Wilfred J. Harrington

Reading Mark for the First Time


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Early Christians had no need for spoiler alerts before reading a gospel, for they already knew the story of Jesus well. Hence, Harrington argues, their guiding question was not so much What will happen? as Why is the author telling the story like this? The pleasure of studying the gospels (then and now, for Harrington) stems from this recognition: aided by a sophisticated literary art, each writer marked his gospel with its own distinctive “spin” so that in reading a familiar story one nonetheless “repeatedly discovers something fresh to admire” (1).

Harrington thus sets for himself the “modest” task of demonstrating, first, that Mark is “a gifted storyteller and talented writer” and, second, that Mark’s distinctive “spin” forefronts the significance of the cross (2). Thus, for Harrington, “reading Mark for the first time” means understanding Mark’s theologia crucis. Accordingly, Harrington divides the book into two main parts: one detailing the prominent features of Mark’s craft of storytelling and the other the concept of the suffering Christ and its impact on the meaning of discipleship.

To be sure, these are essential insights to consider for those who are in fact reading Mark for the first time. However, the way Harrington pursues his project is questionable for
reasons that are necessary to specify up front before the summary of each chapter because these problems are recurrent throughout Harrington’s presentation.

First, when making claims about Mark, Harrington habitually supports his exegesis by referencing not Mark but other New Testament books. For a few among many examples, he cites John 20:30–31 to establish the purpose of the author of Mark (7); Col 1:15 to emphasize that in Mark Jesus is the “image of the invisible God” (8); “Matthew 18:19” (sic; he means 28:19), Jesus’ commission to the disciples, to interpret the meaning of Mark 14:28, Jesus’ promise to reunite with the disciples in Galilee (36); John 13:1 and 15:13 to verify that in Mark God gave his son “to the end” (122); Acts 2:23 to show that Jesus’s death unfolded in accordance with God’s plan (123); and Heb 12:2 to posit that the resurrection in Mark implies that one will follow Jesus “beyond death to share his rest” (126). Claims such as these require careful exegesis of the Markan text itself, but this is too often lacking (for this problem elsewhere, see 11, 39, 47, 54, 57, 69, 72, 73, 79, 81, 84–85, 88, 89, 107, 108, 109, 111, 120, 122, 125, 131–32, 133, 134, 140, 142).

This is not a minor issue because it points to a problem with the coherence of Harrington’s argument that reading a gospel requires the hermeneutical search for each author’s distinctive “spin” on the familiar story. Using John, Colossians, Matthew, and Acts to substantiate exegetical claims about Mark eschews precisely the distinctive voice of this text that is Harrington’s aim to uncover. What emerges instead is the distinctive spin of Harrington’s own theological bricolage of New Testament books.

This is related to another problem that strikes at the core of this book’s coherence: Harrington’s frequent “slippage” between the historical Jesus and Mark’s portrayal. He argues that considering the Jesus of history guards “theology from degenerating into ideology” (100). Elsewhere he distinguishes Jesus the historical person from Jesus the character in Mark (13–14). The problem is not that Harrington makes claims about the historical Jesus in a book about Mark but that Harrington too easily slips from Jesus in Mark to Jesus in history and back again, yielding an impression that Mark’s spin on Jesus is in many cases the very spin Jesus had of himself.

For example, Harrington posits that the “historical disciple of the historical Jesus” (129) followed Jesus not as a choice of his own but as a response to Jesus’s demand that he do so. Harrington at once slips from here to an interpretation of the call stories in Mark 1:16–20, where Mark also emphasizes Jesus’s initiative. Next, Harrington states that “the Twelve” was a historical group symbolic for the historical Jesus of the reunion of the twelve tribes of Israel. Again, there follows direct slippage into the claim that Mark 6:7–13, the mission of the Twelve, is a symbol that the reunion has begun (129–32). Substantiating statements such as these requires two separate arguments, one for the text.
of Mark and one for the Jesus of history. But both are lacking. The result is that readers may be confused about which Jesus Harrington has in view: history’s? Mark’s? or both? In any event, one loses sight of what this book is supposed to be about: hearing afresh Mark’s own distinctive spin on the already-familiar story.

Argumentative coherence is thus a major problem and hampers each chapter of the presentation. In chapter 1, “The Story” (7–22), Harrington addresses introductory topics. He locates the composition of Mark’s Gospel in Syria around 70 CE, though he offers no argument except that this accords with “mounting scholarly opinion” (10), an inaccurate characterization of the state of research on this issue.

There follows a subsections entitled “The Gospel and the Man,” which vaguely describes Mark’s audience as the struggling church desiring to understand who Jesus really is and Mark’s close relationship with Paul, particularly on the centrality of “Christ crucified” (1 Cor 2:1–2). In the next subsection, “Mark’s Spirituality,” Harrington writes hazily of “Christian life” as “faith inspired life … marked by love—love of God and of one another. It is a koinonia—fellowship” (12). Here is evident the first major problem addressed above, Harrington’s willingness to introduce concepts imported from the Johannine tradition and Paul, respectively. Harrington references only Mark 10:14, Jesus’s reception of the little child, to substantiate his further claim that Markan spirituality requires love for the marginalized.

Harrington stands on more solid ground when he discusses plot, which he analyzes in terms of Jesus’s conflicts between religious authorities and the disciples. He also addresses characterization, which enables storytellers to give listeners a more intimate picture of a protagonist such as Jesus and hence know him more profoundly. Minor characters serve as positive foils to the religious leaders and the disciples (e.g., the Gerasene demoniac, Bartimaeus, and the woman who anoints Jesus). These are concepts in narrative criticism, which Harrington specifies as his method (with reader response).

