

BOOK REVIEW

Geoff R. Webb, *Mark at the Threshold: Applying Bakhtinian Categories to Markan Characterisation* (BIS, 95; Leiden: Brill, 2008). xii + 275 pp. Hbk. US\$179.00.

It is no simple feat to search through the many and varied works of a linguist, semiotician, literary critic and even social commentator with a long publishing history and formulate a singular method for application to any New Testament book. The task is made all the more difficult by the advances in New Testament scholarship since the death of Mikhail Bakhtin. In *Mark at the Threshold*, Geoff Webb has produced a balanced and thoughtful work on the topic, and has demonstrated a close, if not always creative, grasp of Bakhtin's approach to carnival and chronotope as literary categories as they apply to characterization in the Gospel of Mark.

Webb's introduction focuses on Bakhtin and his work. It begins with a short introduction to the history of Bakhtinian scholarship and its application to biblical literature. This section is brief enough to demonstrate that he is equally well informed of Bakhtinian biblical criticism and original in his application of Bakhtin's thought to the Gospel of Mark. He uses the introduction to provide some definition of the uniquely Bakhtinian language that he consistently uses throughout the book. For example, he introduces the concepts of a 'word-with-a-sideward-glance' and '-with-a-loophole', 'the hearing-reader', as well as the larger concepts of dialogism and chronotope. Most importantly, Webb uses his introduction to stage a caveat: that *Mark at the Threshold* represents his synchronic interpretation of a large body of work that is 'fraught with development', and thus cannot be summarized without a significant degree of (dialogic) interpretation.

Webb spends his first chapter developing the methodology that he will apply to the remainder of the book. He begins his argument with a discussion of the Bakhtinian concepts of genre-memory and chronotope, in which he defends the idea that a text's participation in a genre

is not defined by its use of predetermined literary elements. Rather, ‘genre memory’ dictates that authors are products of their literary and cultural influences and, based on these influences, produce texts with a generalized perception of writing of a particular kind of story. Webb contends that linguistic and chronotopic similarities suggest that Mark was more familiar with the ‘penny dreadful’ Greek novel than, for example, the Greco-Roman biography. For Webb, the rudimentary language of *Ephesiaca* and *Callirhoe and Chaereas*, their frequent use of εὐθύς and Mark’s lack of a formal birth narrative, suggest that these works bear a much closer resemblance to the Gospel of Mark than any of the high literary genres.

Finally, building on Bakhtin’s various discussions of dialogue and the multiplicity of voices represented in any given text, Webb describes a three-leveled system of textual description based on the layering of dialogue in a text. The first level describes dialogue between characters in the text; the second describes narratorial dialogue with ‘the hearing-reader’; and the third level of dialogue encompasses what many have called ‘intertextuality’—the various external influences of other texts and cultural phenomena reflected in the text. By analyzing the layering of ‘voices’ using this three-tiered methodology, Webb claims to be able to reveal something about the way the text has been shaped by its author to influence a hearing-reader, and the way the author has been influenced by social and literary convention.

The remaining chapters follow the same general pattern, and each is organized around chronotopic boundaries in the Markan narrative. Chronotope, along with the description of dialogic voices-in-text, is a key feature of Bakhtinian description of literature, and quantifies how stories make use of time and space to carry the action of the plot. For Webb, there are multiple chronotopes at work in the Gospel, each functioning within a particular phase in its development, and each supplemented by the carnivalesque—a Bakhtinian sub-genre that encompasses all ‘laughter’, however ironic, and is particularly useful for the subversion of the status-quo. To this end, he addresses two large chronotopically defined sections of the Gospel (Mk 1–8; 8–10), and includes two supplementary chapters on smaller sections. The first of these draws parallels between the women’s experience at the tomb (16.1-8) and the execution of the Baptist (6.14-29), while the second addresses the Trial and Passion Narratives (14.43–15.41). Webb also adapts Bakhtinian language to uniquely biblical pursuits when he ad-

dresses the textual issues in the manuscript tradition under the heading ‘dialogue with the text’. Here he addresses each variant reading using standard criteria before proceeding to measure the effect of each variant on the ‘voices’ present in the text.

