Reader-Response Criticism: Figuring Mark's Reader

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What or Who Determines the Meaning of Mark?

What is the meaning of the Gospel of Mark? In what direction do we look to find it? What kind of meaning are we looking for? Is the meaning of the Gospel the author's conscious intention in writing the text? Is the meaning of the Gospel whatever it tells us about the historical circumstances in which it was produced? Can the meaning of the Gospel be as simple as a basic understanding of the language in which it was written? Or is the meaning a more sophisticated understanding of the way in which the story was constructed, its plot, characters, and settings?

Take, for example, the two extraordinarily similar episodes of the feeding of the five thousand, in Mark 6:30-44, and the feeding of the four thousand, in Mark 8:1-10. What is the meaning of these two stories? Even if we agree

that their meaning is historical in nature, there are still several ways to understand them. Perhaps they serve to report the fact that Jesus fed two different crowds, on two different occasions, with just a few loaves and fishes. Perhaps Jesus fed only one crowd on one occasion, but the story was told so often that different versions developed, two of which Mark (accidentally?) includes in his Gospel. Maybe the real significance of the two feeding stories is the historical insight that ancient people generally believed in the powers of holy men and women to manipulate the forces of nature, that Jesus was regarded as such a holy man, and consequently that stories such as these would inevitably be told about him. If the meaning of the stories is taken to be theological instead of historical, other possibilities appear. Could the feeding stories be symbolic allusions to the Lord's Supper? Still further down that same path, is Mark's Gospel suggesting what John's Gospel clearly does, that Jesus himself is the "bread of life," "the bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:25-59)? Instead of historical or theological meaning, could the meaning of the feeding stories be literary in nature? Do the feeding stories in Mark contribute to the advancement of the plot of the narrative? Do they reveal the character of Jesus or the Twelve? Could the setting of both feeding stories (in the desert, like Moses and the Israelite tribes in Exodus[1]) be the most significant thing about the stories?

Whether we take the meaning of Mark to be historical, theological, or literary, all of these approaches focus on the written text. They presume that some kind of meaning is bound to the text and waiting there to be discovered. These approaches take the text of the Gospel of Mark either as a window through which to look out on historical events, theological ideas, or cultural attitudes, or as a house of mirrors, reflecting internally the grammar, syntax, plot, characters, and settings of the narrative.

All of these perspectives assume that meaning is available in or through the text, independent of the reader. What if we take seriously the role of the reader in determining the meaning of the text? Regardless of whether the text is considered a window or a mirror, does it matter who is doing the looking, and when, where, why, and how they are looking? What if we consider meaning not as a property of the text itself, but rather as a function of the experience of the reader in the act of reading the text? What if, instead of considering meaning as something static, unchanging, and preceding the reading experience, we consider it the dynamic, ever-changing creation of the reader in the act of reading?

A text does not come to us wearing its meaning, like a campaign button, on its lapel. The reader-response critic argues that whatever meaning is and wherever it is found the reader is ultimately responsible for determining meaning. In reader-response criticism, meaning is no longer considered a given. It is not something ready-made, buried in the text, and just waiting to be uncovered. Rather, it is something produced in the act of reading through the

1. John 6:25-59 explicitly compares Jesus' feeding of the multitude with Moses' providing manna for the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. Many interpreters of Mark have suggested that a similar allusion, however vague, is present also in Mark.

unique interaction of the text and the particular reader doing the reading, at a particular moment, from a particular slant. Instead of *What* determines the meaning of a text? reader-response critics prefer the question, *Who* determines the meaning? The immediate answer is "the reader," which in turn leads to further questions. When, where, why, and how does the reader read?

Reader-response criticism is only one among many forms of criticism today that advocate a change in our understanding of meaning. A shift is taking place, away from a static, objective meaning bound to the text to a more subjective meaning experienced by the reader in the temporal flow of the reading experience. Some of the other approaches to the Gospel of Mark introduced in this book advocate, to a greater or lesser degree, a similar shift in focus to the reader and the reading experience. Approaches such as feminist and deconstructive criticism have explicitly focused attention on the reader and the reading experience. They could be described as first cousins of reader-response criticism. Even approaches that claim to be text-centered—narrative criticism, for example—nevertheless talk a great deal about the reader and the experience of reading. Many kinds of biblical and literary criticism today are closely related to reader-response criticism.

Who Is the Reader and What Happens in the Reading Experience?

Reader-response critics talk a lot about the reader and the experience of reading, but who is this reader, and what happens when this reader reads? One way to understand the reader of Mark's Gospel is to think of him or her as the average, everyday reader on the street or in the church pew, anyone who picks up the Gospel and reads it for personal enrichment or pleasure. Some reader-response critics like to study the responses of such average readers. Then again, we can think of the reader of Mark as the informed, expert reader. An expert reader is someone who has received specialized training in order to be able to probe the Gospel more deeply than the average reader. Many reader-response critics are concerned about how informed, expert readers read.

A similar distinction made by the literary critic George Steiner between "the reader" and "the critic" is helpful. What Steiner means by "the reader" is someone who honors, reveres, and "serves" the text she or he is reading. What he means by "the critic" is someone who probes, questions, challenges, and "masters" the text.[2] Both roles are common in the church (laypersons are usually readers and clergy are often critics). They are definitely acted out in the college or seminary classroom (students in introductory Bible courses tend to be readers, and their professors tend to be critics). This book is written by critics in the hope that it will help our readers to read and to talk about their reading experience more thoughtfully. The critic aims to deepen and enrich the experience of the reader. Some of our readers may even become critics themselves.

2. George Steiner, "'Critic'/'Reader,'" *New Literary History* 10 (1979): 423–52.

However, both readers and critics read the Gospel of Mark, so what difference, if any, is there between their reading experiences?

Both the reader and the critic of the Bible have their reading experience shaped by the communities of which they are members. Many average readers of the Bible are members of churches or synagogues that have given them some explicit and much implicit instruction in how to read the Bible "correctly." Depending on the beliefs, presuppositions, and style of the religious community, its members may approach the Bible with a fairly clear idea of what they should find there. People tend to find in the Bible what they have been taught to find there.

Critics also are members of communities that tell them how they ought to read the Bible, but often today these are academic instead of religious communities. Once upon a time, the most rigorous training in how to read the Bible was to be had only in religious communities. In the United States of the late twentieth century, however, most expert readers of the Bible receive their training in academic institutions that may or may not have an affiliation with a religious denomination. Such expert readers are typically taught to ask historical and literary questions about the Bible. They may or may not ask the old familiar religious or theological questions. Let us be clear: an expert reader can be a member both of a religious community and an academic community. Such a reader has to wear a different hat and behave in a different way when participating in the life of one community or the other. The situation is awkward, but it is a fact of life in American culture today. Many of us regularly get our costumes and behaviors mixed up because we belong to so many communities at once.

What is the difference between the kind of Bible reading taught in religious and academic communities? Generalizations here are risky, but perhaps a fair statement is that academic communities are generally more committed to open, public dialogue about the Bible than many religious communities. Why? Religious communities are obligated to remain faithful to their founding vision or to their dream of the future. Being religious does not necessarily mean being closed-minded, but religious people do have definite ideas about how life is or how it ought to be. In their common life they attempt to live out of that understanding. If they are Jews or Christians, they will read the Bible in the light of their particular experience of God in their life together. To belong to a religious community is to have a tradition to uphold.

The tradition in the academic world, however, is to question and challenge traditions. In contrast to the duty of a religious community to preserve a precious legacy, the business of an academic community is to challenge old ideas and to create new ones. Furthermore, these ideas are usually of a different sort than the ones cherished in a religious community. Today the reading experience of the expert reader of the Bible is typically more intellectual than religious.[3]

3. That is, it is more a matter of mind than heart, more cognitive than emotive. However, we must not draw too sharply the distinction between religious and academic communities or between matters of the mind and the heart. Presumably, using one's intellect does not preclude being religious, and vice versa.

Although average readers are deeply influenced by the community that has taught them how to read the Bible, nevertheless their reading experiences are frequently personal and private. Such personal experiences can be very powerful to them. Indeed, almost everyone who has learned how to read has had such personally meaningful experiences. However, even the most powerful of private reading experiences is limited, in several ways. For one thing, it often hinges upon personal history or psychology. In such cases, others in the same community may not be able to share the experience, to say nothing of outsiders. Also, everyone's knowledge of the world is limited. Everyone has biases and personal opinions. But average readers are often not aware of their own limitations and biases. Many of the average reader's experiences are based on presuppositions and opinions that have never been questioned or even acknowledged. The average reader may also be limited by having read only a narrow range of literature, perhaps a mere handful of favorite texts. For example, some Christian churches teach their members that the Bible is the only literature a Christian should read, a restriction that most of the authors of the biblical books themselves would probably find unnecessarily severe.

The expert reader, by contrast, believes that to read well one must first read widely and deeply. The more literature and more kinds of literature one has read, the better equipped one is to read with skill and insight. In order to read the Bible well, reading widely outside the Bible helps. Moreover, expert readers try to be constantly aware of the limitations and biases of all readers, most especially their own. One of the best ways to learn about one's limitations and biases in reading is to submit one's reading experience to the scrutiny and criticism of other readers. The community of readers to which one belongs can render great service here. Average readers may challenge each other, but expert readers must do so. They probe, question, and challenge, not only the text they are reading, but other critics as well, thereby gaining greater insight into one another and into the text being read.

