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Incigneri, Brian J.

The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark's Gospel

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The Gospel to the Romans, a version of Brian Incigneri's dissertation at the Australian Catholic University, joins the welter of studies that propose to situate the Markan community in space and time in a way that will clarify the meaning of the Gospel. His thesis is that the Gospel of Mark was written in late 71 in Rome in order to address the stressful situation in which Roman Christians found themselves at that time. According to Incigneri, the causes of the Markan community's stress arose from the recent Triumph of Titus upon his return to Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, along with the community's pervasive fear of arrest and summary execution by Roman authorities. The Markan community was also struggling with the issue of forgiving those of their community who had betrayed their fellow Christians out of fear of the Roman authorities but later desired to return to the community. When read through these two lenses (pervasive fear of arrest and execution; the pressing issue of forgiving [or not] Christians who have fallen away), Incigneri believes, many passages in the Gospel come into focus and can more easily be "explained."

The introductory chapter situates Incigneri's approach to Mark within recent Markan scholarship. While respecting much of recent scholarship, he finds fault both with approaches that do not put enough weight on the circumstances that called forth the

Gospel of Mark (e.g., redaction criticism, new criticism, reader response criticism) and with approaches that get those circumstances wrong (i.e., studies that place Mark somewhere other than Rome and/or at some time other than late 71). Two areas of special attention especially characterize his approach: (1) attention to the “pathetic” (in addition to the “logical” and “ethical”) nature of the text, which in practice shows itself mainly by observations that Mark is “stirring the emotions of his readers”; and (2) attention to Mark’s use of allusions, by which he means allusions to recent events in the experience of the Markan community (and not, for instance, allusions to texts of Scripture). Mark is an “act of communication between its writer and its intended recipients,” he argues, and must be understood as such in order to be read rightly.

This commitment to the determinative nature of Mark’s origins is explicit. As Incigneri argues, just as genes determine the “physical nature” of humans and are essential to an understanding of “the body at its most fundamental level,” so also the “genetic origin” of the Gospel of Mark “determines its nature and the way it operates.” The “two parents” of the Gospel of Mark, from which the book received its “genes,” are “the author and his community” (1). Working with E. D. Hirsch’s distinction between “meaning” and “significance,” Incigneri argues that clear attention to Mark’s setting within “the moment” of its birth—the “moment” that “determines” its “meaning”—will both clarify difficult passages in the Gospel and facilitate appropriate understandings of the later “significance” of the text. In fact, once the “meaning” is properly ascertained, application of Mark to modern situations will be “easy” and “automatic” (29). In other words, Incigneri thinks there is a lot on the line in getting the origins of Mark’s Gospel right.

In chapters 2 and 3 Incigneri argues for a Roman provenance and post-70 date for Mark, covering mostly well-worn ground. It is in chapters 4 and 5 that he offers the most significant part of his argument to locate the origin of Mark specifically in Rome in the latter part of 71. He appears to be the first scholar to argue for this specific date and provenance. In these chapters he moves between the text of Mark and extrabiblical evidence to flesh out his thesis that the situation of the Roman Christians in the fall of 71 best accounts for the text of Mark and that the text of Mark supports his thesis of the situation of the Roman Christians in the fall of 71. It should be noted that his argument is circular and has to be, given the lack of any evidence pointing unambiguously to any particular date and provenance for the Gospel. Drawing on a variety of ancient sources, Incigneri relates what is known about the events surrounding the destruction of the temple, the behavior and character of Vespasian and his sons, and the effects of the Triumph of Titus upon his return to Rome. He also argues that the persecution of Christians under Nero in 64 set a legal precedent that meant that thereafter, in Rome at least, Christians would have been subject to arrest and execution simply for being identified as Christians. Along the way he makes inferences about how Christians in

Rome “must have” or “probably” or “most likely” experienced these events and how they must have been terrified for their very lives all of the time in light of the Neronian legal precedent. Incigneri highlights numerous “coincidences” between what we know about the events of 71 and the text of Mark and uses these “coincidences” to build his thesis, small piece by small piece. As one example, Incigneri notes stories about Vespasian restoring a blind man’s sight by using spittle and healing another man’s withered hand. If these stories were well known in Rome in late 71 (he thinks it is probable that they were), then they form a backdrop for similar stories in Mark, which Incigneri thinks functioned as counterarguments to Vespasian’s self-aggrandizing propaganda (168–72).

