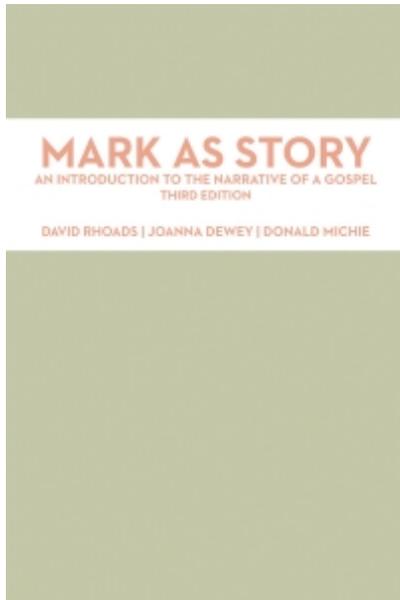


RBL 02/2013



Rhoads, David, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie

Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel

3rd edition

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012. Pp. xiv + 191. Paper.
\$24.00. ISBN 9780800699093.

Michael W. Pahl
Cedarville University
Cedarville, Ohio

For thirty years *Mark as Story* has served as a standard first introduction to narrative criticism of the Gospels in general and the Gospel of Mark in particular. What began as an interdisciplinary collaboration in undergraduate teaching still retains a strong pedagogical sensitivity in this, its third, edition.

The authors, David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, note three main changes from the second edition. First, there is a focus on the Gospel of Mark as an oral/aural composition, as performance literature. Practically this is seen in a change of terminology throughout the book (e.g., “composer” instead of “author”), additional reflections at various points on how understanding the Gospel in this way influences its interpretation, and an appendix providing suggestions for performing the Gospel. Second, the book focuses more on the cosmic dimensions of Mark’s story; the conflict between God and opposing cosmic forces, and the cosmic dimensions of God’s rule inaugurated through Jesus, are not mere “background” but integral to the story. This results in a shift throughout the book in the “interpretive center of gravity” from the end of Mark’s story to its beginning, though Jesus’ death still is still seen as having “climactic force” (xiii). Third, while the Judean context of the Gospel is still highlighted throughout the book, the Roman imperial setting of its composer and intended audience—in particular the

aftermath of the Roman-Judean war of 66–70 C.E.—has been brought to the fore. This emphasis is seen most extensively in a case study in the conclusion that provides some reflections on how a mixed Judean-Gentile peasant audience in 70 C.E. might have heard a performance of the Gospel.

These changes have not affected the book's basic structure. An opening introduction offers some brief reflections on authorship, provenance, and the like, before turning to narrative concerns. In chapter 1 the authors provide an original translation of Mark's gospel. This translation appears to be largely if not entirely unchanged from the second edition, which had undergone significant revision from the first edition. The result is a readable translation that serves the book's purpose admirably, though it reflects the inevitable idiosyncrasy of personal translations (e.g., helpfully avoiding overused and often misunderstood words such as "repentance" but retaining others such as "righteous").

The remaining chapters each focus on a particular element of narrative. Chapter 2 explores the narrator: his role, point of view, style and tempo, and so on. Of particular note are the book's discussions of the narrator's asides and provision of privileged knowledge to the audience, the Gospel's distinctive patterns of storytelling such as two-step progressions, sandwich episodes, and series of three, and the use of irony in the story.

The third chapter examines the settings of Mark's Gospel. The "cosmic setting," the political-cultural setting, and the geographical setting of Mark's "journey" motif are each described, with the last (especially "Galilee," "journey to Jerusalem," and "Jerusalem") providing the framework for the book's subsequent treatment of plot.

Chapter 4 explores the plot of Mark's story from several angles. Following an introductory discussion of the unity of the plot and the nature of conflict in the story vis-à-vis the kingdom of God, the chapter examines Jesus' conflict with cosmic forces, with the authorities, and with the disciples. The result is a very helpful illumination of some of the most important and distinctive emphases of Mark's story.