The average reader often does not talk about reading at all. To him, reading is such a personal matter that he may feel uncomfortable talking about it. The expert reader, however, talks passionately about reading. Whether we realize it or not, whenever we open ourselves up and talk with other people about our reading experience, we are acting as a critic or expert reader. "The reader" and "the critic" are actually roles that we have all acted out from time to time. When an average reader chooses to talk about his reading experience, he is slipping for a moment into the role of critic. When a critic grows weary of talking about reading, she may relax and just savor reading for a while.

Other characteristics further distinguish the expert reader or critic. Unlike the average reader, who may or may not know about others' reading experiences, the expert reader makes it her business to know what other people have experienced as they have read. The expert reader of Mark, for example, is familiar with the history of the reading of Mark's Gospel, sometimes called its *reception history*, some of which was discussed in chapter 1. Consequently, the expert reader is familiar with the problems, questions, and puzzles that generations of readers have encountered. Expert readers are acutely aware that they are participating in an age-old conversation—often an argument!—about what happens when we read a particular text. One of the major goals of an introductory course in the Gospels is to introduce beginning students to the Gospels' reception history, so that they, too, may participate in the ongoing conversation.

Critics also talk about imaginary, ideal readers of the texts they discuss. Because expert readers are conscious of participating in a centuries-long history of reading, when they talk about the reader they are often thinking about an imaginary, ideal reader who is familiar with this entire reading history. Critics often write as if they themselves were all-knowing ideal readers, but this pose is always a fiction; no flesh-and-blood reader ever really becomes this imaginary superreader.

Another kind of ideal reader is the reader or hearer of the story that we can imagine the Gospel of Mark itself suggests. The most common labels for the imaginary reader or listener in the text of Mark are *implied reader* and *narratee*, terms that were already introduced in chapter 2. Much reader-response criticism of biblical texts has concentrated on discerning the features of the implied reader or the narratee of each text. Some biblical scholars have argued that this approach might be a fresh, new way to gain historical insights into early Christian readers. In this direction lie all the usual pitfalls of historical research, chief among them the temptation to assume that the ancients were just like us. In chapter 6 David Rhoads discusses the growing body of knowledge about how different people in first-century Mediterranean cultures were from ourselves. Therefore, we should be cautious in making claims about how first-century readers read Mark's Gospel. Admitting that ultimately the reader whose reading experience one is talking about is really one's own self is probably wiser.

Even if we admit that the implied reader and narratee are our own imaginative constructions, we can still imagine them in a multitude of ways. For example, we can imagine the implied reader or the narratee either as entities suspended in the amber of the ancient text or as lively and dynamic roles recreated and performed anew every time a real reader reads. Some kinds of literary criticism of the Bible discuss the reader in the former, static style, in which meaning is still regarded as something frozen in the text. The reader-response critic, however, emphasizes the reading experience through time. When the reader-response critic discusses the implied reader or narratee, she will return constantly to the question of what happens in the temporal flow of language in the act of reading. There are many illuminating ways of talking about the temporal experience of reading, as we shall now see.

Figuring Out the Experience of Reading Mark

All language is based on figures of speech. Words never communicate perfectly to reveal exactly how things *are*. The best we can ever do is to use figures of speech that hint at what things are *like*. It follows that the experience of reading can never be captured fully in words. As we talk about our experience of reading, we can use a variety of metaphors or other figures of speech. In the

rest of this chapter I shall apply several of these metaphors to the experience of reading Mark's Gospel.

These metaphors are tools in the reader-response critic's tool kit. In the sections that follow, I shall introduce a handful of these tools and demonstrate how to use them on interesting passages in Mark. I need to stress that only a handful of tools are introduced and demonstrated. As the critic gains experience, she will want to collect a more complete set than I shall discuss here. In addition, I need to stress that I shall not discuss any section of Mark at length, for several reasons. For one thing, verse-by-verse discussions of the entire Gospel are readily available in commentaries on Mark, and there is little need to produce more of that kind of discussion here. Moreover, extended discussions can be dull because the critic has to pretend that every verse is as weighty as every other verse, and we all know that is not true. To the contrary, we all like to talk about the high points or challenging moments of the reading experience. Reader-response critics like to focus their attention on the pivotal moments in reading that have provoked the most arguments through the years. So, these few tools are introduced to you, and their use only briefly illustrated, to entice you to use them yourself to talk about your experience of reading Mark's Gospel. Add your own tools to the kit and use them on the many passages not discussed in this chapter.

The Temporal Experience of Reading

To talk about the temporal experience of reading requires using images about time. In fact, reader-response critics use a variety of time or movement figures of speech to talk about the "temporal," "kinetic," "dynamic," "flow" of reading. As already suggested, reader-response critics are trying to lay aside images of static, fixed meaning embedded in texts. They favor instead images of dynamic processes that focus on the reader in the act of reading. The "response" in reader-response criticism is always a fluid, shifting response, mutating throughout the time of the reading experience.[4]

Assume that we are reading a sequence of words (or sentences, or episodes, etc.), A, B, C, D, E, and so forth. Our understanding of and attitude toward what we are reading changes at each step along the way.[5] For example, at point A we may have a vague idea of what lies ahead at point C. At point C our suspicions about C may be confirmed, denied, or revised. By the time we reach point E, our attitude toward C may be changed yet again, in retrospect. Or again, point A may appear one way at point A, another way from the vantage point of B, another way at point C, another way at point D, and so forth. In brief, the reading experience, if we stop to think about it, is full of twists and turns, surprises and developments. Our minds change constantly as we read. As our minds change, meaning changes.

4. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 26.
5. Ibid., 27.

Many traditional approaches to interpretation unconsciously hurry past the reading experience in order to get to its conclusion. Discussions of narratives often look back upon the story from the vantage point of the end of the reading experience. The end of reading—moment Z, let us call it—may be a very important moment, but it is just one moment among many. We have all read stories that were so enjoyable that we were sad to finish them. Endings are often anticlimactic, in contrast to the intriguing journey that led up to the ending. Like many things in life, the trip itself is often more interesting than the arrival. This approach does not minimize the importance of the final moment in the reading experience, which may be a moment of illumination or power. However, one of the virtues of reader-response criticism is that it encourages us to take seriously every moment of the reading experience, not just the final moment. Accordingly, all of the metaphors that will be introduced here are "temporal experience of reading" metaphors. They try to do some justice to our journey through the text.

Because reader-response criticism is not primarily interested in historical meaning, the fact that the emphasis on the temporal experience of reading can help us to understand better the experience of first-century audiences of the Gospel may come as a surprise. In antiquity all reading was done out loud, even when a person read in solitude. A piece of religious literature such as Mark's Gospel would typically have been read to an assembly of interested listeners. The Gospel would not have been read silently, the way average readers are taught to read today. It would not have been scrutinized with a critical eye, the way critics analyze texts today, patiently flipping printed pages back and forth. Rather, the typical first-century experience of the Gospel would have been to hear it performed orally, probably in a continuous recitation and probably from beginning to end. The first encounters with the Gospel were thus temporal experiences of oral performance. Nineteen centuries later, people can still hear portions of Mark read in public worship, but the portions are usually so small that the cumulative effects that are possible in an extended reading are lost. A wide gulf separates first-century hearing of the Gospel from twentieth-century silent reading of it, but reader-response criticism's exploration of the temporal experience of reading is a valuable resource that can deepen our appreciation of the temporal experience of the first-century oral performance of Mark.[6]

Looking Forward, Looking Back

We have already used one metaphor for the reading experience that is virtually universal: as we read we constantly "look forward" and "look back." That is,

6. A good way to gain insight into first-century oral performance of the Gospel is to perform it orally today. For a performance of Mark's Gospel using a contemporary American English translation, see the videotaped performance by David Rhoads (available from SELECT, 2199 E. Main St., Columbus, OH 43209). Rhoads performs the entire Gospel of Mark from memory, an astonishing feat today, but commonplace in antiquity.

as we read we try to anticipate what lies ahead, and we constantly review and reevaluate what we have already read. In order to make maximum sense of what we are reading, the reader must ponder not just the present moment of reading, but how the present moment relates to moments remembered from the past and anticipated in the future.

Writing is hard work, and so is reading. Wolfgang Iser suggests that the reader's toil in constantly reviewing the past and previewing the future is like the original creative struggle of the author in writing the text: "We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation."[7]

Consider the senses that are evoked by our metaphors. Looking forward and looking back are visual metaphors, playing on the sense of sight. One could just as easily substitute an acoustic metaphor, playing on the sense of hearing: a reader "hears" whispers, faint sounds, or maybe trumpet fanfares of what lies ahead, and echoes, loud or soft, clear or indistinct, of what has preceded.

What are some good examples of moments in reading the Gospel of Mark where the reader looks forward or back? When considering the temporal experience of reading, we can talk about both small-scale, micromoments in reading or large-scale macromoments. We shall look at some micromoments first, the frequent occurrence of "immediately" (*euthys*) and "again" (*palin*) in the discourse of the narrative.

Everyone who has read Mark's Gospel carefully has observed that the author seems to make everything in the story happen "immediately" (the Greek word is *euthys*). Sometimes this word occurs in one sentence after another.

