
This volume is the long-awaited conclusion to Joel Marcus’s commentary on Mark, the first part of which appeared in 2000. There can be little doubt that this magnum opus is poised to become the standard critical commentary on Mark for the next two decades.

As is customary in the Anchor series, the volume begins with a lengthy bibliography. This list overlaps extensively with the bibliography in Marcus’ volume on Mark 1-8 but each contains works absent in the other. The two volumes are meant to be taken together, the latter both omitting discussion of introductory matters and regularly making reference to comments and arguments from the first. In this second volume, Marcus provides a translation, as well as commentary, that begins with Mark 8:22 and goes through the end of the Gospel. The commentary proper is followed by nine appendices: “The Jewish Leaders in Mark,” “The Meaning of Christ = Messiah,” “History of Religions Backgrounds to the Transfiguration,” “The ‘Son of David’ Title,” “The Sadducees,” “The Youth Who Ran Away Naked,” “Historical Problems in the Markan Sanhedrin Trial,” “Crucifixion,” and “The Empty Tomb.”

One characteristic of the commentary is that Marcus brings a wealth of biblical and extra-biblical sources to bear on his reading. For example, in commenting on the healing of a blind man in 8:22-23, Marcus highlights echoes of the Exodus story as told in Jer 31 and anticipated afresh in Isa 42 (p. 598). Then, combining both Jewish and Roman parallels, Marcus argues that healing power suggests that someone possesses royal authority (p. 599). One particularly strong engagement with Mark’s biblical co-text assesses allusions to Daniel and Second Isaiah in Mark 10:35-45 (pp. 751-757). The comment highlights ways in which Jesus is scripting himself and his followers into the roles of suffering servant (Isa 53) and those who suffer in the eschatological tribulation (Dan 4, 7). But it also details Jesus’ subversion of the expectation, articulated in Dan 7, that the Son of Man arrives for the purpose of being served.

Several guiding themes recur as this commentary delves into textual minutiae. A central concern in the Gospel of Mark is the question of discipleship, and Marcus is regularly reflecting on the cruciform depiction of Jesus’ call to follow. Mark 8:22ff. depicts a Jesus who is heading to Jerusalem, and if to Jerusalem then also to his death. To follow Jesus on such a way is to answer a call to self-sacrifice. Related to this is Marcus’ understanding of the setting and audience of Mark’s Gospel. In the first volume, he argues for situating the second evangelist within a persecuted community residing in Syria around the Jewish War and siege of Jerusalem (between 69 and 75 CE). Marcus continually highlights the stark reality, for such people, of the Gospel’s call to a discipleship that will entail suffering and persecution.

Another tendency of this work is to highlight the spiritual, especially demonic, dimension to the conflict that drives Mark’s Gospel: Peter’s rebuke of Jesus is “demonic” (p. 763), as are Jesus’ opponents (pp. 815, 854), misattributions of Jesus’ miracles, plots on Jesus’ life, cries of the crowd at Jesus’ crucifixion (p. 1037), Jesus’ testing in Gethsemane (p. 979), and possibly even Jesus’ own cry of dereliction (pp. 1054, 1063).

A few features of the work are open to critique. One issue has to do with the selection of certain words and concepts. There are several examples of this, but I will focus on the
regular occurrence of “magic” in association with Jesus’ miracles. Marcus rightly notes points of contact between magical practices such as laying on of hands and uttering of phrases and Jesus’ actions in the Gospel. But do such parallels provide a viable Markan category for labeling Jesus’ wonder working? The evangelist regularly invites readers to interpret Jesus against the backgrounds of Daniel and Exodus, in which narratives magicians of the nations are contrasted with the prophets of Israel’s God. Such biblical co-texts create a suspicion against “magic” as the operative category for interpreting Jesus’ acts of power. Mark depicts Jesus as an agent of the reign of God, one who has been given authority from God to forgive sins, overcome demons, gather God’s people, and proclaim God’s coming judgment and salvation. Such Jewish, prophetic, and messianic categories create a context strong enough to transform or subvert any allusions to magic, even as Mark’s allusions to Daniel’s Son of Man are not captive to its original significations. Mark shows repeatedly that Jesus does not need to use secret formulas to manipulate the powers of the cosmos—he is anointed by the God of the cosmos to exercise such power in his own name.

The problem with “magic” is, perhaps, a subset of a larger issue in the commentary concerning selection and interpretation of parallel materials. As mentioned above, the commentary is a treasure trove of parallels from biblical and extra-biblical sources. But this strength becomes a weakness in two different ways. First, there are times when an unconvincing parallel is explored in some detail only to be followed by a discussion of a stronger, more likely piece of background material (e.g., pp. 762-66). Often, such material would have been better presented in service of an argument than as part of a kaleidoscope of possible influences. Under-interpreted parallels present a further problem, especially when drawn from documents that post-date Mark. Too often, references to late works occur without reflection on what such a later parallel might mean for our interpretation of the earlier document. A perhaps unintended consequence is that this amassing of data limits the scope of the audience for whom the work is appropriate. While the commentary provides scholars with a wealth of opportunities for further exploration, the presence of so much unprocessed data renders it unsuitable for all but the most critically aware ecclesiastical professionals or seminary students.

As the previous paragraph indicates, Marcus’ work is extensively researched, engaging in a nearly exhaustive survey of both ancient and modern material. Given this, there are a couple of surprising omissions. One relatively minor omission is an alternative explanation of how Jesus’ citation of Ex 3:15-16 in Mark 12:26 might function as proof for resurrection. J. Gerald Janzen and, more recently, Jon Levenson have both argued that God’s giving of an heir to the all-but-dead patriarchs functions as a type of resurrection in the Pentateuch, proposals Marcus does not mention or explore. A more significant omission is the commentary’s failure to acknowledge the proposal that Mark 13 is entirely about the destruction of Jerusalem. Due to the recent advocacy of this position by the widely-read N. T. Wright, just such a reading is gaining an increasingly large popular following. Given this upsurge in popularity, one could wish Marcus had acknowledged and argued against the position rather than ignoring it.

A final point of weakness is seen when the text calls forth hermeneutical or theological judgments. For example, Marcus concludes that the point of the Parable of the Vineyard