THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF MARK 11:1-12:40

by

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I — Assessing the Problems

Despite the attention which has been focussed on Mark 11:1-13:2 during the past 35 years, a consensus on its literary structure has yet to be reached. One reason for this is inherent in the section itself: the pericopae which it embodies are, both formally and in content, much more disparate than the catena of five controversy stories in Mark 2:1-3:6 which has frequently been observed to be the counterpart of the Jerusalem conflict cycle in Mark 11, 12. The ‘actors’ are more varied, and the issues in question more diverse than in the Galilean controversies. This factor alone would be enough to explain the lack of agreement among scholars. Unfortunately there are also unwarranted factors whose unwelcome intervention could perhaps be eradicated if only more attention were paid to the application of method. Most serious of these factors, in my opinion, is the tendency to divorce structural from theological concerns. Too often scholars have drawn conclusions about gospel theology from a purely redactional or linguistic analysis, or even by adopting a blanket approach in which the gospel is understood from a literary-critical perspective, regardless of other methodologies. Surely it is time to take stock of current critical scholarship on Mark, and to heed the advice issued some 16 years ago by the late Norman Perrin1 that our understanding of Mark’s theology — or that of the other synoptists, for that matter — can be enhanced only by synthesising the methodologies at our disposal. In that light, the study of gospel structure must be treated as a genuine critical methodology in its own right, every bit as essential as the more widely accepted ones. If theology is made the

procrustean bed of structural and other considerations, the conclusions drawn will inevitably be distorted. Only when the gospel structure itself has been properly understood — and understood, if possible, from the viewpoint of its own first-century milieu — can we begin to appreciate the theological notions to which it points.

We do not have to search far for studies of Mark 11:1-13:2 whose conclusions have been distorted by a reliance on one critical method at the expense of all others. Several scholars have argued that the structure of this section is dependent largely on some hypothetical pre-Markan controversy collection underlying it. But this is to reduce Mark to a mere stringer of pearls when the trend today is to acknowledge in our Evangelist a creative, theological mind. On the other hand, to be too heavily dependent on redaction-criticism is to lay oneself open to the danger of subordinating structure to theology.

Joanna Dewey goes to the opposite extreme. Despite claiming to unlock the door to Mark's theology with the key of rhetorical and structural criticism, which I think she does with some sensitivity in the case of Mark 2:1-3:6, she fails to allow Mark his true theological voice in the case of Mark 11, 12, because her chief concern is to force these chapters into the same structural mould as the Galilean controversies. There seems to me to be a serious flaw in the reasoning that if Mark 2:1-3:6 is chiastic, so too must Mark 11, 12 be. There is no reason why the Evangelist could not have chosen a totally different rhetorical structure for his second controversy catena, and I believe he did.

Much more sensitive to the situation is Klemens Stock who genuinely acknowledges the importance of the narrative structure as a key to the Markan theology. He rightly perceives the significance of the temporal and geographical rubrics within the

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