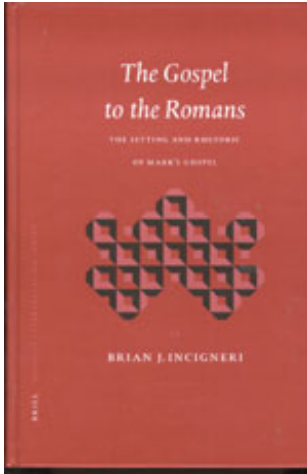


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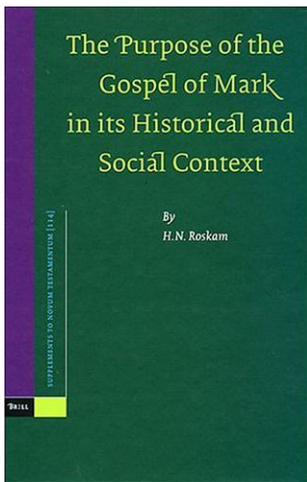


Incigneri, Brian J.

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

Biblical Interpretation Series 65

Leiden: Brill, 2003. Pp. xiv + 426. Hardcover. \$165.00. ISBN 9004131086.



Roskam, Hendrika N.

The Purpose of the Gospel of Mark in Its Historical and Social Context

Supplements to Novum Testamentum 114.

Leiden: Brill, 2004. Pp. xvi + 288. Hardcover. \$129.00. ISBN 9004140522.

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Two recent books from Brill seek, independently of each other, to reopen one of those questions that is of perennial interest to many yet perennially unsolvable: the provenance and purpose of the Gospel of Mark. These two studies reveal that provenance is, in fact, the *crux interpretum* for the explanation of authorial intent: while both authors agree on the dating of Mark, their vastly different explanations concerning Mark's purpose cannot be distinguished, and rightly so, from the provenance they each, respectively, establish. Incigneri places Mark and his community in Rome, and Roskam in the Galilee; clearly both cannot be right, but can they both be wrong?

I begin with a summary of both books. Incigneri argues in three stages that there is no airtight proof that Mark was composed in Syria or the Galilee, that there is no airtight proof against a Roman provenance, and that every detail in Mark—large and small, rhetorical and historical—reflects that Mark and his community were located in Rome (chs. 2, 4). I shall assess the logic and persuasiveness of his evidence below. On the other hand, Incigneri persuades that, like Matthew and Luke, Mark and his community knew about the destruction of the temple (ch. 3). Since Mark and his community were in Rome, they had to be extremely careful not to fan the flames of Roman hostility and suspicion, so Incigneri sees in Mark a coded text designed to console (ch. 5) and assure (ch. 6) his audience, who knew about and were troubled by the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the victorious arrival of Vespasian and his son Titus and who recalled a period of intense suffering under Nero in the 50s, but who could not risk being openly critical of the Roman political situation. Finally, Incigneri argues that Mark's unflattering portrayal of the disciples was designed to show his readers that if Jesus could forgive those who denied and abandoned him, then the Markan community could do likewise for those who may have denied and abandoned the community under duress (ch. 7).

Roskam undertakes her task differently. She opens by arguing that an analysis of Markan redaction reveals a primary concern with the suffering of his readers (ch. 1). I am not sure this chapter was worth the work. Since it is widely acknowledged that suffering is a main concern of Mark, to have established it by recourse to Markan redaction, which by its very nature cannot offer secure results, and especially by relying mostly on Mark/Q overlaps, seemed the least efficient and most contentious way of going about this task. This suffering, Roskam contends, took place in the Galilee in the aftermath of the Jewish war (ch. 2). She establishes the Galilee as the location of the community, as others have done, by referring to (1) Mark's depiction of the last instructions to the disciples to meet Jesus in the Galilee, (2) to Mark's poor geographical knowledge of everywhere *but* the Galilee (which of course requires her to argue, *pace* many others, that Mark's depiction of Jesus' travels in the Galilee are all geographically accurate), and (3) Mark's references to people (James the younger and Joses) who were known to the Galileans but not likely to anyone else.

