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L'évangile selon Marc

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Camille Focant is professor of New Testament at the Catholic University of Louvain. Among his writings are *La famille, de Jésus à Saint Paul* (1989) and *Les Evangiles Apocryphes* (2001). He edited *The Synoptic Gospels: Source Criticism and the New Literary Criticism* (BETL 110; Leuven, 1993).

Focant has written the best commentary on Mark's Gospel that I have read in recent years. The aim of this commentary series is to expound the dynamism of a text taken as a whole. After a working translation, which aims to be as literal as possible, critical textual problems are succinctly treated, and an up-to-date bibliography for the pericope to be studied is supplied. This is followed by an interpretation of the pericope, taking into account the "articulation of the text," while respecting the surprises of a first reading. The wide audience envisioned includes professors, students of theology, priests, pastors, laity with a theological formation, and specialists in the literature of antiquity. The next section, "Notes," is more technical and aimed at clarifying questions of philosophy or history, drawing on the social, cultural, and theological information from the first century. Thus Mark 13:13 finds a significant parallel in Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.44.4) where he describes the detestation of the Christians. This section outlines the state of the question, if not described under "Interpretation." Our text begins with a bibliography of

commentaries and studies of Mark and concludes with three indices: modern authors, ancient literature and Bible, as well as subjects treated.

The key emphasis in the commentary is to expound the “dynamique” of the paradoxical and enigmatic Mark as a whole, without the use of technical vocabulary. The main results of the historical-critical method are given in the notes. Focant finds Mark’s world to be one of “conflicts and suspense, enigmas and secrets, questions and the reversal of evidence, irony and surprise” (29). Jesus is extremely unnerving (“déroutant”) for the opposing religious authorities, for the uncomprehending disciples who run away, and for the ambivalent crowd who clamor for his death. The basic questions of life and death, of good and evil, are constantly addressed. Mark’s theological project is to make evident in a narrative the identity between the crucified one and the risen one, between Jesus of Nazareth and the living Christ. Mark is a subtle invitation to ignore one’s first impressions and enter the new world of the coming of God’s kingdom, where the first are last and the ones who seek to save their lives end up losing them. Focant concludes that the category of Gospel narrative is a better description for the genre of the text than that of eschatological or apocalyptic history proposed by A. Y. Collins (*Is Mark’s Gospel a Life of Jesus?* [Milwaukee, 1990], 46). He finds no good reason to reject the attribution of the text to the John Mark of Jerusalem, even if it is not proven. One does not find in Mark any trace of a Petrine theology or inspiration. Likewise, there is no evidence for the redaction of Mark after 70, as he wrote for Helleno-Christians of non-Jewish origin. The Roman origin of Mark is the most probable conclusion, contrary to Kümmel, Marcus, and Theissen, whose arguments have been criticized by Van Iersel. Mark is writing for a wide public rather than a particular community. Both Mark and Q represent independent voices based on the primitive tradition about Jesus.

For the structure, a prologue (1:1–13) followed by six sections (1:15–3:6; 3:7–6:6a; 6:6b–8:30; 8:31–10:52; 11:1–13:37; 14:1–16:8) is proposed as the most probable. Geographical criteria and christological themes play a much lesser role than literary criteria for modern scholars in deciding the most disputed question of structure today. Focant insists that, even if there are apocalyptic aspects in Mark, the Gospel is not structured as an apocalypse. It is therefore hazardous to make eschatology or apocalyptic the key to reading the whole work, which is paradoxical and enigmatic, disjointed and disconnected. However, there is a hidden truth beneath the sarcasms and ironies where Jesus is proclaimed prophet, king, messiah, and savior. The passion then is the main key for the interpretation of Jesus and his mission. Mark is a Christology of “étonnement” (surprise, astonishment, daze) that is deliberately transmitted to all future readers of his Gospel. As for the messianic secret, Focant seems to agree with Marguerat that Mark does not protect a secret but rather tells of its dissolution (43).

I would have liked a more extensive theological analysis than the provocative points that appear from time to time. However, Focant does mention the study of W. Reiser, *Jesus in Solidarity with His People: A Theologian Looks at Mark* (Collegeville, 2000). I also would have appreciated more dialogue with pre-twentieth century commentaries and the history of Gospel interpretation. Papias, Augustine, and Bede are not in the indices, to mention a few. Focant's main dialogue partners seem to have been S. Legasse (1997), E. Cuvillier (2002), M. J. Lagrange, and other French and German (J. Gnllka, R. Pesch) authors. These provide a very useful contribution for English-speaking students. However, it is refreshing that Focant shows quite a familiarity with what he calls "exegèse americaine," particularly R. A. Guelich, C. A. Evans, and J. Marcus. Focant finds that American exegesis tends to overestimate the value of apocalyptic motifs in Mark. However, in general this is a very judicious and surefooted guide through the ever more complicated maze of Markan studies.