



Ben C Blackwell, John K Goodrich, Jason Maston eds, *Reading Mark in Context: Jesus and Second Temple Judaism*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2018; ISBN 978-0-310-534457, pp 286, Paperback, A\$29.99.

Reviewed by Christopher J Davey

This is one volume in a developing series of commentaries on New Testament books focusing on their original literary and philosophical environments. Curiously, the Introduction positions the mission of the book in the context of the ‘historical’ quest for the historical Jesus (p. 28). This quest was based on the premise that the Gospels do not accurately represent Jesus and that it is necessary to peel away the untrustworthy layers, like peeling an onion, to get to the core, the true historical Jesus. The inevitable result of this process was a mono-dimensional figure of Jesus constructed in the image of the researcher.

In practice this book does not share that journey. Instead, it advocates that ‘To interpret the Gospels wisely, ... students must not *ignore* Second Temple Jewish literature but *engage* it with frequency, precision, and a willingness to acknowledge theological continuity *and* discontinuity.’ (p. 32) In other words it broadens the evidential field rather

than diminishing it. It has not been common for students to engage with Intertestamental literature. While I was at the University of Cambridge only one person sat the Intertestamental literature exam, which as a matter of interest was combined with Biblical Archaeology. With the growth of Dead Sea Scroll research that situation is changing, however ‘there exist virtually no nontechnical resources for beginning and intermediate students to assist them in seeing firsthand how Jesus is similar to and yet different from his Jewish contemporaries.’ (p. 32) This book aims to start filling that void.

After discussing the purpose of the book, the Introduction provides a brief overview of Intertestamental history and literature mentioning the Septuagint, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Philo, Josephus and Dead Sea Scrolls, and the genres they contain including history, tales, rewritten scripture, apocalypse, poetry and wisdom literature.

The remainder of book ‘examines select passages in Second Temple Jewish literature in order to illuminate the context of Jesus’s actions and the nuances of his teaching’ (p. 32) in thirty essays written by thirty scholars covering the entire Gospel of Mark. Each essay has an introduction, an analysis of one germane section of Intertestamental literature, an exegesis of a section of Mark and resources for further study. Of the thirty scholars, eight completed doctoral studies at the University of Durham and three at the University of St Andrews. N.T. Wright, who wrote the Foreword, was the Bishop of Durham from 2003 to 2010 and then became Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at St Mary’s College in the University of St Andrews. The contributors now work in New Testament teaching positions in the United Kingdom, USA, Denmark, Norway, Canada and Australia. Three have positions at the Houston Baptist University.

The issue of continuity and discontinuity is broached in the opening statement of Mark’s gospel where John the Baptist is described to be fulfilling the expectation of the prophet Isaiah to be a voice in the desert calling for the preparation of the way of the Lord (Mark 1:3). This is discussed in the first chapter, which draws on the Rule of the Community, Dead Sea scroll 1QS, as well as Old Testament parallel references, to contrast and compare the different expectations. The idea of a second exodus has often presupposed an involvement of all Israel, but the Rule of the Community does not have such an assumption. It treats the expectation as a ‘spiritual metaphor’ where the ‘men of the community’ would form a righteous wilderness society that would be ready for the return of the Lord (p. 43) because of their obedience to the Torah, calendar observance and ritual purity. Mark also overlooks physical Israel and describes a community founded on its ‘response to the Spirit-empowered Jesus around whom Israel is reconstituted’. (p. 46)

This nuanced discussion continues in the following chapters: Mark’s use of the title ‘Son of Man’ is compared with

