

Compte-rendu de Adam WINN, Reading Mark's Christology under Caesar: Jesus the Messiah and Roman Imperial Ideology, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2018

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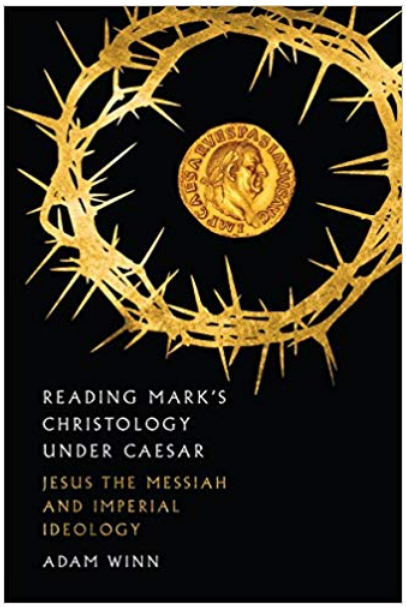
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Adam Winn

Reading Mark's Christology under Caesar: Jesus the Messiah and Roman Imperial Ideology

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Why did Mark write his gospel? The question is old indeed, and the books written to answer it are so numerous that it is highly ambitious to ask it again. Nonetheless, Adam Winn succeeds in proposing a fresh perspective on this important field of study. The book is a reassessment of the author's PhD dissertation, published in 2008.[1] Criticized for having underestimated the theme of the suffering Jesus in his interpretation of Markan Christology, Winn admits to having "swung the pendulum too far in the opposite direction." He tries to correct his arguments here while maintaining a great part of his previous conclusions.

The introduction (1–27) offers a comprehensive review of the successive methodologies and debates about "Mark's Christological puzzle." Winn acknowledges two interpretative options. According to the first one, Mark's Christology is a "Christology of the cross," and what defines Jesus best is suffering and death. According to the second one, Jesus is characterized in this gospel as the mighty son of God. Winn thinks that the problem could be resolved by a closer look at the historical context. The way he sets up the argument is clear, and the questions he asks are fascinating. The strongest critique one could offer is

1. Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark's Gospel: An Early Christian Response to Roman Imperial Propaganda*, WUNT 2/245 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

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that there are too many typographical errors. Similarly, the list of abbreviations (xiii–xiv) contains mistakes.[2]

In the first chapter (29–49), Winn demonstrates that the background of the Markan gospel was the Christian community in Rome. However, the argument he makes based on Latinisms was recently used by Zeichmann in order to prove that Mark's Gospel was written in Palestine, since most of the Markan loanwords are known there but not yet in Italy. The question thus seems to deserve more convincing argumentation. Regarding the date proposed for Mark, the author sees Jesus's saying about the destruction of the temple as the most relevant material. According to Winn, the inclusion of this pericope only made sense if the event referred to in this saying had already occurred. He believes, moreover, that only the destruction of the temple and the subsequent Flavian propaganda could explain why the Roman community to whom Mark was writing would have had an interest in the temple. The imperial response to the Jewish War, that is, the official proclamation that Roman gods had defeated Yahweh and that Vespasian was the messiah awaited by the Jews, is thought to be the better context explaining the writing of the gospel. The Christian community of Rome would have confronted a great challenge to its faith, one that necessitated the portrayal of Jesus as an impressive counterpart of Vespasian. In this chapter, one could regret that Winn bases his argument only on biblical commentaries and not on more historical works dealing with Flavian propaganda, for example, the book published by Gil Gambash in 2015.[3] Winn ignores the existence of the coin IVDAEA RECEPTA published in 2013, even as this evidence of an earlier Flavian policy could challenge his scenario. One could add that the *fiscus iudaicus* was not a tax but a public fund. The dissertation of Marius Heemstra, published in 2010, would have been useful for the present purpose.[4] It is noticeable that Winn's thesis, like that of Heemstra, suggests an early parting of the ways, since it presupposes that the Christian community had no interest in the Jerusalem temple, with the Pauline epistles as the only (and disputable) evidence.

The second chapter (51–68) analyzes the christological titles in the gospel, showing that most of them had meaning both in Roman and Jewish contexts. He pays particular attention to Son of Man, used only by Jesus himself. This title is seen as a reference to

2. Errors appear especially in German (e.g., "Christolgie," "Gescichte," "Markuseangeliums"); one could add the disappearance of *ή* at note 9. For the abbreviations, the *N* in *ANRW* does not signify *Niedergant* but *Niedergang*, *CIL* cannot mean *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, nor *JRS Journal of Religious Thought* but *Journal of Roman Studies*.