> 1:18 And *immediately* they left their nets and followed him. . . .
> 1:20 And *immediately* he called them. . . .
> 1:21 And *immediately* on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. . . .
> 1:23 And *immediately* there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. . . .[8]

The author so overworks this word that embarrassed translators scramble to introduce as much variety as possible in their English translations. They may translate *euthys* as "immediately," "at once," "just as," "just then," or "as soon as," or sometimes in frustration they just leave the word out of the translation altogether.

In current literary discussions of Mark, this quirk in the author's writing style is credited with setting a mood of urgency for the actions of the characters in the story being told. Rather than addressing the mood it sets for the action in the story, however, the reader-response critic prefers to ask how the frequent

7. Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History* 3 (1972): 293.
8. The translation used here is the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

*euthys*es affect the reader. What kind of storytelling strategy is at work here? What does having to negotiate this steady flow of *immediatelys* do to the reader?

To do full justice to this question, we would have to examine each individual instance of *immediately.* We would have to ask ourselves how to relate each instance to moments before and after in the reading experience. The reader-response critic will not automatically assume that each *immediately* works the same way. Nevertheless, we might hazard the generalization that the cumulative effect of all the *euthys*es is to drill into the reader that this narrative has relentless forward thrust. Readers who want to read this narrative must jump on the narrative bandwagon, hold on tight, and be attentive to what lies ahead. *Euthys* never says much about *what* to look forward to; it just reminds us to keep looking forward.

Somewhat like *euthys*, but pointing in the opposite direction, the Greek word *palin* stops us dead in our tracks and demands that we look backward momentarily. In Mark *palin* is usually best translated as "again." Unlike *euthys*, which points forward but vaguely, *palin* usually points us backward to a fairly certain moment earlier in the reading of the narrative. If we stop to think, usually we can recall the previous moment to which the *palin* is pointing us.[9]

To cite just one example, in Mark 8:1 the narrator introduces a scene that should easily remind the reader of the setting for the earlier episode of the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6:30-44:

> In those days when there was *again* a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance" (8:1-3).[10]

Countless readers have puzzled over why the disciples in Mark seem so dense. When Jesus first invites the disciples to feed a hungry crowd in Mark 6:37, they do not know what to do. They have no understanding of what Jesus is capable of doing to satisfy the needs of the crowd. Any reader, however, is bound to understand better than the disciples, especially after Jesus proceeds to feed five thousand men with just a few loaves and fishes. Mark 8:1-3 reminds the reader of this earlier episode. These verses alert the reader to anticipate a second feeding incident in the episode about to unfold. In contrast to the reader's recollection of the past feeding incident and anticipation of another, in Mark

9. Frans Neirynck, with Theo Hansen and Frans Van Segbroeck, has counted twenty-eight instances of *palin* in Mark, nearly all of which point back clearly to an antecedent moment in the reading experience; see *The Minor Agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark with a Cumulative List*, Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium 37 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1974), 276–77.
10. The translation used here is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), with emphasis added.

8:4 the disciples reveal to the reader that they learned nothing from the earlier feeding incident and therefore are oblivious to the possibility that Jesus might do it all over again: "His disciples replied, 'How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?' " (Mark 8:4). How could they *not* know, the reader may say to herself, given their experience back in Mark 6:30-44? The reader-response critic recognizes here and elsewhere that Mark's Gospel is narrated in such a way that the reader perceives and understands what characters in the story do not.

The two feeding stories in Mark 6 and 8 are a classic example of the widespread repetition or duality in Mark. What is the meaning of such repetition? Some possible historical solutions to the problem were listed previously. But what if we are not content with any of these possible historical meanings of the dual stories? What if we suspect that the meaning of these stories lies less in ancient history and more in how they strike the reader who must encounter them now in the act of reading? As you might anticipate, the reader-response critic will ask, "What happens when the reader reads seemingly repetitious material?" And again, the reader-response critic will want to consider every instance on its own terms because the rhetorical possibilities of repetition (as with any storytelling strategy) are endless. By repetition, the reader's insight into the narrative can be built up or solidified; repetition can also weary us, confuse us, or make us suspicious. Repetition giveth and repetition taketh away. It is always wise to consider each moment of reading on its own merits.

Operating at a slightly wider scope than *euthys* and *palin*, the reader looks forward whenever Jesus predicts something and looks back whenever one of his predictions is fulfilled. In Mark's story Jesus can accurately predict the future. This characteristic of Jesus is so prominent in the story that only with difficulty can we shift our attention away from the *story* to the *discourse*—the way the story is told by the storyteller and received by the reader, as explained in the previous chapter.

Perhaps the boldest predictions uttered in the story are Jesus' three predictions of his impending passion, or suffering and death. These three passion predictions (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34) provide the framework around which the central chapters 8–10 are constructed. The three predictions are offered so boldly, so clearly, and above all so frequently that no reader can fail to have his expectations for the rest of the narrative shaped by them. As we read on to the end of the Gospel, the reader can have little doubt about what lies ahead. Once again, the reader experiences an ironic tension between what he understands about the story and what the characters in the story do not understand. No one in the story seems to learn anything from these predictions (see Mark 8:32-33; 9:31-34,38-39; 10:32,35-45). The reader, by contrast, cannot help but be educated by these signposts to future moments in the narrative.

Although Jesus issues his predictions boldly, their fulfillment is seldom observed by characters in the story (by contrast, see Luke 24:6-8,44). Rather, the reader, at the level of the discourse, is left to connect the fulfillment back to the prediction. A good example may be found in Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, the council of chief priests and elders in Jerusalem (Mark 14:53-72). The entire scene fulfills Jesus' passion predictions, especially the third and most detailed prediction in 10:32-34. Jesus' tormenters spit upon him, strike him, and taunt him to "prophesy" (14:65), not realizing that Jesus had "prophesied" their actions. However, the reader understands. Still further along in the same passage, Peter saves his own life by denying Jesus three times, just as Jesus had said he would (14:29-31; see also 8:35-38). Apparently Peter's denial is taking place at the same time that Jesus is being taunted by his tormenters, thus the irony that several different predictions by Jesus are being fulfilled simultaneously. Peter eventually remembers that Jesus had predicted his triple betrayal (14:72), a rare instance of a character in the story making a connection between present and past. Only the reader habitually makes the connections between past, present, and future in this narrative. The characters in the story, with the exception of Jesus, generally do not make these connections. Only the reader *can* make them, thanks to the resources provided to the reader alone by the discourse of the narrative.

To sum up, "prediction and fulfillment" has typically been treated as a function of the character Jesus within the story of Mark's Gospel. The reader-response critic would rather take prediction and fulfillment as a function of the experience of reading Mark's Gospel. Prediction and fulfillment is almost never observed in Mark's story; it is observed frequently in the experience of reading Mark's story.

Filling Gaps

Another metaphor for the reading experience has been popularized by Wolfgang Iser: as we read, we encounter "gaps" in the narrative that must be "filled."[11] Any narrative always has holes, places where something is missing. Reading is not only a matter of making sense of what is there in the narrative but also what is not there. Filling is not the only way to handle a gap. Sometimes we can rig a simple bridge across the gap, we might be able to jump across it, or we might exercise prudence by walking around it. The gaps that appear in the path we walk through the reading experience must be negotiated somehow, but readers often have considerable freedom to handle them as they see fit. Many of the arguments between readers are over how best to deal with gaps in the texts we read. As long as there are gaps (which is forever), readers will argue about how to handle them.

Once again, we can look at some small-scale examples and work our way up. At the level of grammar and syntax, in Mark's Gospel the subjects and objects of sentences are unspecified in many places.[12] In such cases the reader is left to figure out who is who in the sentence. A Greek composition instructor would probably assign Mark a poor grade in style and grammar for such a performance. In Mark's defense, however, his unspecified subjects and objects usually present little difficulty to the reader, and sometimes the reader is caught

11. Wolfgang, Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 167–72.
12. Neirynck, *Minor Agreements*, 261–72.

for a moment in a most intriguing ambiguity. Whether the grammatical gap is intriguing or merely awkward, it represents a challenge to the reader that, however minor, must be negotiated before the reading experience can continue. It guarantees the involvement of the reader in the ongoing business of making sense of the text. This kind of gap may not be stylish, nevertheless it is often engaging, effective rhetoric.

Although many comments by reader-response critics focus on ideal, hypothetical readers, we know a great deal about how actual readers have negotiated Mark's gaps. Two ancient readers who have left us evidence of their gap filling in Mark are the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Most scholars believe that Matthew and Luke produced their Gospels by rewriting Mark's, so their Gospels may be understood as implicit reports of their experiences of reading Mark. Just like us, Matthew and Luke had to steer their way through the discourse of Mark's narrative. We are lucky that they left a record of their response to their experience of reading Mark. If we read Mark's Gospel side by side with Matthew and Luke, we can easily find "gaps" in Mark that have been "filled" by Matthew, Luke, or both.

- Mark 1:14 reads: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." A gap lies here between the arrest of John and the beginning of Jesus' preaching ministry. What connection, if any, is there between these two events? The storyteller gives us no indication, so the reader is free to imagine all sorts of connections. Without doubt, Matthew felt there had to be a connection, for in Matthew 4:12 we read: "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee." Exactly *why* Jesus went to Galilee remains unclear, but that he went *because* of John's arrest is clear. Such minimal gap filling is often sufficient to allow us to continue reading.

- In Mark 3:6 we are told that the Pharisees and the Herodians plotted Jesus' death. Then, in 3:7 we are told that Jesus withdrew to the Sea of Galilee. Should we construct a bridge between these two comments? Matthew does bridge the gap by stating that Jesus "knew" about the plot and consequently "withdrew" (Matt 12:15).

