

## BOOK REVIEW

Winn, Adam, *Reading Mark's Christology Under Caesar: Jesus the Messiah and Roman Imperial Ideology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018). xiv + 204 pp. Pbk. \$24.00.

Winn's book aims to correct his earlier work on Markan Christology without abandoning its understanding of the Second Gospel as a response to Flavian propaganda. His introduction surveys four elements of Jesus' characterization in Mark—titles, power, suffering and secrecy—before addressing how past scholarship used these features to assess the document's meaning. Having noted narrative criticism's overemphasis on Jesus' suffering, Winn admits his dissertation erred in the opposite direction by characterizing Mark's Jesus as powerful. As a corrective to both views, Winn proposes a 'historical-narrative' response to Markan Christology that affirms the equal significance of Jesus' power and suffering against the backdrop of his assessment of Mark's *Sitz im Leben*.

The book's argument commences by first determining Mark's date and provenance and then reconstructing the Gospel's historical genesis. Winn uses patristic testimony, Latinisms and the amenability of Mark's suffering discipleship motif with Neronian persecution to affirm Rome as Mark's place of composition. He settles on a post-70 CE date because it makes the best sense of Mark's prominent anti-temple motif. The remainder of the chapter reconstructs the political situation in Rome in the years following Jerusalem's fall to illuminate Mark's reason for writing. Vespasian's response to problems he experienced in becoming emperor likely provided the determining factor for Mark's composition, since he sought to overcome objections to his low-birth status by engaging in forms of propaganda that resonate with the Second Gospel's portrait of Jesus. Vespasian used his victory over the Jews to appeal to the Roman citizenry's theology of victory. His reputation as a healer, generosity with benefactions and status as the subject of favorable portents and prophecies likewise legitimated Vespasian's claim to be Rome's divinely sanctioned ruler. Of particular importance for Winn are three

passages in Josephus, Tacitus and Suetonius that, he argues, promote Vespasian as ‘the true fulfillment of Jewish messianic prophecies and expectations’ (p. 45; cf. p. 46 n. 50). Vespasian’s propaganda thus presented Roman Christians with a pair of theological challenges. First, his destruction of the temple implied the Roman gods’ superiority over Yahweh. Second, Flavian propagandists claimed that Jewish sacred texts did not anticipate the emergence of their Messiah, but rather Vespasian’s rise as emperor. Mark’s composition thus represents ‘a strong pastoral response that undermined Flavian propaganda and made a convincing case that Jesus was God’s Messiah and true ruler of the world’ (p. 48).

Winn’s second chapter examines four Christological titles in Mark—Christ, Son of God, Son of Man and Son of David—all of which characterize Jesus as God’s eschatological ruler. Winn wisely resists the narrative-critical urge to ignore what Mark’s readers brought with them to his text when determining the titles’ meaning. While he devotes but a single paragraph to the first title, he associates the second with the coronation language of Ps. 2.7 to suggest ‘Jesus’ divine sonship expresses his identity as God’s appointed ruler’ (p. 53). ‘Son of Man’ is more than a generic means of self-reference, as it helps identify Jesus as God’s appointed ruler who would suffer and die before experiencing eschatological vindication (see Dan. 7.13-14). Jesus’ discussion of Psalm 110 in Mk 12.35-37 does not mitigate the significance of the title ‘Son of David’. Rather, it ‘becomes another way in which the Markan narrative conveys Jesus’ identity as God’s Messiah, but it adds ... the priestly authority possessed by that Messiah’ (p. 66). While Winn admits the four titles do not by themselves require readers to evaluate them against the backdrop of Flavian propaganda, he feels the first two fit his reconstruction of Mark’s *Sitz im Leben* well.

