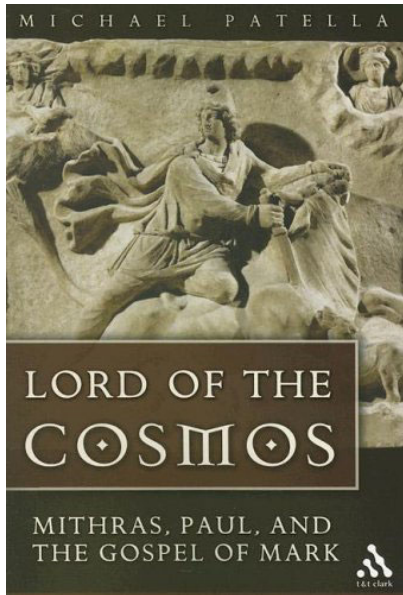


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Patella, Michael

Lord of the Cosmos: Mithras, Paul, and the Gospel of Mark

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This book is one of the results of the manly sounding Task Force on Mark, a gathering at the annual meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America. Patella's main thesis is to show that Mark and Paul provide an alternative to Platonic-influenced Hellenistic cosmology by using and transcending well-known Hellenistic categories. Patella provides an overview of Hellenistic cosmology, astrology, and astronomy, grounded in Plato's *Timaeus*. He then proceeds to show how Jewish texts interacted with their Hellenistic contexts, with particular reference to the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*, 2 *En.* 8:1–10:6, the *Treatise of Shem*, and 2 Cor 12:1–4. These cosmological debates were an important general cultural context for Mark and Paul, so Patella can stress that we should not be looking for precise intellectual matches with, say, Mithraic thought.

With this in mind, relevant Markan themes are covered (divine communication, divine authority, eschatology, messianic secret, and discipleship), and, it is claimed, they are used by Mark to illustrate the cosmic battle with Satan. The passion, death, and resurrection in Mark are discussed in a separate chapter (59–71), for these represent Jesus' cosmic triumph over Satan and usher in the end times. The baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9–11), the healing of Bartimaeus (10:46–52), and the death and resurrection of Jesus (15:33–

16:8) are especially important for the salvation of the universe in a Greco-Roman context and are discussed in further detail (75–82, 88–105, 106–19).

The discussion of Bartimaeus is the closest the book gets to a more precise correspondence with Hellenistic thought. While Patella notes that Mark picks up on biblical and Jewish themes, he adds that the name Bartimaeus is supposed to recall Plato's *Timaeus*, with the casting off of the cloak recalling baptismal imagery. As the baptism in Mark has Jesus descending and ascending into and out of the water, as it is an act of divine communication, and as it becomes a metaphorical action of death and resurrection, Mark constantly reflects a theology of the cross and therefore a major part of Pauline theology. These dramatic cosmic Pauline issues are discussed with reference to Rom 5:12–21; 8:12–17; 1 Cor 15:12–28; Phil 2:3–11; and Col 1:11–14. Paul, it is suggested, was a big influence on the apparently Roman Gospel of Mark.

Happily, the overall thesis of this book is at the very least plausible. Irrespective of whether Mark was written in Rome or influenced by Paul (no persuasive case is given for either), it is not difficult to imagine at least some ancient readers making connections with Platonic-influenced thought. This is boosted by Patella's wise decision to go for general cultural context rather than a relentless one-to-one precise correspondence. So for critique, it is to the details that this review must inevitably turn.

For all the detailed exegesis, the main problem with this book is where Patella follows some traditional interpretations of Mark. Christological discussions are asserted too hastily without sufficient definition or background. In his reading of Mark 2:1–12, Patella appears to imply that "Son of Man" is a prophetic term, despite this neither being the case in early Judaism nor spelled out in Mark ("His twofold action, therefore, proves his 'authority' as 'the Son of Man,' a prophetic term in the eyes of the people" [33–34]). There are occasions where Jesus' divinity is supposedly revealed in Mark's Gospel. The centurion is the only human who acknowledges Jesus "divinity" by calling him God's Son (15:39). Leaving aside the well-known grammatical issues in 15:39, the long-known range of meanings for the term "son of God" demands much more exegetical care. Jesus words in Mark 2:27–28 means that "he claims equality with the God of Sinai," and Mark 3:1–6 "confirms this point" (41). This is highly unlikely for a number of reasons, including the fact that humans being in charge of the Sabbath was saying nothing too dramatic (cf. Exod 16:29; *Jub.* 2:17; *Mek. Exod.* 31:12–17) and the fact that Mark records opposition to Jesus' legal actions without a single word being said about Jesus claiming equality with God, something we might expect if the Markan Jesus had said something so radical (cf. John 5).

The dealings with specifics of Judaism are also problematic at times. On page 41 Patella argues that Mark 2:18–22 concerns questions about “their master’s lack of attention to ritual purity,” without any indication of the sense in which this passage might concern “ritual purity.” It is argued that the unforgivable blasphemy of the Jerusalem scribes (Mark 3:20–30) is because, “by holding Jesus to be an agent of Satan, they reject the very forgiveness offered them” (43). But Mark does *not* say that Jesus offered them forgiveness, and it is difficult to see how such an offer is even implied. Similarly, Patella claims Jesus’ remarks about doing “the will of God” (Mark 3:31–35) over family “is nothing short of revolutionary” (43), despite no one in the Markan text picking up on this and despite similar sentiments occurring in early Judaism (cf. Josephus, *War* 2.121–122; *Ant.* 3.87). On a couple of occasions it is argued that the rending of the temple veil (Mark 15:38) shows that God “no longer manifests himself in the Temple” and that if God is now to be seen, then this requires looking to the cross (111; see also 70). Again, such ideas are simply not mentioned in Mark, and there are plenty of other plausible alternatives, such as Roger Aus’s suggestion that Mark 15:38 reflects haggadic ideas of God mourning.

Strangely, then, while the major thesis of the book is sound, I found many of the exegetical details (although certainly not all) problematic. It is significant that the problematic details are not specific to Patella’s book but rather an issue for Markan scholarship as a whole. Time and time again scholarship presents Mark as a heavily Christianized document standing over against Judaism. The problem is that Mark just does not say what a lot of scholars claim the Gospel says. There are too many gaps in the Markan answers to the exegetical questions posed. That is when the ideological concerns of Markan scholarship fill the gaps with the details required for its own generalized needs. These concerns are implicit in Patella’s narrative. Taking up the cultural concerns of his environment, Paul “was able to offer something better in Christ” (121), yet it is not clear whose opinion this is. On page 30 Patella states, “In this section, we look at the way the Father communicates his love for his creation,” which gives some indication of Patella’s perspective coming through. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with such perspectives, and obviously one target audience is confessional. But such confessional echoes give some indication of the ideological concerns of Markan scholarship and, when placed alongside the problematic exegetical details, the uneasy marriage of confessional (Christian) and nonconfessional approaches in Markan scholarship.