New Title from Jeffrey W. Aernie

*Narrative Discipleship: Portraits of Women in the Gospel of Mark*

*Narrative Discipleship* examines the thematic and theological impact of women in the Gospel of Mark. Using narrative analysis, Aernie explores how Mark intentionally crafts the narratives of women in the Gospel to extend his portrait of discipleship. Mark portrays these women as exemplars of four key aspects of discipleship—restored life, kingdom speech, sacrificial action, and cruciformity. These portraits of discipleship provide a transformative paradigm for Mark’s audience. Mark creates a portrait of narrative discipleship as a means to encourage his audience toward embodied discipleship and faithful participation in God’s in-breaking kingdom.

1. What was your inspiration for this book?

Several years ago a colleague asked me to contribute to the project Bible, Borders, Belonging(s) (SBL Press, 2014). In that volume I examined the intriguing narrative of Jesus’s interaction with the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7. That engaging narrative encouraged me to examine Mark’s narrative portrayal of women more closely.

2. For whom is this book written?

My hope is that the book can be used widely. The project grew out of my day-to-day in interaction with students as I attempted to model the process of exegesis and to engage with them in faithful interpretation of the Gospel of Mark. In my attempt to offer insight into narrative readings of Scripture and provide close readings of specific narratives in Mark’s Gospel I hope the volume will prove to be a useful teaching tool. Those engaged in teaching and preaching Mark’s Gospel will also find that the book engages with some challenging material in a constructive and readable way.

3. What was most surprising for you as you worked through Mark’s Gospel?

Perhaps the most unique argument in the book is my engagement with the challenging conclusion to Mark’s narrative. The final portrait of the women at the tomb is complex. I tried to offer some useful insights into this part of Mark’s narrative. Perhaps the most surprising element of the project was the constant realization of just how intentionally the narrative is structured. The links between these narratives are constructive and essential.

4. What do you mean by “narrative discipleship?”

In the book I argue that Mark crafts the narratives of eight women to broaden his portrait of discipleship. Mark’s intentional integration of the narratives of these women in the Gospel contributes to what I refer to as narrative discipleship—the composite set of actions and attributes associated with the identity of Jesus and derived from the cruciform shape of his life and ministry which Mark portrays in the Gospel as essential for those who desire to participate in the reality of God’s in-breaking kingdom.
5. What are the key elements of discipleship that you explore?

I explore four areas of discipleship in Mark’s narrative: restored life, kingdom speech, sacrificial action, and cruciformity. Each of these four characteristics speaks to a key way in which the women reflect the reality of Jesus’s own life and ministry. They are disciples as they embody and reflect the way of Jesus in Mark’s narrative.

6. What do you think is the key takeaway from *Narrative Discipleship*?

Mark’s Gospel aims to shape the lives of its audience. Mark’s dramatic narrative of God’s kingdom breaking into the world in Jesus calls us to participate in this new kingdom as those who faithfully embody it’s reality in belief and action. In that sense Mark’s Gospel aims toward virtue—to toward a holistic re-imagination of our existence as inhabitants of God’s kingdom and participants in the life of discipleship.
Markan discipleship is rooted in the narrative of Jesus. There is an inseparable link in Mark’s Gospel between Christology—what the narrative proclaims about the identity and mission of Jesus—and discipleship—what the narrative asserts about the identity and mission of those who desire to follow Jesus. A key way that Mark demonstrates this connection is through the intersection of the narrative of Jesus with the narratives of other characters. The distinct characters that feature in the Gospel elucidate Mark’s definition of discipleship as they interact with and respond to Jesus. The twelve disciples are a constructive example of this process. Their extensive engagement with Jesus creates a unique portrait of the radical demands of Markan discipleship. The aim of this volume is to demonstrate how Mark’s narrative portrayal of women extends the portrait of discipleship that he creates for his audience.

In his otherwise insightful volume *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, William Telford suggests that the women in Mark’s Gospel “are essentially minor characters who do little in the context of the Gospel to propel the plot forward.” Telford’s largely negative assessment of the women is built on the confined role that they have in comparison to the twelve disciples and other male characters. In spite of the limited narrative space that the women occupy as minor characters in Mark’s Gospel, my contention is that Mark narrates specific stories of women as an essential dimension of the plot’s development. Mark’s intentional portrayal of eight women—Simon’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31), the bleeding woman (Mark 5:25–34), the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30), the poor widow (Mark 12:41–44), the woman who anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3–9), and the three named women in the passion narrative (Mark 15:40–41, 47; 16:1–8)—contributes to the theological progression of the Gospel. These women are exemplars of discipleship who serve as narrative representatives of the way in which God’s in-breaking kingdom renews creation and reorders humanity.

My intention is to demonstrate how these eight women function together as a distinct character group within the Gospel narrative to extend Mark’s theological portrait of discipleship. In specific terms, my aim is to describe how Mark’s depiction of these women creates a portrait of narrative discipleship. To explain that we learn about the nature of Jesus’s identity and mission only through our engagement with the narrated events of the Gospel, Robert Tannehill helpfully describes Mark’s portrayal of Jesus as “narrative Christology.”
The form of Mark’s theological communication shapes the way we learn from it and respond to it. In the same way, as the audience of Mark’s Gospel, we learn to define discipleship only through our engagement with its narrated events. Mark’s portrayal of the women develops narrative discipleship just as his portrayal of Jesus develops narrative Christology. The goal of Mark’s portrayal of these women is not to encourage his audience to imitate their specific actions. Our historical context means it is impossible to do this. We cannot touch Jesus’s clothes from behind in the midst of the crowd (Mark 5:25–34) or anoint him with expensive perfume in preparation for his burial (Mark 14:3–9). In contrast, Mark’s goal is to provide a narrative expression of what it means to embody characteristics that are essential to the nature and reality of God’s in-breaking kingdom.

By using the phrase narrative discipleship my goal is to demonstrate that it is the thematic emphases of the women’s individual narratives which extend the theological framework in which the life of discipleship can be worked out. As narrative representations of essential characteristics of Markan discipleship—restored life, kingdom speech, sacrificial action, and cruciformity—these women are a key bridge in the communicative act between author and audience. Mark integrates their individual stories into the wider narrative of God’s in-breaking kingdom so that the audience of the Gospel—both ancient and contemporary—can learn to embody these characteristics of discipleship in its own context. That is, Mark seeks to convert the imagination of his audience—to reshape us both cognitively and affectively so that we can participate in the kingdom as faithful followers of Jesus.
“Through circumspect yet creative narrative exegesis, Jeffrey Aernie makes the compelling case that Mark’s depiction of several women characters display essential dimensions of faithful discipleship in the way of Jesus. Such character sketches of narrative discipleship coalesce to round out what following Jesus entails and thereby elicit embodied discipleship on the part of discerning readers. Insightful and illuminating, this carefully crafted book composes a crucial and constructive contribution to Markan studies.”

—David J. Neville, St Mark’s National Theological Centre, Canberra

“Jeff Aernie takes readers on a fascinating journey through Mark’s portrayal of female figures. He shows how together these ‘minor’ characters become faithful guides to following Jesus by highlighting specifically four models of discipleship: restored, spoken, active, and cruciform. Far from being left in silence, through Aernie’s insightful reading, the voices of the women disciples are heard loud and clear as witnesses to Jesus and the way to live. The book is highly recommended.”

—Jason Maston, Houston Baptist University