Chapter 3 claims that Mark 1–8’s presentation of Jesus counters ‘the powerful resume of Vespasian ... to demonstrate that Jesus is in all ways superior’ (p. 88). Not only does Mark’s opening verse parrot Roman imperial jargon, the following scriptural citations refute Vespasian’s claim to have fulfilled Jewish messianic expectations. The account of Jesus’ baptism functions as his divine coronation ceremony, and the miraculous deeds dominating Jesus’ Galilean ministry verify the incipit by establishing him as powerful. Like Vespasian, Jesus heals a man’s crippled hand and restores another’s sight with his spittle. Details of the Gerasene demoniac’s healing invite readers to interpret the exorcism as Jesus’ symbolic reversal of Vespasian’s military success in Judea. The calming of the sea finds a political analogue in Philo’s

description of Augustus in *Embassy* 145–146, and his ability to feed the masses bests Vespasian's gift of grain to a famished Roman populace. Mark 1–8's presentation of Jesus' power thus seeks to bolster the faith of community members who wavered because of Flavian propaganda.

Winn's fourth chapter argues that Mk 8.22–10.52 does not move away from Jesus' power and toward a depiction of his suffering in a way that eclipses the former's significance. While Peter's confession at 8.29 aligns with Mark's incipit, he fails to see that Jesus must suffer and die. Demonstrating that suffering and death form a legitimate part of Jesus' identity thus forms the central chapters' primary purpose. Winn maintains, moreover, that a proper understanding of Mark's political context explains an otherwise unresolvable tension between Jesus' demonstration of power in chs. 1–8 and his prominent suffering in chs. 9–16. Per Winn, the Roman citizenry's commitment to self-rule and their rejection of monarchical tyranny tasked emperors with masking their genuinely despotic behavior with deliberate acts of self-abnegation. 'Ideal Roman rulers ... exercised their authority as humble citizens rather than kings and ... sacrificed their own interests for those of the state' (p. 105).

Winn uses this practice of *recusatio* as a lens for interpreting Mk 10.42–45: 'The Markan Jesus' rejection of ... tyrannical rule would have been favorably received by Mark's Roman audience, which saw in Jesus' teaching their own deeply held political convictions' (p. 108). Indeed, vv. 43–45 hyperbolically describe the self-effacing style of leadership Mark's Roman audience held dear. So while Jesus remains a messianic figure, he is no 'king' in the popular sense of an autocratic despot. Rather, his suffering and death constitute 'acts of generous benefaction and humble service' (p. 116). Winn accounts for Mark's secrecy motif in chapter 5 by similarly appealing to the emperors' strategic refusal of honor. The Second Gospel's original audience would have understood Jesus' rejection of others' acclaim as yet another form of *recusatio*.

The book's final chapters concern Jesus' activity in the temple and the passion narrative. Jesus' triumphal entry demonstrates an appropriate willingness to receive messianic honor, and both the intercalation at 11.12–21 and the teaching that follows portray him as a powerful figure with the authority to condemn the temple and its corrupt leaders. Jesus teaches that the temple's function as a center for prayer and forgiveness has shifted to his community. As a consequence, Mark's readers are free to regard the temple's destruction not as evidence of Rome's power but of successful divine judgment.

Vespasian was not the Jewish God's conqueror in 70 CE but his prophetic pawn who fulfilled what Jesus proclaimed decades prior.

Even though Jesus' death by crucifixion in Mark remains shameful, Winn still sees it as embodying Roman political ideals. 'This death is the proper outcome for the true ruler of the world ... as an act of service for his people' (p. 152). The Second Evangelist does not abandon his powerful portrait of Jesus in the process of recounting his miserable demise but consistently incorporates reminders of his status as God's appointed ruler. Through the cry of dereliction's anticipation of Psalm 22's fulfillment, through Mark's confirmation of the same in the resurrection account, through the solar eclipse attending Jesus' death, through the temple veil's rending, through the curiously brief duration of Jesus' crucifixion and through the similarities Mark's passion story shares with other Roman triumphs, the Second Gospel's author carefully and ironically preserves the powerful portrait of Jesus more prominently on display in chs. 1–8.

