Trainor, Michael F.

The Quest for Home: The Household in Mark’s Community


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The Quest for Home is an investigation of the Gospel of Mark in the light of the Greco-Roman household. Trainor combines both social-scientific and narrative methods to create a political reading of the Gospel with relevance to today’s church communities.

The book is divided into two parts. The first, “The ‘House’ in the Ancient World,” discusses the givens of houses and households in Mark’s world. The chapter is devoted to the various types of houses found in the first-century Mediterranean world, and the two following chapters discuss Greek and Roman ideologies of household and community. The second, more extensive, part, “Reading Mark’s Gospel,” provides a commentary on many of the episodes in the Markan narrative as they relate to Mark’s ideology of household.

The chapter on house types provides a clear summary of archaeological descriptions of houses of the period. Trainor divides houses into six types: simple, courtyard, big mansion, farmhouse, house with shop, and apartment-styled dwelling. Trainor understands Jesus’ mission as “primarily to the peasant community and those victimized by the economic structures imposed from the
social hierarchy” who would inhabit the simple two- to four-room house of the peasant. Some of the disciples were from wealthier situations and would live in larger, courtyard houses. Mark’s own urban audience would be familiar with urban forms, the big mansion, house with shop, and apartment dwelling. While most members of Mark’s audience would live in houses of the latter two types, the community would gather in the larger, mansion-style homes of the wealthier members, and thus such houses would be familiar to all. Trainor discusses the physical layout of each of these house types and how the physical layout relates to the social and economic structure of the households that make use of them. He omits a description of the larger farmhouse types because he does not believe that it was a location for either Jesus’ ministry or the community of Mark.

The discussion of the Greek ideology of family and household draws on three Greek philosophers: Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle. Pythagoras is a curious choice, considering his limited influence in the first century, but he provides an example of an atypical “egalitarian” household, in which the women were educated, were entrusted with the care of Pythagoras’s secret writings, and even wrote themselves. Plato’s ideal household, on the other hand, was based on the need for order. Those naturally superior, namely, free males, were to rule over women, children, and slaves. Aristotle agrees with the need for hierarchical organization but tempered it with his concern for koinonia or partnership. Trainor does not intend to provide a complete survey of the philosophical discussion, but it would have been helpful to give the reader some indication of how more contemporary philosophers handled the issue.

The chapter on the Roman household is based largely on Cicero and Roman legal material, but Trainor draws on a variety of other writers, such as Ovid (for a pastoral ideal) and Vespillo’s funeral oration for his wife (for the virtues expected of women). Trainor emphasizes the authoritarian nature of the Roman family and the absolute power of the paterfamilias. He acknowledges, however, that this power was often tempered by affection between family members. Cicero saw the household as essential for the moral good, especially as an embodiment of the value of communion and its associated virtues of solidarity, partnership, and affection.

Trainor assumes a largely Gentile Roman audience for the Gospel of Mark and has selected material accordingly. As a result, there is no discussion of Jewish ideology of family and household. While the omission is understandable in terms of Trainor’s interests, it is unfortunate. Many people might turn to this book for an introduction to houses and households in the New Testament world,
and they would benefit from such a discussion. Certainly, Jesus’ own teaching about family would have been expounded in relation to a Jewish understanding of family, and even a Gentile Christian community would have some familiarity with those aspects of Jewish ideologies of families expressed in scripture.

Trainor’s discussion of Mark’s Gospel draws only occasionally on the earlier discussion of housing types. Because of the large crowds that gathered in a number of the houses, Trainor believes that Mark often envisaged them as large Roman mansions that had atriums in which a large group could gather in a semipublic space. Thus Simon’s house is envisaged as a domus, or mansion, as well as the house in which the paralytic was healed (94–95).

Trainor’s principle concern is with Jesus’ redefinition of household relationships. He sees Jesus and his followers as constituting a household that is a model for individual Christian households as well as the larger household the church. Trainor seems to take for granted that household is an appropriate description of the group that gathered around Jesus. The point would be strengthened if he presented a more explicit argument for understanding the group as a household rather than in terms of other available social models, such as a school or sectarian organization. Mark certainly uses household language on occasion, but the school language is much more pervasive. A recognition of the way that various social models overlap and interact would strengthen the book.

Trainor sees the household of Jesus and the disciples as presenting a strong contrast with the predominant hierarchical model of the Greco-Roman world.

The household of disciples envisaged in the gospel is one in which women and men collaborate in ministry, authority, and leadership. This reciprocal and mutual style of relationships builds a community in which people experience welcome, hospitality, and nurture. This is the kind of environment in which people are healed at the deepest levels of their being. Such healing occurs because people experience the true meaning of genuine community where their quest for home is fulfilled. (182–83)

“Authority was to be collaborative and membership inclusive irrespective of status, gender, and wealth” (181). “What is clearly absent in the redefinition of membership in Jesus’ household is the paterfamilias” (153). While most readers would probably agree that Mark’s emphasis on servant leadership and concern for marginalized people pushes the community in this direction, I believe that
Trainor has overstated the case. Jesus, after all, seems to wield absolute authority and appoints only males as apostles.

Other important themes in Trainor’s presentation of Jesus’ household are its imperfection, need for repentance and renewal, and a concern for the inclusion of those who have apostatized under pressure. He understands the story of Bartimaeus as the inclusion of a former apostate into the community. Building on the common understanding of blindness in the healing stories as a symbol of spiritual blindness, Trainor understands the return of sight to one who once could see as a reference to the restoration of an apostate into the community (155–56).

The first part of the book provides a useful introduction to the physical and social aspects of housing in the first century as well as the ideology of household and family. It will be very helpful for students who need more information than is provided in Bible dictionaries but not the detail of specialized monographs. The entire book will be of interest to anyone concerned with community definition in Mark or the early church.