

The Disciples in Mark: Narrative and Theology

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For a long time, the Gospel of Mark had been the neglected stepchild of New Testament research. With the advent of the “Two-source Hypothesis” this situation started to change: Mark was now seen as one of the two major sources lying behind the other canonical Gospels (and the only source directly available for study), and thus as providing the most direct and dependable access to the historical Jesus. Even so, Mark was still read “in the shadow” of the other Gospels, because of the lingering effect of a reading tradition which treated it as a palimpsest of the other Gospels:

For nearly nineteen hundred years the Gospel of Mark has been read in the light of the other three canonical gospels, notably Matthew. In consequence of this it was long eclipsed by its rivals... There is still the tendency, however easily we may talk about the “established priority of Mark”, to continue to regard it through the lenses of the other gospels...

In the last two decades the increasing use of modern literary and sociological approaches has helped us to rediscover the Gospel of Mark in its uncompromising and provocative call to follow the suffering Son of God on the way of the cross, against impossible odds; walking in the footsteps of the first disciples whose abject failure mirrors our own cowardice, misunderstanding and failure. The new insight into the depths of meaning hidden in the deceptively simple story told by Mark, has become possible because of a new appreciation of the narrative character of the Gospel as a dramatic story. To understand the separate parts of this Gospel, we have to follow the story, “walk the way” with the disciples, read each episode in connection with the other episodes and the Gospel as a whole, and take note of the motifs, themes and narrative techniques which the author employs to bring his message home. In stead of constant comparison with the other Gospels, we need new reading which takes *this* Gospel seriously as a literary and theological work in its own right.

The plethora of recent literary and sociological studies has contributed greatly to a clearer picture of the disciples (the Twelve) in Mark: their characterization by the author, their function in the plot of the story and especially the possible reasons for their negative portrayal (particularly when compared to the way they are portrayed in the other Gospels). This study intends to review recent research into narrative aspects of the Gospel of Mark, particularly relating to the disciples, with the purpose of delineating the outlines of Mark’s “theology of discipleship”.