The key to understanding the suffering of Mark's community is found, according to Roskam, in the reference in 13:9 to believers being brought before sanhedrins, synagogues, governors, and kings. This reflects that the Jewish leadership after the Jewish War was concerned to keep the peace themselves and would hand over troublemakers in order to avoid violent Roman intervention (ch. 3). Given this environment, Roskam concludes that Mark's purpose was to quell both Jewish and Roman suspicions of Christians: Jesus was authorized by God and was thus a legitimate object of Jewish worship, and he had no political aspirations and thus was no threat to the *pax Romana* (ch. 4). Mark's depiction

of Jesus as commanding silence concerning his identity (the so-called Messianic Secret) and his miraculous healings (ch. 5), as well as his depiction of Jesus' death as the result of Jewish ill will and not anti-Roman political ambitions (ch. 6), were all designed to show that Jesus was no threat to the Romans, despite being crucified, and so neither would his followers pose a threat. To complete the book, Roskam offers a modest corrective on the genre of Mark (ch. 7). She argues that, while "ancient biography" is in essence a correct generic category, the designation fails to tell us anything about the *purpose* of the writing. She would therefore characterize Mark as "an apologetic writing in biographical form" (236). That is, its purpose was to defend the faith and Jesus' innocence to those followers who might have been about to apostatize under external hostile pressure.

Since provenance seems to decide purpose—Incigneri's Roman Mark is a coded text of biting criticism of the Roman elite, and Roskam's Galilean Mark is a benign text showing the validity and harmless nature of Jesus—it is worth carefully assessing whether *either* author has mounted a persuasive argument on provenance. I start with Incigneri because his is the more complex argument. For Incigneri, Mark is a coded text meant to criticize the Roman political elite in a way that would be simultaneously obvious to the Christian readers—otherwise it would lose its emotional impact—yet opaque to their enemies. He writes that, because of the past experience and continued threat of persecution, Mark needed to use "cryptic allusion[s] ... understandable only to insiders" (226) and that "[i]t would have been unwise to circulate a document, even privately, that might further incriminate Christians, one that might appear critical of the emperor, of Titus, or of Roman society" (227). So, for example, Incigneri argues that the story of the healing of the blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52) is intended to echo but also challenge the (presumably) widely known story of Vespasian healing a blind man (Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.81). Similarly, the story of James and John arguing about who of them is greater is a criticism of the political ambitions of Titus and Domitian.

The very issue of "subtle" criticism is one problem with Incigneri's reading of Mark. Granted, if the unnamed but faithful women in Mark's Gospel (12:44; 14:9) are a coded tribute to Christians martyred in Rome, this is indeed subtle. The words *dynamis*, *sōtēr*, *euangelion*, *kyrios*, being political in nature, are coded criticism of Rome's use of these same terms; Mark uses them of Jesus in order to show how wrong-headed was the imperial use of them. But how subtle would it be to use such terms of Jesus in this politically charged environment? Maybe it was subtle criticism of imperial ideology to have a dove land on Jesus and not an eagle (as a way of mocking Roman imperial ideology), but would the open condemnation of "signs and omens" and false prophets (13:21–22), widely acknowledged as anti-Vespasian propaganda, have been very subtle? The problem is that if much of the criticism of Rome is actually not very subtle, then why

the need for *any* cryptic allusions and coded language at all? Thus, his arguments for reading certain passages as cryptic allusions are not persuasive.

Another problem with Incigneri's reading of the cryptic allusions, all of which "prove" Roman provenance, is that they take on an almost allegorical dimension: James and John are actually allusions to Titus and Domitian; Jesus represents Vespasian; Herod Antipas represents Titus; the "Strong man" (Mark 3:27) is Vespasian; the parable of the divided kingdom is about the civil war; and it goes on and on. Incigneri's reading of the Gospel is incredibly close, and he has shown considerable imagination in suggesting possibilities for what *could* lay in the background. But one wonders whether the original reader/hearer could really have been expected to have kept up with this whirlwind of allusions and coded events and players, especially when the key players like the emperor and his sons are allegedly represented by so many different characters in the Gospel. This is important, because, while Incigneri admits that Mark's readers may not have understood all the allusions, it is also central to his argument that the text was *emotionally* charged for the readers, and, in order for this to have been the case, they would have had to understand most of the allusions.

