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Incigneri, Brian J.

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

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This monograph is a revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation submitted to the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, Australia. Incigneri's central contention is that the Gospel of Mark is a rhetorical text that attempts to persuade readers in a particular setting, namely, Christians who lived in the volatile and fearful context of the city of Rome in the latter months of 71 C.E.

In the opening chapter Incigneri states that his aim is to show "that recognition of this social, political and religious context and its effects on the local Christians is the key to understanding the Gospel's design, and provides explanations for many literary features that have long puzzled scholars" (2). In the subsequent sections Incigneri is highly critical of redaction criticism, reader-response criticism, and narrative/literary approaches to Mark. He is also critical of scholars (e.g., Richard Bauckham) who believe that the intended readership of Mark is general, open, or indeterminate. Instead, Incigneri opts for a rhetorical approach where the text seeks to persuade readers in a specific setting and "to bring them to faith and changed attitudes and action" (42).

In chapter 2 Incigneri argues against a setting for Mark's Gospel in the East (e.g., Syria or Galilee) and instead advocates a Roman location. He argues for Rome based on

several lines of evidence: use of Aramaic, geographical errors, reference to the Syrophenician woman, coins, the Pauline view of the law, Latinisms, early church traditions, and persecution (96–115). At this point it would be quite interesting to compare Incigneri with a recent monograph by H. N. Roskam (*The Purpose of the Gospel of Mark in Its Historical and Social Context* [NovTSup 114; Leiden: Brill, 2004]), which examines the same text and yet contends for a Galilean provenance for Mark.

Chapter 3 presents arguments for a post-70 date for Mark. Here Incigneri argues that the prediction of the destruction of the temple in Mark 13 is *ex eventu* and that the speech reflects events known to have transpired in Jerusalem during the destruction of the temple. For example, Mark 13:2 (“no stone upon another”) is a suitable description of the temple’s destruction when correlated with Josephus’s account of the event, the flight of Mark 13:14–18 refers to those who escaped Titus’s siege, the abomination of desolation in Mark 13:14 is taken as a reference to Titus as the “desecrator” of the temple, and the woe to those in the city in Mark 13:18 evokes pity for those caught up in the disaster. Additionally, Incigneri finds evidence from the attitude exhibited toward the temple in Mark 11 that also indicates a post-70 date.

This is followed by chapter 4, which argues more specifically for a date in the latter part of 71 C.E. in proximity to Titus’s return to Rome. Incigneri does this by arguing that elements of the Gospel reflect the social and political climate of Rome at this time, as opposed to Nero’s reign in the 60s (202). He cannot be faulted for his close examination of the situation in Rome in the late 60s and early 70s, but one wonders if he reduces the Markan Gospel to a somewhat oblique allegory of events transpiring in Rome. It makes good sense to grant the parallels between Mark 15 and the triumphal procession of Vespasian, but I found Incigneri’s attempt to make the renting of the veil (Mark 15:38) correspond to Vespasian’s act of parading the veil through Rome in his procession (Josephus, *War* 7.162) less convincing (202–7).

Incigneri offers a picture of the Markan community as one traumatized by suffering and persecution in chapters 5 and 6. He likens their situation to that of prisoners in a concentration camp (247). Incigneri postulates that Mark’s aim is to demonstrate how the story of Jesus correlates with the experience of his audience. Specific attention is paid to Mark 3:20–6:44 and 13:1–37 in order to demonstrate Mark’s attempt to allay the fears of his audience and to provide them with hope in light of the current crisis.

Chapter 7 suggests that Mark’s portrayal of the failure of the disciples (principally Peter) was rhetorically construed in order to confront “the painful question of forgiving and readmitting apostates and betrayers who were seeking to return to the community.” In addition, “Mark’s narrative is designed, through emotional appeal, to engender sympathy

for them” (342). Mark’s readers would have known that many of the disciples became evangelists and martyrs (e.g., Peter) and their restoration is a model for those in Rome who have either denied the faith or else betrayed Christians to the authorities.

The center of gravity to Incigneri’s thesis is his contention that Mark’s Gospel essentially mirrors events in Rome and the trials suffered by the Markan community (although he does not deny that Mark did work with some earlier traditions [358]). There is an inherent element of circularity to the project, since properly understanding the Markan Gospel is only possible by accurately postulating the setting in which it arose, but postulating the setting is itself dependent upon analysis of the Markan text. The whole process can easily descend into a chicken or the egg type problem; nevertheless, Incigneri handles it reasonably well and presents a sound case for a Roman provenance for Mark’s Gospel. Perhaps a larger problem that looms on the horizon is that Incigneri has not been able to assuage completely the reservations of some scholars concerning our inability to locate a “Markan community” with any certainty. Although Incigneri engages with Bauckham’s proposal that the intended audiences for the Gospels were relatively broad, I did not find his refutation entirely convincing (31–33). Furthermore, I believe that Incigneri is correct when he writes that “Mark’s Gospel is human experience communicated” (19), but I would be prepared to argue that the Markan experience that runs through the text might have been formulated over decades, in various geographic, cultural, and social settings, and forged in a variety of theological and ecclesiastical circumstances. In this case the Christian experience that permeates the Gospel may be significantly wider than any one geographical or temporal setting. If this is the case, then it would go some way to explaining the power of the Markan narrative to evoke pathos in Christians who were beyond the boundaries of any one particular community (be it Rome or Syria) without assuming that the Gospel’s rhetorical purpose was “forgotten,” “deliberately set aside,” or “misunderstood” by others like Matthew and Luke (364). This one misgiving about the book aside, Incigneri has presented a rigorous case for a Roman provenance for the Gospel of Mark and raised some interesting arguments for a specific date of 71 C.E. It is a study that I imagine will prompt further dialogue and engagement on the subject (a point confirmed by the appearance of an article that I just picked up and that engages with Incigneri: Ivan Head, “Mark as a Roman Document from the Year 69: Testing Martin Hengel’s Thesis,” *JRH* 28 [2004]: 240–59).