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BOOK REVIEW

Mark. A theological exposition of sacred Scripture

Voelz, J.W., (Concordia Commentary), (Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, 2013), Mark 1:1- 8:26, ISBN: 0758603142, Mark 8:27 – 16:20, ISBN: 0758639554

This is a full-scale commentary on the second Gospel, comprising two volumes and totalling xxxv + xliii plus 1,320 pages in pleasantly readable print.

The first 88 pages are devoted to introductory matters, including linguistic and literary features, with a briefer section on “major isagogical features”. The remainder of the book offers a very detailed commentary on the Gospel, with Christopher W. Mitchell treating section 16:9-20.

All commentaries on Mark, of necessity, treat language problems, although their main interests of emphasis may lie elsewhere. For Prof. Voelz, the language of Mark is the key to its correct understanding. His deep interest in and commitment to the Hellenic language is witnessed since the 1980s, when he published an impressive article on “The language of the New Testament” in the *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, which I read at that time with great appreciation.

In this commentary, Voelz asks detailed and engaging questions on Mark’s expressions. He does not leave a stone unturned in his effort to understand and explain for others the choice of words, the phrasing, the constructions, as well as the grammatical and semantic significance of



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Mark's linguistic choices. Thus, his commentary becomes a veritable mine of information.

But he goes one step further. His interest in the Hellenic language is such that he attempts to bring to bear even insights from the classics. He is not satisfied merely with registering grammatical and syntactical similarities; he proceeds to even compare the plot of various Marcan episodes with such authors as Homeros, Thoukidydes, Platon, and Polybios. Not everyone may be able to follow him in all this, but he certainly reveals an awareness of the Hellenic language on a higher level, not merely the few easy or obvious comparisons. Thus, his take – which is in line with more recent writing, especially on classical themes, not least through the prospects that the TLG has opened up – should be taken seriously and be further investigated.

Above all, this is a theological commentary. Voelz is interested in the theology of Mark. Unlike some commentaries that are so technical – skeletons assembling every little bone but with no flesh on them – Voelz's commentary seeks to bring out the meaning of the text in such a way that the reader will be confronted with the demand that the text makes on him. For Mark did not write his Gospel for modern scholars to exercise their ingenuity on it, but in order to let his Great Subject speak and confront the readers with His claims. This is the enduring message of the Gospel and it comes through in the present commentary.

Although critical scholars will be challenged on many points and thus have every reason to consult it, the Christian preacher and teacher will be enriched by its *cornucopia*. Unsettling questions about the Gospel – occasioned by much writing nowadays – will be answered in a responsible manner and will elicit positive food for thought.

Naturally, in a commentary of this length and detail, it is inevitable that colleagues will sometimes have another opinion. This, of course, belongs to the art of exegesis and interpretation, and this *Auseinandersetzung* is the mother of progress in understanding.

Thus, I would like to take up one point of detail. On pp. 280-296, Dr Voelz discusses the interpretation of the parable of the Sower. The crucial verse is Mark 4:12 and, in particular, the use of the conjunction ἵνα: ἵνα βλέποντες βλέπωσι καὶ μὴ ἴδωσιν καὶ ἀκούοντες ἀκούωσιν καὶ μὴ συνιῶσιν, μήποτε ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἀφεθῆ ἀυτοῖς. The author notes – correctly, in my view, generally about this sort of thing – that “many interpreters hesitate to give it purposive/final force” and rightly rejects the attempts to construe the conjunction consecutively: [the] “parables have *the effect of* blinding and stupefying their hearers”, as he does also T.W. Manson's suggestion that the oral Aramaic ܘܝܗܘܝܘܢ behind Mark, in this instance, had the sense of “who”: “who,

seeing, see and do not see". Therefore, taking the conjunction finally "in order that ...", as Voelz does, appears natural enough.

What is unsettling, however, is the fact that ἵνα also developed a causal sense. We have this on the authority of the great Alexandrian grammarian, Apollonios Dyskolos (see Chrys C. Caragounis, *The development of Greek and the New Testament: Morphology, syntax, phonology, and textual transmission*. Tübingen: Mohr (WUNT 167), pp. 221-224): ἵνα ἀναγνῶ ἐτιμήθην, ἵνα λοιδορήσω ἐπεπλήχθην, which he interprets as "Because [ἵνα] I read, I was honored; because [ἵνα] I mocked, I was reproved". This understanding, which heaps all the blame on those who look but do not see, is supported by the parallel in Matthew 13:13: διὰ τοῦτο "for this reason" they do not see. Another famous example is Romans 5:20: ἵνα πλεονάσῃ, which should be rendered "Because [sin] increased", not "in order that sin might increase". Many commentators have missed the causal use of ἵνα and landed in hopeless embarrassments: for example, V. Taylor, *Mark*, 256; W.L. Lane, *Mark* 156-159; Nolland, *Luke* I. 20, 380; Gundry, *Mark* 202; R.H. Charles, *Revelation* II. 177; Ladd, *Revelation* 198; Aune, *Revelation* II. 788, 839, III. 1221.

The above point underlines the importance of the holistic or diachronic approach to the Hellenic language. As long as scholars keep to "NT Greek" rather than to Greek period, faulty interpretations will continue. Dr Voelz, however, is one of very few who has extended his reading into the earlier periods of the Hellenic language and, for this, he ought to be congratulated.