

Wednesday 3rd October, Prof. Séamus O'Connell, St Patrick's College Maynooth
“Purity or Power? Jesus, the Spirits, and the Narrator in the Gospel of Mark”

In a rather sharp criticism of Jack Dean Kingsbury's *Christology of Mark's Gospel*, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon observes that, because “Kingsbury takes ‘the narrator’s point of view’ to be the only ‘correct’ view’, his Markan Christology is more a Christology of the Markan *narrator* than a narrative Christology of Mark [see *Mark's Jesus* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009) page 243]. A similar criticism can be made of the implicit demonology of almost all Markan interpretation: critics rarely, if ever, question the discourse-shift in references to demons and to unclean spirits. Therefore, apart from the Spirit [of God] and the Holy Spirit, all spirits are unclean—never evil—and just another way of referring to the horde of demons who are Satan's minions in Mark's narrative.

However, when it is noted that ‘unclean spirit’ is found only on the narrator's lips and once on the bystanders’, it can be seen that narrator has a particular point of view. For the Markan Jesus, his non-physical opponents are never unclean: they are either demons (see 3:22, 7:29) or ‘mute and deaf’ spirits (see 9:25). While the narrator would appear to narrate in a purity perspective, the primary concern of the Markan Jesus appears to be cosmic. In Jesus' point of view, the key issue is not purity, but the ongoing binding of ‘the strong man’ and the ‘plundering of his house’ (see 3:27). This paper outlines a narrative demonology of Mark. It establishes the point of view of Markan Jesus in respect of spirits and demons, explores the creative tension between his point of view and that of the narrator and the other characters, and seeks to situate these within the framework of larger Markan motifs and concerns.

--

Monday 8th October, Dr Columba Stewart OSB, St John's University, Collegeville, USA:
“Re-situating Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* and the *Book of Steps* in the ascetic landscape of Late Antique Mesopotamia: Marcionites, Manichaeans, and other conversation partners.”

This presentation explores ways of recovering the broader ascetic context for the well-known Syriac *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat (ca. 270-ca. 345 CE) and the anonymous *Book of Steps* (?mid-late 4th century CE). These texts present two distinct conceptions of Christian asceticism: Aphrahat wrote of the ascetic *qyama* or “covenant,” which was also promoted by other early Syriac authors; the *Book of Steps* describes a bi-partite church consisting of “perfect” ascetic members and “just” (married, property-owning) members.

The origins of both the *qyama* and the distinction between “perfect and “just” Christians are obscure. Other ascetic movements in Mesopotamia that would have been considered by the authors of those texts to be heretical (Marcionites) or inimical to Christianity (Manichaeans) may offer avenues of approach to this problem, despite challenges of recovering a complete view of their ascetic practice because of the suppression of those movements in the Roman and Sasanian empires.

The study of both Marcionites and Manichaeans (especially of the latter) has expanded enormously in recent years with important scholarly explorations of Marcion's role in the development of the biblical genre of “Gospel” and the continuing publication of Manichaean literature recovered from archaeological sites in Egypt (notably Medinet Madi and Kellis) and central Asia (Turfan and Dunhuang). Marcionites are known to have been active in Mesopotamia, and Mani's own writings were composed almost entirely in Syriac, though direct evidence for both in the Syriac cultural ambit is largely missing. It is, however, possible to recover a sense of their importance in that region, and to infer from Marcionite and Manichaean traces in other parts of the Late Antique world how they would have played a major role in the development of early Syriac Christian asceticism and influenced the forms of asceticism discoverable in the literature that came to be seen as representing “orthodox” Syriac Christianity.