- In Mark 3:31-35 Jesus is teaching inside a house. Next thing we know he is teaching alongside the sea (Mark 4:1). How did he suddenly get from one place to the other? Matthew fills the gap, if only slightly: "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea" (Matt 13:1).

- Another equally wrenching gap in Mark's narrative occurs between Mark 6:14-29, the story of the death of John the Baptist, and Mark 6:30-44, the story of the feeding of the five thousand. Mark juxtaposes these two episodes with no transition from one to the other. How the reader is to connect them, if at all, is not indicated. Matthew reworks Mark 6:30 into an explicit transition from one episode to another. In Matthew 14:12 Jesus' disciples go to tell him of John's death, which they do not in Mark, and in Matthew 14:13 Jesus hears their report, which of course he cannot in Mark. As a result, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus and the Twelve's withdrawal to the wilderness, where the multitude will be fed, is in direct response to the report of John's death. No such connection between the two episodes is suggested by Mark. Nevertheless, Mark does give us the gap between Mark 6:29 and 6:30, and Matthew's bridge is one reader's reasonable attempt to negotiate the gap. If we do not like Matthew's bridge, we are free to build our own.

The gap filling by Matthew and Luke is exactly what any reader must do when reading Mark's Gospel. The service provided by the reader-response critic is to alert us to what we have always done while reading but seldom stopped to think about.

Other gaps in Mark's narrative are of still larger scope. These gaps occur either in the story or in the discourse of the narrative. To spot such gaps requires recognition that story and discourse need not always go together hand in hand. If he wants to, the storyteller can leave something out of the story; if he wants to, he can leave something out of the discourse. The analogy is imperfect, but imagine yourself watching a movie in which occasionally the picture continues while the sound is turned off, and at other times the picture is blanked out while the sound continues. Some examples may help us appreciate how Mark's Gospel can function occasionally with either story or discourse turned off.

An example of a gap in the discourse may be found in Mark 4, the parable chapter. Historically, the parables of Jesus of Nazareth were surely designed to provoke and intrigue his audiences, for they still provoke and intrigue us today. The challenge of Mark 4 to the reader-response critic is to be sensitive not only to the provocation of Jesus' audience within the story, but at the same time to be attentive to how the parables strike us, the readers, who hear them thanks to the narrator's discourse. Furthermore, if we are open to the possibility that something can happen in the story that is missing from the discourse (and vice versa), then we will be in position to discover how we handle this kind of gap in Mark 4.

Mark 4 begins with the famous parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-9). Immediately afterward, disciples approach Jesus, asking for help in understanding his parables. His response is perhaps more perplexing than the parables themselves: "And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven"'" (Mark 4:11-12). Verse 12, in which Jesus seems to say he uses parables with the purpose of preventing people from understanding him, has been a source of arguments for generations of readers. I shall deal with it further later, in considering another metaphor for the reading experience. For now I want to concentrate on Jesus' comment that his listeners have "been given the secret of the kingdom of God."

The reader has a major problem here. If we review the first four chapters of the Gospel, we cannot find the place in the story where the "secret of the kingdom of God" was given to Jesus' followers. Countless expert readers have offered countless suggestions as to when this event happened in the story, but

there is no consensus solution. Average and expert readers alike want to believe that if a Gospel refers to a scene or an episode in the story, then surely the storyteller meant to narrate that scene or episode in the discourse of the narrative. In other words, is not the storyteller obliged to make all the action of the story take place on the stage, in front of our eyes? Surely Mark would not make something happen offstage, where the audience can neither see nor hear it?

As soon as the question is put this way, most readers will realize that nothing prevents the storyteller from referring to portions of the story that, for whatever reasons, he does not tell us. An analogy between Mark and a play performed on a stage may be helpful. Perhaps you have seen a play by Shakespeare in which a murder or a battle is announced on the stage after it has supposedly happened offstage, out of our sight and hearing. Similarly in storytelling, omitting from the discourse a portion of the story is a standard technique among skilled storytellers. The "giving of the secret of the Kingdom of God" is just such a gap in the discourse of Mark's Gospel. It is an allusion to an episode in the story that the storyteller declines to narrate.

Besides gaps in the discourse, Mark's story also has gaps. The stage analogy would be the scene that takes place on the stage, seemingly in full view of the characters and the audience, but the characters on stage are utterly oblivious to it; only the audience sees and hears. In such a case, as far as the characters are concerned, what happens on stage has no bearing on them. For all practical purposes it happens only for the sake of the audience. That is, in narrative terms, the only thing that is moving forward is the discourse; the story has momentarily halted.

An example of such a gap in the story is Jesus' cry from the cross in Mark 15:34-35: "At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah'" (15:34-35). Jesus cries out to God, using the opening words of Psalm 22. But these words are not in Greek, like the rest of Mark's Gospel—they are in Aramaic! Fortunately for the Greek-speaking implied reader of the Gospel, the storyteller slips in a translation, which tells us exactly what the otherwise exotic words say: in his forsakenness, Jesus is crying out to God. The characters standing around the cross, however, do not understand what he is saying. They hear Jesus' cry as an appeal to the prophet Elijah.

So where is the gap? The gap is opened by the storyteller's parenthetical comment to the reader, which translates Jesus' words for our benefit alone. Without the translation, the Greek-speaking reader might be just as lost as those characters on the stage around the cross, who mistakenly hear Jesus cry to Elijah. They hear the same cry that we do, but whereas we are made to understand it by the storyteller's parenthetical comment, they utterly misunderstand. We have been drawn into a charmed, inner circle of understanding. The characters in the story, however, are excluded from understanding the story. As far as they are concerned, the story has halted, but without their knowledge. In Mark 15:34-35 no one in the story (except maybe Jesus) understands the story, which is to say that for them Mark 15:34-35 is a gap in

the story. Only the reader outside the story understands, not so much the story as the discourse of Mark 15:34-35.

Other figures of speech may be helpful in our quest to appreciate gaps in story and discourse. Aside from the metaphor of gaps, in Mark an opaque veil often seems to have been dropped between the audience receiving the storyteller's discourse and the characters in the story. In Mark 4:11, for instance, the opaque veil seems to favor the disciples while shutting the reader of the Gospel out of the secret of the Kingdom of God. In Mark 15:34-35, on the contrary, the reader is the privileged insider while the characters in the story are excluded by a veil that prevents them from understanding what they are seeing and hearing.

Whether we use the metaphor of the gap or of the veil of exclusion, fundamental here is the distinction between the story and the discourse of a narrative. Distinguishing between story and discourse allows us to recognize the occasional possibility of having story without discourse or discourse without story. (Later we shall see that sometimes story and discourse can work simultaneously but at cross-purposes, for instances in dramatic irony.) In such cases, the reader does not so much fill gaps in the story or the discourse as endure them, or, if the veil metaphor is used, the reader must live and learn through the dropping and lifting of veils. Like so many of our reading experiences, we are so accustomed to negotiating the gaps or enduring the veil that we seldom stop to think about it.

Reconstruction

In recent years finding irony galore in the Gospels has become fashionable among biblical critics. The Gospel writers, they commonly argue, constructed their narratives with a strong ironic twist in order to intrigue their readers. Many of these discussions have been inspired by the literary critic Wayne Booth, whose insights into the rhetorical uses of irony have proven to be a rich resource for biblical critics.[13]

Booth is fascinated by the process readers go through, first to decide whether an author is being ironic, and second to figure out what the author really means to say if indeed she is using irony. Booth suggests that the process of discerning and deciphering irony can be best described by using the metaphor of "reconstruction."[14] At its most basic, an ironic utterance is one that cannot be taken at face value. The true, intended meaning of the words lies hidden somewhere behind the surface meaning. An ironic utterance is like a wobbly building standing on a shaky foundation—we cannot take it the way it stands, so the reader must dismantle and reconstruct the ironic edifice on a more solid footing. Booth proposes a four-step process for reconstructing the meaning of an irony.

13. Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

14. Ibid., 10–14, 33–44.

"*Step one*. The reader is required to reject the literal meaning."[15] An ironic utterance is incongruous or inconsistent, either within itself or with something else. This incongruity or inconsistency makes accepting it at face value impossible. So the first step is for the reader to decide that the author does not mean exactly what she says.

"*Step two*. Alternative interpretations or explanations are tried out."[16] If the author does not mean what she says, what could she possibly mean? Did she misspeak? Was she careless? Has she forgotten what she has said or done elsewhere in the narrative? Has she gone mad? What could she possibly be up to?

"*Step three*. A decision must therefore be made about the author's knowledge or beliefs."[17] This step is pivotal. The reader must step back and make a judgment about the author. What does the author really think? Where does she really stand? What are her true convictions and motives? Only with such a judgment in hand can the reader hope to reconstruct what really lies behind the irony.

"*Step four*. Having made a decision about the knowledge or beliefs of the speaker, we can finally choose a new meaning or cluster of meanings with which we can rest secure."[18] This step is the reconstruction proper. Having decided where the author really stands, the reader can dismantle the ironic utterance and reconstruct it. The result is, Booth says, a "stable" new construction of meaning.

Turning to examples, Booth himself discusses a much-discussed instance of irony in Mark, the ironic mockery hurled at Jesus as he hangs dying on the cross:[19]

> Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from cross now, so that we many see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him (Mark 15:29-32).

