

Review of Scott S. Elliott, *Reconfiguring Mark's Jesus: Narrative Criticism after Poststructuralism*. Bible in the Modern World, 41. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011.

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Elliott extends his dissertation director's critique of biblical narrative criticism (see Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels*) by reading Markan characterization with biblical narrative criticism, Greek novels, and poststructuralist literary theory. He finds the readings of biblical narrative critics too similar to those of historical critics and too different from those of poststructuralists. He bases this evaluation on claims about the discoured (or plotted) quality of both narrative and human experience. Mark 14:21—"the Son of Man goes as it is written of him"—serves as his mantra. He sets out this theoretical perspective in an introduction and a two-chapter discussion of literary theory and then investigates the characterization of selected Greek novels and Mark in three subsequent chapters.

While Elliott chastises biblical narrative critics for investigating particular (gospel) narratives, rather than studying the properties and functions of narrative generally, he locates their primary theoretical fault in their reification of Seymour Chatman's analytic distinction between story and discourse (chapter one). Consequently, discourse becomes rhetoric and rhetoric becomes an implied author's direction of an ideal reader. Like their historical-critical counterparts, biblical narrative critics try to penetrate texts, but to find this implied author's message, rather than history. Like their historical-critical counterparts, biblical narrative critics view literary characters as simulacra of persons whom they see in modern terms as autonomous, subjective agents. This view of character also supports assumptions that a real historical Jesus stands behind the gospels, and the gospels remain his(s)ories.

In contrast, Elliott champions the discoured nature of both texts and persons and so suggests a concentration on characterization, rather than on (reified) character. In addition to the poststructuralist works of Moore, George Aichele, and Andrew Wilson, Elliott finds an important precursor in Elizabeth Struthers Malbon's *Mark's Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology*, which in addition to focusing on characterization also reflects on narrative tensions (rather than integrity as biblical narrative critics tend to do). For Elliott and the poststructuralist literary theorists he follows, characters are but "paper people" (chapter two). Elliott explores these creatures of discourse, and Mark's Jesus in particular, by concentrating on focalization, dialogue, and plot. While these discourse features create character, they also threaten to undo it at the same time—at least in so far as character relates to subjectivity, identity, and agency.

Focalization is the relationship of a narrative element to the vision that presents the narrative (chapter three). The focalizer is not a person, but merely a chosen point. While tracing differences in focalization (internal, external, and zero, as well as fixed, variable, and multiple), Elliott's primary point is the indeterminacy of narrative focalization, which he nicely illustrates with a discussion of Mark 6:48 and 15:37-39. He furthers his case with an analysis of descriptions of spectacle and readers' reliance on characters' views for "narrative facts" in *Leucippe and Clitophon*. The case is similar in Mark, but the primary focalizer is Jesus (although not in 6:14-29 or in the passion). Mark's readers see Jesus seeing and what he sees, and readers have to decide whether Jesus, an embedded and therefore unreliable character, sees rightly. While readers' responses are scripted, the text is a prism, because of Jesus' discourse status and because of narrative's conservative quality. Despite the standard interpretation of Mark 8:22-26, which sees the pericope as a synecdoche of Mark's

rhetorical direction of disciples and readers to a correct view of Jesus, nothing about such clear sight depends on anything at the story level. The transfiguration (see Wilson) reveals only narrative discourse. Texts are mirrors repeating and reaffirming readers' identities. Texts are lenses only onto discourse.

The common view in Biblical Studies is that dialogue reveals Jesus' subjectivity, but Elliott demonstrates that dialogue reflects narrative discourse (chapter four). In Elliott's examination of the *Life of Aesop*, a work consisting almost entirely of discourse, the gods (or narrative discourse) give Aesop speech (he was mute until inspired by Isis) with which he confounds others repeatedly (by being relentlessly literal) until the gods are done with him and he dies, "witless in his own cause." Mark's pattern is similar, but the source of Jesus' speech is less carefully defined, and Jesus' silence about his identity is an important part of his characterization. The ambiguity renders Mark's Gospel the trace of competing attempts to name the figure of Jesus. The so-called controversy stories reveal the inherently dialogical, contesting-identity quality of narrative. Ultimately, what comes out of narrative is only what the readers put into it (see Elliott's analysis of Mark 7:14-15).

