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Proclaiming the gospel: first century performance of Mark

Ruth Spielmann

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profound commitment to linking the texts with the Jewish, Christian and human project of liberation.

Oscar Cole-Arnal
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark

Whitney Shiner

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2003

214 pages, \$23.00 Softcover

In recent years much has been written about the oral culture in which the New Testament documents were written. Due to very low literacy rates, all first century texts were primarily known through public performance rather than through individual reading. Several scholars have concluded that the Gospel of Mark was either written to be performed, or was written down after a period of development as oral performance. Within the relatively new discipline of performance criticism, Shiner's book adds significantly to the understanding of what performances were like in the first century, and more specifically, what the experience of an audience would have been in hearing a performance of the Gospel of Mark.

Shiner's study of oral performance in the first century leads him to conclude that oral performance was much more highly valued than it is in our culture, that oral performance was done dramatically, that recitation emphasized emotional impact, and that both the performer and the audience were lively and emotionally involved in the performance. He states, "We are not hearing the Gospel through first-century eyes if we do not hear the emotions." (5)

Two general chapters describing oral performance in the ancient world are followed by seven chapters which each discuss a particular aspect of performance: emotion, delivery, memorization, gesture and movement, audience response, audience inclusion, and applause lines. Throughout, he looks for evidence of these within Mark. Yes, applause lines in the Gospel of Mark! Shiner looks at what first-century audiences applauded: the content of a speech, well-crafted verbal style, and impressive vocal delivery. Then he looks at Mark and

suggests that audiences would have applauded, for example, when the narrative relates Jesus defeating his opponents, when Jesus speaks a well-phrased pithy saying (epigram), when the crowd within the narrative is applauding, and when the narrator speaks directly to the audience. Shiner's interest is not only historical, for he finds that "consideration of the audience's interaction with the Gospel performer helps us to recover the intended meaning of a passage." (168)

At times the search for indications of performance markers in Mark seems a bit stretched, as in the description of vocal effects in the Greek text of the beginning of Mark, and the conjecture regarding gestures that a performer might have used at specific points of a story. Nonetheless, even there the explanations are plausible.

Shiner is not just interested in history and academic research; he wants to understand how modern audiences can be moved by Mark's Gospel in similar ways to first century audiences, too. His love for the Gospel of Mark is evident. He himself performs Mark, and he refers to many examples in which his own performance has given him insights into the meaning of the Gospel, and to many examples in which he incorporates first-century performance strategies (e.g. gestures) into his presentations to make them more authentic, interesting, and moving.

The book is written in a style that is easy to read, and although it is well grounded in scholarship, it will appeal to those interested in modern day biblical storytelling as much as to New Testament scholars interested in performance criticism or the Gospel of Mark. The bibliography reflects this appeal to a varied audience: it is divided into topical sections, and includes one section that lists videotaped performances that are available of the Gospel of Mark. The Greek text of Mark is cited from time to time, but it is always in transliterated form and translated (and once there is even an attempt to provide pronunciation for those who do not read Greek). *Proclaiming the Gospel* is not difficult to read, and in places the reader will be reading aloud or making hand gestures to better understand an example, and in places even laughing out loud. I highly recommend it.

Ruth Spielmann
Canadian Bible Society
Kitchener, Ontario