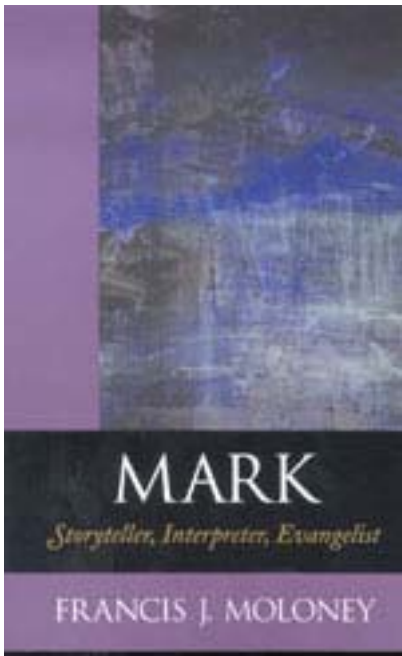


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Moloney, Francis J.

Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist

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After focusing on the Gospel of John for much of his career, Francis J. Moloney has recently turned his attention to Mark, first publishing a commentary on the Second Gospel (*The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002]) and now a narrative and theological study that draws heavily from that earlier work. The present volume has considerable strengths and a few noticeable weaknesses, but overall it is a useful primer for nonspecialists or complementary textbook for undergraduate and M.A./M.Div. courses on Mark. Moloney nicely organizes the book in four parts around its title, dealing in turn with authorship issues (*Mark*), the Gospel narrative (*Storyteller*), its understanding and redaction of traditions concerning Jesus and his disciples (*Interpreter*), and its ongoing relevance (*Evangelist*). The footnotes provide needed support for and nuancing of the book's argument as well as helpful resources for readers who wish to pursue further issues that are not fully explored in the study itself. In addition, Moloney judiciously uses the Greek text, for which he provides transliterations, to flesh out his interpretive proposals.

Part 1 surveys the tradition behind attribution to Mark, rehearses arguments for date and location, and recaps the history of critical scholarship in the modern period and its impact

on Markan studies. Moloney bases his discussion of authorship on the work of C. Clifton Black (*Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001]), although his conclusion that the author was an otherwise unknown person named Mark moves beyond what Black is explicitly willing to claim. Like those before him who have ventured into the issue of Mark's identity, however, Moloney's arguments are too speculative to be persuasive. The most plausible explanation continues to be that the author of Mark's Gospel—like the other New Testament Gospels—wrote anonymously, and was sufficiently accomplished to keep his identity from being teased out of the narrative.

Moloney provides a concise and helpful summary of the history of critical biblical scholarship in chapter 2. I might quarrel with his emphasis on defenders of the Bible as principally responsible for the rise of biblical historical criticism, but his conclusion that after Wrede Mark's Gospel was viewed as "primarily a story of Jesus driven by a *theological* rather than a *historical* agenda" (24; emphasis original) offers a valuable insight to those beginning to wrestle with methodological options in Gospel interpretation. Moloney's extensive work on John's Gospel is evident in his explanation of narrative criticism in this chapter. Several deficiencies distract from the effectiveness of his discussion, however: (1) he blurs the distinction between implied and original readers; and (2) he gives insufficient attention to the contributions of reader-oriented approaches, the role of the reader in the determination of meaning, and the possibility of multiple legitimate interpretations.

In Part 2 Moloney turns to the specifics of Mark's narrative. What is most compelling in this section is his appreciation for the author's ability as a storyteller. He identifies as key for understanding Mark's structural design four "textual markers," narrative shifts that represent distinct movements in the unfolding of the story (e.g., summaries, repetitions, and shifts in geography, time periods, and characters). These significant markers include the opening of the Gospel (1:1), the commencement of Jesus' ministry in Galilee (1:14–15), Jesus' first announcement of his forthcoming death and resurrection (8:31), and the women's discovery of the empty tomb (16:1–4). From these markers Moloney develops a four-part Gospel outline: prologue (1:1–13), identification of Jesus (1:14–8:30), suffering and vindication of Jesus (8:31–15:47), and epilogue (16:1–8). Although Moloney's conception of the Gospel's structure is instructive, his discussion lacks a sense of the tentative and provisional nature of any organizational scheme. Indeed, he critiques Morna Hooker's acknowledgment of the arbitrariness of all such scholarly proposals and fails to engage those who argue against any coherent structure for Mark (e.g., Robert Gundry).

