Wire, Antoinette Clark

The Case for Mark Composed in Performance

Biblical Performance Criticism 3


Larry W. Hurtado
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom

A senior scholar well known for her contributions to the study of the New Testament, Wire writes out of the conviction that the Gospels “were composed, not by individual authors with pens in hand, but orally in performance” (2). In this very readable book she lays out her argument that Mark in particular was composed in this manner, building upon similar observations and arguments offered, for example, by Joanna Dewey, Pieter J. J. Botha, and David Rhoads (curiously, Whitney Shiner, Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark, is not mentioned by Wire). Indeed, Wire’s book appears in a series devoted to promoting Biblical Performance Criticism, an approach based on the view that the biblical writings derive from “oral composition” and “performance,” the written forms that we know simply textual artifacts (residue?) of these processes. The foreword to the series states as the aim “to shift academic work on the Bible from the mentality of a modern print culture to that of an oral/scribal culture” and hails Wire’s book as presenting “an alternative paradigm for the emergence of Mark.” Given its ambitious aim, it is appropriate to devote some sustained consideration to Wire’s book.

Early in the introduction she notes that the Gospels are “not signed by their composers” (1) and urges that this should signal that these texts are not really to be seen as literary productions of individual authors but much more as bodies of material heavily “shaped in
the telling” (2). She goes on to portray a distinction between composition by an author and composition in “oral tradition”: “Authors may draw on given traditions in the process of a story or an argument, but they do so in order to make their own particular statement. Performers of tradition are understood to be transmitting a given tradition of the community” (3). Wire urges that to treat Mark as a story “told by several favored oral performers rather than as the product of a single writer” leads to understanding the text differently in several ways. Instead of thinking of “an urban male shaped in the Greek language and Hellenistic culture,” we can allow for “composition over decades” and by various people, such as individuals who knew Jesus, hosts of Christian circles, and/or others who simply were good at storytelling or whose physical attributes advantaged them in public speaking. This also means that, instead of seeing Mark as responding to “a single historical and social setting,” we take it as reflecting “multiple contexts of composition” (5). Moreover, she grants “the heavy weight of tradition” (exercising a conserving effect) over against “the near freedom of a modern novelist.” Finally, not only in content but also in its textual character, she proposes, Mark “will reflect the oral traditions and embody the oral performances that lie behind it” (6).

Wire then briefly reviews “Twentieth-Century Rediscovery of Oral Tradition,” summarizing work from Parry and Lord (on Serbo-Croatian epic singers) on through studies of Homeric epics (Nagy), folklore of various peoples, recent studies of early Jewish and Islamic oral tradition, and “Gospel oral tradition” (from early form criticism through to recent study of “orality” (e.g., Dewey, Botha, Horsley, Draper, Foley, Dunn). But, judging that “the default setting has not changed” in most of this recent work, she urges that “it is time to make the case for Mark as an orally composed tradition” (17). She concludes her introduction by listing anticipated objections to her thesis, framing her arguments in succeeding chapters to answer them.

In Part 1, Wire lays out “external evidence” of Mark’s composition in performance. But chapter 1 really addresses anticipated objections to her thesis from those for whom the biblical texts are canonical and authoritative and from advocates of “postmodern theory.” In chapter 2 she turns to how Mark appears in ancient manuscripts, underscoring the frequency of variants, the paucity of early manuscripts (only P45 before 300 C.E.), and what she describes as the comparatively “free text” of Mark. Along with some valid observations, however, I think her description of the early textual transmission of Mark and the other Gospels is flawed, reflecting a lack of “hands-on” acquaintance with manuscripts and their data (regrettably, an all-too-common shortcoming among contemporary New Testament scholars).

Wire proposes that P45 reflects an earlier, less-controlled copying practice and that a subsequent, more “strict” copying is exhibited in P66 and P75 (36–37). But, although the
early Gospels papyri reflect varying copyist abilities and tendencies, this is hardly a basis for the large claim that she makes. Given that we have only one copy of Mark among these manuscripts, it is not possible to distinguish a supposedly earlier and later approach to copying this text. Actually, the most substantial variant in Mark, the “long” ending, first appears in manuscripts of the fifth century and later. Moreover, all the papyri that she cites are roughly from a similar period (indeed, P66 and P75 are typically dated a bit earlier than P45), suggesting that whatever textual tendencies they individually reflect were roughly contemporary.

In chapter 3 (“Mark Found in Writing: The Setting”), she first discusses “writing and reading in the Greco-Roman world” and again makes what I regard as sweeping and debatable claims. For example, how does one square the statement “In general, reading and writing were not a part of life except in small scribal and ruling circles” with the abundant evidence of popular-level use of writing/reading reflected in the thousands of Greek personal letters, which are undeniably from people of various walks of life? Likewise, there are the many other “documentary” texts (e.g., marriage certificates, land transfers, bills of lading, invoices) that suggest at least a “utilitarian” use of writing/reading among various social levels well below “small scribal and ruling circles.” For a fascinating demonstration of how much we can learn about everyday life from this material, see Peter Parsons, *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: Greek Lives in Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007). Wire rightly emphasizes the prominence of speaking and hearing in the Roman world, but I think she errs in appearing to play off “orality” against “textuality.” I submit that the full range of evidence suggests a rich interplay of both, “authors” as well as “performers.”