Exploring Booth's four-step process in detail should not be necessary here. Clearly, when Jesus' detractors call him "Messiah" and "King of Israel," they do not mean what they say. These characters do not for a second believe that Jesus is Messiah or King (step one). Indeed, the storyteller himself signals that all those surrounding Jesus are "deriding," "mocking," and "taunting" him (step three). The conclusion is easy to draw: everyone is heaping verbal abuse on a dying man (step four).

Thus far we have identified and reconstructed *verbal irony* in the crucifixion scene. At the same time, however, *dramatic irony* is at work here. As the name

15. Ibid., 10.
16. Ibid., 11.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 12.
19. Ibid., 28–29.

suggests, verbal irony is an ironic utterance, such as the words said in mockery at the cross. Dramatic irony is ironic incongruity in situations or events in a narrative. It is a classic technique used by playwrights in dramas written for the stage. In the theater, dramatic irony occurs when the audience recognizes and comprehends an ironic incongruity between what the characters on the stage know or understand and what the audience in the seats knows or understands. In a narrative such as the Gospel of Mark, dramatic irony typically involves an incongruity between what is known or understood by characters at the level of the story and what is known or understood by the reader at the level of discourse.

Although the process of perceiving and fathoming dramatic irony is similar to that for verbal irony, Booth's reconstruction metaphor works better for verbal irony. With verbal irony, we can often reconstruct "what the person really meant to say," and thus arrive at a stable, reconstructed meaning. With dramatic irony, however, the ironic incongruity is one of circumstances and events, not necessarily of words, and once the reader has understood the dramatic irony of circumstances or events, it does not go away. Indeed, once the dramatic irony is grasped by the reader, its ironic tension may grow in magnitude. Dramatic irony, like verbal irony, needs to be figured out, if not entirely reconstructed, but dramatic irony continues to reverberate even after it has been comprehended.

The dramatic irony in Mark 15:29-32 is that, unknown to the mockers at the foot of the cross, Jesus *really is* the Christ, the King of Israel. Ironically, the words they use to insult him are the truest and best possible description of him (step four). They do not realize this fact, however. Only the reader of the Gospel is in position to understand what the characters in the story do not understand. The entire experience of reading Mark's Gospel up to this point has prepared the reader to see the deeper truth: for the author of this Gospel, Jesus is exactly who the mockers think he is not (step three). Whereas the verbal irony in the crucifixion scene is openly signaled as such by the storyteller, the accompanying dramatic irony is unannounced. The reader has to recognize and come to terms with it entirely on her own. This irony represents a great challenge to the reader, but it is at the same time a tremendous expression of trust by the author in the reader's ability to figure things out for herself.

Other verbal ironies are found on the lips of characters in the story. In the passion narrative especially, many words spoken by characters are ironic:

- Judas calls Jesus "rabbi" (my teacher), kisses him, thereby betraying him (14:45).
- Peter, confronted with being a follower of Jesus, says of Jesus: "I do not know this man you are talking about" (14:71).
- Pilate, speaking to the crowd, asks, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" (15:9).
- The execution squad conducts a mock coronation, complete with pretend royal garb and a crown of plaited thorns, and calls out to Jesus, "Hail, King of the Jews!" (15:18).

Earlier in the Gospel, on occasion Jesus himself speaks ironically. In Mark 7:9, for example, Jesus "congratulates" the Pharisees and scribes for setting aside one of God's commandments: "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!" Given everything that surrounds this comment by Jesus in Mark 7, there is little danger of any reader taking Jesus at face value; he does not intend to congratulate, but rather to condemn the Pharisees and scribes for substituting their own traditions for the commandments of God. The verbal irony in Mark 7:9 is easily recognized and reconstructed.

Other examples of dramatic irony in the Gospel are numerous. A favorite technique of the storyteller to create ironic tension between the story and the discourse is to narrate two almost identical incidents in which the disciples of Jesus seem to learn absolutely nothing. Wonderful examples of these matched pairs of stories are the stilling of the storm in Mark 4:35-41 and the walking on the water in Mark 6:45-52, the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6:30-44 and the feeding of the four thousand in 8:1-10, and the two incidents in which Jesus welcomes and embraces children in Mark 9:35-37 and 10:13-16. Let us examine this last pair of episodes.

> He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (9:35-37).

> People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them (10:13-16).

The story content of these two episodes is so similar that the temptation is to concentrate on that. The reader-response critic will resist that temptation, however, by concentrating on the reader's encounter with the storyteller's discourse.

Unlike the verbal ironies we examined in the passion narrative, no explicit signals here indicate that anyone is saying something that he does not really mean. Dramatic irony is typically more subtle than that, and consequently the business of reconstruction is less straightforward. At the level of the story, the reader easily grasps Jesus' consistent attitude toward children. Just as clear to the reader is the disciples' persistent and stubborn rejection of Jesus' example. Here we begin to detect an ironic tension between what is happening in the story and what we understand about the story thanks to the narrator's discourse.

The introduction to the first of the two episodes is already unflattering to the Twelve: they had been discussing among themselves "who was the greatest"

(9:34). Such egotism is unlikely to impress the reader favorably, especially in that the reader realizes that the disciples were debating their own greatness at the same time that Jesus was trying to instruct them about his own impending death (9:31). Jesus has death on his mind; the disciples, their own glory. In that setting Jesus embraces the child as a lesson to the self-centered disciples that instead of seeking to be great, they should seek to be "last of all and servant of all" (9:35). Accepting someone as insignificant as a child is like accepting God himself (9:37). Still, in this first of the two episodes, we may be willing to give the disciples the benefit of the doubt—perhaps they will learn their lesson. However, the reader has been instructed that the disciples stand apart from Jesus in their attitude toward children. Will they do better when a second opportunity arises?

They do not. The second episode jumps immediately into the issue of receiving or not receiving children. The disciples want to turn children away. This makes Jesus angry (10:13-14). He insists, again, that children must be embraced—the Kingdom of God belongs to them (10:14)!

The obtuseness of the disciples is quite remarkable. If we were so inclined, we could forever offer psychological explanations for the disciples' insensitivity in the story. More important to the reader-response critic, however, is observation of how our response to the two episodes is shaped by the way the storyteller narrates them to us. What allows us to recognize and reconstruct dramatic irony here? Two observations are key. First, the disciples' obtuseness and self-centeredness is already firmly established for the reader even before the first child-embracing scene unfolds. The alert reader may already be prepared to encounter insensitivity on the part of the Twelve in the first of the two scenes, to say nothing of the second. The second key is that when Jesus repeats his warm embrace of children and the disciples are, if anything, more insensitive than before, the reader is struck by the insight that the Twelve have learned nothing from their previous encounter. The reader experiences an ironic incongruity between the logical expectation that the Twelve would learn from their past mistakes and the reader's observation that they do not in fact learn a thing. The reconstruction metaphor does not work well here; although the reader may perceive and comprehend this ironic incongruity, the incongruity is not resolved or "reconstructed." Rather, the ironic tension continues to haunt the reader. That the disciples have learned nothing from their experience is solidly established. But, the average reader may ask, Why have they learned nothing? And what is it that they have not learned? The expert reader may go a step further and ask, If the disciples have learned nothing, what has allowed *us* to learn a great deal? And have we learned all that we should? A reader-response critic goes still further and observes that average and expert readers alike are dealing with a narrative whose fabric is woven with powerful ironic tensions. All readers of this narrative must work their way through ironic tensions between the story and the discourse. All readers of this narrative are regularly challenged to reconstruct irony, to the extent possible.

Besides describing the reader's encounter with irony, the reconstruction metaphor also helpfully describes many other reading experiences. Whenever the reader has to deal with incongruity or with aspects of the story or the

discourse that cannot be accepted at face value, the reconstruction metaphor may help us to describe the experience of dismantling a portion of the narrative in order to reconstruct it on a firmer footing.

The Self-Consuming Artifact

Our next metaphor for the reading experience comes from one of the classic works of reader-response criticism, Stanley Fish's *Self-Consuming Artifacts*.[20] The title of the book is self-explanatory. Fish is concerned with pieces of literature that seem to say something but then take it back, or that do something to us and then undo it, in the course of the reading experience. In fact, Fish does not limit himself to a single metaphor—the text that consumes itself as we read it—but instead he includes a whole family of similar metaphors. The "self-consuming artifact," he says, is a text that "self-destructs," "self-subverts," "inverts," "undermines," "unbuilds," "reverses," "disappoints," "frustrates," "unsettles," "breaks down," "self-cannibalizes," and so forth.[21] To add my own figures to the collection, some texts operate like a knitting machine that knits but at the same time unravels what it has knitted. When you get to the end of the reading experience, although a lot of knitting has taken place, you may not have a sweater, just loose piles of yarn. Or, the self-consuming literary artifact is like a railroad locomotive and crew who tear up the track behind the locomotive in order to relay the track in front so that the locomotive can continue to roll forward. As we read, we often cover ground that can never be revisited because continuing to read requires that we leave those places behind us, sometimes forever.

