A DIVINE TRAGEDY: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE OF MARK’S GOSPEL

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At various times during the past 65 years the question has been posed as to whether the structure of Greek tragic drama might not be evident in some parts of the Bible. Sarah Halperin¹ has claimed to detect in the Samson narrative a comparable structure, while the dramatic possibilities of Job have also been examined.² But it is the Gospel of Mark whose structure has been found to conform more closely than any other biblical work to dramatic literature.³ Despite the gathering momentum of interest in this field, however, the superficiality of much of the work has given rise to certain inconsistencies, and most certainly to the need for further study. Many writings merely touch upon the matter as a means to other ends, and Bilezikian’s volume remains the only readily accessible systematic study of the subject.

Although we shall be making critical reference to particular scholars as occasion requires, we should mention at this stage two points which, if not universal in their scope, at least have a more general application. The first is that Aristotle’s Poetics always seems to be made the yardstick with regard to what the ideal structure of

² Job, indeed, has been treated as a drama since the fourth century A.D. See M.H. Pope, Job (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1965) xxx-xxxii, and the literature cited there.

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Novum Testamentum XXXVII, 3
a tragic drama ought to be rather than the plays themselves. Some
writers, indeed, have managed to pronounce at length on the issue
with hardly more than a passing reference to any of the dramatic
texts. Now there is no doubt that Aristotelian precepts do make for
an obvious point of departure, and the broad structural principles
elucidated there are in general conformity with what we find to be
the case in the extant plays. Nevertheless, we ought to appreciate
that the standardisation of such principles as an expression of
literary-dramatic theory arose out of the historical development of
drama in fifth-century Athens, and not from the fourth-century pen
of Aristotle. He, at best, can be no more than a literary adjudicator
or critic passing opinion upon the principles that had already been
established. As Standaert has rightly observed, some of the
skeulities behind Aristotle’s assessment of the ‘ideal’ play might
better be ascribed to the sublety of his own thinking.

On the other hand—and here is our second point—there is a
sense in which some scholars have not read Aristotle closely enough
in that they fail to make a clear distinction between the structure
and the plot of the drama. Standaert, for instance, treats ‘pro-
logue’, ‘recognition’ and ‘epilogue’ in direct sequence, as if they all
operate at the same structural level. We may accept as fundamen-
tally sound Standaert’s desire to demonstrate that in Mark the pro-
logue is related in substance to the epilogue, and both these
elements to the central recognition scene (8:27-30): this is to be
faithful to Aristotle’s dictum that every literary whole must have a
beginning (ἀρχή), a middle (μέσον) and an end (τέλευτά)’.
But on
further examination of the Poetics we discover that ‘recognition’ is
regarded as part of the plot (complication—δέσις; recognition—
ἀναγνώρισις; dénouement—λύσις), whereas ‘prologue’ and
‘epilogue’ properly belong to the dramatic structure (prologue—
πρόλογος; episode—ἐπεισόδιον; exode—ἐξόδος; parode—παρώδος;
stasimon—στάσιμον) which, of course, extends beyond the limits of
the plot.

4 Standaert, Marc, 33.
5 Standaert, Marc, 83-106.
6 Poetics, VII.2-3. This and all subsequent references to this work are to the
Loeb edition (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann,
1927).
7 Poetics, X.3-4; XVIII.1-3.
8 Poetics, XII.1-3. Chapter XII as a whole, which discusses the various elements
comprising the drama, appears to be something of a misfit in its present context,
since it interrupts the discussion of plot. The fact that, but for one word, the
opening and closing sentences are identical also suggests an interpolation.