The fifth and sixth chapters investigate the characters of Mark's story. After describing the Gospel's general approach to characterization, the characterization of Jesus rightly receives extended attention. The descriptions of Jesus as agent of God's rule, Jesus' faith, his service to and self-giving for others, and the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion are especially good. The authorities, the disciples, and various minor characters in Mark's story receive separate treatment in the following chapter.

The concluding chapter discusses the ideal audience of Mark's Gospel and the way Mark's story is told to persuade this audience to a particular course of thought and action. Of special note in this third edition is the interesting case study described earlier, suggesting how Mark's Gospel might have been received by a first-century audience.

Rounding out the book is a short epilogue on the ethics of reading, an afterword by Mark Allan Powell surveying the three editions of the book and its importance, appendixes that provide exercises for the narrative analysis and oral performance of Mark's Gospel, endnotes, and an updated select bibliography. One would be wrong to view this concluding material as mere filler; it provides a useful and substantive contribution to the book, especially for instructors interested in using *Mark as Story* as a textbook.

One should be cautious in critiquing a book that has influenced a generation of scholars—including me—and that gets better with each new edition. Nevertheless, I have one general concern that tempers my overall enthusiasm for the book: the role of Jesus' death in Mark's Gospel is inadequately explored. This is not to deny the very helpful discussions of the significance of Jesus' death to be found in the book (e.g., on irony in the passion narrative or on "ransom" and "covenant" language in the Gospel). However, in my view these discussions do not go far enough. This has been a concern for each edition of the book, but it is intensified in this third edition with the intentional shift of the "interpretive center of gravity" from the end of Mark's story to its beginning. The recognition of the cosmic dimensions of Mark's story is a welcome one, but it should not come at the expense of losing Jesus' suffering and death as the real gravitational center of the Gospel.

While Martin Kähler's "passion narrative with an extended introduction" is a caricature of Mark's Gospel, it still gets at the crucial focus of the story. Yet the authors insist that "the theological significance of [Jesus'] death is not ... Mark's primary concern" (113), in spite of the narrative space devoted to Jesus' passion in Mark's story, the prominent use of foreshadowing (i.e., the passion predictions) and intertextuality (e.g., Ps 22) related to Jesus' death throughout the Gospel, the allusive interpretations of Jesus' death in the story (e.g., the centurion's climactic confession of Jesus' divine sonship at his death), and the direct interpretive statements of Jesus' death given by Mark, which the authors do briefly discuss (114). If, as the authors state, the overriding plot theme is that "God is establishing God's rulership over 'the creation that God created'" (73), and Jesus' death has "climactic force" (xiii), then one would expect Jesus' death to provide the focal point for Mark in God's establishment of God's rulership, even perhaps as the central means by which God's rule is established. So, for example, while the authors acknowledge that Mark's "ransom" and "covenant" language are evocative intertextual echoes that interpret Jesus' suffering and death for his followers (114), could these not further allude to Israel's

larger story of how the Davidic kingdom came about—from redemption from slavery, to covenant with YHWH, to kingdom under God’s suffering anointed—and thus indicate how Mark sees Jesus’ suffering and death similarly as bringing about God’s eternal rule? Moreover, while the authors acknowledge the impact of Israel’s prophetic oracles on Mark’s story, particularly those of Isaiah (57–59; cf. the opening scenes of Mark’s narrative), could this not further suggest that Jesus’ suffering and death are viewed by Mark through the lens of Isaiah’s re-visioning of Israel’s story of redemption, covenant, and kingdom through YHWH’s suffering servant? Space precludes fleshing out these thoughts, but I hope this is enough to demonstrate that there is a far richer interpretive framework for Jesus’ death in Mark’s Gospel than the authors seem to acknowledge.

Yet none of this should take away from the book’s importance in biblical narrative criticism and Markan studies, especially as a teaching tool. As recently as 2011, Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie predicted that “there will be no third edition of *Mark as Story*” (Kelly R. Iverson and Christopher W. Skinner, eds., *Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect* [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011], 274). We can be glad they were wrong. Changes in this third edition ensure that *Mark as Story* remains the best book available for introducing students and others to narrative criticism of the Gospels in general and of Mark’s Gospel in particular.