Mark's narrative seldom unravels itself to the degree that Fish likes to find in seventeenth-century European literature, but at times it comes close. The examples from Mark that I wish to examine all involve surprising revelations to the reader about aspects of story or discourse that the reader could not have anticipated. The first, Mark 10:17-22, is an episode often called "the rich man"—an unfortunate label, as we shall see. At the beginning of this episode a man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do "to inherit eternal life." We know nothing about the man, so most readers will be inclined to hear him out. The question he asks is significant, and we have no reason to suppose that he is not a sincere seeker. Besides, would we not like to hear Jesus' answer to this weighty question ourselves? Jesus responds by quizzing the man about his observance of several of the Ten Commandments. The man replies that he has faithfully kept them all. The episode hurries toward its resolution, as Jesus replies: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Presumably Jesus' demanding prescription strikes at the heart of the man's question.

20. Stanley E. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1972).
21. This list has remarkable affinities with what Stephen Moore will have to say in chapter 4 about a "deconstructive" interpretation of the Gospel of Mark.

We cannot imagine how Jesus' words are relevant, however, until we hear the final comment by the storyteller: "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, *for he had many possessions*." Only now do we grasp what stands between the man and eternal life: his many possessions. He is a rich man, something we had not known until the last two words of the episode. The story sets us up, encouraging us to think favorably of the man, only to pull the rug out from under us at the end. The traditional title given to the episode is unfortunate because it tips off readers to the punch line, thereby robbing it of its punch. This self-consuming narrative artifact has lost much of its power for generations of readers because everyone knows, or thinks he knows, what the lesson of the story is before ever reading it.

Let us turn to another moment of surprise and reversal in reading, one that stills packs considerable punch after all these years. In Mark 14:32-42 Jesus and his disciples visit Gethsemane, where Jesus prays an anguished prayer in anticipation of his death. In 14:34 Jesus tells the disciples how deeply grieved he is by the prospect of death, and he charges them to keep watch while he prays. Next, in 14:35-36 he moves on a little farther, where he prays this prayer: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." He returns to the disciples and finds them sleeping (14:37)! Then he issues his famous rebuke of the slumbering disciples ("the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"). If the story were not so horrific, it would be slapstick comedy that Jesus pours out his soul to God three times, and then comes and finds the disciples sleeping every time.

The moment of surprise and reversal in the reading of this passage is the moment when Jesus first returns to find the disciples sleeping (14:37). When Jesus goes on just "a little farther" and prays his prayer, the reader has no reason to suppose that the disciples are not watching and hearing his prayer from a short distance away. Certainly, the reader "watches" Jesus and "hears" his prayer. So should not we assume that the disciples are watching and hearing the same things that we are? However, when we return with Jesus to find the disciples sleeping, we are shocked, just as he is shocked. He assumed they were watching and hearing him. We assumed they were watching and hearing him along with us. Both he and we are surprised and disappointed. The disciples have failed Jesus, but they have also failed us. No one in the story stayed awake and heard the prayer. The only faithful, wide-awake witness to Jesus' prayer was the reader. Only the reader of the storyteller's discourse has fulfilled the role of the faithful follower. The master storyteller knits us into the fabric of his narrative at the same time that he unravels the disciples' role inside the story. Further, he successfully keeps us from learning of it until after the fact, much to our surprise.

The last example we shall examine not only is a good example of a self-consuming artifact—it, too, offers surprise by means of reversal—but also demonstrates other interesting reading experiences, including an encounter with a gap and a challenge to reconstruct irony.

Mark 4:10-13 was already mentioned in our discussion of gaps. We observed that 4:11 reveals a gap in the discourse of the Gospel. There Jesus says that his followers have "been given the secret of the kingdom of God," but the

giving of that secret was never narrated. Presumably the giving of this secret happened in the story, but nevertheless it was omitted from the discourse. However, that is just the beginning of the dance steps this passage puts the reader through. Let us see what happens when we continue to read.

To add further insult to the exclusion of the reader from the secret of the kingdom, 4:11 goes on to state that "for those outside everything is in parables." Apparently the secret of the kingdom is reserved for insiders only; to outsiders, such as the reader, it is a mysterious puzzle or riddle.[22] A curtain seems to separate the reader from Jesus and his disciples: they are on the privileged side, while we stand on the other side, wondering what we are missing. Lest we despair, however, we need to read on.

Just a few steps down the road, a double reversal springs forth. In 4:13 Jesus turns to the "insiders" of 4:11 and asks them: "Do *you* not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"[23] The tables are turned; roles are reversed. The disciples, the insiders of 4:11, are now revealed to be outsiders, those for whom the parables are riddles. The reader of the Gospel, the outsider of 4:11, now understands that the disciples do not understand. This insight is not much, but it is enough to make the reader a modest insider. No longer do we stand on one side of the curtain, wondering what is happening on the other side. Now we realize that those on the privileged side did not understand what was being given to them, and they have no advantage over us. Indeed, that we understand at least this much gives us an advantage over them. The insiders of 4:11 are revealed in 4:13 to be outsiders; the outsiders of 4:11 discover themselves in 4:13 to be insiders.

This double reversal in 4:13 encourages us to look back over the preceding verses to reconsider and reevaluate what we have just read. Once we hear Jesus' sharp rebuke of the disciples in 4:13, we may want to reevaluate his comment to them back in 4:11 that they are the recipients of the secret of the kingdom of God. In retrospect, in 4:11 could Jesus have been speaking with tongue in cheek? Could he have been speaking a verbal irony? His words might not have sounded ironic when we were at 4:11, but viewed in hindsight from 4:13, they may have changed in tone.

Our suspicion that 4:11 is ironic may be strengthened as we grapple with a verse we have avoided so far, the notoriously difficult verse in 4:12. This verse says that Jesus teaches in parables "*so that* in seeing, they may see and not perceive, and in hearing, they may hear and not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."[24] In other words, Jesus uses parables with the express purpose of keeping people from understanding them. Otherwise they would turn their lives around and receive forgiveness, and we would not want that, would we? Of course we would! If taken literally, however, this is the logic of 4:12, and it strikes us as absurd. (Thus step 1 in the process of reconstructing irony is invoked: the literal meaning of 4:12 is nonsense.) But maybe

22. The word *parable* in 4:11 and elsewhere in Mark seems to have the sense of "puzzle" or "riddle."
23. RSV, with emphasis added.
24. My own translation.

we should not take it literally (step 3—surely both Mark and his protagonist Jesus want to have an impact on their respective audiences, so that they will turn their lives around; see Mark 1:1 and 1:15). Could Jesus be speaking with tongue in cheek throughout 4:11-12, teasing his disciples (step 2)? Then in 4:13 he gets serious and levels a severe rebuke at the supposed insiders of 4:11. The result is an experience of dramatic irony in 4:13, when the reader realizes that the apparent roles of 4:11 have been reversed (step 4—Mark loves to construct powerful moments of dramatic irony, and this is one of them).

Altogether in 4:10-13 we experience a gap in the discourse in 4:11, a strong possibility of verbal irony in 4:11-12, and an experience of a self-consuming artifact in 4:13. Becoming aware of the double reversal in 4:13 requires looking back to reconstruct what was happening in 4:11-12, and the result is a powerful moment of dramatic irony. All of the figures for reading that we have discussed thus far—looking forward, looking back; gaps; reconstruction; the self-consuming artifact—can be used to help us to understand what happens when we read Mark 4:10-13.

The Resisting Reader

Our last metaphor for the reading experience is "the resisting reader." This metaphor comes from Judith Fetterley's book by this title, a classic work of feminist reader-response criticism.[25]

Fetterley's specialty is the study of American fiction, which she claims is thoroughly androcentric (male oriented and dominated). The masculine perspective is so pervasive in American literature, and among the teachers of American literature, that women as well as men are indoctrinated "to identify as male" as they read:

> The cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women but the *immasculation* of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny.[26]

Fetterley exposes the sexism and misogyny in standard works of American fiction by male authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, William

25. Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978); idem, "Reading about Reading: 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'The Murders on the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 147–64. For a discussion of the basics of feminist criticism and for an application of feminist reader-response criticism, see chapter 5 by Janice Capel Anderson.
26. Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader*, xii, xx.

Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Norman Mailer. The female characters in these novels and short stories are routinely victimized by men, often without raising the eyebrows of the male characters in the story. Presumably the reader is also expected not to raise his (or her?) eyebrows. Such is woman's inevitable (and deserved?) fate, the stories seem to imply. In several stories a female character dies, requiring a male character to suffer nobly *his* loss. If a female reader is not careful, she can easily absorb from these texts and perpetuate the very misogynist attitudes that would rob her of "nothing less than sanity and survival."[27]

Accordingly, Fetterley conceives of her book "as a self-defense survival manual for the woman reader lost in 'the masculine wilderness of the American novel.'"[28] Once the sexism and misogyny of American literature and the American educational system are recognized, the woman reader can learn to read without giving automatic assent to the sexist indignities of these texts, which the educational system insists she must read. Rather than granting unthinking assent to the text, the woman reader can become a resisting reader:

> The first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us. The consequence of this exorcism is the capacity for what Adrienne Rich describes as re-vision—"the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction."[29]

Notice how the metaphor of "resisting reading" mutates into the metaphor of "re-vision," which returns us to "looking back," the first metaphor for reading discussed in this chapter. Resisting reading is practiced not only by feminist readers as a defensive strategy in the face of misogyny. It can also be practiced by any reader who finds that resistance, rather than assent, is the responsible, conscientious course of action in a threatening situation.

