

**Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark's Gospel: An Early Christian Response to Roman Imperial Propaganda*, WUNT 2/245; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008 236 pp + xiv, ISBN 978 3 16 149635 6 €54.00.**

Reviewed by John Noack

The author begins this book by surveying other scholars who have presented theories and suggestions about Mark's purpose or aim in writing his Gospel. These theories include the historical purpose, which involves the recording of the supposed historical events and people which were part of Jesus' life (p 6). The theological purpose seeks to explore such metaphysical themes as Christology (Son of God, Son of Man) and the Messianic secret. The pastoral purpose explores discipleship, the 'cross Christology' and various ethical issues. The evangelistic purpose clarifies the roles of Jesus and the failures of the disciples as it presents its message and promotes the use of Mark's gospel. The socio-political purpose brings in political and economic aspects and it sees in Mark an apology that seeks to distance the Christian Movement from its Jewish roots following the Roman attack on the Jews between 66 and 70 CE.

In contrast, Winn's opinion is that Mark presents a clash between two first-century claimants to the title 'Son of God' and its manifestations in divine, supernatural glory and in cosmic or universal power.

One claimant was the Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasian, who was ruling the Roman Empire from 69-79 CE, at the same time as St Mark or some other author was writing the Gospel of Mark in Rome. The city of Rome was a melting pot of the many Religions and Mysteries attracted to Rome from the conquered regions of the Empire, so it was an ideal location for Mark's clever blending of Hellenistic/Roman and Hebrew/Jewish beliefs. This Roman 'Sitz im Leben' or Context in Life brings together the world of Jewish messianic hope and the Roman imperial cult (p 99). Thus, Vespasian could see himself as (1) the Jewish Messiah, who, according to Josephus in *Wars* 399-408, had been predicted in Hebrew and Jewish writings; (2) a claimant to the divine right to rule the world and (3) a performer of supernatural miracles (p 160).

Even earlier than Vespasian, Winn points out that Julius Caesar was deified after his death with the title 'divus Iulius' or God Julius. His adopted son Octavian, who became Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor at the time of Jesus' supposed date of birth, adopted for himself the title 'divi filius' or Son of God (p 101). The Greek word 'euaggelion' meaning good news and used in Mark 1:1 was also widely used to announce political and military victories in the Roman imperial cult (p 96). Winn even ponders whether the composition of the Passion Narrative is an 'anti-triumph' narrative, constructed on the common Roman Imperial Triumphal Procession, held after great

Roman victories over their conquered and defeated enemies such as the Jews in Judea (p 130).

The other party was naturally enough the Galilean Jew called Jesus-Christ (in Hebrew Joshua-Messiah or in English Yahweh Saves-Anointed One) with his Christology of Power and Glory and his resume of miracles, healings and exorcisms, although Jesus could point to 'no tangible kingdom or visible power' (p 169). Yet readers of Mark soon notice that the first half of Mark's Gospel repeats and stresses Jesus' title of 'Son of God' and Mark lists some very impressive healing and nature miracles, including the feeding of 5,000 people with a handful of bread and fishes, walking on water and raising the dead.

On the other hand, the second half of Mark repeats and stresses Jesus' title of the 'Son of Man', who must suffer, die and then rise again after three days, as Jesus reminds the disciples at least three times.

Winn manages to see in the Passion Story Jesus' Cross of Execution but in the Easter Story Jesus' Crown of Exaltation, thus presenting the required theme of the glory and exaltation of the 'Son of God' throughout the whole of Mark's Gospel and in competition with Vespasian.

Winn also sees several secondary purposes in Mark's Gospel, such as equipping his readers for persecution by the Romans and alleviating their eschatological anxiety about the non-arrival of the Second Coming of Christ as the heavenly Son of Man (p 204).

In summary, Winn interprets Mark's Gospel as an antagonistic polemic against the Roman Emperor Vespasian and his personal claim to being the 'Son of God'. Mark's Gospel was thus composed to demonstrate that this Roman claim to glory was a false claim and that, in the language of today, 'Everything Vespasian the Emperor can do, Jesus/Joshua the Christ/Messiah can do much better'!

During the 70s in the first century, no doubt this anti-Roman perspective was easy to understand and in this context, probably conveyed some truth to believers in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah or the Christ.

However, many puzzles in Mark still remain after the evidence for such a polemic is assembled and these enigmas are often described in Mark's text as under-meanings beneath the surface level which require deeper exploration and understanding. Concepts such as the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Messianic Secret, the Mystery of the Kingdom of God/Heaven/the Heavens still contain dimensions not fully explored or understood in the context of an anti-Roman polemic. This book is certainly scholarly, with a Bibliography of 16 pages. It is generally consistent in argument and it provides evidence which mostly rings true as a polemic. However, in my opinion, it certainly does not deal with nor does it resolve all of the many enigmas, puzzles and deeper under-meanings which are features but also creators of frustration for diligent commentators of this Gospel of Mark.