

Charles A. Bobertz. *The Gospel of Mark: A Liturgical Reading*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016. 258 pages. \$27.99.

*The Gospel of Mark: A Liturgical Reading* interprets the whole of Mark's Gospel in light of two central rituals of the church, baptism and Eucharist. As Professor of Theology at St. John's University (MN) and a Roman Catholic deacon, Bobertz's interest in liturgical theology animates the whole of his project, providing a liturgical touchstone for readers who seek to understand how the early church's understanding of baptism and Eucharist may inform our interpretation of the oldest canonical Gospel.

Amid the apocalyptic context of the early church, Bobertz contends that of foremost concern to Mark was the controversy over whether baptized Gentiles, both male and female, would have a place at the Lord's Supper with Jews. According to Bobertz, the Gospel's symbolic narrative attests that through baptism both Jews and Gentiles ritually enter into the death of Jesus Christ and both are given a place at the table of the risen Lord. He argues that the earliest of the canonical Gospels "was created to convey a particular understanding of these two rituals to the community" (xvii) and that "it is not possible to understand what Mark is attempting to convey without realizing that the story itself emerges from Mark's experience of the cultic reality of his own church" (7) – a reality that includes being crucified in baptism and joining the risen Christ in the Eucharist as Christians whose identities are bound to him in martyrdom.

Addressed to the "liturgical reader" who encounters the Gospel "from the present formative experience and reality of Christian liturgy, especially baptism and Eucharist" (10), Bobertz offers a sacramental reading of the text and a liturgical reconstruction of the Markan community's ecclesial concern over who is included in these ritual practices. He argues that through Mark's deeply symbolic narrative Jesus begins his struggle against death and chaos in his baptism and that these are overcome through his crucifixion and resurrection on behalf of all people. In ritual meals, Jesus further invites his followers "to enact in ritual the final gathering of a unified humanity, Jews and Gentiles, men and women" (6f). Each of the book's ten chapters explores narrative blocks of the Gospel and argues for their having been created to provide a theological rationale for baptism and Eucharist as the bases of Christian identity, theology, and practice. Of particular note are the chapters addressing Jesus' own baptism in Mark 1 and his feeding of the crowds in the first and second "ritual meals" described in Mark 6:30-44 and 8:1-9. Chapter 7 also provides an intriguing examination of Jesus' apocalyptic discourse as Bobertz proposes that Mark 13 was not created as an historical account of Roman destruction (as most modern interpreters have insisted) but was created as Gentile men and women gathered with Jewish men and women in house churches, to communicate deeply "the proper identity of the ritual body in the face of the daunting circumstances of active persecution." (147)

However commendable the author's interest in portraying the early church's inclusive practice of Eucharist may be, his liturgical interests sometimes override ethical and theological concerns named in the Markan narrative itself. For example, by arguing that Mark was "first and foremost a story about Jesus created to convince the original readers and hearers of the story that there was a correct way to understand and practice these rituals in the context of violent persecution and an expectation of the imminent return of Jesus as Lord and judge of history" (xvi), Bobertz sets these liturgical concerns above the text's own claim that there are other

reasons for Jesus having fed the thousands who came to him: namely, he had “compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat.” (Mark 8:2) More than asserting correct liturgical theology and practice, Mark portrays Jesus as embodying divine compassion and care for those who are hungry and hurting. Whatever speculations may be made about the early church’s interest in establishing correct ritual practices, Mark’s narrative leaves no doubt as to what governs Jesus’ presence and ministry, both sacramental and practical: it is the divine imperative to provide food for the hungry, care for the hurting, and other ministries that embody God’s just and loving intentions for all creation. The liturgical reader whom Bobertz addresses may well reach within this book to find support for the church’s liturgical practices but must also reach beyond it to Mark’s Gospel itself to learn more about the church’s call to compassionate ministry for neighbors near and far.

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