That the Bible itself is full of examples of resisting or re-visionary reading is immensely important. The Israelites would be still be in Egypt and the Exodus would never have happened if they had not resisted the enslaving words of Pharaoh rather than giving them assent. Christianity would never have been born if the Jewish followers of the Jewish Jesus had not found in him good reason to re-vision their Jewish legacy in the light of the Gospel. Today, both Jews and Christians, both women and men, are awakening to the age-old history of sexism and misogyny, which permeates the Bible and the religions that revere the Bible. Jews and Christians, women and men, are only now learning to read the Bible resistantly with regard to what it has to say about gender roles. At the same time, however, they are also learning to read resistantly what it seems to say regarding a number of contemporary life-and-death issues, such as war, racism, ethnic and religious strife, the environment, and economic justice.

27. Fetterley, "Reading about Reading," 164.
28. Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader*, viii.
29. Ibid., xxii.

Persons professing biblical faith need not be fearful that resisting reading of the Bible is somehow unfaithful reading. To the contrary, one could argue that the most faithful reading of all is resisting reading. Some of the noblest moments in Jewish and Christian history are moments of resistance to officially approved oppression, injustice, or traditions gone sterile. Therefore, resisting reading is practiced not only by feminist literary critics. It has been and will always be practiced by all kinds of people struggling for dignity, justice, or new relevance for their old traditions.

I want to turn to one passage in Mark where resisting reading can be practiced at several levels. What follows is not a feminist reading, but I shall point out some possibilities for a feminist reading of this passage. Also, my example will not address directly the issues of justice and dignity, but it could easily be led in that direction, if a reader were so inclined. Again, I shall only illustrate briefly the exercise of the metaphor. It is up to you to put it to further good use.

The passage I want to consider is Mark 16:1-8, the last episode of Mark's Gospel, the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb.[30] Actually, Mark 16:1-8 was already read resistantly long ago by the author of the Gospel of Matthew, and I would like to make the focus of our own reading Matthew's resisting reading of the ending of Mark (Matt 27:62—28:20).

The majority of biblical scholars believe that Matthew composed his Gospel by editing the Gospel of Mark. I share that presumption, but with a crucial difference in language. Rather than talking about Matthew as an editor of Mark, I like to describe him as one of the first known readers of Mark. Matthew's Gospel is a record of Matthew's response to his experience of reading Mark's Gospel. Although Matthew often reads Mark with assent to what Mark is trying to do, frequently Matthew is a resisting reader of Mark.

Resisting reading is adversarial reading. It is reading against the grain of the text. It is reading in conflict with other possible readings of the text. Matthew and Mark are in competition with each other, each of them striving to control how you and I read the story of the empty tomb. Matthew's resisting reading of Mark's empty tomb story has been so successful that we tend to read Matthew's version of the story back into Mark's version. That is, in order to read Mark's empty tomb story, we have to resist the urge to read Matthew's story instead. *We have to read resistantly Matthew's resisting reading of Mark.* Unless we read against the grain of Matthew's Gospel, we cannot really read Mark's Gospel at all, either with or against the grain.

Let us consider some of the features of Matthew's resisting reading of Mark 16:1-8:

- *The guard at the tomb.* In Matthew, a guard is set at the tomb, supposedly to prevent Jesus' disciples from stealing his corpse and dishonestly proclaiming him resurrected from the dead. In Mark, there is no guard. Nothing

30. Although some ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark include additional verses at the end of the Gospel, the oldest and most accurate manuscripts end at Mark 16:8. The manuscript copies of Mark that tack on extra verses beyond 16:8 themselves represent resisting readings of Mark's ending. Certain copyists did not want Mark to end at 16:8, so they took it upon themselves to supplement the ending.

in Mark's story safeguards against someone telling a rival story about the corpse being stolen.

Matthew expertly deploys his Guard story, placing one piece before Mark's empty tomb story (Matt 27:62-66), one piece in the middle (Matt 28:4), and one piece afterward (Matt 28:11-15). Matthew's *story* of the guard surrounds Mark's empty tomb *story* to resist the illegitimate *story* of the disciples' theft of the dead body to which Mark's story is vulnerable.

- *The women who come to the tomb.* In Matthew, two women, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary," come to the tomb merely to see it. They succeed. In Mark, three women, Mary Magdalene, Salome, and "Mary the mother of James," come with spices to anoint the body. They gain entrance to the tomb, but they fail to anoint the body.

In Matthew, the identity of "the other Mary" is unclear. By contrast, "Mary the mother of James" in Mark 16:1 is well known. She is also described as "Mary, the mother of Joses" in Mark 15:47 and as "Mary, the mother of James the younger and of Joses" in Mark 15:40. Because the Gospel has already introduced to us a woman named Mary who has sons named James and Joses (Mark 6:3), it makes sense to conclude that these are all references to the same woman.[31] This conclusion, however, yields some surprises. The Mary introduced in Mark 6:3, along with her sons James and Joses, is none other than Jesus' own mother. Why does Mark refuse to call her "Mary, the mother of Jesus"?[32] Rather than clarifying who she is, why does Matthew hide her identity completely? Is Matthew posting another guard, this time around the reputation of Jesus' mother and his brothers?

Not only does Matthew mask Mary's identity but also he erases any mention of the women's intention of anointing the body. In Mark, the mention of an anointing may strike us as a dramatic irony. The reader has already heard that an anonymous woman anointed Jesus for his burial (Mark 14:8). When three named (prominent? important?) women come to the tomb to anoint the body, the thoughtful reader may suspect that they are doomed to failure because what they intend to do has already been done. By hiding Mary's identity and by changing the women's purpose from anointing to merely viewing the tomb, Matthew resists several innuendos about the women in Mark 16:1-8.

31. In making this identification, I am in agreement with Werner H. Kelber, John Dominic Crossan, and Thomas Boomershine; see Kelber's discussion in *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 103–4.
32. Some clues: in Mark 3:21, Jesus' family come to take him home because they think he "has gone out of his mind." When his mother and brothers arrive to take him away, Jesus acknowledges that he is estranged from his family (Mark 3:33-35). This estrangement is alluded to again in 6:4. Altogether this suggests that Mark avoids calling Mary "the mother of Jesus" in 15:40, 47; 16:1 in order to imply to the reader that Jesus is still alienated from his mother and his brothers.

- *Rolling the stone away from the tomb.* In Matthew, because the women have no need to go inside the tomb, they do not need to have the stone rolled away for them. Nevertheless, the stone is rolled away, before their very eyes (and before the reader's eyes) by an angel from heaven. In Mark, although the women need to gain entry to the tomb, and although they have the foresight to buy spices (before sunrise!), they talk to themselves (and to the reader) about their lack of foresight in recruiting someone to roll the large stone away from the tomb. In spite of their incomplete preparations, they go to the tomb anyway and find the stone already rolled away (Mark 16:3-4).

Preserving the rolled-away stone is Matthew's one nod of assent to Mark 16:2-5 (Matt 28:2). Otherwise, Matthew so freely adds and subtracts that Mark is completely re-visioned. Among the material Matthew subtracts is the question posed by the women in Mark: "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" (Mark 16:3). This question is an ironic reminder to the reader that Jesus had four brothers (Mark 6:3) who could have helped their mother with funeral observances for their dead brother. He also had twelve disciples who all said they would never forsake him (Mark 14:31). In Mark everyone seems to abandon Jesus, even God (15:34), but the question by the women in 16:3 points out especially the absence of men who might have accompanied the women in paying their last respects. Are we to contrast the faithlessness of the men with the faithfulness of these three women? Is this a place where a feminist reading of Mark can produce interesting results? We will return to this question later.

In Mark, the women find the stone already removed. Who removed it, when, how, and why is a mystery. Matthew adds to Mark's material and explodes Mark's mysteries by describing an earthquake and an angel descending from heaven (Matt 28:2-4). Matthew resists Mark's ambiguity and replaces it with a blindingly clear revelation of divine power.

- *The angel.* In Matthew, because "an angel of the Lord" rolls away the stone before our eyes, we have no doubt who, when, and how the stone was removed. (However, the answer to the why question remains unclear.) After flexing its heavenly muscles, the angel sits on the stone, outside the tomb (Matt 28:2). In Mark, there is no "angel." Rather, a mysterious "young man" (*neaniskos* in Greek) is discovered by the women sitting inside the tomb (Mark 16:5).

In the long history of reading Mark's Gospel, the puzzle of the young man in the empty tomb has been much debated. Frequently this puzzle is linked to the even more bizarre puzzle of the young man running naked through Gethsemane (14:51-52). Because the word *neaniskos* is used in Mark only in 14:51 and 16:5, and because both young men seem to be distinguished primarily by what they wear or do not wear, one option is to conclude that both are the same young man. Even with this much decided, many questions remain. Who is he and what is he all about?

What could it mean that he is unclothed in 14:52 and resplendently clothed in 16:5?[33] Both *neaniskos* puzzles in Mark remain a mystery.

And both puzzles are neatly solved by Matthew. The young man of Mark 16:5 is turned into an angel, and the young man of Mark 14:51-52 is erased from Matthew's narrative. The ambiguity and mystery associated with both young men in Mark are resisted and resolved in Matthew.

- *The women's report*. In Matthew, the angel instructs the women to go tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead. "With fear and great joy" (Matt 28:8), they run to fulfill this charge. In Matthew, joy overcomes fear. In Mark, the young man gives similar instructions, but the women run away in "terror and amazement" and say "nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8). In Mark, fear paralyzes the women into silence. Matthew resists the fear and the silence with which Mark's Gospel ends and re-visions it as joy that must be proclaimed (Matt 28:7, 10, 19-20).

