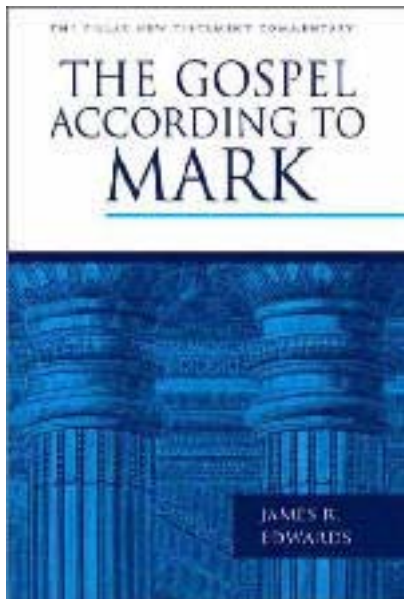


RBL 06/2003



Edwards, James R.

The Gospel According to Mark

Pillar New Testament Commentary

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. Pp. xxvi + 552.
Hardcover, \$40.00. ISBN 0802837344.

Scott S. Elliott
Drew University
Madison, NJ 07940

The Gospel According to Mark is the seventh volume published in the Pillar New Testament Commentary series edited by D. A. Carson. The series is aimed primarily at pastors and teachers of the Bible and thus has the goal of elucidating, in the most straightforward manner, the biblical text in its canonical form. Contributors “blend ... rigorous exegesis and exposition, with an eye alert both to biblical theology and the contemporary relevance of the Bible, without confusing the commentary and the sermon” (x). In keeping with the underlying assumption of this approach, which is that “the vision of ‘objective scholarship’ (a vain chimera) may actually be profane” (x), the author does an admirable job of avoiding forced readings of the text even while remaining sensitive to theological commitments.

James Edwards, Professor of Religion at Whitworth College, describes the commentary as “a work dear to [his] heart,” and his deep-seated love for Mark is clearly evident throughout the book. The author points out that the present volume began taking shape as a pedagogical aid (xii) and explains that his primary objective was to give attention to three aspects of Mark that he deems essential to a “proper understanding” of the Gospel: its *historical* setting, *literary*

methods, and *theological* purposes. His aim is “to expound the Gospel of Mark in such a way that readers may be enabled to see Jesus as God’s Son and to follow him as disciples” (xiv).

Edwards, of course, provides his readers with the customary introduction, but it is remarkable both for its concision and for the rather interesting and thought-provoking points it manages to raise in spite of its shortened length. For example, he takes time to mention some of Mark’s distinctive stylistic features, one of which is the author’s use of irony. Edwards labels Mark a “master of the unexpected” (12), thus using irony in the sense of incongruity between one’s expectation and what actual happens in any given instance. Therefore, Edwards draws attention to instances in which Mark portrays Jesus challenging or even breaking with social conventions or responding to various people and situations differently than the reader might anticipate. Arguably, there have been more sophisticated and critically nuanced treatments of irony in Mark (e.g., Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*; Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark’s Gospel*), and one could contend that what Edwards labels ironic is in fact something less literary and rather more socio-ideological. Nevertheless, this reviewer sincerely appreciates Edwards’s decision to introduce his readers to these dimensions of the text. Edwards’s consistency in pointing out instances of irony in Mark over the course of the entire commentary will remind readers of its prevalence throughout the Gospel, which in turn will give readers an opportunity to reflect on its significance.

In a similar vein, Edwards also draws attention to a number of distinctive literary themes running through the Gospel of Mark, two of which I find particularly interesting: the journey motif and the relative (and often shifting) positions of insiders and outsiders. A number of Markan scholars have dealt with the journey motif, but Edwards does a nice job of noting parallels between the journey pattern interspersed from the Gospel’s beginning to end and early Christianity’s self-conceptualization as “the way.” Moreover, he highlights the fascinating shift in Mark from an ambiguous and indeterminate sense of the way early in the Gospel to one of increasingly sharp focus as the narrative moves toward its climax.

