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## Preaching Mark

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call the northern state "Israel's forgotten first kingdom" (chapter 7), and argue that Jerusalem only belatedly came to prominence.

If Finkelstein and Silberman find little historical accuracy in the biblical story, this does not lessen their appreciation of the Bible. Indeed their entire book is suffused with admiration for the biblical vision and its enduring power. In particular, it survived and adapted to the exile and return, when others would have given up.

This book often reads more like a historical novel than a dry, academic tome. Yet it shows an intimate knowledge of the entire range of historical and archaeological research in the field. The lack of footnotes will occasionally annoy the specialist, but the bibliography (356-372) is carefully chosen, and is organized by chapters and topics. All in all, this book is highly recommended!

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## **Preaching Mark**

Bonnie Bowman Thurston

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002

218 pages, \$27.90 Softcover

If you are in the habit of preaching from the Gospels, this affordable volume will be a helpful addition to your library. Bonnie Brown Thurston has written a dry but useful book for preachers of Mark. There is nothing very exciting about it, to be sure, but her succinct and detailed approach will likely endure in value.

*Preaching Mark* addresses the whole of the Markan Gospel (not just lectionary selections). Thurston has divided the material into eight progressive chapters. Within each chapter is a brief introduction followed by chapter-and-verse pericopes (sadly lacking helpful titles). Further reading is given at the end of each pericope (useful for those who have access to scholarly journals, frustrating for those who do not!); endnotes and two appendices (lectionary readings, helps for preaching Mark) are also provided.

Thurston notes her purpose in the preface: to aid preachers and teachers of the church in using Mark. She wants to write a non-technical yet precise book about Mark, and in this she succeeds admirably. She avoids “scholarly apparatus,” as she terms it, yet real strengths of the book include her use of the transliterated Greek which she translates for the reader, the depth at which she has plunged into journals and other sources and come up with riches, the articles for further reading that she notes, the precision of her use of other scholars’ work whom she quotes and refers to frequently. She helpfully conveys the concerns of the author’s likely community (e.g., “the first recipients of Mark’s Gospel would not have doubted *that* miracles occurred, but they would have wanted to know *why* they were performed and what they signified” [59]). Thurston is a careful reader who draws your attention towards important details. In these elements this book is a real joy to work with.

Let one example give a bit of the flavour of her work. In discussing the healing of Jairus’ daughter, Thurston notes that Jairus is a “leader of the synagogue” (*archisynagogos*, an “administrator” in modern parlance, and probably not a spiritual figure). And a bit later, “... I think Mark intends the hearer/reader to be sympathetically disposed toward this official, this distraught parent who braves the indignities of a crowd in order to seek help for a female child. In a world that valued sons over daughters, men over women, that in itself tells us something about the man” (67). Thurston notices the details, and helps us appreciate their meaning.

Yet at times the book also has the flavour of overcooked vegetables: good for you, but oh, so blah. The Jesus whom Thurston portrays does not confound us, but is quite comprehensible, even reasonable. One of her assumptions is that Mark wrote for the church, and many of her interpretations fit seamlessly with North American mainstream church piety: decent, kindly, but nothing too unusual, and unlikely to get anyone killed. The preaching points she introduces may help out a blank mind, but they will more likely put you to sleep. So, for example, on the rich young ruler, 10:17-31, “The passage asks that we consider what are our greatest obstacles to entering the kingdom. To what do we cling that we should be willing to let go of? Perhaps, as vv. 28-31 suggest, it may be our sense of ourselves as disciples of Jesus! Do we think that by our various renunciations or our acceptance of persecution for Jesus and for the sake of the gospel

we have “earned” the kingdom/salvation? If so, we may find “in the age to come” that we were very much mistaken. The sermon that plumbs the spiritual depths of this passage goes well beyond the matter of “wealth and possessions” (114-15).

There are two other major difficulties with this work. Although Thurston notes frequently that the Markan Jesus clearly came to die, she never investigates why nor looks at Mark’s atonement images with any depth. Nor does she closely examine Mark’s negative portrayal of the scribes and Pharisees; she notes in one section that Mark has likely created “polemical figures, composite characters who represent opposition to Jesus” (153, see also 169), yet the actual character of Jewish religion at the time is unexplored, neither in general nor within specific stories (e.g., she does not address why the Pharisees might be threatened, 3:1-6, nor why she “hold[s] the historicity” of other critical views like 7:1-23 and 8:1-21, nor what actually happened at the trial by the Sanhedrin, 15:1-20). If one follows Thurston’s lead, one ends up avoiding the head-on collision with the foolishness of the cross, and one’s sermons may also reflect a kind of creeping anti-Semitism, as slowly a misleading portrait of Jesus’ fellow Jews emerges.

This would not be the first volume I would turn to as a Markan commentary, but still, Thurston’s interpretation will likely inspire you to similar careful reading, and its useful detail would help any of us when we are floundering for something to say!

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## **Paul in Acts**

Stanley Porter

Tubingen: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999

233 pages, \$28.69 Softcover

The focus of this book is the depiction of Paul as a literary figure in Acts – especially his character, his speeches, and his theology—using