C. Clifton Black’s revised doctoral dissertation put forward a significant challenge to the application of redaction criticism to Mark, and in this new edition he has included an afterword that addresses the academic reception of his thesis since it was published in 1989. The essence of his critique boils down to the question of how the method can attain verifiable results with regard to Mark when redaction critics neither possess this Gospel’s direct literary precursors nor agree on the hypothetical sources available to its author, leading to the proliferation of mutually exclusive deductions about Mark’s individual contribution to the Jesus tradition. The situation is markedly different for the other Synoptic Gospels, as scholars, on the assumption of Markan priority, can at least make inferences about the changes introduced in Matthew or Luke by comparing pericopes in the Synoptic triple tradition.

Chapter 1 outlines the historical roots and methodology of Redaktionsgeschichte. Despite the problem that the traditions available to Mark are no longer extant, Black summarizes the criteria set out by Robert Stein (see “The Proper Methodology for Ascertaining a Markan Redaction History” NovT 13 [1971]: 181–98) for detecting the Evangelist’s editorial hand in the selection, arrangement, modification, omission, or invention of material for the Gospel as well as in the Markan seams, insertions, summaries,
introduction, conclusion, vocabulary, and christological titles (22–31). Black notes only that the criterion of vocabulary can be broadened to literary style and that redaction critics often call attention to the ways in which Mark arranges the material in the service of key theological themes (32). A major part of Black’s investigation revolves around how faithful redaction critics have been to implementing these criteria and whether their results necessarily follow from them.

In order to evaluate the validity of the method, Black narrows the parameters to a particular case study concerning Mark’s treatment of the disciples in chapter 2. Black identifies three divergent interpretations championed by redaction critics: the type 1 “conservative position” upholds Mark’s fidelity to the tradition and positive attitude toward the disciples, the type 2 “mediate position” offers a nuanced assessment of Mark’s handling of pre-Markan traditions and complex portrayal of the disciples, and the type 3 “liberal position” insists upon Mark’s freedom to develop or create new material and to polemicize against the disciples (46–59). Since the labels “conservative” or “liberal” can carry political or theological connotations not intended by Black, perhaps it would have been better to characterize types 1 and 3 on the basis of how “restrained” or “free” the redactor is judged to have been with respect to the traditions he or she inherited. Even so, in chapters 3–6 Black performs a critical analysis of the three positions on his taxonomy as represented by Robert Paul Meye, Ernest Best, and Theodore Weeden.

According to Black’s findings, not all of Stein’s criteria are of equal value to Meye, Best, and Weeden. Nevertheless, they agree on the importance of Mark’s modifications as uncovered via a comparison with the other Synoptists, literary arrangement, conclusion, and vocabulary or style as evidence of redaction. Indeed, each places particular emphasis on one of these four criteria (192). Black, however, exposes methodological flaws and internal inconsistencies in their work. For example, the differences between Markan passages and their Synoptic parallels may reveal Matthean or Lukan rather than Markan redaction (79, 115, 154). Notwithstanding the form-critical axiom that the pre-Markan pericopes circulated independently, Black is skeptical that we can know whether it is the redactor or a pre-Markan tradent who linked pericopes and imposed structure on the oral tradition (85–86, 119–20). Black observes that the usage in Mark of some of the terms labeled as redactional in the studies under review hardly exceeds that of the other Gospels and adds that the frequency of a term falls short of proof that it is redactional as opposed to the Evangelist fancying a term found in a source (93–95, 130–31, 167). Further, their readings are as much guided by their discernment of major themes in Mark, such as Jesus as the teacher par excellence of a messianic διδαχή (Meye) or a conflict over a θεῖος ἄνήρ Christology (Weeden), which is not a strictly redaction-critical criterion. Lest his case get dismissed for its focus on three exegetes, Black finds similar weaknesses and circular argumentation in the efforts of James Crichton Little, Lloyd Gaston, Charles Joseph
Reedy, William Oliver Walker, Edgar John Pryke, and David Barrett Peabody to refine the methodology of redaction criticism in chapter 7.

In chapter 8 Black reviews why redaction criticism became the dominant approach to Mark in spite of its flaws. Redaction criticism, with its stress on the theologies of the individual Gospels, filled in a gap left by the waning confidence in the possibility of reconstructing the historical Jesus behind the texts or in locating a unified theological center in the biblical theology movement. Black accepts the positive contributions of redaction criticism in supplying a comprehensive method for studying the prehistory and final form of the Gospels, recovering the role of the Evangelists as creative authors, and accentuating the theological dimensions of the Gospels. Yet the liabilities inherent in the method include the speculative attempt to delineate the Evangelist’s editorial activity when we do not have access to Mark’s sources, the fallacious equation of major themes present in Mark with Markan redaction, and the tendency toward “methodological imperialism” in trying to solve all sorts of literary and sociohistorical questions (267–76). As a way forward, Black proposes a model of synthetic biblical interpretation in which a close reading of the literary text is primary and from which scholars may branch out into historical criticism, tradition criticism, authorial-theological criticism, or reader-response criticism. It should be noted that Black believes that a holistic reading of Mark that takes into account the successes and failures of the disciples best supports the qualified positive reading of the disciples that is characteristic of the type 2 “mediate” position (291).

Readers will appreciate the afterword of this new edition for its delightful prose, engagement with the critical reviews, and updated survey of scholarship on the Markan disciples. In his subsequent correspondence with the late Ernest Best, Black rebuts some of Best’s counterarguments as well as concedes some of his own mistakes and statistical errors. Moreover, Black recognizes that the “conservative,” “mediate,” and “liberal” positions on the Markan disciples are alive and well; a new book could be written with types 1 to 3 represented by the recent monographs of Suzanne Watts Henderson, Cédric Fisher, and Mary Ann Tolbert (328). Another valuable observation is that the hegemony of redaction criticism in the mid-twentieth century has given way to a plurality of methodological approaches and, further, that the mediate position has become the majority opinion among scholars studying Mark from different angles. Black sees in this some validation for his model in which a position established from a close reading of the text receives additional confirmation from a variety of methodological approaches (330).

In my judgment, Black has largely succeeded in demonstrating the subjectivity and circularity of redaction criticism when there are no sources to act as controls. There may be limited cases where scholars can point out probable examples of Markan editorial activity, such as the explanatory asides that clarify Jewish customs presupposed in the
controversy narratives for the benefit of non-Jewish members in Mark's audience (see 7:3–4), but the wide-scale effort to separate Markan redaction from the tradition may not be feasible. Yet to the extent that redaction criticism flowed into composition and narrative criticism, there may be room to ask questions about the authorial-theological agenda reflected in the inclusion and arrangement of the material in Mark. The redaction-critical method cannot be entirely faulted for the discrepant results on the Markan disciples reached by its practitioners; it is the Evangelist who allowed positive and negative features about the disciples to stand in tension and chose to wrap up the story on an open-ended note instead of narrating the reunion of the disciples with the risen one in Galilee. The reader may thus legitimately fill in the gaps in the narrative in different ways. Even so, since Markan redaction cannot be detected with certainty and a preserved tradition may be as significant to the Evangelist as a minor editorial change, I agree with Black that only a close reading of Mark as a literary whole can resolve the enigma of the Markan disciples.