Edwards devotes an entire chapter to the insider-outsider dynamic in Mark (110–46, which covers Mark 3:13–4:34). In Edwards’s view, one’s status as either insider or outsider is determined by one’s “proximity and receptivity to Jesus” (110). Furthermore, “outsiders include the public gamut, from declared opposition in the scribes and Pharisees to those who may even sympathize with

Jesus but who hear only casually or carelessly and 'do not bear fruit' " (132). Thus, the parable of the sower serves as the central metaphor for Edwards's reading of this theme. Reflecting on 4:11–12, he suggests, "The sense ... is that Jesus' parables confirm the states of people's hearts: insiders who are with Jesus will be given the understanding of the mystery, and outsiders who are not with Jesus will be confirmed in their disbelief" (134). It is interesting to note, from a conservative standpoint, Edwards's interpretation of the parables in general, and these verses in particular, functions in the same fashion. In other words, the majority of Edwards's readers will be happy to know that they, too, are confirmed in their positions as insiders who have been afforded a clear understanding of "the mystery." Granted, Mark's readers are, to a certain extent, those on the inside, privy to information that comes to others only in cryptic language. However, the disciples of Jesus—those ambiguous fellows who pose so many problems for Markan scholars—are also provided with answers to their questions as to the meaning of these parables only to be chided later for not understanding (e.g., 8:17–21 *et passim*). It is reasonable, then, to suggest that this dimension of Mark is much more complex than Edwards's interpretation would allow.

I want to be clear that I am grateful Edwards chose to highlight such aspects of Mark, even if in the end I found myself wishing he had explored them further or had come to different conclusions. There is undoubtedly more work to be done in these areas, but Edwards does a great service to his readers by introducing them to these issues and, in turn, inviting further consideration of their implications for understanding Mark.

At times, Edwards's desire to persuade his audience that Jesus is the Son of God so that they will follow him as disciples leads him to favor too quickly Mark's (or his own) theological purposes over Mark's historical setting and literary methods. For example, although Edwards stresses that Old Testament "prooftexts" would have had a limited influence on Mark's audience, since Mark was written for Gentile Christians in Rome, he nevertheless directs the reader's attention to Old Testament parallels on a frequent basis. Similarly, Edwards draws too heavily, in my judgment, on the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and even John. He goes beyond simply showing parallels and allusions to actually using them, in certain instances, to support his arguments. As a result, the boundary between ancient readers and contemporary audiences is occasionally blurred. Considering the goals of the commentary series, this may be an unfair criticism. Either way, it is certainly a minor point. Nevertheless, whether talking about Mark in its historical context or discussing it with regard to its value for contemporary

society, I suspect there is still much to be gained from lingering with Mark alone, apart from the canonical packaging in which we receive it.

The book follows a fairly customary verse-by-verse format. Edwards includes remarks on the so-called longer ending of Mark (16:9–20) and a delightfully interesting, albeit brief, appendix on the “Secret Gospel of Mark.” Edwards also provides readers with helpful excurses on a number of topics related to the Gospel of Mark: “The Secrecy Motif and Jesus’ Messianic Self-Consciousness”; “Son of Man”; “Divine Man”; “Christ”; “How Should the Transfiguration Be Understood?”; “Women in the Gospel of Mark”; “Pontius Pilate”; and “The Son of God.” Given the brevity of these asides, for the most part they are quite informative and certainly will be beneficial to the audience envisioned for this series. Of the eight, his treatment of women in Mark is most assuredly his weakest and gives the impression of being somewhat contrived despite its immense relevance. Along with these elucidative sidebars, the author furnishes the reader with an ample supply of valuable footnotes that are accessible, useful, and do not feel overbearing or gratuitous. My only recommendation would be a fuller bibliography. In view of the goals of this commentary series and Edwards’s long-standing familiarity with Mark, perhaps even an annotated bibliography would be worthwhile.

Edwards does a commendable job of presenting his readers with an evenhanded exposition of Mark’s Gospel, notwithstanding its more traditional point of view. As intended, the book will be suitable and beneficial to pastors, especially if taken as a whole rather than consulted only for individual passages. Those who teach the Bible within a ministerial context (e.g., a local church or perhaps an undergraduate Bible college) will also find the commentary useful, although it will appeal most to students with theological interests and conservative dispositions. It is less likely that the text will meet the needs of critical scholars working primarily in academic settings.