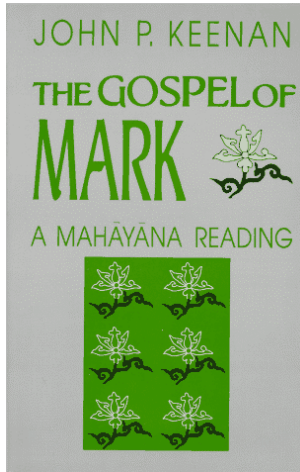


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Keenan, John P.

The Gospel of Mark: A Mahayana Reading

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This book is a commentary in which Mahayana Buddhism is employed as a lens through which to read the Gospel of Mark. Keenan approaches Mark not as a NT scholar, but as a scholar of Buddhism. Nevertheless, he is intimately acquainted with a vast array of contemporary Markan scholarship, and he reads and cites the Gospel of Mark in Greek. He also generously uses Mahayana technical terms in the original languages, which leads me to say that I wish my Sanskrit and Pali were as good as his Greek. Keenan's Mahayana reading of Mark resonates with many readings of Mark current today, and he succeeds in demonstrating that a Mahayana reading has much to offer us.

Explaining the hermeneutic of Mahayana Buddhism, Keenan observes that its two great themes are the twin paradoxes of "emptiness" coupled with "dependent co-arising," and "ultimate meaning" coupled with "worldly convention." First, regarding "emptiness" and "dependent co-arising," Mahayana Buddhism asserts that "truth is empty of any fixed essence and in the final analysis beyond the grasp of discriminative thinking" (p. 5). "Emptiness means not that things simply do not exist, but rather that nothing has any firm and fixed essence. Their essenceless existence is described in terms of their mutual conditioning, their co-arising in mutual dependency" (pp. 7-8).

Second, regarding "ultimate meaning" and "worldly convention," Mahayana Buddhism declares that "ultimate meaning" is "completely other" and "ineffable," but that provides no excuse to withdraw from a deep investment in "worldly, conventional truth." "One is

to hold the silence of ultimate meaning in dynamic tension with the conventional awareness of language-constructed world of convention” (p. 13). One has only the ordinary and conventional with which to intimate the extraordinary and ultimate.

Mahayana Buddhism challenges its practitioners to walk the “middle path,” “living in the healthy tension between emptiness and dependent co-arising” (p. 99). Keenan aptly observes that Mahayana's “middle path” is hauntingly reminiscent of Mark’s constant theme of “the way.”

Mahayana's tensive, paradoxical reading strategy suits Mark well, Keenan claims, for it is a text permeated by a rhetoric of indirection (irony, paradox, ambiguity, and the like). This book is in many ways a deconstructive reading of Mark. Keenan observes that Mahayana developed sophisticated strategies of deconstructive reading centuries before Derrida, and he draws the inevitable comparisons between Mahayana and Derrida’s critique of logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence. Keenan’s primary conversation partners in this book, however, are the Markan scholars who have engaged in literary studies (e.g., structuralist, narrative-critical, reader-response) of the Gospel over the past twenty years or so.

Keenan’s Mahayana reading of Mark casts many features of Mark’s narrative into a striking new light:

(a) Keenan offers a number of intriguing insights into the apocalyptic eschatology of Mark’s Gospel. He suggests that eschatology is a meditation upon the Mahayana insight of “emptiness” and “impermanence.” Eschatology is more about emptiness than time, he says, and I suspect that is correct.

(b) The “wilderness” in Mark can also be rendered in Mahayana terms as an encounter with “emptiness,” with the ever-present temptation to seize the emptiness and to remain in the wilderness, instead of leaving the wilderness in order to reengage the sphere of “worldly convention.”

(c) Jesus typically tells those whom he heals not to follow him, but to return home, thus encouraging them to reengage in everyday life and “worldly convention.” Having encountered something ultimate in him, they should not leave their ordinary lives behind, but reengage their lives still more deeply. Only the Twelve, who still need a “cure,” continue to follow him!

(d) Mark offers an “emptied” Christology, the utter negation of all familiar and comfortable theological affirmations about Jesus. “One might say that the Markan portrayal of Jesus is an emptying of all views of Jesus” (p. 223). “Jesus in Mark is a demythologized messiah” (p. 367).

(e) Why does Jesus suffer in Mark? Because, as Mahayana Buddhism knows, all of life is suffering.

(f) The Mahayana “no-self” is a haunting echo of Jesus’ admonition to “deny the self” in Mark 8:34.

(g) I gained new insight into moments in the experience of reading Mark where the reader is misled or victimized by the indirection of Mark’s discourse; for example, the demons’ declarations of Jesus as son of god are inadequate and mislead the reader if given too much credence.

Keenan thus persuades me that students of Mark have much to learn from Mahayana Buddhism. But is the reverse not true? How might Mark provide a reading grid for Mahayana Buddhism? That possibility is not explored in this book. In this conversation between Mahayana Buddhism and Mark, the former always has the upper hand. Features of Mark that do not easily fit into the Mahayana grid are nevertheless pressed to fit. For example, Keenan finds no theory of divine necessity in Mark. In Mark, he says, “God is not a transcendent self concocting overarching plans about what is to happen in the world” (p. 314). As much as I would like to believe this, I am not sure that Mark does.

Similarly, Keenan’s readings of other features of Mark sometimes do not ring true. For example, his interpretation of demons is that these represent those who have encountered “ultimate meaning,” but have become so enamored by it that they have failed to reengage life at the level of “worldly convention.” This interpretation of the demonic falls flat and does not begin to approach the interpretive power of anthropological or ideological readings.

As a practical matter, too much of the book consists of long quotations from Markan scholarship. While it is gratifying to be quoted frequently by Keenan, nevertheless, short, judicious summaries of scholarly opinion would have made the book less tedious to read and more useful as a commentary.

I happily recommend this book to Markan scholars seeking a fresh, new angle on the Gospel, as well as to anyone participating in Buddhist-Christian dialogue.