

Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies

Vol. 9, No. 1 (2016)

The Quest for Mark's Sources:

An Exploration of the Case for Mark's Use of First Corinthians

Thomas P. Nelligan, Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2015

Review by Tom Dykstra

In an article I recommend to anyone interested in the historicity of Jesus, Joel Willitts carefully examines the criteria that many biblical scholars use to distinguish history from legend.¹ He concludes that the effort to find objective and reliable criteria is a lost cause. Each scholar submits a different list of criteria, and each applies them differently to the scriptural texts. In the end, the goal of genuine objectivity with its attendant power to convince others proves elusive.

In *The Quest for Mark's Sources*, Thomas Nelligan has a similar goal. The criteria that he is interested in are about textual relationships rather than historicity, but he too recounts a history of scholarly disagreement over which criteria to use and inconsistencies in applying them. Unlike Willitts, he does not give up on the game. He proposes his own set of rules—his own criteria and methodology for applying them—and that proves to be one of the most valuable aspects of the book.

The ultimate goal of *Quest* is to determine the likelihood that the author of Mark's gospel read 1 Corinthians and used it as one of the sources for his gospel story. The book looks for evidence of literary borrowing in three specific places, in each instance between a set of parallel passages in the Gospel and the epistle (1 Cor 1:2 and Mark 1:1-28; 1 Cor 5 and Mark 6:14-29; 1 Cor 11:2-34 and Mark 14:1-25).

Nelligan proposes three categories of criteria: external, internal, and probing. External criteria represent the historical context and answer the question: was a proposed source text written before the target text and likely to be accessible to the author of the target text? Internal criteria represent features of two texts that suggest dependence: similarities in vocabulary, context, theme, and plot, order of thematic elements, and intelligibility (can we understand the reason for the borrowing).

External and internal criteria are almost universal among earlier investigators. Nelligan's "probing criteria" are his contribution. These provide a technique for weighing the strength of the external and internal evidence. For example, some similarities may be weak evidence for

¹ "Presuppositions and Procedures in the Study of the 'Historical Jesus'. Or, Why I Decided Not to Be a 'Historical Jesus' Scholar," *JSHJ* 3 (2005): 61-108.

dependence, but if there are strong similarities, the weak points can be used to bolster the overall case. Even strong similarities between source and target text, however, might not have resulted from direct literary dependence, so alternatives must be considered. Both texts could depend on a common tradition, or the similarity between target and source may appear to be strong, but the similarity between target and a completely different source could be stronger.

Applying this category of “probing criteria” is what makes Nelligan’s analysis more thorough than that of many others. Here there is no narrow focus on the target and source text. Each section of *Quest* consistently starts with an overview of alternative sources that Mark may have used, including not only biblical sources such as the Elijah-Elisha cycle but also classical texts such as Homer. A good example is the way the story of John and Herod in Mark is shown to have parallels with the story of Elijah, the book of Esther, and even with Herodotus.

The comprehensiveness of Nelligan’s approach enables him to build strong cases for interpretations that have not (yet) been commonly accepted by scholars, the most prominent example being Mark’s borrowing from 1 Corinthians for his story of the last supper. The similarities between the Gospel and the epistle here are commonly written off as a result of dependence by both on a common liturgical source. Nelligan points out the obvious fact that no actual document has ever been found that might have functioned as this common source. And because his criteria are not limited to a focus on vocabulary and phraseology, he also notices a number of other similarities between the sections of Mark and 1 Corinthians related to the institution of the Eucharist.

It is the connections between Mark and 1 Cor in these surrounding texts that lead to this conclusion [that Mark depends on 1 Cor]. For example, preceding the Eucharist in both texts are scenes involving angry and contentious people, judgment and condemnation. As has also been seen, there are many shared themes, elements of action and plot, and some shared vocabulary. ... No other text can be shown to be as close to Mark here without appealing to traditions which are hypothetical and unnecessary. (p. 145)

In this instance the book does a great job proving the methodology’s value by formulating a convincing argument for a position that few scholars have yet accepted. But there are also some ways in which the book is less effective than it could have been.

One of Nelligan’s internal criteria is intelligibility, but the narrow focus on a few short passages precludes a discussion of intelligibility on a broader scale. What was Mark’s purpose in writing the Gospel, and how was that achieved by using 1 Corinthians in this way? It is ultimately more enlightening to understand the literary purpose of the borrowing than to understand the mechanics of it. In *Quest* we learn well the case for believing that Mark did use 1 Corinthians, but not so much about why he did so.

Nelligan assumes that “[a]t the core of Mark’s gospel is the basic story of the life of Jesus which existed before Mark’s gospel and which must ultimately be the driving force behind the entire gospel.” Do we know that there is such a “basic story” or do all these connections to earlier sources suggest that the core itself is a combination of authorial borrowing and creativity? Acknowledging the latter possibility would open up new vistas for exploring the literary purpose behind the borrowing.

While the book is worth reading for a specialist interested in understanding Mark or New Testament intertextuality, it would be a tough slog for the general reader. This is a revised doctoral dissertation and retains the style of one. It freely uses technical language such as Latin terms, and

quotes blocks of German and Greek text without translations to English. It applies the literary dependence criteria in a mechanically consistent fashion that involves much repetition and placeholder text that doesn't advance the argument. Nelligan criticizes others for not applying their own criteria completely and consistently, and so he takes pains to avoid inconsistency himself. But the resulting text works well mainly for a reader who uses the book as a reference work, less so for someone who wants to read through from cover to cover.

Time will tell whether Nelligan has succeeded in his attempt to craft an objectively compelling argument. Objectivity in the humanities and especially scriptural studies is elusive, and what one person finds compelling another does not. However, this book shows a way to develop an argument for textual dependence that is more thorough and thus more convincing than many earlier attempts.