Dietmar Neufeld


Laura C. Sweat


Dietmar Neufeld and Laura C. Sweat both examine literary aspects of Mark’s Gospel, each drawing upon a variety of methodological approaches to argue his or her respective thesis. Neufeld approaches the role of secretism in the Second Gospel from social-historical, social-scientific, and literary perspectives, while Sweat approaches the theological role of paradox through historical and literary criticisms. Each examination yields a rich analysis of these varying components of the Gospel of Mark.

In *Mockery and Secretism in the Social World of Mark’s Gospel*, Dietmar Neufeld examines the role of mockery in the Gospel of Mark in relationship to the many instances in the Gospel in which Jesus commands persons not to speak about what they have just seen or experienced. The author lays out the three goals undergirding his study: (1) explain how mockery functioned in the Roman world and how it is utilized in Mark’s Gospel; (2) explore how ridicule and mockery functioned as a form of social sanction; and (3) discover why the author of Mark’s Gospel seems preoccupied with secrecy. Methodologically, Neufeld approaches his task from primarily social-historical and social-scientific perspectives. He discusses the role that mockery played in Roman society and applies that social phenomenon to Mark’s depiction of Jesus. He argues that in Mark secretism is a way for Jesus to avoid mockery.

In the “Introduction,” Neufeld presents his thesis that mockery was part and parcel of daily life in the Roman Empire. “The lives of the inhabitants of Rome,” he writes, “were punctuated daily by the possibility of slander, which constituted a serious source of shame for anyone caught in its vector” (2). The reality of one potentially being subjected to mockery at any turn is woven through the fabric of Mark’s Gospel and is a key factor in understanding Mark’s depiction of Jesus’ life, teaching, actions, and death. Neufeld asserts that Mark deliberately created a story that exploited “mockery’s potential for crystallizing questions about Jesus’ nature, teaching, activity and conduct” (5). While Mark puts Jesus in situations that inevitably invite public gaze and exposure to shame, he also shields Jesus from the harmful potential of mockery through the motif of “secretism.” After differentiating “secretism” from “secrecy” – the latter was the basis of Willhelm Wrede’s “Messianic Secret,” which Neufeld addresses in
detail in a later chapter – Neufeld moves to discuss the production of Mark’s Gospel. He argues vigorously that Mark originated as a written text intended to be read in a variety of settings. Thus, the Gospel was written to appeal both to the reader and to the listener. He rejects proposals put forth by Antoinette C. Wire and Richard Horsley that the Gospel was orally composed and that it was meant to be performed. As opposed to those who emphasize that the Gospel’s origin was based in orality and thus reflected low literacy rates in the Roman Empire, Neufeld argues that there was a high degree of literacy in a variety of forms in Roman society.

Chapter 1, “Modes of Mocking and Being Mocked in the Graeco-Roman World,” examines how mockery functioned in the milieu of the Roman Empire. Neufeld establishes the prevalence of the tradition of mockery by providing examples from various Greek and Latin texts as well as the Gospel of Mark. Neufeld discusses areas of invective used in the tradition of mockery, and how even a person’s name could be used in his or her mocking. The result of mockery was shame, especially the fear of being publicly shamed. Neufeld then discusses the nature of honor and shame, and the relationship among honor, power, and influence. He also gives a helpful discussion of the way in which persons with disabling conditions were subjected to ridicule and mockery in Rome, and the use of physical infirmities in Mark’s Gospel. He closes the chapter with a discussion of the nature of spectacle in Roman culture, noting that anything eye-catching was carefully observed. If someone drew attention to himself or herself, mockery and shame likely lurked just around the corner.

Chapter 2, “The Messianic Secret in Recent Studies,” provides background information for one of Neufeld’s central assertions: The “secrecy” motif in Mark’s Gospel is not about hiding Jesus’ identity but rather functions to shield Jesus from shame and mockery. Neufeld summarizes Wrede’s “Messianic Secret” and several scholars’ critiques of Wrede’s position. He notes as well how the theme of privacy fits into the traditional secrecy motif. For Neufeld, however, both secrecy and privacy are means of avoiding shame. The chapter closes with a discussion of the use of gossip and information management in the Roman social context and how Mark uses gossip to control the flow and interpretation of information about Jesus.

Chapter 3, “Secretism and Mockery,” demonstrates how these two social phenomena worked together and “were powerful tools to shape public policies, enhance reputations, denigrate and destroy opponents, marginalize groups, stigmatize individuals, change religious and cultural self-definitions and affiliations and establish authorial integrity/legitimacy in a competitive literary social milieu” (104). Neufeld shows how mockery and secretism were woven together, and that Mark knew their power and employed them to