Thomas Boomershine


This book is an advanced elaboration of employing performance criticism, specifically on Mark’s Passion-Resurrection Narrative. Drawing from the theme of his lifelong study, Mark, the Storyteller (his dissertation in 1974), Boomershine recommends performance literature commentary as a new paradigm for biblical studies in post-literate digital culture today. Boomershine’s book, as part of his contribution to biblical performance criticism, is accompanied by a website (www.messiahofpeace.com), which provides video recordings of Mark’s story being performed in both Greek and English versions. Thus, his book is a faithful guide, either for viewers to enjoy the performance of Mark’s Passion-Resurrection Narrative itself, or for those who wish to perform it as storytellers to help their audiences experience Jesus as the non-violent Messiah of Peace, invoking participation in their calling as a response.

Readers may ask: Why undertake a performance criticism commentary? Assuming the fact that the Gospel of Mark was originally composed to be performed in the first century for audiences who were mostly illiterate, Boomershine tries to reenact the telling of Mark in its context to reach its original meanings. Otherwise, Boomershine warns that we might distort or pervert Mark’s intended meanings. Actually, Boomershine does suggest that contemporary textual-critical scholarship has misread Mark, resulting in an anti-Semitic or pro-Roman interpretation that accuses Jews of being the main killers of Jesus in “the rhetoric of alienation and condemnation” rather than “involvement and implication” (pp. 23–26). Indeed, the Gospel of Mark was not read but performed, and its manuscript functioned as only an aid for performers like a music score.

In order to clearly understand Mark’s intended meaning, Boomershine argues, performance criticism is necessary because it prevents us from falling into a misreading or distortion of Mark’s meaning. He points out significant differences between reading Mark as a written text in silence and listening to Mark being told by the storyteller in his or her performance. According to Boomershine, modern individual readers, by reading the text in silence, tend to keep a psychological distance from the text for the purpose of “critical reflection” to draw both historical and theological “meaning as reference” in detachment (p. 9). However, hearing the story orally invited Mark’s original audience to be more “participatory and responsive” (p. 10), because they could sympathize more easily with characters in the story. Thus, “meaning as reference” in the former becomes “meaning as experience” in the latter, depending on the
“willingness of audience to enter fully into the story and to identify with characters of the story” (p. 12). Fortunately, Boomershine does not overgeneralize or overemphasize this as if Mark’s readers need only sympathetic participation but no critical reflection; instead, he proposes performance criticism to “establish a dialectical relationship between engagement in the experience of the story and critical analysis” (p. 13).

Boomershine assumes the main audiences of Mark to be Hellenistic Judeans and Gentiles after the First Judean-Roman war. This view is important for him because it supports his main argument that Mark is not an anti-Judean book, but that it engages and encourages listeners to identify with fallible characters such as the disciples, Peter, the crowd, and the women who fled from the tomb. Mark’s intention for his or her audience who had experienced the disaster of the Judean-Roman war was to proclaim that any violent path to redemption would not work. Instead, Mark intended for them to follow the way of non-violent peacemaking. Through his suffering, death, and resurrection, Mark’s Jesus shows this as the only way of redemption from the human violence of the past and of today.

Boomershine uses the traditional framework of “prophecy and fulfillment” to unfold the contents of Mark’s Passion-Resurrection Narrative, arguing that the narrative structure consists of eight sections: the day before the Passover (14:1–11); the Passover meal (14:12–25); the night in Gethsemane (14:26–52); the trials at the high priest’s house (14:53–72); the handing over to the Gentiles (15:1–20); the crucifixion of Jesus (15:21–32); the death and burial of Jesus (15:33–47); and the resurrection (16:1–8). In each section, as other textual commentators do, Boomershine starts with critical notes and comments on the meaning of the Greek and its English translation; additionally, he gives detailed suggestions and advice for the performance of the story. What is also unique in Boomershine’s commentary is the “sound mapping” it provides through the work of Margaret Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott (p. x, 368–86), so listeners to or performers of Mark’s text know, for instance, where to pause, how to emphasize, and what is echoing from other Israelite traditions or stories. Even though Boomershine does not fully provide exegetical explanations, he – following the work of John H. Elliot – cautions against using terminology such as “Jews,” “Judaism,” “Jewish,” and “Christians” in our English translation of Mark.

Besides the “sound mapping,” Boomershine’s book contains seven other appendices, including among others, the historical context of Mark and the audiences, the pronunciation of Koine Greek in the Roman period, the rhetoric of biblical storytelling, and Markan terminology. These are helpful to understand not only Mark itself from the perspective of performance criticism, but also potentially other NT documents.