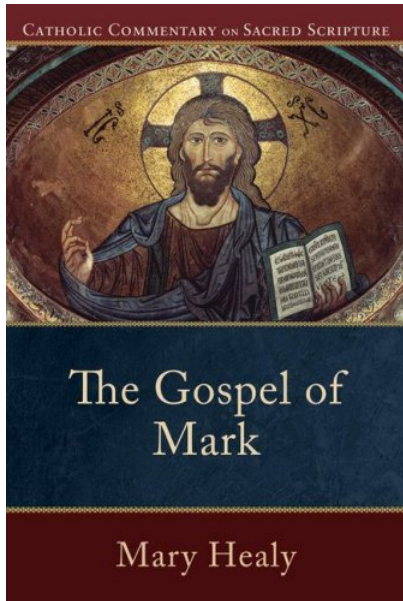


RBL 06/2009



Healy, Mary

The Gospel of Mark

Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008. Pp. 348. Paper. \$19.99. ISBN 0801035864.

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This is the first volume to appear in a series dedicated “to serve the ministry of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church” (11). The title of the series indicates that “the Church” in this instance is largely the Catholic Church. Depending upon where one stands in an interpretative tradition, this may be seen as the book’s (and the series’) strength or weakness.

A brief introduction situates Mark as the disciple and witness of Peter in Rome. The Gospel was written during the persecution of Nero in the late 60s. Paul is also his “mentor.” Healy opts for Markan priority but is open to other suggestions. She sees the suffering and failure side of the story, but “for Mark these human touches do not in any way diminish from Jesus’ sovereign majesty as the Father’s beloved Son” (24).

The commentary itself follows an “outline” of Mark that understands Mark 1:1–13 as a prologue, followed by two parts—1:14–8:26 (Who is this man?); and 8:31–16:20 (revelation of the suffering and glorious Messiah)—linked by the hinge of 8:27–30 (Peter’s confession of faith). These overall divisions, although not shared by all commentators, are easily recognized. The literary structure of the internal argument of the Gospel is a little more idiosyncratic. The proclamation of the kingdom with deeds of power is covered in 1:14–

6:32, while 6:33–8:26 deal with the matter of understanding the bread. After the hinge of 8:27–30, the commentary is divided into three sections. The way of discipleship is the theme of 8:31–10:52, the Lord comes to his temple in 11:1–13:37, and 14:1–16:20 covers Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. Mark 16:9–20 is recognized as the product of the later church but is regarded as canonical, used in cross-reference regularly during the commentary. At 14:28 the forward-looking promise of Jesus to the fleeing disciples is seen as fulfilled in 16:15 (288).

Healy opens her commentary upon each passage with the NAB text and a list of links with the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Catholic Church teaching (very often the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). The commentary is well-presented. The verse under consideration is indicated in the margin, and any words from the Markan text used in the commentary are produced in bold as they appear. This makes the work very easy to follow and consult. The book is also replete with side-bars that discuss what might be called “background” and “foreground.” The former presents biblical background to terms, places, past events, and the like. The latter instructs the reader in the way the Catholic tradition has used the passage, or ideas from the passage, in its teaching. The latter comes from a variety of sources: the patristic tradition, the saints, the popes, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* being major players. A helpful “glossary” at the end of the book explains some technical terms.

One gets the impression that the bulk of the Gospel of Mark records the thoughts, words, and practice of the historical Jesus. Of course, Jesus’ life and ministry lie behind the narrative, but it should not replace the uniquely Markan presentation of the “good news.” For example, in the two miracles of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, “Mark narrated two distinct events so as to highlight their similarities” (150). The eschatological discourse of Mark 13 is not the result of the Markan response to the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem but a record of Jesus’ use of the Old Testament, especially Daniel, to speak “in the typological manner of the prophets” (257). The reference to the abomination “standing where he should not (let the reader understand)” in 13:14 is Jesus’ instruction: “calling his disciples to pay close attention to hidden clues in the Book of Daniel” (265). She regards all the passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; even 10:32–34) as words of Jesus. The reference to the resurrection on the third day is Jesus’ use of Hos 6:1–2. This interpretative stance will surprise many who have come to see these (and other) major moments in Gospel as powerful textual indicators of turning points in the Markan story but not necessarily in the life of the historical Jesus.