While I found Winn's book enjoyable, his principal claims seem to lack sufficient warrant at points. For example, in light of the importance Mark's *Sitz im Leben* holds for his 'historical-narrative' approach, it seems odd that Winn would devote only twenty pages to its reconstruction. His three-page assessment of the Gospel's provenance, for instance, denies the need for a full treatment of the debate since 'for the purpose of this project it is only necessary to demonstrate the existence of strong evidence for Roman provenance' (p. 29). Such comments set the scholarly bar too low by requiring only a 'plausible' answer to a critical question. Since 'history' could only have happened one way, why not demonstrate instead that Rome constitutes the best hypothesis available and avoid the risk of building the remainder of the argument on sand?

Although Winn cites Josephus, *War* 6.312–313 in support of his claim that Roman historians cast Vespasian as the fulfillment of Jewish messianic expectation (p. 45), the Josephan text cannot possibly support such a reading. Far from presenting the new emperor as the realization of Old Testament anticipations about the emergence of a new world leader, the passage instead decries the tragic interpretive mistake Josephus' contemporaries made by adopting a messianic understanding of a vague non-canonical prophecy. Per Josephus, this 'ambiguous oracle' (*χρησμὸς ἀμφίβολου*), that for some found confirmation in their sacred texts (*ὁμοίως ἐν τοῖς ἱεροῖς εὐρημένους γράμμασιν*), concerned not the emergence of the long-awaited Jewish messiah, but Vespasian's assumption of the title 'emperor' while on Judean soil. Similar

observations hold for the additional passages Winn cites from Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13.1-2 and Suetonius, *Vesp.* 4.5, which leaves him without any evidence to support the idea that Vespasian promoted himself as the fulfillment of Jewish prophetic Scripture. Hence, there is no reason to suggest Mark's author countered such a notion in his portrait of Jesus.

Aspects of Mark's narrative also complicate Winn's thesis in ways the book does not address. According to Winn, Vespasian commemorated his victory over the Jews by minting coins that highlighted 'the prominent role ... Vespasian's victory ... played in the Flavian foundation myth' (p. 43). If Mark sought to counter Flavian propaganda by promoting Jesus as Vespasian's superior, explaining Jesus' laissez-faire attitude toward Roman taxation in 12.13-17 becomes problematic. In light of Jesus' advice to 'give the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and God the things that are God's' (v. 17), why would Mark's readers not infer a categorical distinction between the Gospel's Christological focus and their experience of imperial propaganda? While Winn recognizes that the passage presents 'numerous interpretive issues', he claims that 'for my purposes it is only necessary to note that the answer Jesus gives ... successfully thwarts the efforts of the temple authorities' (p. 141).

Winn also points to recognition of the Senate as a means of *recusatio*: 'By honoring and respecting the Senate, the emperor sent a clear message that he respected the Roman political values and that he viewed himself not as a monarch but as the "first among equals"' (p. 99). In light of this, how would Mark's audience assess Jesus' open conflict with, criticism of and condemnation by Jewish religious leadership? Furthermore, if through submission to Roman law 'good emperors reinforced their identity as Rome's first citizens' (p. 102), what does Jesus' dismissive attitude toward Sabbatarian requirements in 2.23-28 say about his respect for Torah? While Winn is right to detect ideas amenable to Roman distaste for autocratic rule in Mk 10.42-45, these verses clearly seek to counter a perceived Greco-Roman norm rather than appeal to a shared traditional sentiment. Put simply, these verses speak from the perspective of Jews who were subjected to Roman imperial domination and grew to resent it. Consequently, their presentation of an alternative to corrupt forms of Gentile leadership does not fit Winn's hypothetical *Sitz im Leben*. What Winn attributes to 'hyperbole' here and elsewhere suggests instead that Mark's author did not share popular Roman ideology but instead opposed it. What the Second Gospel's Christology addresses is not a political issue with important religious overtones (Jesus as Roman emperor), but a

spiritual matter with significant political implications (Jesus as Jewish Messiah). In short, Winn's book perhaps demonstrates how a member of the Flavian dynasty would assess the aspects of Mark's content he discusses. Yet the book, like his dissertation before it, overstates its case when the focus shifts instead to Mark's author and his intentions.

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