3. Gil Gambash, *Rome and Provincial Resistance*, Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies 21 (New York: Routledge, 2015).

4. Marius Heemstra, *The Fiscus Judaicus and the Parting of the Ways*, WUNT 2/277 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

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Dan 7:13–14 and said to designate "God's eschatological agent." Here one could regret the paucity of references to debates on the meaning of messianism, but Winn's conclusion, that the titles convey no competing understandings of Jesus but are interchangeable and opposed only to the imperial titles, is noticeable.

The Christology of Mark 1–8 gives material for the third chapter (69–88). The numerous miracles performed both by Augustus and the founder of the Flavian dynasty are shown as sources of inspiration for the miracles of Jesus. By ousting the demons named Legio near Gerasa, he inflicted "a symbolic defeat" on the Roman power; while Augustus brought peace to the sea by defeating pirates, Jesus calmed the sea itself; and by multiplying bread, Jesus did better than the emperors distributing bread to the *plebs*. The main problem of such a reconstruction lies in the complete rejection of faith as a relevant factor in the writing of the gospel. If the author's only aim was to respond to Flavian propaganda, did he create his character *ex nihilo* without any belief? As some have already responded to Winn, there is a significant difference between selecting memories for a particular community and making up stories. The Flavian context may indeed have played a role in the elaboration of the final form of the gospel, but does this fact mean that it was the only motivation for this gospel? Is it not possible that such data were only late adornments to the text and not its essence?

The section of Mark 8:22–10:52 is studied with scrutiny in the fourth chapter (89–117). Winn dwells on the subject of Roman political ideology: the best ruler is the one able to refuse too much power and honor, the one who "distances himself from monarchical extravagances." Compared to this model, Jesus seems to be the best ruler ever. He taught his disciples not to imitate the world's rulers, who hypocritically renounce the appearance of power in order to exercise a dissimulated tyranny. Jesus sacrificed his own life for his beloved people. Here lies the key of the narrative, according to Winn: the suffering and death of the Messiah would not have been evidence of weakness but, on the contrary, the climax of the Markan Christ's greatness.

The so-called messianic secret is the topic of the fifth chapter (119–30). Here again the comparison with the Roman political context is fruitful: Jesus did not try to hide his identity; besides, such a theory fails to explain why he sometimes accepted recognition. Unlike Roman emperors, however, he took care not to be elevated too highly above his peers. "In essence," Winn writes, "the Markan Jesus beats the Roman emperors at their own game by easily embodying the ideology they must work so hard to appease." It would have been useful, however, for Winn to elaborate on why Jesus accepted some kinds of recognition of his authority while rejecting others.

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The relationship between Jesus and the temple is summarized in the sixth chapter (131–50). According to Winn, Jesus was profoundly hostile to the temple because of its fruitlessness, and he exercised divine judgment against it. The question of the tribute due to Caesar seems to be underestimated here, since taxes are religious matters, especially in the Jewish context. Indeed, not just the emperor but the temple as well required a tax. It would thus have been interesting to spend a few more lines on the famous saying "render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Winn's conclusion is that Mark's gospel undermined the Flavian propaganda; according to him, what Caesar destroyed was merely an abandoned house condemned by God many decades prior.

Finally, Winn analyzes the passion narrative (151–62) and argues that Jesus's death is not presented as a natural one. He died within only a few hours, while having sufficient strength to cry out. Winn compares the passion narrative to a ceremony of Roman triumph, including the centurion's tribute, which would have been expected to honor Caesar as a "son of God" instead, as the zenith.

The book continues with a short appendix proposing a third way between high Christology (Jesus is God) and low Christology (Jesus is ultimately human). Following Roman political ideology, the emperor was honored as a god only after his death, and a too explicit high Christology would have undermined the argument that Jesus was mightier than Vespasian. Winn argues that an "implicit" high Christology is present in Mark's Gospel. A short bibliography (169–80) and indices (181–87) close the book.

All in all, the demonstration is smoothly handled, with surprising conclusions and some very convincing proposals. However, a few more steps would have been desirable in order to be fully persuade the reader: indeed, several major points are postulated rather than demonstrated.

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