In the second chapter, Webb addresses the first large section of the Gospel (chs. 1–8). He begins by defining ‘the adventure chronotope’—an ancient literary form, most commonly typified by the Greco-Roman novel. In the adventure chronotope, the same events that are described in the text could well occur at any time and place with little consequence to the story, which usually strings together several ‘chance encounters’, with little thought given to the amount of time that elapses between encounters, the total length of time elapsed or the particular place in which the encounter occurs. In the adventure chronotope, the hero/heroine randomly encounters several situations over which he/she prevails as a demonstration of his/her character. As such, there is little focus on character development (such is a feature of the modern novel), though Mark often violates this character of the chronotope. In each of his three example cases—the story of the cleansed leper (1.40-45), the Gerasene demoniac (5.1-20) and the Syro-Phoenician woman (7.24-30)—Webb uses the rapid-fire character of the first eight chapters of Mark as evidence for ‘adventure time’. He aptly demonstrates carnival at work, with Jesus as the masked (his explanation of ‘the messianic secret’) ‘carnival clown’, i.e. the character-agent responsible for upending the standing social strata, subjecting the sacred to carnival laughter and showing it foolish. Mark’s Jesus accomplishes this by his frequent ‘making clean’ of those whom Jerusalem had deemed unclean, and by demonstrating the uncleanliness of Jerusalem. It should also be noted that Jesus, like other archetypal carnival clowns, suffers at the hands of those he mocks.

The third chapter follows the same formula, but substitutes adventure time with the chronotope of ‘threshold’ in which characters and readers alike are drawn to the moment (threshold) when they are forced to make a decision concerning Jesus’ identity. Characters are shown to fall short of their threshold moments (e.g. by executing John and failing to report the news of Jesus’ resurrection). Here ‘carnival inversion’ is applied to show, in the first case, that Herod and his step daughter are shamed by the act of removing the Baptist’s head (honour), and in the second, that the women fail to report the identity of the finally ‘unmasked’ Jesus, which is in direct contrast to the multiple faulty reports

of the Jesus masked as ‘carnival clown’—the agent of carnival inversion.

In the fourth chapter, the second major section of Mark (chs. 8–10) is addressed in light of Bakhtin’s chronotope of ‘the road’. Though similar to adventure time, there is more development expected in the chronotope of the road. Also, adventure time’s ‘chance encounter’, independent of any particular location, is replaced by the road adventure’s meeting ‘on the way’, in this case ‘on the way’ to Jerusalem. For Webb, the transfiguration episode is at the centre of the dialogue and demonstrates Jesus’ call to the threshold—to follow him on the way. The transfiguration account offers Peter’s voice as a failure to cross the threshold: he wants to end Jesus’ journey symbolically by erecting structures for Elijah and Moses. The disciples are called to this threshold—to follow Jesus on the way—by the heavenly voice, which partially unmask Jesus and partially reveals his identity. Peter’s response indicates that he has misunderstood Jesus’ identity—an identity that is once again mistaken by Bartimaeus, the blind man at the end of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem.

The final chapter returns to the chronotope of the threshold, but this time the carnivalesque elements are tragic—any laughter in the Passion account, for Webb, is ironic laughter. The narrative of Jesus’ trial is, in fact, the ultimate unmasking of Jesus as ‘carnival clown’. There is nothing hidden or ambiguous about his identity in his voiced claim before the council. However, the unmasking is steeped in irony—the final revelation of Jesus’ identity as the Son of God is all that is needed to pronounce him guilty of blasphemy. This reaction promotes ironic laughter from the hearing-reader and demonstrates the blasphemy in the voice of Jesus’ accusers. This theme is repeated over again through Webb’s characterization of the many voices in the section that sound their opposition to Jesus or simply fail to cross the threshold and become ‘followers’. Irony dominates the carnivalesque, and there is the continual inversion of virtue for violence and the condemnation and abandonment of what is good, true and worth following.

