

RBL 11/09/1999



Wills, Lawrence M.

The Quest of the Historical Gospel: Mark, John and the Origins of the Gospel Genre

London: Routledge, 1997. Pp. viii + 285, Hardcover, \$75.00, ISBN 0415150930.

Mark Goodacre
University of Birmingham
Birmingham, UK B15 2TT

The exciting title of Lawrence Wills's book is compounded by a cover notice assuring us of provocation, erudition, and fresh light on both the canonical gospels and Christian origins. Closer inspection reveals "two interrelated but not interdependent theses" (p.21), the first of which is that the gospel genre, for so long a subject of such intense and inconclusive debate, finds its origin in the narratives of the "cult of the dead hero," a thesis that is argued by means of comparison between Mark, John, and the *The Life of Aesop*, described as An aretalogical biography related to the foundation of a cult," for Wills "the closest parallel to Mark and John" (pp. 177-8). The second thesis is that careful analysis of Mark and John will reveal their mutual dependence on an earlier gospel narrative (p. 178). These two independent Gospels are used "as lenses through which we can perceive the refracted image of the earlier gospel tradition" (p. 156). This is the "historical gospel" for which Wills is questing.

Of the two main arguments, the first one, concerning the *The Life of Aesop*, is better sustained. Other views of the origins of the gospel genre are taken seriously and are discussed in the book's strongest chapter (1, "the Gospel Genre"), and the thesis that the *The Life of Aesop* provides the best example of the "hero cult paradigm" for comparison with the gospels has the value of novelty and the inevitable interest that a fresh analogy provokes. But in the end this thesis is implausible, not least because Wills finds himself drawing too strong a line between Mark and John on the one hand and Matthew and Luke on the other, the latter having moved away from the genre of "aretalogical biography" to the extent that they have become "in effect something else, a different kind of biography" (p.10). One cannot help being troubled by a thesis in which the *The Life of Aesop* is

supposed to look more like Mark and John than do Matthew and Luke, which have, and have always been perceived as having, such an intimate interrelationship with each other. Further, careful attention to Wills's useful English translation of the *The Life of Aesop* (Appendix, pp.180-215) will confirm that the handful of similarities between the texts are far from striking. Isis' bestowal of speech and wit on the sleeping Aesop (*The Life of Aesop* 6-7; pp.29-30) bears at best superficial resemblance to God's affirmation of Jesus' sonship in the Markan baptism, for example, and other comparisons between structure, literary technique, and function appear strained. Indeed, one fundamental difference between *Aesop* and the gospels receives scant attention: for whereas in Mark and especially John the presence of a group of disciples to whom the teaching is imparted is key, in *Aesop* there are no followers at all. This is an important contrast given the claims that Mark, John and *Aesop* are alike in being foundation documents of a cult.

The bulk of the study, however, is taken up with a comparison between Mark and John in an attempt to trace a common ancestor (chap.3, pp. 51-155). Wills proceeds by means of "a Synopsis of Mark and John" in which each section is followed by a comment supposedly demonstrating Mark and John's independent dependence on an earlier gospel narrative. It is held that there are enough similarities between Mark and John to make this the most plausible explanation, given the (supposed) absence of demonstrably Markan redactional features in John. But there are several problems with both the conception and the execution of the thesis.

One difficulty is that a clear enough distinction between knowledge of a text and literary dependence on a text is not made. Thus while acknowledging that the influence of one text on another might be direct or indirect (pp. 3, 51, etc.), Wills nevertheless proceeds as if the absence of evidence for literary dependence is identical with the absence of evidence for knowledge of a text. This is a fatal mistake because the broad similarities between Mark and John to which Wills draws attention are as explicable on the grounds of John's knowledge of Mark as they are on the grounds of mutual dependence on an unknown text.

A second difficulty concerns the supposed lack of Markan redactional elements in John, for the relevant passages in Mark and John are simply reproduced in English in solid, unsophisticated blocks of text -- Wills's synopses are not designed so as to bring out the literary links on a verbatim level to enable fair consideration of the evidence. More seriously still, Wills does not attempt to demonstrate the thesis by means of engaging with the key literature on the question of John's dependence on the synoptics -- the work of Frans Neirynck, for example, is hardly mentioned. Wills's thesis depends, he often reminds us, on its (supposed) plausibility, but in order to establish plausibility, the reader is likely to expect to see some critical engagement with the rival theories, theories that often make equally plausible analyses of the same data, and without postulating a particular kind of early Gospel narrative of a character that Wills keeps suitably vague.

It is, apparently, a matter of policy since Wills rules out careful consideration of the detail from the outset. "In omitting the hundreds of detailed arguments for Mark's redaction in John that have been proffered by scholars," he explains, "I am deliberately choosing to privilege the 'forest' over the 'trees'" (p. 51). This is, however, unfortunate since it amounts to a means of prejudicing his own thesis -- the evidence most able to refute it is disallowed before the investigation has begun, and this despite the mantra-like refrain concerning the supposed lack of Markan redactional elements in John.

Nor are many of the parallels adduced really striking enough to make the case. Some, such as the comparison between the Jairus story in Mark 5:21-24, 35-43 and the officer's son in John 4:46-54 (pp.81-3) are straightforwardly explicable on the standard form--critical grounds. Others, such as the supposed connection between Mark 1.21-28 and John 7:14-18 (pp.64-6) are simply too weak to make the case -- the passages are in a different order and focused on different places with only one word (ἐδίδασκεν) in common. Still other parallels between Mark and John are discussed without any reference to closer parallels to the same material in Matthew and/or Luke, as when John 13 is dealt with alongside Mark 14 (pp.118-22) without any reference to Luke 22. Indeed, Wills consistently avoids discussing Matthew and Luke, in spite of the obvious possibility that several of the parallels on which he lays much stress might well be explained by the mediation of Markan material to John via Matthew and Luke.

Overall, the problems with both the method and the argument render this thesis at best a valiant attempt to do something different. Although Wills is to be commended for both his imagination and his bravery, his thesis cannot be commended for its plausibility. Readers looking for the revolution promised by the title will be disappointed.