Entries in the Graeco-Roman World”) is perhaps the most original part of Kinman’s study, where he delves into primary literature to reveal the characteristics of the three types of triumphal entries: (1) the arrival (or parousia) of the emperor or king, (2) the arrival of the governor and (3) the arrival of the Roman Triumph. Chapter 4 continues this delving into primary literature by exploring the “Jewish precedents” of the triumphal entry with the royal welcomes of Solomon (1 Kings 1), Zion's King (Zech 9:9–10), Jonathan Maccabeus (1 Macc 10:86–89; 11:60–61; 12:43) and Ps 118:26 (since every gospel writer applies this psalm to Jesus' entry).

Chapter 5 reviews the context of the entry, probing the pericope of the healing of the blind beggar (18:35–43), the call of Zaccheus (19:1–10) and the parable of the