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Black, C. Clifton

Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter

Studies on Personalities of the New Testament

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We have Fortress Press to thank for reprinting in affordable paperback the series *Studies on Personalities of the New Testament*, which was edited by D. Moody Smith and originally published by the University of South Carolina Press. Other volumes in this series are concerned with Jesus, Jesus' mother Mary, Peter, Paul, James the Just, John the son of Zebedee, and Herod the Great. The volume under review, by C. Clifton Black of Princeton Theological Seminary, originally appeared in 1994.¹

Black's introductory chapter contrasts maximal and minimalist approaches to the Mark credited with writing the Second New Testament Gospel. The chapter culminates with the argument that "the prevailing minimalist reconsideration of Mark" (10)—that is, that we do not know much of anything about this "Mark"—needs to be followed by a

¹ Since the present review concerns a reprinted volume, it may be appropriate to mention certain other reviews of this work that I have read at one time or another and may be of interest to others who read this fine book: E. Best, *SJT* 49 (1996): 112–13; D. R. Catchpole, *ExpTim* 106 (1995): 245; J. R. Donahue, *TS* 56 (1995): 396; H. H. Graham, *ATHR* 77 (1995): 98–99; R. M. Grant, *JR* 75 (1995): 408–9; A. R. Hunt, *CRBR* 8 (1995): 175–78; L. W. Hurtado, *CBQ* 58 (1996): 147–499; J. L. Jaquette, *JAAR* 64 (1996): 680–83; F. Neiryck, *ETL* 70 (1994): 459–61; J. C. Paget, *JTS NS* 46 (1995): 620–25; J. T. Riddle, *PRSt* 24 (1997): 215–18; S. H. Smith, *EvQ* 68 (1996): 154–56; R. N. Soulen, *Int* 50 (1996): 200–201; W. R. Telford, *Epworth Review* 22 (1995): 112–14.

commensurate amount of caution in both form- and literary-critical studies of this Gospel.² From the beginning of *Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter*, Black notes “that the personality of Mark is ... irretrievable [and his] biography impossible” (xiii). Accordingly, Black’s erudite study offers not a quest for “the historical Mark” but a survey of the Marks mentioned in the New Testament (25–73) and in much of the earlier and later patristic literature (77–191) and, finally, of what the Second New Testament Gospel reveals about its author’s location and possible connection with Peter (193–250). A conclusion (251–59) is followed by a bibliography (261–88) and three indices (289–327).

Part 1 on the Marks mentioned in the New Testament argues persuasively that a distinction is to be made between the historically plausible yet rather unremarkable and sometimes negatively portrayed John Mark in Acts, on the one hand, and Paul’s “coworker,” whose greetings the apostle conveys in Phlm 24, on the other. Paul’s positive reference to someone named Mark is continued, moreover, in two of the disputed Pauline epistles: Col 4:10–11 presents “Mark” as not only Paul’s coworker but also Barnabas’s cousin. Similarly, 2 Tim 4:11 presents a Mark as “useful in [Paul’s] ministry.” Black makes a plausible case that 1 Pet 5:13 (“my son Mark”) points to yet a third person named Mark.³ Tearing the heart out of a maximal reconstruction of “the historical Mark,” Black concludes that since the traditions preserved in Acts, in three letters attributed to Paul, and in 1 Peter refer to three different “New Testament Marks, they should not be harmonized with one another (66–67).

Part 2 of this volume turns to patristic testimonies and “how ‘Mark’ emerges, shifts, and perhaps evolves as a discernable figure within early Christian tradition” (77). The fine analysis of the notoriously problematic tradition of Papias about Mark the interpreter of Peter (80–94) yields two noteworthy conclusions. First, against the well-known and influential inference of Clement of Alexandria (*apud* Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.15.2), Black denies that a connection between 1 Pet 5:13 and Papias’s testimony can be maintained (87–88). This conclusion supports the inference of multiple attestation, namely, that two different traditions connecting “Mark” with “Peter” circulated independently in the early second century. Second, and building on J. Kürzinger’s analysis, Black notes the

² “In short, if uncertainty bedevils traditional claims about Mark, then the same holds true for the claims of Mark’s modern critics” (11).