Another problem is Incigneri's claim, with each coded allusion he uncovers, that we have further proof of a Roman provenance. In the end, however, not one item of all the evidence he points to in support of a Roman setting—for example, the Latinisms in Mark, the political language, references to taxes, allusions to the civil war and the Jewish War, the tearing of the veil—*proves* a Roman setting. At most it can be said to be *consistent* with a Roman setting. The allusions and coded language Incigneri points out do—potentially—become meaningful *if* the Gospel was composed in Rome in the early 70s, but that is the very problem we are trying to solve. To use those details, therefore, to argue for such a provenance is tautological. Conversely, Incigneri claims that the sheer number of details consistent with a Roman provenance proves his point, but methodologically this too is flawed reasoning: allusions, clues, echoes, and coded language that are faint or weak individually, which he admits is the case at times, are not strengthened by their number.

Incigneri does well to point out that the evidence adduced in favor of a Syrian or Galilean provenance can be interpreted in other ways. He is also right that "there is no internal or external evidence that contradicts a Roman setting" for the Gospel (96). But what he fails to recognize is that the evidence he presents in favor of Roman provenance is no more airtight than was the evidence for Syria or the Galilee. Incigneri appears to be motivated by the questionable and naïve assumption that, having destabilized Syrian and Galilean provenance, Rome is the default option because of Eusebius's claims about Mark and Peter. In short, Incigneri shows that we cannot be certain Mark's provenance was either

Syria or the Galilee, but he has failed to show that we can be any more certain that it was Rome.

Roskam's arguments for a Galilean provenance are more secure, if for no other reason than that they are not as fanciful as Incigneri's readings. Roskam is right that Jewish authorities, as reflected in Josephus, were often quick to deliver up troublemakers to the Romans in the hope that Rome would not have to step in. This was the case with Jesus son of Ananias, Jonathan of Cyrene, and Theudas. But these cases are useful as analogs for explaining the death of Jesus, since each of these characters were similarly messianic, attracted crowds, and made various threats against the establishment. They are less useful as analogs for Mark's community, since, as far as we know, such communities lacked similarly colorful and charismatic figures. Roskam claims that simply being followers of a person who had been executed under suspicion of sedition against Rome would have been enough to attract unwanted attention, but this strikes me as unlikely. At the very least, the figures drawn from Josephus illustrate how Jewish authorities dealt with real and potential troublemakers, but they do not tell us anything about Mark's community.

Roskam shares with Incigneri the claim that Mark sought to ensure that Jesus appeared as nonthreatening to Roman imperial policy. For Roskam this is illustrated through the Messianic Secret, the Markan concern not to show Jesus gaining notoriety through his miracles and healings, and his presentation of Jesus as a suffering righteous one. But Roskam's attempt suffers as much as Incigneri's. First of all, it is compelling enough to argue that Mark's presentation of Jesus rejecting traditional political definitions of Messiah, and failing to free Jerusalem when he arrives there, is Mark's way of depoliticizing Jesus. But would depicting Jesus' death as the result of a malicious plot on the part of the Jewish leaders have pleased Jewish authorities in Mark's surroundings? What Roskam claims might have pleased Roman ears would surely have displeased Jewish ones, yet Roskam claims that Mark's Gospel needed to avoid the ire of both. It is difficult to see how this could have been accomplished on the Jewish front. On the other hand, Roskam's claim that Mark has depoliticized Jesus suffers the same weakness as Incigneri's: Mark opens his Gospel by referring to the *euangelion* of the "son of God," two titles carrying significant Roman imperial weight, and he consistently uses other similarly political terms such as *sōtēr* and *kyrios*. So the question must be asked of both authors: Can Mark's intent actually have been to render Jesus politically neutered?