In chapter 2, “Mark’s Literary Pointers” (23–60), Harrington attends to the literary techniques by which Mark shapes his story and forefronts his spin. Harrington first proposes a structure for Mark’s Gospel and then considers the function of Mark’s summary statements (1:14–15; 1:32–34; 3:7–12; 6:6b; 10:1), arguing that these mark the start of subsections in the first part of the Gospel (1:14–8:30): 1:14–3:6 (“Jesus Welcomed and Challenged”); 3:7–6:6a (“He Came to His Own”); and 6:6b–8:30 (“Discipleship and Mission”). These divisions further cohere as discreet literary units because, in addition to opening summary statements, they each contain “a narrative concerning the disciples” (1:16–20; 3:13–16; 6:7–13) and “the adoption of a certain attitude in regard to Jesus” (3:6; 6:1–6a; 8:27–30). Harrington also details the sandwiching technique and what he calls...
“bracketing,” where Mark uses word repetitions to emphasize the material between; for example, Mark repeats “great multitude” in 3:7–8, thus stressing that the crowds who have flocked to Jesus consist of both Jews and gentiles. The rest of the chapter Harrington is devoted to itemizing Mark’s major themes: the privileging of Peter, James, and John at pivotal moments; private teaching of “insiders” versus “outsiders”; Jesus’s isolation throughout the passion; the misunderstanding of the disciples; Jew–gentile harmony; and various ways Mark underlines the divine purpose behind the events of the story.

In chapter 3 (61–65) Harrington briefly addresses Mark 16:1–8, questioning why Mark has consciously departed from the more prominent portrayal of the women as fulfilling their messenger role. According to Harrington, Mark “removes all initiative from humans and places it with God. In the end human beings fail. God alone succeeds” (64). Harrington asserts that this is “very much in line with Saint Paul and the Pauline tradition” (64), or at least, I might add, with one way of reading the Pauline tradition. Harrington fails to reference any Pauline text to corroborate this claim and again exposes himself to the problem raised above: the reliance on other New Testament books to interpret Mark.

In chapter 4, “The Christ” (69–102), Harrington interprets Mark’s Jesus in terms of various christological rubrics: prophet, teacher, healer, Messiah, son of David, and Son of God. But the issue of slippage is a major problem, since most of the claims are focused on what these mean in reference to the historical Jesus rather than Mark, although Harrington’s initial proposal is to investigate how Mark “presents the Good News in terms of Christology” (69). The section on miracles dramatizes this slippage from Mark’s to history’s Jesus. In lieu of any discussion of Mark’s text, Harrington proceeds from the criteria of multiple attestation and coherence and asserts, “It is reasonably certain that Jesus did perform startling deeds regarded by himself and others as miracles” (92). Here again there is a disconnect between Harrington’s ostensive purpose, presenting Mark’s spin on Christology, and his execution, the self-understanding of the historical Jesus himself.

Harrington allocates chapter 5 to the “Suffering Christ” (103–27), in which he articulates the meaning of the Messiah in Mark as one who must suffer, tracing this through the key texts, including the confrontation with Peter in 8:27–33, the subsequent passion predictions, Gethsemane, and the passion. Harrington thus underlines the theologia crucis, which he has posited as the distinctive spin of Mark. Harrington interprets the confession of the centurion as particularly expressive of this, for this gentile is the first human to acknowledge the Son of God hanging on the cross. Harrington tirelessly references this moment (2, 11, 29, 30, 48, 59, 97, 99, 100, 103, 108), but not once does he address the significant exegetical questions raised by this passage. Is the centurion’s
statement to be read ironically along with others in the chapter? How is the anarthrous ἱὸς θεοῦ (15:39) to be translated (“son of [a] God [god]”)? This again is indicative of Harrington’s inattention to the Markan text itself.

In “Walking the Way” (129–57), Harrington considers the style of discipleship required of one who accepts Mark’s theologia crucis. In a way that is relatively free from the problems I have raised, Harrington argues that in Mark discipleship of a crucified Messiah entails persecution and the willingness to serve (9:35–37; 10:13–16), faith (a theme he traces in 5:21–43 and 9:14–29), love of God (12:28–34), prayer (modeled by Jesus himself and addressed in 9:28–29), and partaking of the “Eucharist” (14:12–16). Discipleship also requires that one withstand the “threats” that come from riches and ambition (8:34–38; 10:25–34), false religion (modeled by Pharisees in 12:38–40), and human traditions and false purity (7:1–23).

Unfortunately, due to the problems I have raised, Harrington does not succeed in disclosing Mark’s spin on the familiar story. His attempt is also haggard by instances where he repeats entire sentences and even paragraphs word for word (cf. 2 with 9, 35 with 142, 44 with 121, 62 with 124, 64 with 127) as well as by hefty but vague theological terminology that verges at times toward “theobabel” that is too disconnected from Mark’s text (e.g., see 109, where Harrington writes of Jesus as “a pacifist for the cause of God,” and 11, where he is “Deus humanissimus”).

At best, this book has value as a semihistorical, semiexegetical, and semitheological reflection on Jesus and the theologia crucis for those who are committed (particularly Catholic) Christians, the book’s intended audience (as evident on 1, 7, 9, 10, 11, 100, 110, 136, and 147). Still, even here its value is limited because of its problems with overall incoherence. What, after all, does “reading Mark for the first time” ultimately mean in this book? Too often, it entails confusing Mark’s text with others in the New Testament and Mark’s Jesus with history’s.