Chapter 4 explores further “the event” of Mark being written. Wire reviews briefly various putative scenarios for why someone wrote it, judging that most scholars “seem to exaggerate the significance of writing as the turning point in the Markan tradition” (56). Having made a somewhat similar point years ago (“The Gospel of Mark: Evolutionary or Revolutionary Document?” *JSNT* 40 [1990]: 15–32), I am inclined to agree, basically, that in content and even in stylistic matters, there is likely considerable congruity between Mark and the “pre-Markan” transmission of Jesus-tradition. But I remain less confident than Wire that this pre-Markan tradition involved the oral recitation of accounts that map so directly onto Mark. Wire does not engage adequately the arguments of scholars such as Richard Burridge that the Gospels comprise a noteworthy event in the literary history of earliest Christianity, reflecting the Christian adaptation of and participation in “bios” writing.

Judging a “lack of any authorial presence in Mark,” Wire doubts a “literary writer” at work and prefers a view of the text as “a scribe’s re-performance of the tradition” (57).
This, however, summarily goes against the judgments of a goodly number of scholars that Mark reflects the work of an author. To be sure, the anonymity of the Gospels indicates that their authors were not concerned to promote their own status but likely saw themselves as serving the message and movement for which they wrote. Wire’s approach rightly cautions us against too much of a “cult of the individual” in our approach to the Gospels. But I doubt that she will convince many that the Gospels do not reflect real authors exercising their individual efforts to give inspiring “renditions” of Jesus.

Wire goes on the claim that “the written Mark would have been unwieldy and very difficult to read” and so “was likely reserved in a case for symbolic value or used for pedagogical purposes in its early decades while oral performers continued their composing task” (58). These comments, I fear, further reflect an unfortunate lack of acquaintance with the material evidence. For example, consider P66, which was originally a 78-page copy of John in a codex with pages circa 16.2 x 14.2 cm. John is a considerably larger text than Mark, but this manuscript would hardly have made an “unwieldy” item. Even as a bookroll, any of the Gospels would have made an entirely portable text.

Moreover, to judge from the earliest extant remnants of New Testament manuscripts, they were prepared to be used, read from, typically in Christian group-occasions, and certainly not placed in a “case for symbolic value.” In format, these manuscripts make an interesting contrast with the high-quality copies of pagan literary texts, which William Johnson cogently showed were designed to reflect the elitist circles in which they were used: *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). By contrast, New Testament manuscripts typically have elementary punctuation and use spaces to mark sense-units. They also often have breathing marks, somewhat larger writing, and wide line-spacing (with fewer lines per column-inch), all of which seem to be reader’s aids intended to facilitate the public reading of these copies. I have discussed these and other features of early Christian manuscripts in *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), urging their importance for wider historical issues about early Christianity.

In chapter 5 Wire reviews questions about the languages used in the Roman East. Somewhat curiously, she also highlights here what she regards as “a remarkable aspect of the Markan narrative … that Jesus’ ministry takes place strictly in small towns and the countryside” (67) and takes this as perhaps reflecting “a cultural alienation from the values represented by the cities” (68). Hmm. Maybe. Maybe not. In any case, it is not clear how this pertains to her larger case.
In part 2 Wire offers “internal evidence of composition in performance.” In chapters 6–8, she points to Mark’s use of parataxis, the repeated καὶ, simple vocabulary, and quoted speech. In chapters 9–11, she discusses several kinds of “repeated scenes” in Mark: exorcisms, controversies, healings, the vision of a heavenly voice, and “the vision of one coming on the clouds.” Chapter 12 focuses on showing that the Markan narrative “as a whole has been shaped in the telling” (110), that is, that it exhibits features that could derive from oral “performance” of Jesus-tradition.

Chapters 13–14 treat “the story pattern” of Mark, focusing on motifs of conflict a “report of a prophet’s sign.” This focus on themes and motifs continues into part 3, “Soundings in Mark.” These include Mark’s emphasis on Jesus’ identity (ch. 15), in which (curiously, to my mind) she alleges a “minimal Christology” in Mark, by no means a consensus view. Chapter 16 is given to Mark’s treatment of God’s kingdom as announced and arriving. Chapter 17 deals with Mark’s ending (at 16:8), Wire briefly exploring the possibility that women’s testimonies may be reflected in the Markan tomb scene, yet also accepting the view that the women are presented as not speaking to anyone at all about the empty tomb (even though a growing number of scholars have inclined to David Catchpole’s proposal that 16:8 should be read as the women not speaking to anyone else than those to who they were sent).

In part 4, Wire engages in interesting speculations about whether the link of the text to “Mark” (a figure connected in Acts 12 with “the house of Mary”) may reflect a derivation from “the telling of Jesus’ story that might have been taking place in Mary’s house” in the decades prior to the writing of the Gospel, or whether Mark derives from Jesus-tradition “among women in Galilee.” In chapter 19 she reviews her arguments, then concludes by addressing “our own context” (192–94).

Wire’s handling of themes and motifs in Mark is clear and often persuasive, but her specific claim that Mark is essentially a recording of a particular “performance” of its narrative leaves me unconvinced. On the one hand, there certainly are factors that suggest a strong connection of Mark with the prior and larger transmission of Jesus-tradition, including particularly oral transmission. On the other hand, for the sort of reasons mentioned briefly here, I regret to say that I find some of Wire’s claims somewhat simplistic (as if we have to choose between oral tradition and authors) and weakened by an insufficient grasp of the material evidence of the transmission and reading of texts in early Christianity. To be sure, early Christianity was, and thrived in, a Roman environment in which “orality” was important. But, as Harry Gamble showed, early Christianity was also remarkably invested in the composition, copying, distribution, and reading of texts (Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts ([New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995]).