Daniel and the Parables of Enoch; Josephus' description of the Pharisees is contrasted to that found in Mark; the genre of apocalyptic in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs leads to the view that 'Mark is a subgenre of Greco-Roman biography that uses themes of the Jewish apocalypse to portray Jesus's ministry as a cosmic conflict' (p. 62); the anti-gentile perspective of the Book of Jubilees is thought to be contradictory to Mark; while the Damascus Document, with its description of the Teacher of Righteousness, is counterpoint; the description of Elijah in Sirach illustrates popular belief about him and gives additional meaning to the Transfiguration; faith and belief are discussed in the light of the nationalistic hope in Tobit; Jesus' egalitarian idea of community is contrasted with the hierarchy of Qumran as defined by the Rule of the Community; the question about divorce (Mark 10:2) is explained in the context of contemporary debates found in Mishnah Gittin; Jesus' attitude to wealth may be judged less extreme than that advocated by the Eschatological Admonition (1 Enoch 108); Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was clearly subversive when compared to the entry of Simon Maccabaeus described in 1 Maccabees; Jesus' cleansing of the temple resonates with the judgement envisaged in the Psalms of Solomon, but Jesus' messianic role goes far beyond that envisaged by the psalmist; the Animal Apocalypse of Enoch provides context for the parable of the wicked tenant farmers; the apocalyptic world view and symbolism in the Parables of Enoch parallels the language used by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse; the Mishnah Pesahim's description of the Passover enables Jesus' changes to be identified; the Babylonian Talmud provides evidence that Jewish people may have prayed to God as 'father' although the Aramaic *abba* is less certain; and finally, the procedure of the crucifixion as described by Mark is plausible when considered in the light of the Dead Sea Scroll *11QTempte^a*, Philo and Josephus. The breadth of discussion and the different perspectives adopted by the writers is refreshing and their respect for the ancient authors adds gravitas and realism.

A review such as this cannot reasonably discuss the viewpoints presented throughout and to do so would be unfair to the contributors, who have had to be brief. In most instances, authors have listed more extensive treatment of the subject, often by themselves, as further reading. Mark's major themes are examined, and most Intertestamental books are alluded to at some point. There is not enough room in the book for the essays to discuss matters of authenticity and background details of the literature; those wanting to do so can study the references listed as secondary literature. The book has a glossary, the terms of which are in bold throughout the book, a passage index and a subject index.

The references inside the front cover by significant New Testament scholars offer effusive praise for the book because of its 'brilliant design', readability, conciseness and respect for the primary texts, amongst other qualities. Anyone who is willing to put aside an aversion to the

odd names of much Intertestamental literature that often invoke long dead Old Testament entities, will find this book fascinating. The discussion focusses on meaning and philosophy and not on authenticity, on hermeneutics rather than apologetics. For example, Chapter 28 about Jesus' trial draws attention to the character of Pilate as described by Philo of Alexandria as a means to understand the nature and outcome of the proceedings, not the validity of the account itself.

The premise of this book may be queried because some of the quoted extra-biblical literature was probably written later than Mark and was influenced by Christian traditions. Indeed, the Testament of Solomon, as we have it, (Chapter 6) clearly reflects Jesus' visit to the region of the Gerasenes (Mark 25:1-20) and the Mishnah (Chapter 7) was arranged in the third century AD. However, these books are assumed to convey long running Jewish traditions that were relevant to the earlier philosophical environment of Jesus' ministry.

In the Foreword, N.T. Wright states 'what matters is *to learn to think like a first-century Jew*' (p. 13, emphasis in the original). This does seem to be going too far. While it is helpful to *understand* the way first-century Jews thought because they were Jesus' audience, the fact is that comparatively few of them became Christian and the narrative in the Acts reveals that those who did, often did not immediately appreciate the universality of Jesus' teaching. It was non-Jews who read Mark's Gospel in its original Greek and who had not been persuaded by Jewish ideas, that became the greater portion of the early Christian community. Clearly the exploration of first-century Jewish philosophy helps define and comprehend the theology and rationality of Mark, and how Jesus interacted with the ideas and philosophies of his time. Jesus' way of dealing with contemporary issues may still help his followers frame Christian perspectives in the context of their own time. But experience unfortunately demonstrates that many Christians today have adopted the rigid legalism and nationalistic hope found in Jewish literature, and abandoned the freedom, compassion, and universality that the Gospels advocate. Much of the Jewish thought behind the New Testament needs to be abandoned, as indeed the authors of the New Testament, as described in this book, intended it to be.

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