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MARK 1:1–8:26 Concordia Commentary By James Voelz

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MARK 1:1–8:26 Concordia**Commentary.** By James W. Voelz.

St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013. 624 pages. Hardcover. \$49.99.

This first volume of a projected two-volume set presages that the final commentary will likely be the finest available on the Gospel of Mark. Whether the readers be pastors, seminarians, students of religion, or professors, they will find the substance of the commentary to be masterful, provocative, and comprehensive. This volume attests to the commentary's masterful nature in that Voelz bases his argumentation on an extensive analysis of evidence drawn mainly from the gospel itself. This volume attests to the commentary's provocative nature in that Voelz argues on behalf of numerous positions that are strikingly at odds with settled scholarly opinion. And this volume attests to the commentary's comprehensiveness in that Voelz devotes thirty-seven pages to the linguistic features of the Gospel of Mark, thirty-three pages to the literary features, and fourteen pages to major isagogical issues—all before readers turn to Voelz's interpretation of the gospel itself. Imbued with these features, this volume shows that the commentary is linguistically and grammatically driven, literary in the sense that it describes how Mark's story is presented, and theological in that it strives to capture the meaning of Mark's story.

Linguistically, Voelz argues that the text of the Gospel of Mark, written in Koine Greek, is nonetheless not simple, as is commonly asserted, but complex and sophisticated. The best manuscript witnesses to the gospel are Codex Vaticanus and texts related to it. In terms

of the Synoptic Problem, Voelz contends that the Gospel of Mark is not earlier than Matthew and Luke, which scholars customarily assume, but later than they. Also, a peculiar characteristic of Mark's Greek, which scholars have scarcely noticed, is that Mark shifts the tone of his gospel in line with the story he tells. In chapter 8, Jesus is depicted as leaving Galilee and setting out on his way to Jerusalem. Correspondingly, Mark shifts from a more Semitic Greek (Galilee) to a more Hellenic Greek (Jerusalem). In conclusion of his linguistic discussion, Voelz treats readers to two important excursuses, the first on grammar and the second on basic linguistic categories and principles of interpretation.

Literarily, Voelz draws out the implications of the fact that Mark's Gospel conveys meaning not only through the use of language on its most basic level but also through the story it tells in narrative form whereby the focus is on the development of characters and plot. The protagonist, of course, is Jesus, who is authoritative, powerful, fearsome, human, strange, and divine. To punctuate the divinity of Jesus, Mark highlights, at the beginning of his story, the declaration by God at the baptism that Jesus is his Son (1:11), which is essentially repeated at the transfiguration (9:7), and, at the end of his story, the centurion's confession that the crucified Jesus truly was the Son of God (15:39). The followers of Jesus are the disciples, whom Mark nevertheless paints in largely negative hues. In contrast, Mark casts the minor characters, such as Jairus (5:22–24, 35–43) or the Syro-Phoenician woman (7:24–30), in a positive light. Arrayed against Jesus are the Jewish leadership, demons, and even his family. With

a view to the plot of Mark's story, Voelz cites eleven characteristics, three of which are conflict, the concealment of Jesus, and Jesus's increasing abandonment. Finally, in brief summary of Mark's story, Voelz provides a narrative outline in five sections, calling attention to the third section (8:1–26) as constituting the critical turn at which Jesus leaves Galilee and heads toward Jerusalem. To round out this literary section, Voelz attaches two more highly informative excursions, the one on literary assumptions regarding the Gospel of Mark and the other on the hermeneutics of narrative interpretation. The significance of the latter is that it dwells on what happens when a narrative is interpreted; here is where Voelz explains the model he himself uses in interpreting the Gospel of Mark.

Isagogically, Voelz emphasizes that because a literary approach to the Gospel of Mark takes seriously the story of the narrative as a whole, interpreters ought not feel constrained, as has been and is still the case, to use the text as a “window” to discover matters of history lying behind the text (e.g., what really took place in the life of Jesus, or what the Markan community was like out of which the gospel arose). Hazardous though it is to make of the Gospel of Mark a window, the historical questions interpreters endeavor to answer this way are common and popular. Thus, although one cannot specify who the author of the gospel was, it appears that he was a man named Mark who wrote his gospel from memory in the late 50s or early 60s for Christians facing rising persecution in Rome. This man Mark knew Matthew and Luke and perhaps even Paul, and was especially dependent upon the oral presentations of

Peter. Generically, the Gospel of Mark is best understood as a tragic drama on the basic story of Jesus. The strength of these aforementioned suppositions is that they are congruent with both the historical evidence of early church fathers and the literary evidence of the Markan narrative itself.

Two crucial questions we have thus far ignored are these: Where does Mark's story end, and what is the gospel story about? Voelz pegs the end of the story at 16:8. He then deals with the implications of this and the theme of the Gospel of Mark on two levels: the penultimate and the ultimate. On the penultimate level, he agrees with the majority of interpreters who see Jesus as the one who walks upon the way of the cross and leads his disciples therein. Should, however, one read the gospel on the ultimate, or literary, level, he or she will find a more strange and fascinating story and a more strange and fascinating Jesus. Jesus now becomes an ambiguous figure and the gospel becomes an ambiguous story. Ambiguity, in fact, lies at the core of the Gospel of Mark. Even as Jesus is a powerfully divine figure, so he is also a frail, strange, and scary human being. Equally, the plot of the story is ambiguous. Whereas God declares Jesus to be his Son and Jesus performs miracles and reveals the mystery of God's kingdom, his family takes him to be crazy, the disciples wonder who he is, and he himself, despite being God's Son, utters the cry of dereliction on the cross. Voelz puts it this way: in the Gospel of Mark, one finds a story that is hard to follow and a protagonist who is difficult to understand.

To elaborate on the latter, one cannot, in reading the Gospel of Mark,

“see” clearly so that one may “believe” (cf. 8:22–26; 15:32). On the contrary, one must first “believe,” and then one can “see” clearly. To explain what this means, consider the ending of the gospel (16:1–8). Unlike the authors of the other three gospels, Mark does not describe one or more scenes in which the disciples “see” the risen Jesus and have Jesus interact with them or lead them to understanding. Far from seeing the risen Jesus, the disciples in the Gospel of Mark receive only promises. Atop the Mount of Olives, Jesus tells the disciples, “But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” (14:28). Then, after Jesus has been raised, the women are told at the empty tomb by the young man in white: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he [Jesus] is going before you to Galilee; there you will ‘see’ him, as he told you” (16:7). To “see” Jesus clearly and therefore with understanding, the disciples are first called to “believe” these promises. To believe these promises, however, is to believe the Word. When this is applied to the readers of Mark’s story, Mark exhorts them to “believe the Word”: the Word of the gospel; Jesus, who is the Word; and Jesus who speaks the Word. The theme of the Gospel of Mark is now apparent: “believe” so as to “see.”

Those who read this review will wonder why it deals with prolegomena and does not focus on Voelz’s commentary itself. The reason is that Voelz’s commentary is linguistic and literary in nature and hence different from the great number of other commentaries on Mark. Voelz’s commentary rests on matters set forth here, and to rush to the commentary without bothering with these matters is surely to misunderstand not only the character of the commentary but also why Voelz proceeds with the Gospel of Mark as he does. It is crucial, to cite but two examples, that readers know how Voelz defines both the theme of the

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