Chapters 4 and 5 contain an overview of Mark's narrative according to the outline above. Moloney perceives a recurring literary pattern in the first half of the Gospel (1:1–8:30): a

summary of Jesus' ministry to that point in the narrative (1:14–15; 3:7–12; 6:6b), leading to a passage on discipleship (1:16–20; 3:13–19; 6:7–30), and concluding with a series of episodes responding to Jesus (1:21–3:6; 3:20–6:6a; 6:31–8:30). He concludes that Mark's major concerns in the first half of the Gospel are twofold: "a presentation of the life and person of Jesus, and the increasing fragility of the disciples" (77). These concerns set the stage for the second half of the story, namely, the passion predictions (8:31–10:52), open conflict with Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (11:1–13:34), Jesus' passion and death (14:1–15:47), and the closing epilogue (16:1–8). In places Moloney's interpretation needs more precision. For example, he rightly argues that Mark 11–13 is about endings in Jerusalem: (1) Jesus symbolically halts temple practices (11:1–25), (2) then systematically challenges and silences the Jewish religious leaders, (3) and, finally, forecasts the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem and the end of the world (13:1–37). But his reading misses the intercalated character of his outline that lifts up as the center of chapters 11–13 Jesus' opposition to the misuse of the temple and customs by Jewish leadership more interested in its own perpetuation than in serving its constituents. The climactic scene of Jesus' crucifixion returns to this theme. The two apocalyptic events narrated there, sudden darkness in the middle of the day (15:33), an allusion to Amos 8:9, and the tearing of the temple curtain (15:38), a passage often connected with the temple cleansing scene, signify God's judgment against those responsible for the suffering of the righteous, judgment that involves the tearing apart of the current power structure to be replaced by one modeled on Jesus' teaching about servant leadership in 10:43–45.

Part 3 deals with Mark's interpretation of the traditions about Jesus (Christology) and understanding of the Markan community (discipleship). Moloney provides a brief but carefully nuanced summary of first-century Jewish messianic expectations in chapter 6 and, after examining the variety of possibilities, concludes that Mark's interpretation of Jesus as the Christ represents "the creative theological activity of an early Christian thinker and writer" (131). He maintains that Mark's Christology is based entirely on Jesus' crucifixion and so is not associated with royal messiahship, that is, the restoration of David's dynasty. Jesus does not accept the Davidic acclamation of the crowd upon entering Jerusalem (11:10), and the use of the title "son of David" in the Bartimaeus episode (10:46–52) that precedes it concerns Jesus' role as a healer in the Solomonic tradition, not his messianic status. In this otherwise sound presentation, Moloney's attempt to put forward historical Jesus claims, such as that "[s]cholars are in universal agreement that Jesus saw his mission as the establishment of the kingdom of God" (126), is unfortunate. Even John P. Meier, whose multivolume work Moloney cites in support of this assertion, acknowledges that Jesus' understanding of his role in the establishment of the kingdom was far more complex than that (*A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* [3 vols.; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991–2001], 2:237–506). Given the explicit

aim of Moloney's book and the fact that he does not develop his argument, it would have been better to avoid making historical Jesus claims altogether.

In chapter 7, on the other hand, he argues that Mark is not interested in offering a historical portrayal of Jesus' disciples but in associating them with Mark's community. Just as Jesus' disciples in Mark went from followers to failure, so too the Markan community experienced the fragility of discipleship. Mark assures a community aware of its own shortcomings of Jesus' ongoing presence and acceptance reminiscent of his refusal to reject the disciples in the Gospel in spite of their continual blunders. It is with this theological claim that Moloney closes his study (part 4). The significance of Mark's Gospel, Moloney nicely concludes, is "the good news of human failure" (191). That is to say, just as Mark depicts Jesus' constancy toward his disciples and assures the members of the Markan community of Jesus' unfailing presence despite their inadequacies as Christ's followers, so also the Gospel announces to subsequent Christians "that God's action in and through the risen Jesus overcomes all such failure" (196).