Throughout *Mark at the Threshold*, Webb consistently maintains his discussion in terms of the three levels of dialogue—the represented ‘voices’ in the text, chronotope and carnival. The result is a consistent methodology that is clear, concise, and within the grasp of the beginning reader of Bakhtin and that does not overwhelm the reader with undefined Bakhtinian language. He has limited the scope of his study nicely, and has chosen categories of description that are cohesive on

their own, but also provide an honest representation of Bakhtinian thought. Though the three levels of dialogue are Webb's own interpretive creation, they adequately represent Bakhtin's varied discussions of dialogue and the varying functions of 'voices' in the text. It is notable, however, that Webb consistently avoids using Bakhtin's language related to dialogue—there is very little mention of hybridization, and almost no mention of double-voiced discourse, though these are implicit in the Bakhtinian foundations of Webb's first and second levels of dialogue. Nevertheless, he does maintain an impressive consistency in the language that he has chosen to use from the Bakhtinian catalogue, and applies his own hybrid methodology with little variation from chapter to chapter.

Webb's discussion of direct dialogue skilfully identifies Mark's use of opposing voices-as-ideologies in the text, and helps him to make unique but apt observations on Mark's unique characterization of otherwise misunderstood figures, and particularly of Mark's Judas and the Syro-Phoenician woman. His identification of Markan innuendo relating to the Syro-Phoenician woman, and the sexual implications of her falling at Jesus' feet (7.25; was she offering him favours?), indicates a close and fresh reading of the passage that holds significant explanatory power for Jesus' initial response (7.27). This identification may provide an interesting Markan parallel to the man with the demon-possessed son in light of Jesus' initial negative response and the subsequent healing of a demon-possessed child.

In contrast, Webb's discussion of third level dialogue—and particularly his discussion of texts for intertextual comparison—is conspicuously limited. Webb relies almost exclusively on two second-century sources, the Greek novels *Ephesiaca* and *Callirhoe*. This limitation is exacerbated by Webb's frequent deferral to intertextuality to provide nuanced definitions of difficult words encountered in Mark. For example, while the use of ὄρκος may have a 'passionate oath' as its referent action in *Ephesiaca* and *Callirhoe*, it is certainly unreasonable to limit one's survey to these two sources and to pronounce that Mark must have understood the word, and Herod's oath to Herodias's daughter, as a 'passionate' (and sexually charged) oath. It is curious, given the many other instances in which Webb proves himself a close contextual reader, that he should rely exclusively on intertextuality to clarify Markan language, since it leads him to ignore the unique semantic features offered by Mark's use of related language.

There are also sections in which Webb's knowledge of Bakhtin has been uncreatively applied to the Gospel. Specifically, in some instances he applies some of the more detailed archetypal elements of Bakhtinian carnival—namely the use of food, defecation, death and sexuality. For example, in his discussion of the Gerasene demoniac, he focuses on the pigs into which demons are cast as food for soldiers, and reads sexuality/fertility into the resuscitation of Jairus's daughter, since the dead cannot have children. While pigs are a source of (unclean) food, and death does, in fact, limit reproduction, there seem to be other series of thematic development in the Gospel that provide greater explanatory power. Webb seems to have chosen to describe these two episodes (among others) in light of their references to food, defecation and sexuality because they are the thematic series that Bakhtin offers as explanation for carnival in the medieval novels of Rabelais. In this respect, it seems that Webb is attempting to be more Bakhtinian than Bakhtin, since he limits himself to series identified by Bakhtin in medieval literature, rather than looking for new series that Bakhtin may have found had Mark been the object of his study.

All told, Webb has demonstrated himself equally comfortable in the Bakhtinian study of literature as in the study of the New Testament and first-century Greek literature. The task of bringing these three disciplines together is a precarious one, fraught with conflicting points of view from within the bastions of each scholarly community. Nevertheless, *Mark at the Threshold* is a delicately balanced approach to these three disciplines. Its faults—the over-application of existing Bakhtinian categories and Webb's tendency to overstate the implications of his findings—are to be expected from an early work representing a fairly new project in New Testament literary scholarship. Its imperfections are evidence of the early stage of the Bakhtinian New Testament project, and should call emerging scholars to add their voice to the dialogue.

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