- *Encounters with the risen Jesus*. In Matthew, as the women run to report to the disciples, they encounter the resurrected Jesus himself (Matt 28:9-10). He greets them and repeats the instructions of the angel to tell the disciples. Matthew's Gospel then ends with the famous Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations," a mountaintop encounter between the resurrected Jesus and his rehabilitated disciples (Matt 28:16-20). In Mark, no one encounters the risen Jesus. The mysterious young man says that Jesus has been raised up, but no one in the story experiences it personally. Mark's Gospel ends with no one in the story either witnessing the resurrection of Jesus or reporting it.

Matthew must have been extraordinarily dissatisfied with the way Mark's Gospel ends. In Matthew's resisting reading of the ending of Mark, ironies that cast a doubtful light on the mother, the brothers, and the disciples of Jesus are erased. Puzzles are either resolved or eliminated. Fear is swallowed up by joy, and silence is overcome by proclamation. The absence of Jesus, as well as that of the disciples, is replaced by the glorious appearance of Jesus and a fantastic mountaintop reunion with the disciples. Finally, the mystery of the empty tomb and the ambiguity of the young man are thoroughly clarified with bright beams of heavenly glory.

We could go on and on discussing Matthew's resisting reading of Mark 16:1-8, but this much must suffice. Mark's Gospel is comfortable with offering its reader an abundance of irony, ambiguity, and mystery. Matthew's Gospel is not. Therefore, Matthew's reading of Mark is typically a resisting reading, a

33. A common historical solution for the puzzle of Mark 14:51-52 is that the young man is the author himself, which would make Mark an eyewitness of the scene in the garden. A common literary-theological solution to the puzzle of Mark 16:5 is that the young man is really an angel (as in Matthew). Both of these solutions are ingenious, but neither is explicitly authorized by the Gospel of Mark. Mark likes to give us puzzles without obvious solutions.

reading against the grain of Mark's Gospel. Mark's narrative seems designed to intrigue and perplex the reader. Matthew wants to instruct us, openly and clearly. Matthew likes to tell us what to think; Mark wants us to learn to think for ourselves. Mark can live with the possibility that his narrative might be misunderstood and misappropriated—witness his unguarded and ambiguous empty tomb story, vulnerable to many conflicting interpretations. By contrast, Matthew wants to guard against misunderstanding and misappropriation—witness his carefully guarded tomb story. Given Mark's Gospel, one can easily imagine someone like Matthew coming along to clarify and to straighten out Mark's mysteries; given Matthew's Gospel, it is hard to imagine how someone like Mark could hope to interest anyone in giving up Matthew's clarity in favor of Mark's mysteries. Matthew's Gospel is well designed to outshine Mark's Gospel, which it has done throughout the history of the reading of both Gospels.

Matthew and Mark are not merely different narratives; they are narratives in conflict with each other. Mark 16:1-8 and Matt 27:62—28:20 are competing versions of the same story, all tangled up in each other like a bad knot in a pair of shoelaces. If we wish to read either Gospel apart from the other, first we must untangle them. Most readers unconsciously read the Gospels of Matthew and Mark (along with Luke and John) in their native tangled state, and, the clarity and directness of Matthew are typically more appreciated by the average reader than the mystery and ambiguity of Mark. If you want to read *Mark*, however, you have to resist Matthew's resisting reading of Mark.

If we can read Matthew resistantly, then we can decide whether to read Mark with assent or with resistance. I am not going to attempt a resisting reading of Mark 16:1-8 here, but one way it might be done is through a feminist reading. I shall point out how this might be done and leave my reader to explore further the possibilities.

A common feminist reading of Mark 16:1-8 argues that the three women are worthy models of Christian discipleship. By witnessing the crucifixion and burial of Jesus and then by visiting the empty tomb, they have succeeded where the male disciples in the story have all failed.[34] From a feminist perspective, this reading has several attractions. First, it resists and shatters the dominant assumption throughout two thousand years of Christian experience that the chief witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus were men. Second, it uncovers a crucial, prestigious role for women in the early church. Third, it thereby provides encouragement to women today to assume significant roles in the Christian church.

However, as I indicated before, there are severe problems with this reading of Mark 16:1-8.[35] To read Mark 16:1-8 as a story of the success of the three

34. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 138–39, 321–23; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 29–48.

35. A feminist critic who also has problems with this reading is Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 291–99.

women is an unconscious reading of the ending of Matthew back into Mark. Therefore, it is not a resisting reading at all, but an assenting reading of Matthew masquerading as a reading of Mark. Matthew grants the women a positive role in witnessing the resurrection and reporting to the disciples, but it is a minor role, entirely subservient to the major role of the male disciples, who are the only ones to appear in the Great Commission (Matt 28:16-20). Because the brothers of Jesus and the twelve disciples are utterly absent at the end of Mark, the minor success of the women in Matthew can appear a major success when it is imported into Mark. However, this success is only an illusion, the result of reading Mark the way Matthew would have us read it.

If we can resist Matthew's resisting reading of Mark, we can recognize that the three women in Mark 16:1-8 fail, just as so many others in the story have failed before them. All is not doom and gloom at the end of Mark, however. Many biblical critics are now recognizing that the ending of Mark, just like the rest of the Gospel, is mostly concerned to make an impact on the reader.[36] Mark's Gospel may end without insight and faith among the characters in the story, but that does not mean that the audience of the Gospel has not been well instructed and deeply moved by the experience of reading the Gospel. The key to understanding the ending of Mark is not to understand the women or men in the story, but to understand what is happening in the women or men reading the story.

Maybe a resisting, feminist reading of Mark 16:1-8 could be constructed, but it would have to take another shape. Readers recognize today that Mark's Gospel contains some remarkably positive images of women, such as the woman with a flow of blood in Mark 5:25-34, the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-30, and the woman who anointed Jesus in Mark 14:3-9. Mary Ann Tolbert takes care to observe that the women just mentioned are all anonymous. By contrast, the three women who come to the tomb are all named, as if they were prominent and well-known persons, as indeed Jesus' mother surely was. Tolbert suggests that the conspicuous naming of the women at the tomb may be an attempt to criticize the "the human desire for fame, glory, status, and authority."[37] Speaking of names, the brothers and disciples of Jesus, whose absence is underlined by the women's question in Mark 16:3, are all prominently named in the course of Mark's narration (Mark 3:16-19; 6:3). What might Mark be suggesting to the reader by leaving unnamed most of the minor but successful women and men characters in the story, while prominently naming major women and men characters who fail?[38] Gender roles may indeed be significant in Mark, but gender in Mark (or anywhere) is always tangled with other weighty issues, such as psychology, race, class, ethics, and politics. Any and all of these issues may need to be considered in a feminist reading of Mark. Furthermore, even the brief introduction to reader-response criticism provided by this chapter is enough to teach us that a feminist reading of Mark 16:1-8 might have to look back and re-vision preceding episodes involving (or not involving) other women (or men) characters, negotiate the gaps in 16:1-8, reconstruct the ironies there, and be open to the possibility that in the end the Gospel of Mark may unravel itself, just as it has so many times before. Reading the ending of Mark resistantly may mean resisting our own desire for neat and simple solutions to the puzzles it presents to us or that we present to it.

36. Regarding the impact of the ending of Mark on the reader, see Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*; regarding the entire Gospel's orientation toward the reader, see Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

37. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 292–93.

38. Mary Ann Tolbert also seems to be asking this question, but does not go far in pursuing an answer *(Sowing the Gospel*, 274, 292–93). On the minor characters or "little people" in Mark, see David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 129–35.

The tangled endings of Mark and Matthew illustrate the lesson that the Bible itself is full of adversarial, against-the-grain, resisting reading. Printed side by side in our Bibles, the Gospels appear to be cozy bedfellows, comfortably snoozing in the same bed. Appearances, however, can be deceiving. The Gospels are far more in competition with each other than is commonly suspected. They may share the same bed, but like rambunctious siblings, they tussle over who gets the covers. Self-conscious, self-critical, and honest reading of the Gospels requires us to recognize this conflict and to be willing to jump into the fray ourselves. Moreover, what is true of reading the Gospels is true of the Bible generally: To read the Bible is to participate in a rich, long legacy of resisting reading.

Conclusion

Reader-response criticism is a critical practice that helps readers read with greater awareness and self-consciousness. As we become more aware of what we are doing as we read (looking forward, looking back, filling gaps, and so on), we become more aware of our response to our reading experience. Our reading and our response to reading become more thoughtful, more considered, which can lead us to take greater personal responsibility for our reading and our response. Particularly if we practice resisting reading, we can become more self-conscious about our acts of assent and our acts of resistance. Our commitments may deepen and be strengthened. Then again, our commitments may change altogether, if we are wise enough to practice resisting reading on ourselves or if we are lucky enough to have friends who challenge us to change.

Reading and responding to our reading is not optional. The question is, Do we read with more or less self-consciousness? Do we respond with more or less awareness and sensitivity? Assenting and resisting are not optional. The question is, To what shall we give our assent? What shall we resist? Reader-response criticism can help us to answer these important questions.

FURTHER READING

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TOMPKINS, Jane P., ed. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. London and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. Important anthology of reader-response essays. The concluding essay by Tompkins helpfully situates reader-response criticism in the history of criticism. Good bibliography.