

BOOK REVIEW

Maloney, Francis J., *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012). xviii + 398 pp. Pbk. \$36.00

Francis J. Maloney has contributed significantly to the voluminous commentary literature on the Gospel of Mark. In keeping with the nature of its genre, this commentary blazes few new paths of inquiry, but the skill with which Maloney summarizes previous research and presents it in accessible fashion is itself noteworthy. This book is well-placed to introduce students to the landscape of the current study of Mark's Gospel, and even those familiar with that landscape will benefit from Maloney's insights on particular points.

Maloney's comments in the preface on the nature of commentary writing and what he was attempting to accomplish with this commentary bear discussion before summarizing and evaluating the commentary itself, for a work can only be evaluated appropriately in light of the author's view of his or her task. In terms of assessing previous commentaries, Maloney recognizes his debt to previous research but also points out some of the weaknesses present within it, noting that '[c]ontemporary biblical commentary sometimes either ignores the literary contribution of a document, or disregards the historical-critical questions that must be asked in the interpretation of any text' (pp. xvii-xviii). By contrast, Maloney aims to portray 'the Gospel of Mark as a unified, theologically driven narrative' (p. xvii). He also intends 'to marry the rich contribution made by traditional historical scholarship with the contemporary focus on narrative as such' (p. xvii). Lastly, he states that the 'ongoing relevance of the narrative, as well as its original setting, will be a concern of the following study' (p. xvii).

Chapter 1 is an introduction that exemplifies his concern with presenting historical issues in accessible terms. In terms of the reception history of Mark, Maloney briefly mentions the widespread neglect of Mark up to the Enlightenment before jumping into a detailed exposition of how Markan studies developed over the course of the twentieth century, including the

development of source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism and narrative criticism. Maloney's assessment of these tools is judicious and accessible, particularly his discussion of the problems with redaction criticism of Mark, the progression from one tool to the other, and some of the dangers associated with more extreme forms of narrative criticism. In terms of the historical context of the book, Maloney dissents from the return to the traditional view that the Gospel comes from Rome, and he treats a post-70 CE date as one of the four 'hard facts' with which proposals of a historical context have to deal (p. 14).

Nevertheless, a few points of contention remain with the positions Maloney takes in this introductory chapter. First, although Maloney's passing response to the hypothesis of a *Deuteromark* ('a second edition of the canonical Mark used by Matthew and Luke' [p. 3 n. 9]) as an explanation of the minor agreements between Matthew and Luke makes sense, appealing to 'the vitality of the oral tradition' (p. 3 n. 9) to explain away the minor agreements raises the question of whether said oral tradition is sufficient to account for the overlap with Mark. Moreover, later Maloney seems to imply that Mark created the plot of his Gospel out of whole cloth. This raises the question of the precise content of the oral tradition. Second, the argument for a post-70 date seems a bit nebulous, and certainly falls short of the status of 'hard fact' that Maloney ascribes to it (p. 14). It seems that Maloney's case for dating the Gospel after the fall of Jerusalem hinges on a reading of the Olivet discourse that he admits is disputed.

Maloney's introductory chapter also presents narrative issues in an accessible fashion. In keeping with the intent stated in the preface, Maloney avoids complicated terminology; the most technical term used is '*dénouement*' (p. 16). Maloney uses this term to highlight how the effect of the end of the Gospel paves the way for the reader to resolve the crisis formed by the silence of the women: 'Narrative texts keep promising the great prize of understanding—later. The "later" of the Gospel of Mark, I will suggest, is the "now" of the Christian reader' (p. 16). He also points out specific features of the text, what he calls 'textual markers' (p. 16), that prompted him to divide the Gospel into four major sections (Mk 1.1-13; 1.14-8.30; 8.31-15.47; 16.1-8) and further subdivide both large sections into three subsections. Maloney is to be commended for making explicit the bases of his structural decisions and grounding them on features of the text, though—as he himself recognizes—the chosen features do not exhaust Mark's organization. Indeed, Maloney stresses that the quest for divisions of the narrative is

something of a chimera. He notes that at any given point, '[t]here are certainly links with what went before, and there are also pointers to what is yet to come' (pp. 20-21).

Maloney's introductory chapter calls attention to several theological themes in the Gospel of Mark. First, he mentions the role that the close of the Gospel plays in its Christology: 'in his journey away from the absolutes of a human success story, Jesus of Nazareth has led the way into the only enduring success story' (p. 22). Second, Maloney points out that, even though the disciples continuously assess events from 'this-worldly' perspective, 'Mark writes "good news"' that 'reverse[s] the common sense of this world', with Jesus as a crucified Son of God and 'sensible' followers turning away in 'terror and flight' (p. 23).

