

*Jesus' Defeat of Death:
Persuading Mark's Early Readers
(SNTS Monograph Series 125)*

Peter G. Bolt

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SUMMARY

This book studies the Gospel of Mark as it would have been understood by non-Jewish readers in the Graeco-Roman world. It focuses on the 'suppliants', those who come to Jesus for healing or exorcism, and argues that such stories would have appealed especially to a culture dominated by the fear of death. Mark's good news is of the defeat of death not only through Jesus' resurrection but through his rescue of those who lived under the shadow of death. The author has read widely in ancient Graeco-Roman literature, including the papyri and magical texts and the medical writers. He urges NT scholars to take more notice of the vastly increased knowledge of ancient magic. The book offers many new insights, but its value for the exegesis of Mark depends on whether his primary target was Graeco-Roman or Jewish culture.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieses Buch untersucht das Markusevangelium, wie es von nichtjüdischen Lesern in der griechisch-römischen Welt verstanden worden sein könnte. Es richtet das Augenmerk auf die „Bittsteller“, diejenigen, die zu Jesus kommen, um geheilt zu werden oder einen Exorzismus zu erleben. Es wird argumentiert, dass solche Geschichten besonders in einer Kultur ihren Anreiz hatten, die von der Angst vor dem Tod dominiert war. Die gute Nachricht des Markus besteht im Sieg über den Tod nicht nur durch Jesu Auferstehung, sondern auch durch seine Rettung derjenigen, die im Schatten des Todes lebten. Der Autor ist wohl bewandert in der antiken griechisch-römischen Literatur, inklusive der Papyri und magischen Texte sowie der medizinischen Schriftsteller. Er bittet die Neutestamentler eindringlich, das erheblich angewachsene Wissen über antike Magie mehr zu beachten. Das Buch bietet viele neue Einsichten, aber sein Wert für die Markusexegese hängt davon ab, ob dessen primäres Zielpublikum der griechisch-römischen oder der jüdischen Kultur angehörte.

RÉSUMÉ

Bolt étudie l'évangile de Marc en fonction de la compréhension que pouvaient en avoir les lecteurs non juifs du monde gréco-romain. Il s'intéresse plus particulièrement aux figures des « demandeurs », ces personnes qui s'adressent à Jésus pour être guéries ou délivrées de démons. Il pense que de tels récits devaient être spécialement pertinents pour des gens d'une culture dominée par la peur de la mort. La bonne nouvelle, selon Marc, est celle de la défaite de la mort, non seulement par la résurrection de Jésus, mais aussi par la délivrance qu'il a apportée à ceux qui vivaient à l'ombre de la mort. L'auteur connaît bien la littérature gréco-romaine ancienne, y compris les

papyrus, les textes de magie et de médecine. Il recommande aux spécialistes du Nouveau Testament de prendre davantage en compte les informations que l'on possède sur la magie dans l'antiquité, dont la connaissance s'est grandement accrue. Ce livre apporte de nombreux éléments nouveaux utiles, mais la validité de sa thèse pour l'exégèse du deuxième évangile reste suspendue à la question de savoir si Marc a écrit principalement pour le monde gréco-romain ou pour le monde juif.

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Most current NT studies give primary attention to the Jewish context of thought in the first century. This book is a deliberate counter-balance to that trend. The author has read widely in Graeco-Roman literature, including especially the papyri and magical texts. A 20-page index of ancient sources consists largely of non-Jewish material, in contrast to only 8 pages of biblical references! Bolt does not argue that Mark wrote specifically for those of a non-Jewish background, but that such people would have been a substantial part of the gospel's actual readership once it was in the public domain. This book (a London PhD thesis by an Australian) discusses how such readers might have understood Mark's gospel.

This means that this is not so much an exercise in exegesis, i.e. a study of how Mark's text would have been understood, and intended to be understood, by his immediate target readership (which I take to have been more at home in a Jewish than a pagan cultural context); rather it is an illuminating study of how one particular group of actual readers might have been affected by it.

New and unexpected insights abound, since few NT scholars are sufficiently familiar with (or interested in?) the world of classical paganism to be able to read Mark through such eyes (I speak as a former classicist). In particular the author stresses the huge recent increase in available data on ancient magical views and practices, which he rightly complains has not yet significantly influenced mainstream NT interpretation. But I think it is questionable how far the overall thrust of his thesis will (or should) affect the writing of future exegetical commentaries on Mark. This would require us to agree that the Graeco-Roman reader Bolt envisages was the typical and intended reader of the text, and that is something which Bolt has not demonstrated, though the thesis sometimes seems to assume it.

The study focuses on the 'suppliants', those 13 characters who come to Jesus for healing or exorcism, and whom Bolt believes to be portrayed with more attention to their individual characters and needs than the other minor characters in the gospel. Mark thus enlists the reader's sympathy and identification with the characters, and so 'delivers them up to the main story' (277). By sharing the suppliants' hopes, fears and experiences the reader is enabled, like them, to find in Jesus the one who defeats death, not only in his own resurrection but in freeing people from the shadow of death in their own lives.

