

David G Palmer's Review of Helen K Bond's

The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark's Gospel

This is a scholarly work. It is the fruit of much scholarly research and it sits well within the currents and consensuses of New Testament gospel research today. But it is not the ground-breaker that it might have been. To start with, there is a missing final chapter which might have demonstrated 'the profound difference' in reading and understanding Mark's Gospel, which is promised on the inside book cover, for knowing that the Gospel is *bios*. Further to this, Helen herself, at many points in her book, admits deficiencies in the Gospel's representation of *bios*: on p.11, we read, Mark does not set out his credentials at the beginning; on p.115, there is no strong authorial voice; on p.125, there is a lack of interest in Jesus' early years, no ancestry (Helen may think that Matthew and Luke in turn add such to Mark's gospel, to improve Mark's Gospel as *bios*, but it does not prove that they viewed his work already as *bios*); on pp.161, 164, there is no physical description of the text's primary character (Mark's reluctance to give it is noteworthy); on p.178, Mark does not offer any formal comparisons of people and situations, because, says Helen, he cannot have had the kind of rhetorical training that would have enabled him to do this (it is a concerning deduction which does not recognise the dangers of tautological argument); and on p.251, reading Mark as *bios* does not solve the problem of Mark's ending.

On genre itself, Helen and those who preceded her appear to think that 'genre' is of greater importance than 'structure' for interpreting a script. Rather, see Augustine who argued that *literary form* and *meaning* were inseparable (On Christian Doctrine, IV.6-7). To him, there was no understanding a text without first understanding its *structure*. It is unhelpful, therefore, that Helen's contribution on 'Structure' is the least developed of her whole presentation; it takes us back forty years to Ernest Best's reading of Mark and fails to discuss the developments of the 'nineties' and the 'noughties' and everything since.

Most importantly, I think, Helen fails to give consideration to the nearest alternative to *bios*, which is *drama*. In the case of Mark, I think, the *drama* is a *Greek Tragedy*. Examples of such are many which include: a Prologue (*Prologos*, for the setting of the scene), *Parados* (entry of characters), *Episodia* (three or more episodes or series) interspersed with *Stasima* (explanations, commentaries on the developing situation) and the *Exodos* (Epilogos, the concluding of the story). [Consider here, Aristotle's *Ars Rhetorica* for what it teaches on the Epilogue, that its sentences are not to begin with KAI (with this form of 'and'). If scholars had known this rule they would not have been so quick to judge un-Markan the parts of Mark's 'longer ending' because the sentences did not begin with his normal 'And...']. *Drama*, we note, gets an audience to reflect on its social, political and religious values. Good *drama* maintains

unity of the plot and is a tightly organised sequence of 'necessary and probable' events, with the hero going from happiness to misery. *Drama* is performance more than it is recital, with up to three actors, in addition to a chorus usually. My 1998 PhD literary analysis of Mark's Gospel reveals four episodes of seven parts, Four Series in the chiasmic arrangement of ABB'A', each of Seven Days, with days in the arrangement of ABB'XABB', the arrangement of Days in Homer's *Iliad*, where X is the middle turning point and the sub-Series, ABB', each side of it consist of an introductory piece, followed by two parallel pieces, the first and the second developments.

Helen further fails to give any space to the responsibilities of all writers to their readers, reciters, performers and audience. In the context of the first century when an oral/aural form of communication prevailed, because approximately 95% of the population were unable to read, all were able to benefit when the writer kept to the rules of Invention, Structure, Style, Memory and Performance, whereby the reader would be enabled to interpret the text's columns of capital letters, without gaps between words and with no punctuation other than indentations. It is through Style (and dualities and repeating opening words, etc.) that the Structure is revealed and through Structure that the purpose of the text (the writer's Invention) is revealed. And it is through Style and Structure that memorable arrangement is revealed and the text set to Memory for its Performance, or of course for helping non-readers memorise it.

