

Exegesis of Mark 5.1-20 – Part 2 – Kennedy in View

👤 Joel Watts 📅 March 30, 2011 📄 Mark, Mimesis, Rhetoric, Thesis 💬 3 Comments

Examination of the Period's Trend of Literary Rhetoric

In a chapter devoted to literary rhetoric in George Kennedy's classical treatment of Rhetoric, he gives the sense that it has lost something along the way, especially as oral rhetoric was moved to written rhetoric. He notes that literary rhetoric relies more fully upon the reader to know rhetoric whereas oral rhetoric relies on the speaker. As the Evangelists moved oral history to written history, they must have been concerned that written tales of Jesus wouldn't carry the same weight, while at the same time, they found that a literary rhetoric might allow for more stories with pointed criticism. There is a danger, as Kennedy notes, in the written text becoming linear, and that may explain why books such as Revelation have become difficult to understand, especially if it was meant to be heard. Mark, on the other hand, meant for his work to be read, and in doing so, we also allow that the author was concerned with the hearing of the text (Kennedy, 1980, 109) and may have used what Kennedy identifies as *letteraturizzazione*.



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Kennedy notes that *letteraturizzazione* 'was also made easier by the fact that a great deal of Greek literature is in some sense public, and like oratory, had religious and political functions within society' (Kennedy, 1980, 110). While Mark's Gospel may not fit neatly into recognized Greek literature, we may assume that Mark knew of some rhetorical styles and normative Greek styles, especially if we assume this Mark is the same Mark who traveled with the Apostle Paul who was known to use Greek rhetoric in his Epistles. He goes on to note that the 'fiction of orality' can be seen in written works with the characters often written so as to use rhetoric and other forms of 'speaking' where by the reader could easily understand that rhetoric was being used. If we understand that Mark is using this to his advantage, then the conversation between Jesus and the Legion, Jesus and the former demoniac, and Jesus and the Town People are thus needed to be examined as *letteraturizzazione*.

Literary rhetoric was being established during the time in which Mark was being written. We know that Longinus and Tacitus were writing around the end of the first century with a marked trend toward literary rhetoric. Further, Virgil, writing a generation before Christ, was mimicked by Lucan, a rising star of literary rhetoric in the mid-first century. Cicero, writing before Virgil, shows a Latin trend in literary rhetoric as well. The Evangelist, then, would have been at

home, either in Rome or Palestine, in using literary rhetoric to write to a young Messiah-believing community. Kennedy notes that during the Silver Age in Rome, names familiar to us now, such as Ovid, Martial and Juvenal, were writing the first 'truly rhetorical literature' (Kennedy, 1980, 113). These authors surrounded the Christian era with Mark fitting somewhere in the middle.

In a matter directly related to my position on Mark's demoniac story is the *mimesis* of Virgil's *Aeneid* – the mythic poem of the glorious founding of Rome – by Lucan in his poem, *Pharsalia*, which details the downfall of Rome due to the lack of virtue found among her leaders. Virgil's poem opens with,

*Arms, and the man I sing, who, forc'd by fate,
And haughty Juno's unrelenting hate,
Expell'd and exil'd, left the Trojan shore.
Long labors, both by sea and land, he bore,
And in the doubtful war, before he won
The Latian realm, and built the destin'd town;
His banish'd gods restor'd to rites divine,
And settled sure succession in his line,
From whence the race of Alban fathers come,
And the long glories of majestic Rome.*

Lucan ups Virgil's tale with a spiraling pattern of immorality, which is some ways aimed at Nero and all of the Caesars:

*Wars worse than civil on Emathian plains,
and crime let loose we sing; how Rome's high race
plunged in her vitals her victorious sword;
armies akin embattled, with the force
of all the shaken earth bent on the fray;
and burst asunder, to the common guilt,
a kingdom's compact; eagle with eagle met,
standard to standard, spear opposed to spear.*

There are other examples to be made, such as when the heroes of the poems are compared with one another and their various actions. Virgil presents a real hero while Lucan presents Rome at her lowest. Essentially, during this time, it has become the rhetorical flare of a few writers to take a well-known story and through *mimesis* use it to tell a different story, sometimes, with an almost satirist take.

Kennedy notes that *mimesis* (imitation) is 'fundamental...in theories of literary rhetoric.' (Kennedy, 1980, 116). It goes beyond, however, merely imitation or repeating a previous action but goes also to the length of imitating an action, or an actor, to tell a different story. I note that Lucan has been identified using *mimesis* with his coopting of Virgil against Nero which no one can call a real imitation, but can point to the mockery of mimicking. Aristotle notes that *mimesis* can be found in different forms,

Now it is evident that each of the modes of *imitation* above mentioned will exhibit these differences, and become a distinct kind in imitating objects that are thus distinct. Such diversities may be found even in dancing, flute-playing, and lyre-playing. So again in language, whether prose or verse unaccompanied by music. Homer, for example, makes

men better than they are; Cleophon as they are; Hegemon the Thasian, the inventor of parodies, and Nicochares, the author of the Deiliad, worse than they are. The same thing holds good of Dithyrambs and Nomes; here too one may portray different types, as Timotheus and Philoxenus differed in representing their Cyclopes. The same distinction marks off Tragedy from Comedy; for Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life. (Aristotle – Poetics, II)

While later literary rhetoricians narrowed *mimesis*, Aristotle allows for a variety of uses, such as perfecting in some way 'real life.' Again, I note that Lucan, while employing *mimesis* used Virgil's structure and imagery but against contemporary Rome. In the same way, the Evangelist uses a historical event familiar to the Jews of Palestine to make his political point.

George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition* (Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 108-119.

See Chapter 1 of Kennedy's work. It relates to the 'repeated slippage of rhetoric into literary composition.' (cf Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 109)

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[J. K. Gayle](#)

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So much of Aristotle's mimesis and so much more of Kennedy's letteraturizzazione. With respect to literary rhetoric, as you're calling it, would you think that Mark or his Jesus might be mimicking the sophist Gorgias? I see some remarkable parallels between chapter 4 of the gospel (the parable of the sower) and The Encomium of Helen. What do you think? I think you're on to something by suggesting, "Mark's demoniac story is the mimesis of Virgil's Aeneid."



[Joel](#)

MARCH 30, 2011 AT 11:53 AM

To be honest, I haven't quite read [The Encomium](#) just yet, but I will. There is much to the rhetorical study of the New Testament and it does grasp my imitation.

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