The remainder of the commentary builds on the attitudes to history, story and theology found in the introductory chapter. The following sections of this review focuses on how the body of the commentary bears out these trajectories and raises some points that could potentially be developed further.

The body of Maloney's commentary demonstrates considerable attention to historical issues, such as both Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds, showing familiarity with a wide variety of ancient literature. Nevertheless, Maloney avoids allowing the background material to serve as a Procrustean bed that confines what Mark is allowed to say. For example, he recognizes that Mark's use of the term Son of God develops over the course of the narrative in a manner that 'will stretch the traditional understanding of the expression' (p. 31).

One of the 'historical-critical questions that must be asked in the interpretation of any ancient text' (p. xviii), is how the language of the ancient text was used. In my view, Maloney's handling of the Greek text is uneven. His lexical work is often insightful, displaying a command of, in particular, the connotations that the words Mark uses had in the LXX. For example, the discussion of *εὐαγγέλιον* and the cognate verb notes both the biblical and Greco-Roman use of these lexemes. His comments related to voice and what systemic-functional linguists would refer to as transitivity are sometimes interesting.

On the other hand, sometimes the connection between Maloney's point and the grammatical evidence he adduces to support it is unclear, at least to me. For example, Maloney argues that the use of *ἐκβάλλει*, a 'strong verb', in 1.12 'illustrates the divine urgency which determines the actions of Jesus' (p. 38), but he does not define what he means by a strong verb, and I see no

intrinsic connection between how a particular lexeme forms the aorist tense (the only common grammatical sense of which I am aware for that term) and how God's actions impel those of Jesus. Likewise, Maloney asserts that Jesus using the imperative mood to rebuke the storm (Mk 4.39) 'reinforces the idea that the storm is generated by demonic and chaotic powers' (p. 99). Presumably, he means that addressing a command to a natural phenomenon would be meaningless, but that is not clear. Also, although Maloney is hardly alone here, the grammatical resources cited in his bibliography (BDF, Moulton and Zerwick) are both meager in number and dated in outlook.

The body of Maloney's commentary presents a variety of narrative insights without bogging down with cumbersome terminology. In particular, Maloney exhibits a sharp eye for the repeated use of terminology. For example, I had not previously noticed that the four uses of the term ἔρημος in the prologue (Mk 1.1-13) are balanced in two groups of pairs: the first pair is in vv. 3 and 4, the prophecy of John's ministry and then the narrative report of it, while the second pair is in vv. 12 and 13, Mark's truncated narrative of the temptation of Jesus. Another example is noting the use of the same terms at the end of the Mark's first chapter and the beginning of the second, albeit in the opposite order.

On a related note, Maloney's eye for intertextual connections with previous Scripture and post-biblical Jewish writings leads to some helpful narrative insights, such as when he notes the parallel between Jesus and Isaac, both of whom are beloved sons, as a 'first subtle hint of Jesus' destiny' (p. 37). Another example from the prologue is the drawing together of a variety of texts to illustrate how the mention of beasts in 1.13 evokes the images of creation, the fall and new creation.

The body of Maloney's commentary presents an understandable picture of Mark's theological message, attending to the ramifications of that message for the original and modern readers alike. Often these theological comments build on the historical and narrative insights already mentioned. For example, Maloney comments, following J.R. Donahue and K. Scholtissek, that in the Gospel 'an omniscient narrator tells the story of how God acts among us through the death and resurrection of the Messiah and Son' (p. 30), starting at the very outset of the book in the Scriptural quotation of 1.2 where Mark applies '*God's own name*' (p. 32, emphasis original) to Jesus. This comment builds upon the historical examination of the connotation of εὐαγγέλιον and its cognates and the literary examination of the co-text of the quotation, in which the highway in question is for YHWH himself. Another

example would be the theological comment that ‘miracles are a means to an end, not an end in themselves’ for Jesus, which builds upon the historical insight that the so-called messianic secret ‘is the worst-kept secret’ (p. 59). Once again, Maloney shows how the historical, literary and theological examinations of a text build on each other.

In summary, I would recommend this commentary to those who are looking for an erudite yet accessible commentary on the Gospel of Mark. Maloney’s familiarity with the history of research and his attention to historical, narrative and theological detail will reward both the novice reader and those familiar with the previous scholarship.

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