An interesting survey of ancient pagan attitudes to illness and death (26-34) shows how close to death they lived. Life expectancy was under 30. In order to escape death people had recourse first to doctors, then to the gods, and then, most practically, to magicians. Magic (34-39) was omnipresent in the desire to stave off death. Illness was routinely attributed to magical interference and so had to be combated by magical means.

The study of Jesus' healings and exorcisms against this background takes up most of the book. The author is determined by one means or another to find 'death' present in every such episode. Exorcisms relate to death because the possessing spirits were the daimones, understood to be the ghosts of the dead returning to haunt the living (55-64; it was here that I felt particularly how alien this Graeco-Roman view was to the Jewish setting of the NT, where I find no such view of the nature of possession and exorcism). Diseases we regard as minor (e.g. 'fever') were seen as killers, so that to cure a fever was in effect to raise the dead. Leprosy was a 'living death'; so was paralysis, in which death had invaded the body. A menstrual problem probably involves barrenness, and so a sort of death. And so on! The discussion of each pericope includes a section on how 'death' is present in that patient's case ('albeit with varying degrees of certainty', 271), until I found myself suspecting that the author 'doth protest too much'. Was it not possible to be ill or afflicted without thinking of death all the time? Apparently not.

The author takes us through the whole Gospel of Mark, focusing in detail on the pericopes that include the suppliants, but feeling the need to say something about every pericope even where it has nothing to contribute directly to his thesis. I could not see the point of this, since the comments on such passages were inevitably brief and unremarkable. In the 'suppliant' passages he first looks at the angle 'Text to (implied) reader', then separately at '(Actual) Reader to text'. The former section largely retells the story, with focus on the feelings evoked in the reader. It is in the latter that the interesting material is found, drawing on the author's impressive knowledge of the Graeco-Roman context, in particular his knowledge of medical texts as well as magic. There are useful and quite surprising discussions of ancient pagan views of death (178-190) and of immortality (260-268). But there is also a worrying degree of speculation, e.g. as to whether Jairus' daughter had been killed by 'love magic gone wrong' (162-4) when there seems no basis in the text for supposing a magical dimension, or on whether Antipas thought that Jesus was a magician who had raised John's spirit in order to use its power (191-2).

There's a lot for most of us to learn from this book, and it opens up fascinating insights into ancient thought and culture. But how far it will help in the task of gospel exegesis is less clear to me.

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The Cambridge Companion to St Paul

James D. G. Dunn (ed.)

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, xxi + 301 pp., pb, £15.99, ISBN 0 521 78694 0

SUMMARY

An Introduction by the editor and eighteen chapters by famous Pauline scholars cover a wide range of fields: from the historical background of the epistles to Paul's life and to thematic treatments of his teaching. In four parts the following themes are dealt with: 1. Paul's life and work; 2. Paul's letters; 3. Paul's theology; 4. St Paul (his history of effect). As regards authorship, most contributors differentiate between undisputed Pauline letters and deutero-Pauline epistles, but a welcome caution is exercised by most of them when pointing to the hypothetical character of these views. The monograph as a whole is a good textbook, presenting all the main views of present day Pauline scholarship.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Eine Einleitung des Herausgebers und achtzehn Kapitel von bekannten Pauluskennern decken ein weites Feld ab: von den historischen Hintergründen der Briefe über das Leben des Paulus bis hin zu thematischen Abhandlungen über seine Lehre. In vier Teilen werden die folgenden Themen behandelt: 1. Paulus' Leben und Werk. 2. Paulus' Briefe. 3. Paulus' Theologie. 4. St. Paulus (Wirkungsgeschichte). Im Hinblick auf die Autorenfrage unterscheiden die meisten Beiträge zwischen unangefochtenen Paulusbriefen und deuteropaulinischen Briefen, aber eine willkommene Vorsicht wird von den meisten hinsichtlich des hypothetischen Charakters der Ansichten signalisiert. Die Monographie ist aufs Ganze gesehen ein gutes Textbuch, in dem alle wichtigen Ansichten der gegenwärtigen Paulusforschung präsentiert werden.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet ouvrage comporte une introduction par l'éditeur suivie de dix-huit chapitres rédigés par des spécialistes renommés de la littérature paulinienne et couvrant des domaines divers : l'arrière plan historique des lettres de Paul, la vie de l'apôtre, des thèmes de son enseignement. Il se compose de quatre parties : 1. la vie et l'œuvre de Paul ; 2. les lettres de Paul ; 3. sa théologie ; 4. l'impact de son ministère. Pour ce qui concerne l'authenticité des lettres qui lui sont attribuées, la grande majorité des auteurs distingue les lettres incontestablement reconnues comme étant de Paul, et les épîtres deutéro-pauliniennes, mais la plupart manifeste une heureuse prudence en soulignant le caractère hypothétique de ces opinions. On a là un bon manuel, présentant les points de vue principaux que l'on rencontre chez les spécialistes actuels de l'apôtre Paul.

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The excellent Cambridge Companion series of the recent years has been enriched by a new volume on the apostle Paul. An Introduction by the editor and eighteen chap-