

Lorenzo Gasparro, *Simbolo e narrazione in Marco. La dimensione simbolica del secondo Vangelo alla luce della pericope del fico di Mc 11,12-25* (Analecta Biblica 198; Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2012). Pp. 688. € 40. ISBN 978-88-7653-198-9

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This book is a revised version of the doctoral thesis presented by Lorenzo Gasparro in 2011 at the École biblique et archéologique française in Jerusalem.

It originates in a twofold insight. The author believes that the symbolic aspect of the Gospel narratives is important and has been too often neglected. Furthermore, like other readers, he has been puzzled and even disconcerted by the episode of Jesus and the fig tree in Mark 11:12-25, and came to suspect that it might be best understood as a symbolic act. A study of the pericope in this light was the starting point for an exploration of the symbolic dimension of the entire Second Gospel.

We are, of course, well used to the study of symbolism in John; much less so for Mark. In fact, such an approach to the Second Gospel seems to go right against the received idea (now already under attack, but still often repeated) of Mark's as a 'primitive' narrative, closer to the events and for that reason not much given to theological reflection, especially one that makes extensive use of symbolism. This book shows that, on the contrary, Mark's Gospel also is rich in symbolism. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, the author emphasises that his approach, which he calls 'symbolic exegetical analysis', does not imply a figural or allegorical explanation of the text. Rather, it involves an analysis of the symbols that are worked into the text itself. In other words, symbolism is not some extrinsic interpretation that is imposed on the text, but is an integral part of the *literal sense* of the text. Consequently, such an analysis as Lorenzo Gasparro proposes is not opposed to the historical nature of the Gospel narrative and is perfectly compatible with an historical-critical exegesis. Indeed, historical-critical exegesis may call on the symbolic in order to deal with the extravagance or strangeness, or even improbability of an act of Jesus such as the episode of the fig tree. More than one exegete has already suggested a parallel with the surprising

behaviour of some Old Testament prophets, which demands a symbolic interpretation.

Lorenzo Gasparro shows that the Scriptures are imbued with a vision of the world that finds expression in symbolic language. Such a world view is not in fact confined to the Bible but is shared with the ancient Near East generally and also with traditional cultures even today or at least in a recent past. So symbolism in the Scriptures is not limited to a few ornamental or rhetorical 'figures', but belongs to an entire perception of reality and its appropriate expression. One feature of the Biblical narrative is that it occupies a place 'between myth and symbol'. Whereas myth dwells in a sacred sphere, clearly different from the everyday world, and tends to draw the human being into that dimension, the Biblical events, by contrast, belong decisively to the everyday plane, to a time and a place that can be, at least in principle, identified. Even when they are 'assumed' in a moment of revelation, they do not leave this concrete space-time context and do not lose completely their 'ordinary' tone.

But is it possible to speak of a symbolic universe proper to Mark? Norman Perrin has already demonstrated the key role of the Kingdom as a true symbol (and not simply an idea or metaphor) in the Second Gospel. In Mark the mystery of the Kingdom is made present in the parable and as parable. Lorenzo Gasparro takes us further. We now realise that the parabolic nature of Jesus' language about the Kingdom is not simply a pedagogical strategy, to get his teaching across to the masses, and it is not limited to the six formal parables told in chapter 4. Instead, 'parable' characterises the whole of Jesus' spoken teaching in Mark. This teaching is indeed rooted in daily life in 1st century Galilee and Judea. At the same time, it is never without a certain 'extravagance' that carries its hearers or readers to something 'beyond'. In a word, paradox is central to the Gospel of Mark and to the Jesus who is there portrayed. Paradox constitutes the very logic of the Kingdom, where the Cross is the supreme paradox.

Lorenzo Gasparro gives a new and convincing interpretation of Mark 11:12-25, this pericope that is so difficult (and for some, unacceptable). Further, he provides a key to understanding not only that passage but in fact the Good News according to Mark. He has put beyond doubt the importance of the symbolic dimension in the whole of the Second Gospel.