In the final two chapters Incigneri expands his reading of Mark against his proposed originating circumstances. Chapter 6 argues that the whole Markan narrative is structured to allay the fears of and give comfort to the original readers of Mark, devoting special attention to Mark 3:20–6:44 and Mark 13. Jesus’ conflict with his family (3:20–35), for instance, is presented as exemplary of the conflict members of the Markan community had with members of their families, many of whom had turned them over to the Roman authorities for execution. Chapter 7 addresses the question of Mark’s portrayal of the disciples. Because his proposed Markan community would have known that the disciples turned out to be committed evangelists, many of whom became martyrs, Incigneri argues that the treatment of the Twelve is meant both to condemn the values of Roman society (e.g., power, wealth, political glory) to which the disciples succumb in the story and to evoke the reader’s sympathy for those who, like the disciples, had failed under pressure but later wished to return to the fold. The book concludes with indices of ancient literature cited, modern authors cited, and subjects discussed.

The strength of the book is its single-minded focus on reading Mark firmly within the strictures of a particular provenance, date and situation: Rome in late 71 with a Markan community living in constant fear of arrest and execution. If readers accept this premise, there is a certain sense to Incigneri’s reading of Mark. (The same can be said for other proposed Markan communities and the readings of Mark that result from them.) Readers who are committed to idea that correctly identifying the originating circumstances of Mark is critical to its proper interpretation will be interested in Incigneri’s arguments, even if they are not persuaded by all of them.

Readers who doubt the hermeneutical importance of the originating circumstances of Mark, however, will see weakness in Incigneri’s book. One weakness is the (viciously) circular nature of the argument. What might have made the argument less viciously circular would have been some firm historical evidence that the Markan community was at all like Incigneri says it is. Because direct evidence is lacking, it is incumbent upon Incigneri persuasively to demonstrate the likelihood of his contentions. But on my

reading, this does not happen. For instance, in light of the widely held judgment that persecution of Christians in the first centuries C.E. was sporadic and the death penalty for them rare, Incigneri might have offered a careful argument that the precedent set by Nero's persecution meant that Roman Christians would legitimately have feared arrest and execution even well after 64. Instead, he suggests that we "should" accept his version of the story of Christian persecution, citing Pliny's second-century correspondence with Trajan without interacting with any recent scholarship on that correspondence (106–8). So while Incigneri's thesis might be possible, he has not sufficiently argued that it is likely.

A second weakness is the strained exegesis of numerous passages in which Incigneri seeks to "explain" texts of Mark through highly speculative historical reconstructions. One example is his treatment of Mark 5:1–20, the story of the demon-possessed man among the tombs (190–94). In the story, the spirits in the man identify themselves as "Legion," presumably a reference to a Roman military unit, before being sent into a herd of two thousand swine that immediately rushes off a cliff to drown in the sea. Incigneri sees numerous details in this text that can be "explained" by reference to the late-71 Markan community in Rome. The fact that Mark numbers the swine at two thousand is a clue, since we know from other sources that a legion actually comprised 5,120 men. This discrepancy can be explained, says Incigneri, by reference to the siege of Jerusalem. During that siege, the Tenth Legion occupied the Mount of Olives and, according to Josephus, was attacked by those defending Jerusalem and suffered heavy losses. Incigneri wonders if "[p]erhaps it was known [in Rome] that the Legion was well below its normal strength." People in Rome would also have heard that the Tenth Legion had participated in the desecration of Jerusalem, and it is possible, Incigneri thinks (although he admits there is no direct evidence for it), that they desecrated the altar by sacrificing a pig. According to Incigneri, this background explains both the unclean spirits being called "Legion" while numbering only two thousand and their being sent into pigs. Furthermore, says Incigneri, the scene of the pigs running into the sea over the cliff "may have been inspired" by reports—which might have just reached Rome in late 71—indicating that the Tenth Legion had been recently dispatched to Machaerus and Masada, "both with cliffs abutting the Dead Sea." Incigneri concludes that these "coincidences between the role of the Tenth Legion and Mark's narrative strongly suggest that he used it . . . to further strengthen the link in the Gospel between Rome and Satan." This argument, as unpersuasive as it is convoluted, is not the only one of its kind in the book.

The Gospel to the Romans will be of interest to scholars concerned about recent discussions of the Markan community, but its price makes it likely that it will only be purchased by libraries.