A key verse in Roskam's reconstruction of Mark's provenance and purpose is Mark 13:9; indeed it is interesting to see how different a role this passage plays for these two scholars. First, Roskam argues that Mark redacted an earlier saying referring to followers being handed over to synagogues (reflected in Q 12:11–12) so that it included sanhedrins, as well as Gentile governors and kings. This must therefore reflect a pointed Markan

concern with suffering in his community at the hands of these authorities. Initially, this passage is only used to prove that Mark was concerned with suffering, but later it becomes the center piece for Galilean provenance, since Roskam argues it reflects the elite Jewish practice of handing troublemakers over to Roman authorities. This is a problem. On the one hand, the situation envisaged in this passage may well be older than Mark, and therefore not refer to Mark's period at all. These are the risks of Markan redaction—the process is such that assured results of Mark's redactional concerns are difficult to produce. On other hand, the situation envisaged could refer to any number of places in addition to the Galilee, and thus cannot be thought unique of the Galilee in the 70s. Having said that, it is possible that the reference is not to any concrete suffering at all, since both authors agree that Mark's perception of the suffering of his readers is the only thing of which we can be certain, but not that there was necessarily *actual* suffering. The perception of the risk of suffering could have occurred anywhere in the Roman Empire.

Incigneri's interpretation of Mark 13:9 is interesting. One would think that such a passage would be crippling to his claim of Roman provenance. However, Incigneri claims (he does not argue) that in this passage Mark was giving a "veiled tribute" to the apostle Paul (297), who *was* brought before sanhedrins, synagogues, governors, and kings, while Mark's audience would never have been. Here is yet another example of how Incigneri's claim that Mark must have been written in Rome shapes an interpretation he could never have made without coming to that conclusion first. Further, Incigneri assumes (again) that Mark knew or even knew of Paul, of which there is no evidence. Roskam's arguments for a Galilean provenance and her interpretation of this passage are less problematic than Incigneri's, but they are no more persuasive or airtight.

There is one last issue that arises in both books that I would like to examine: authorial creativity. Incigneri's focus on the relationship between author, social location, and rhetorical purpose leads him to argue time and again that stories ostensibly set in Palestine in the 20s were designed to allude cryptically to a Roman setting in the 60s–70s and that the arrangement of stories was intended either to promote Mark's criticism of Roman power and society or to increase its emotional impact on his traumatized readers. In practically every pericope, it would seem, Incigneri finds Markan creativity, and Mark's motivation to create a rhetorically secretive yet powerful sermon begins to far outweigh his motivation to record a history of the founder. This same sense comes through Roskam's work, though much less intensely. In a number of places her arguments are based on the premise of heavy Markan redaction, and she acknowledges that Mark's primary concern was apologetic and not historical. She implies that if ancient biographies were already not primarily preoccupied with factual accuracy (227), then Mark's primary aim being apology set within a biographical framework will make accuracy even less of a concern.

Incigneri is correct that awareness of the rhetorical power of a work in conjunction with its historical and social location (if those can be known definitively) is a potentially fruitful supplement to redaction criticism, but it will require us to acknowledge that such writings are a great deal more the creative work of the author than a reflection of history. And, by extension, if this is the case for Mark, how much more removed from historical accuracy must have been Matthew and Luke, who relied on Mark as a source? Both often refer to Markan creativity; in the end, however, Incigneri is unwilling to entertain the logical conclusion that Mark “composed it out of nothing” (365), and Roskam does not address this implication of her work.

It perhaps bears repeating that Incigneri has justifiably challenged the convenient consensus of a (more or less) Syrian provenance for Mark and of a dating prior to the fall of Jerusalem. He provides as close a reading of Mark as is surely possible and a plausible explanation for the portrayal of the disciples, though not one that has to occur in Rome to make sense. But this book fails to prove its central thesis: that Mark can *only* have been written in Rome. Roskam’s strongest contributions are her arguments (following the same rationale as Incigneri) for dating Mark after the destruction of the temple and her suggestion that Mark should be characterized more precisely as a form of apologetic biography. One hopes that these powerful arguments for dating Mark might become widely accepted. Incigneri has taken a daring approach, and I am convinced there is value even in those studies that try something new but fail. Roskam’s study was less daring, and I could not help thinking that too often she was simply reinventing arguments and conclusions that are already well known and widely held.

Unfortunately, after reading both of these thorough attempts to reconstruct the provenance and purpose of Mark, I am inclined to agree with Dwight N. Peterson’s pessimism: that when conclusions are grounded on vague and illusory evidence, as they always will be in questions such as this, the effort it takes to reconstruct communities behind the Gospels and what little is gained by doing so makes the whole enterprise increasingly “not worth the trouble” (*The Origins of Mark: The Markan Community in Current Debate* [BibInt 48; Leiden: Brill, 2000], 202).