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Moloney, Francis J.

Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist

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Francis J. Moloney, who holds the Katherine Drexel Chair of Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., recently authored a commentary on the earliest Gospel (*The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002]; see my forthcoming review in *RBL*). He considers this former detailed reading of Mark to be a “preparatory work” (xii) for the shorter introduction to the Gospel of Mark under consideration here. Moloney’s latest study covers especially literary and theological issues and is primarily intended to meet the needs of students of religious studies and theology, although Moloney also wants to contribute to scholarly discussion (see xi).

The work is arranged in four sections already indicated by the title of the book. These are divided into eight self-contained chapters, each finishing with short conclusions and instructive endnotes providing further information and literature. Part 1 (“Mark”) explores what we know of the person and personality of “Mark” as the author and of his contribution as a historian and theologian. The second part investigates Mark’s literary skills as a “Storyteller,” is followed by reflections on his work as “Interpreter” of Jesus as well as the early Christian community. In a fourth and final part Moloney considers Mark’s ongoing contribution to the life of the church as “Evangelist.”

Chapter 1 (“The Author of Mark in History” [3–18]) deals with traditional introductory matters. Moloney regards it as possible and even probable “that someone with the name Mark was the final redactor of this Gospel” (13), but he is aware of the uncertainty of this hypothesis. He locates Mark in northern Palestine or southern Syria about the time of the Jewish War. In chapter 2 (“History and Theology” [19–43]) Moloney presents a brief overview of the history of critical scholarship on Mark until the present. He highlights the achievements of redaction criticism and especially of the more contemporary approaches of narrative and reader-response criticism, which he himself is committed to. These led to “a greater appreciation of Mark as a theologically motivated storyteller” (28) as well as of the productive work of the (implied and first real) reader. However, Moloney rightly disapproves of interpretative arbitrariness: “Yet, while there can be *many* readings of the Gospel of Mark, it is not open to *any* reading.” (38, emphasis original) Although this claim is not further developed, it forms the starting point for the subsequent exploration of Mark’s literary achievements in part 2.

In his initial analysis of the plot of the gospel (ch. 3: “Mark’s Story” [47–58]), Moloney draws on the work of Bas von Iersel (see *Reading Mark* [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1988]) to determine “textual markers” in Mark, that is, summaries, repetitions, and shifts in place, time frame, and in focus on characters (see 47–48). These textual signals unfold a four-part structure of the narrative: prologue (1:1–13); recognition of Jesus (1:14–8:30); the suffering and vindicated Son of Man, Christ, and Son of God (8:31–15:47); and epilogue (16:1–8). Thus, the decisive narrative turning point is indicated by Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi (8:29–30). The two following chapters of the book illustrate how Mark plotted his story up to this midpoint (ch. 4: “Mark 1:1–8:30: Who is Jesus?” [59–81]) and from then on until the end (ch. 5: “Mark 8:31–16:8: Son of Man, Christ, and Son of God” [82–121]).

According to Moloney, Mark pursues two major issues in the first half of his story, “a presentation of the life and person of Jesus, and the increasing fragility of the disciples” (77). Yet the focus is obviously laid here on the latter. The disciples—unlike the reader of the Gospel—are ignorant of the prologue of the story (1:1–13) but instead become witness of the growing tension between Jesus and the Jewish leaders (2:1–3:6; 7:1–23; 8:11–13, 15) and of the atmosphere of approaching violence. Thus Moloney concludes: “From a merely human perspective, there is reason for the disciples’ increasing lack of confidence in the man they chose to follow. The stage is set for the reading of 8:31–15:47” (77). This part of the Gospel is summarized in more detail following the central stages of the narrative. As most of the information concerning Markan tradition or philological and historical issues is presented in the footnotes, the reader can fully concentrate on the progression of the story. It is the *reader’s* perspective that makes the open end of the Gospel intelligible: “the very existence *of the story* tells the reader that

what Jesus said would happen, did happen. ... If the promise of 14:28 and 16:7 had been thwarted, there would be no Christian community, and thus no Gospel of Mark, read and heard within the community” (112–13, emphasis original).

The third part addresses the major interpretative activities of Mark. Chapter 6 is dedicated to an investigation of the Christology of Mark’s Gospel (“Mark the Interpreter of Jesus of Nazareth” [125–58]). This aim is achieved not merely by the traditional approach of an analysis of the titles attributed to Jesus but also by an analysis of how the divine authority of Jesus is developed in Mark’s narrative. “The story of the gospel is *about Jesus*, but his life, teaching, death, and resurrection established the reigning presence *of God* as king” (151, emphasis original) Moloney’s stance, that “God may not appear as an active character in Mark’s Gospel, but God’s design lies behind every turn in the story” (130), has been thoroughly investigated by Gudrun Guttenberger (*Die Gottesvorstellung im Markusevangelium* [BZNW 123; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004]). In the following, Moloney examines the attributions of Jesus as Christ, Son of God, and Son of Man. He provides brief but instructive overviews of the traditions and the pre-Markan usage of the titles, which reveal that the Markan Jesus does not match the common expectations. For example, there is no sense of a “royal, military, or priestly figure who restores the hopes of Israel” (152). Instead, Mark claims that Jesus “must be understood as Christ and Son of God insofar as he is the crucified one” (151). That the crucified one, however, “does have the last word” (151) is articulated by Mark through the enigmatic title Son of Man, which “emerged as his major expression to communicate his interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth—slain, vindicated, and the apocalyptic judge” (152).

The subsequent chapter presents “Mark the Interpreter of the Christian Community” (ch. 7 [159–81]). By telling the failure and fragility of the disciples of Jesus, Mark actually addresses the problems of his own Christian community; he wants “to interpret *their* story of following Jesus” (159). Finally, in chapter 8 (“The Good News of the Gospel of Mark” [185–99]) Moloney encourages modern readers of the Gospel who are “invited into the story by anonymous characters” (191) that the “same good news continues to be announced to subsequent disciples of Jesus, Christian readers of the Gospel of Mark. As Christians continue to fail and flee in fear, they are told that God’s action in and through the risen Jesus overcomes all such failure” (196).

The book is rounded out by a bibliography (201–15)—which agreeably also includes non-English literature—and indices of modern authors and ancient sources (217–24). Moloney’s study provides a concise introduction into the Gospel of Mark as a narrative. Even though the traditional background of the text and its theological issues obviously have been undercut, Moloney’s work is highly recommended as resource for students and pastors.