There are many places where Healy catches the power of the Gospel and makes a fine application to the ongoing experience of those who still read the Gospel (see, e.g., her reflections on the cross on 184). But her handling of “the reader” is hard to follow. It is

often not clear which “reader” is meant. On 1:11 she writes: “Mark’s readers are privy to this secret exchange between the divine Persons” (37). In a book written for the ordinary faithful, as well as scholars and preachers, such statements (and there are many) are misleading, as Mark’s original readers had no notion of the divine Persons. Very often, during the commentary (not only in the sections dedicated to “Reflection and Application”), expressions associating “us” (we, our, etc.) enter the discourse. Major exegetical issues are sidestepped. After deciding that Bartimaeus’s calling Jesus “Son of David” is a full confessional title (well before he actually arrives at faith at the end of the pericope), Healy has to avoid any suggestion that the debate over the Son of David in 12:35–37 plays down Mark’s avoidance of the application of the expression to Jesus. The tension in the Markan narrative over these messianic titles and the theological use of the so-called “messianic secret” disappears in Healy’s heavy-handed presentation of Jesus’ divine sonship, close to the surface at all times.

The division of the material into pericopes is often strange. Although Healy is aware of Mark’s use of intercalation, she often loses that by commenting upon the respective parts of the episodes as if they were independent (e.g., 5:21–42; 11:12–26). The narrative power of these passages is enhanced by reading them together. Strangely, for an author who has one eye on Roman Catholic tradition and practice at all times, she regularly breaks up lengthy passages that are found in that form in the Roman Lectionary to analyze them section by section (e.g., 5:1–21). The link between 8:22–26 and 10:46–52, surrounding the material dominated by the three passion predictions and the disciples’ response, is also lost. Healy is aware of the link and mentions it (see 216), but in her division of the material they belong to two sections, divided by the “hinge” of 8:27–30.

Every interpreter is impressed by the Gospel text in a different way. Healy has argued her case with passion and clarity. A number of the endorsements found in the front of the book and the back cover speak of the great value of the book for preachers. I hope that will prove to be the case.

I found it an extremely disappointing book. My main problem does not come from the technical matters that I have outlined above. We must beg to differ in matters exegetical and respect the decisions of people that we do not share. In this book I do not find the voice of the inspired work we call the Gospel of Mark. Truth is not found in a continual “historicization” of the text, an attempt to anchor everything in the story to a history of Jesus. A few examples (among many) must suffice. On 2:3–5 Healy comments: “It must have been more than a little distracting to Jesus’ sermon as the listeners felt bits of falling clay and watched a stretcher being slowly lowered into their midst” (56). On Levi at the tax house (2:14) she writes: “Perhaps he had been listening curiously to Jesus’ teaching as he counted change at his post.” On 5:35–36, as the intercalation of the woman with the

flow of blood closes and Jairus is told of the death of his daughter, she comments: “At their message Jairus’s heart must have been filled with anguish at the fatal delay caused by the haemorrhaging woman” (109).

As a Catholic biblical scholar, I am disappointed by this book. When was the immediate past pope appointed “Pope John Paul the Great” (see 198)? Why the use of an asterisk to indicate books written by non-Catholics? The claim that there is a need for a “Catholic Commentary” on the New Testament, hot on the heels of the completion of the Sacra Pagina series, must make both the scholars and the Liturgical Press that produced that splendid series wonder whether their “catholicity” is under scrutiny and by whom. “Catholicity,” both etymologically and in its true practice, reaches out to cross all barriers, cultures, religions, dreams, hopes, sin, and failure. The Catholic biblical scholar must indeed interpret the word of God from within the Catholic tradition. With few exceptions, this is understood and accepted by all concerned, Catholic and non-Catholic.

I wonder about this commentary and the spirit driving the series. Commenting on the Jewish leaders, Healy accuses that their stance was “not an honest search for truth but an adamant determination to maintain the status quo and preserve their grip on power” (235). We all need to be aware of our own prejudices; no one possesses the whole truth. Both Jesus and the Gospels, narratives that look to him as their source and inspiration, attempt to uncover the weakness credited to the Jewish leaders. They are not alone.