Helen considers how material from Paul's letters may have influenced Mark's compositional approach. In Paul's (seven) letters is much material suitable to the telling of a life of Jesus, the re-telling of some of his teachings, as well as the reportings of events in which Jesus was involved as viewed by Paul as 'church tradition' and 'passed on' by him to his church in Corinth, notably: 1) of a last supper 'on the night he was betrayed' (though not a Passover Supper and not a betrayal by one of the twelve, for which see 1 Cor. 11.23-26; 15.5) and 2) on Jesus' death, burial and resurrection (with appearances, for which see 1 Cor. 15.3-8). To add a further two letters to the possible list of Paul's original letters raises also the possibility of an 'ascension' as well as further 'descriptions' of Jesus. Helen begins to reflect on Paul's metaphorical description of Jesus as the 'paschal lamb', but nothing is developed as it might have been. In my analysis of Mark, I find in Mark's final *episodion*, that the writer balances Jesus' clearing of the Temple of sellers, money-changers and sacrificial animals and birds (through which people were made right with God) with Jesus as the *new* Temple dying on the cross (through which people are now made right with God). Central to these two parallel scenes are the plotting of Jesus' betrayal and the *fragrancing* of him for his burial. Mark gives events their first datings as he re-interprets with action stories Paul's understanding of Jesus' dying as 'a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God' (see both Phil. 4.18 and Eph. 5.2). Mark's Gospel is 'eternal truth' set to story. On this point alone and, maybe, in this way to some extent, Helen and I might want to agree with each other.

How will Helen's book be received? It will be well received as a help to scholars who do not have the time, or inclination, to read as widely as she has been able to do. Who will it help? Scholars, principally! It is difficult imagining her work, without a seventh chapter, helping preachers and teachers in church groups. What will her book be appreciated for? It will be appreciated for its attention to detail, especially as regards to the characters portrayed in the Gospel. It will not set New Testament Studies alight, or set a new agenda of research! Already other books are doing that, which show that the Gospel of Mark is not only Greco-Roman writing as it had to be in the first century, but also an *epic* which fulfils the rules of the *drama* of a *Greek Tragedy* - with Title, Prologue, Four Series of Seven Days and an *Epilogue* which not only mirrors the Prologue for structure, style (ABB') and content, but which also completes the writer's supply of information for his reader so that he can check he has read the text in the way the writer intended: where the last frame of the Prologue reveals 'two brothers' plus 'two more brothers' (where the two middle Series parallel each other and the two outer 'Series' parallel each other); and where the first frame of the Epilogue reveals the number 'seven' (which is indicative of the 'seven' Days in each Series).

Finally, we reflect on Helen's primary thesis, that Mark's Gospel was written 'to extend Christ-following proclamation (the "gospel") from an earlier narrow focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus so that it now included the way of life of its founding figure' (p.253). But what does the Gospel's structure actually disclose? Most impressively, in Mark's Gospel, on the First Day of the opening *episode* we read that the sun sets on the Sabbath of the Old Covenant, and on the Last Day of the closing *episode* the sun rises on the Sabbath of the New Covenant (16.1-8 is no Epilogue). The purpose of Mark's *drama*, therefore, is to establish what God had been doing, how Jesus had been bringing the Old Covenant to its completion, to its end. With the Fall of Judea and Jerusalem in AD 70 (in the Prologue, see who goes out to John: it is the Judeans and the Jerusalemites), God had been bringing his people to judgement, under the Romans this time, as he did in the past under the Assyrians in 722 BC and the Babylonians in 586 BC. And God had been bringing the New Covenant to its beginning, through his Son. (In the first three-day sub-Series of each Series, Jesus is fulfilling and completing the Old Covenant: in the last three-day sub-Series in each, he is founding and establishing the New.) As the likely original Epilogue (a reduced longer ending, Mk. 16.9-16,19-20a) informs: those believing and being baptised were to be saved (gathered up out of the war, at Jesus' return, by his angels, Mk. 13.26-27); whereas those disbelieving were to be condemned. According to the text's title (Mk.1.1 and Codex Sinaiticus) Mk. 1.2-16.20a is the 'Beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ'.

The text is our judge in such matters as these. It judges our capacity for subjective thought as we read it in the ways we think best, but declares its own objective truths about itself and its purposes as we read it in the way its writer always intended.