³ At this point Black’s argument is not compelling, in part because it does not adequately take into account that 1 Peter is a pseudepigraphon. It is equally possible that the author of 1 Peter assumed a continuity between the work and message of Peter and Paul (so *1 Clem.* 5; *Ign. Rom.* 4:3; cf. Polycarp *Phil.* 9:1). On this basis, the pseudonymous author of 1 Peter may present “Peter” as the one who converted Paul’s eventual coworker Mark (thus yielding two, rather than three, “New Testament” Marks). Irregardless, the historical accuracy of 1 Pet 5:13 is entirely another matter.

apologetic tendency of Papias's testimony: "[P]erhaps Papias is defending Markan literature not so much against the proposed superiority of other written documents, as against the acknowledged superiority of *oral traditions* about the Lord" (92, emphasis original).

Brief discussions of Justin Martyr, Tatian, the Muratorian Canon, and Irenaeus (94–102) complete Black's survey of "Mark" in the second century. The following two chapters analyze comparatively a wealth of intriguing and, sometimes, amusing third- and fourth-century anecdotes concerning "Mark" in Western (114–35) and Eastern (136–82) Christianity. The attention Black devotes to the inconsistencies in the disparate materials Eusebius presents about "Mark" is but one example of Black's detailed analyses of these patristic testimonies.⁴ A summary of part 2 notes that, in continuity with the New Testament authors' lack of interest in Marks, "the figure of Mark occupies a minor, if not trivial, position" in these patristic materials (183–91; here, 183). Black notes also that his survey of patristic literature is "selective, not complete" (183). This reviewer notes just a minor *desideratum*: Since Black discusses Clement of Alexandria (137–45), it would have been interesting for comparative purposes with the Papias tradition to do more than note in passing (144) the claim that the early "Gnostic" Christian Basilides' authority stemmed from Glaucias, *the interpreter of Peter*.⁵

Part 3 of Black's study turns to the Gospel of Mark and asks whether there is continuity between the external (that is, other New Testament and especially patristic) testimonies and the possible internal witness of Mark itself to its author's connection with Peter (193–223) and Rome (224–50). Black argues "that we lack enough hard, pertinent evidence to confirm the historicity of the connection between the apostle Peter and the Second Evangelist or his Gospel" (205) and notes plausibly that "the figures of Peter and Mark [were] correlatively supportive, and perhaps mutually interpretive, in emerging Catholic Christianity" (209).⁶ Concerning a possible Roman location, Black notes correctly that in patristic literature "Rome appears to have entered the traditions about Mark only by way of Peter's association with that city" (225). As a result, the validity of the patristic testimonies hangs on the unverifiable associations of Mark and Peter and of Mark with this "Gospel." Black seeks nonetheless a way around the difficulty of

⁴ "[T]he structure of the *Church History* is loosely anthological, not systematically historical, and Eusebius's detached comments on Mark should be interpreted in that vein" (156–61; here, 160).

⁵ Clem., *Strom.* 7.(XVII.)106.4; *pace* Hippol., *Ref.* VII.20.1, according to which Basilides claimed to derive authority from having known "secret discourses" that Matthias spoke, which Matthias had heard from the Savior privately.

⁶ Accordingly, Black asks: "Is it possible that Peter's apostolic reputation in the first and second centuries might have enjoyed a measure of reciprocal confirmation by virtue of its association with a Gospel, attributed to Mark, whose content was more consistent with emerging Christian orthodoxy?" (209).

confirming independently the location of this “Gospel” in Rome. Building upon the work of P. Lampe and others concerning “what can be reasonably inferred about the social, religious, and political circumstances of the first Christians in” Rome (225–31; here, 226), Black highlights similarities with the depictions of Christianity in the Second Gospel (231–36). The solution Black offers, however tentatively (236–48), is equally creative and unpersuasive, for the descriptions of ethnicity and social background, of economic and social standing, of religious organization, and of political turbulence in Rome could apply equally to any number of locations in the ancient Mediterranean world.

This caveat aside, Black consistently displays an appropriate amount of caution and appreciation for uncertainty where other scholars have tried too hard to squeeze blood out of assorted early Christian “turnips” about Mark. He notes, for example, “At the end of the day we may never be able to identify the origin of the portrayal of Mark as Peter’s interpreter, so popular in patristic Christianity” (186). Throughout his analysis, Black’s lucid style, transliteration of Greek, and use of endnotes (happily, at the end of each chapter, rather than at the end of the volume) are appropriate for a “study ... aimed at a general readership, interested in matters religious” (xiii). A delightful combination of scholarship in New Testament and patristics, the book has much to offer to specialists and nonspecialists alike.