Despite the apparent mimesis of his speeches, the Markan Jesus is merely a figure of discourse, subject to the plot which he also affects (chapter five). Mark's introduction (1:1-15) scripts Jesus with a number of texts; Mark 9:2-8 calls attention to the narrative process itself; and Mark 16:1-8 leaves Jesus pointedly with only a textual body. While Jesus asserts the scripted fate of the Son of Man in the passion (14:21 again), commentators have been unable to identify the text to which the Markan Jesus refers. The saying is intelligible only for the reader who has already equated Jesus, the Son of Man, and the Suffering Servant (the same reader who finds a messianic secret in Mark, rather than Aichele's phantom messiah) or for the reader, like Elliott, who sees the script as the nature of narrative itself. Consequently, Mark's Jesus is driven by discourse, (not by the spirit), and Mark is "a novel plot to undo Jesus." Readers cannot pluck Jesus or any character from this plot without situating him in another. For Elliott, plot equals narrative discourse, not merely storyline. He further posits that plot signifies purpose, intention, and theology.

Elliott fulfills his claim to further biblical narrative criticism by a relentless focus on the text—or, rather, on narrative discourse. He also nicely shows that biblical narrative critics' reduction of discourse to an implied author's rhetoric and their assumptions about a real, historical person Jesus override their similar claims to focus on narrative. In Elliott's hands, narrative criticism does not take one behind a text to Jesus or an implied author. His concentration reveals only narrative discourse and a Jesus who goes as he is written. This Jesus is not a simulacrum of a real (modern or historical) person.

But, this discoursed Jesus is a simulacrum of poststructuralist readers like Elliott, and thus functions like the Jesuses who are the simulacra of historical critics and of biblical narrative critics. For Elliott, this similarity is not ironic; it is a reflex of narrative itself, which merely mirrors, rather than converting, readers who contest and construct their identities as they read. Thus, Elliott's reading and his Jesus differ from those of the biblical narrative critics and of the historical critics, just as his worldview and conversation partners differ from theirs. As he rightly observes, early biblical narrative critics read vis-à-vis historical critics while he reads vis-à-vis these biblical narrative critics.

What he does not say is that both self-identifying readings have much to do with institutional locations. Early biblical narrative critics read and identified as SBLers, not MLAers, and read when the SBL was even more dominated by historical criticism than it is today. By contrast, Elliott reads in the context of doing a dissertation directed by a notable poststructuralist biblical critic. Elliott is not at all covert about this location and is as charitable as he can be to his precursors and foils given his dissertation-location, the style of which—visible in various places in this work—demands agonistic novelty.

The dissertation format means, of course, that we are still in the SBL ghetto—however upscale the theoretical address. Many may dismiss any concerns here, and all of us may wonder if any of us would have vocational identities outside the SBL (and its institutions). I raise the issue, however, because of a certain theological aura in Elliott’s discussion and in some versions of poststructuralist theory (I could have also worried or reflected about other tensions in poststructuralist theory, like the issue of agency). Some may remember that the appeal of narrative criticism for some biblical critics was that it served Protestant notions of scripture and provided a vehicle for pious meetings with Jesus (while avoiding the intellectual difficulties and troubling theological implications of historical criticism). Elliott’s focus on discourse deconstructs this pious textual haven. Or does it? Elliott prefers the term “plot” to “discourse,” perhaps because of Russian Formalism or because his foils used Chatman’s distinction between story and discourse badly. But Elliott also claims that plot bespeaks purpose, intention, and theology. “Plot” certainly does that more effectively than “discourse” (and incidentally may also cause more difficulties for a discussion of agency). Further, his fourth chapter in particular draws specific analogies between discourse and the gods. Is this only analogy? Or is this to opt for a theological version of poststructuralist theory? Such a version would play relatively well in the SBL.



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