CHAPTER THREE

‘THRESHOLD’ CHRONOTOPE AND COMIC CARNIVAL IN MARK 6:14–29 AND 16:1–8

Bakhtin, Threshold & Mark

The placement of these two passages together may, at first, appear unusual. In the case of Mark 16:1–8, it would seem preferable to hold the end for after the Passion narrative (see chapter 5). It is helpful, however, from a dialogical perspective, to demonstrate at the outset the unfinalisability of Mark in the way that the end draws the hearing-reader back to the beginning. Thus, it becomes difficult, from a Bakhtinian perspective, to operate in a purely ‘chronological’ sequence.

In the case of Mark 6:14–29, the absence of the primary characters present throughout the rest of the Gospel would seem to provide good reasons for seeing this pericope as atypical, and therefore one best avoided. The unusual nature of the vocabulary and style compared to the rest of the Gospel would seem to reinforce the atypical nature of the passage. This pericope contains a significant proportion of Markan hapax legomena; there is an absence of the more usual historic present; an increased use of aorists, imperfects, and participles (especially of the genitive absolute); and a more ‘cultivated’ style, so that some scholars have therefore questioned whether this passage is derived from an Aramaic original.1

The response of many scholars has been to see Mark 6:14–29—especially if it has been intercalated into the account of the disciples’ mission activity—as foreshadowing the ultimate fate of Jesus (and, by extension, anyone who is his disciple).2 Jesus, like John, will be arrested, executed, and his body placed in a tomb. Thus Mark 6:17, 27–29 is proleptic of

1 Including E. Lohmeyer, quoted in Gundry, Mark, 312.
2 Francis J. Moloney (“Mark 6:6b–30: Mission, the Baptist, and failure,” CBQ, 63, 2001, 647–663) provides a helpful review of the implications of this passage in the context of the material framing it, noting inter alia that “[t]he majority of commentators do not see Mark 6:6b–30 as a Markan sandwich construction.” (647) Moloney’s analysis demonstrates how the passage alerts the hearing-reader to the disciples’ failure(s).
the events of Mark 14:43–15:47. Most would agree that the passage serves to shift the blame from Roman authority (in this case, the Roman puppet Herod, and later the Roman procurator Pilate) to others. Here in Mark 6, the ‘blame’ for John’s death rests with Herodias and her daughter; in Mark 14–15, the ‘blame’ for Jesus’ death rests with the crowds and the Jewish leadership.

Both passages do, however, provide a range of opportunities for demonstrating the applicability of the ‘threshold’ chronotope. This chronotope is significant in these two passages (as well as in the Passion narrative); although it could also be argued that the nature of dialogue itself establishes thresholds that are therefore evident in all chronotopes. Several ‘thresholds’ are encountered in both 6:14–29 and 16:1–8, leading to dialogical interactions between characters (first-level dialogue), including dialogue with characters such as Jesus and the disciples that, although absent, are significant for the passages. Dialogue with the hearing-reader, through various ‘voices’ in the text, provides a significant key to understanding the passage, and provides the passages with an importance within the overall shape of the Gospel. At third-level dialogue, there are significant intertextual comparisons that can be made, especially with Ephesiaca and Callirhoe. Using these two examples may seem unusual, given that they will be considered as two key elements in the discussion concerning the adventure chronotope; their relevance is partly because of the folkloric nature of both of these romances.

It is also apparent that different aspects of the carnivalesque (comic and tragic) are evident in the passages. The first passage could be considered an anticipatory passion narrative embedded in the earlier

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3 Hugh Anderson (The Gospel of Mark, Edinburgh: Oliphants, 1976, 166) claims (contra Taylor, Mark, 307) that it is more than an interlude to span the period of the disciple’s mission activity.

4 Bakhtin notes the potential connection with the motif of encounter (FTC, 248).

5 The ‘folkloric’ nature of Mark 6:14–29 shows strong similarities with both these texts. Note that the generic contacts referred to here relate to the chronotopic ‘orientation’ of the text. Thus the points of comparison cannot be purely on the basis of common morpho-syntactic elements, since “genre forms do not lend themselves to syntactic definition. The [folk-tale] as such does not consist of sentences and periods. It follows that the thematic unity of the work is inseparable from its primary orientation in its environment, inseparable, that is to say, from the circumstances of place and time” (FM 132). Bakhtin comments: “Folklore is in general saturated with time; all of its images are profoundly chronotopic. Time in folklore, the fullness of time in it, the folkloric nature, the folkloric human yardsticks of time—all these are very important and fundamental problems.” (BSHR, 52).