

*The Tragic in Mark: A Literary-Historical Interpretation*, by Jeff Jay. Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 66. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014. Pp. xii + 319. Cloth. €124.00. ISBN 9783161532443.

Review by Daniel K. Christensen

*The Tragic in Mark* is a monographic exploration of tragedy's function within the literary milieu of the Gospel of Mark. In this work Jeff Jay seeks to fill a gap within scholarly literature on Mark, and other early Christian gospel accounts, that overlooks how tragedy and its motifs are embedded within the text. In this regard Jay's main thesis is that "Mark should be called 'tragic' in so far as it strongly elicits aspects of tragic drama's internal repertoire, especially several of tragedy's recurring motifs and moods, which include reversal, revenge, recognition, frequent lamentation, high emotionalism, and strong supernatural interventions" (2). Jay is largely successful in defending this thesis and demonstrates that Mark does exhibit what may be called features of the tragic mode.

Firstly, chapter 1 introduces the problem previous scholars have had when it comes to understanding tragedy as a genre and the tragic within Mark's gospel. Jay argues that rather than viewing tragedy as a genre which encompasses an entire piece of literature, scholars should see tragedy as a "mode." Jay, following Alastair Fowler (*Kinds of Literature*, 1982), defines mode as "a 'selection or abstraction' from a genre, which it nonetheless 'evokes' because it incorporates samples of a genre's internal repertoire, especially its motifs, moods, and values, which are all means by which a mode may 'announce itself'" (13). Or in other words, while genre may be considered a contract for understanding, mode may be considered a modifier of genre or the manifestation of genre within a subsection of text. By defining mode in this way Jay seeks to allow scholars to make modal comparisons among texts that are alike in kind (i.e., have similar motifs) but which may be different in genre.

Secondly, chapters 2 and 3 explore how mode enhances comparisons of the tragic within Greco-Roman literature and then categorizes the modal findings into typological categories of the tragic mode. Jay examines several figures within the works of various authors, including Plutarch, Polybius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Lucian of Samosata. In doing this Jay demonstrates how "the tragic as a mode of narrative allows us to see how the tragic migrates between a wide range of narrative genres, including biography, historiography, and the novel" (77). This tragic migration also manifests itself in tragic motifs, or what Jay terms typologies of the tragic, which include, reversal, revenge, recognition, lamentation, high emotionalism, and the supernatural – which can involve oracles and/or Deus ex Machina.

Chapter 4 follows a similar pattern and explores modes of the tragic within Hellenistic-Jewish literature, especially the Maccabean literature, the works of Josephus, and Philo's *Flaccus*. Again, Jay finds numerous instances of these Jewish authors evoking tragic motifs that were resonant within the literary milieu of the second-temple period. This observation comes across most clearly in Jay's analysis of the Maccabean literature. Here Jay challenges the reader to understand the Maccabean saga not as "tragic historiography," but as an historical account whose author was "fully competent at writing tragically in a way that is consistent with historians of all stripes" (118). To this end Jay points out that the books of the Maccabees are resplendent with typologies of the tragic. This includes emotionalism, reversal, recognition through irony, and divine intervention via the supernatural.

The last three chapters are devoted to exploring these same typologies and motifs of the tragic in the Gospel of Mark. Jay pays particular attention to the motifs of recognition, revenge, and Deus ex Machina (supernatural) as definitive tragic features within the gospel. Recognition, argues Jay, operates within Mark on two levels, one involving the narrator and narratees and the other involving the in-story characters. Irony, especially the failure of the disciples to recognize Jesus as the messiah, thus plays a crucial role in Mark's tragic modal identification (190–193). Most interestingly, Jay argues that the ending of Mark (at 16:8) resembles a Deus ex Machina in line with many tragic plays and is a means for the author to bring about closer to his story. This has implications for how Mark's abrupt ending should be understood. Rather than focusing on the “fright of the non-compliant women in flight” (ἐφοβοῦντο γὰρ), the Deus ex Machina of the divine being at the tomb instead simply indicates that the women exit the stage, “and there alone remains in the mind's eye or on the ‘narrative-stage’ the image of an empty tomb, and within it an awe-inspiring heavenly figure” (201). Chapter 6 then traces tragic motifs surround John the Baptist's recurring role within Mark, and Jay delves deeply into the death of the baptizer (6:14–29) by drawing out the theatric aspects of the dinner scene involving Herod and Herodias. John's life in the Gospel of Mark, argues Jay, demonstrates the mode of the tragic by literarily and narratively prefiguring the life and death of Jesus (229). Chapter 7 closes with the tragic in the Passion narrative (14:32–16:8). The tragic themes Jay finds in this account include oracular inexorability, lamentation, recognition and spectacle. Again, Jay finds that dramatic irony plays a key role in Mark's tragic mode. In particular, Jay argues that the many spectacles of the crucifixion, i.e., mockery (15:9 – 19), procession (15:20–21), and the crucifixion itself (15:22–39), properly belong to Jesus as part of his Markan identification as the suffering messiah (248).

Jay's work should be praised for its clarity of writing, straightforward argumentation, and meticulous engagement with primary source material. In particular, the copious amount of vocabulary given for the repertoire of the tragic mode demonstrates a close reading of these sources and is a mark of excellent scholarship. Hopefully future editions of this book will include a glossary of these terms for scholarly reference.

However, while Jay does demonstrate that Mark exhibits the tragic mode at certain points in the narrative, I would have liked to have seen a more thorough engagement with the entirety of the Markan text on this matter. Specifically, although Jay gives references to tragic motifs throughout the second gospel, his main focus is on the story of John the Baptist and the crucifixion scene in chapters 6 and 7. Instead chapter 5 should really be expanded into several chapters on different tragic themes within Mark to fill out this captivating thesis. For example, a chapter could easily have been devoted to how the disciples' obtuseness in Mark elicits the tragic mode. Jay's journey of tracing the tragic mode within Mark's literary milieu thus takes time away from his overall treatment of the tragic in Mark; perhaps a more fitting title which reflects this journey could be *The Mark of the Tragic*.

Additionally, I was also left wondering from this monograph to what extent “mode” is a usable term or meaningful procedural tool for making comparisons between texts. The main reason, I believe, Jay favors the term “mode” is because it shifts one's attention and mindset away from the problems of genre and ill-advised categorizations of ancient literature (18–20). However, mode may be as equally problematic if left unchecked. In particular, because mode seeks comparisons across a range of literature it has the potential to become an unfalsifiable designator of comparison. For instance, in his conclusion on Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Jay writes, “Indeed, tragic and dramatic narratives come and go throughout the whole of Dionysius's *Antiquitates Romanae*, which is thus seasoned with moving stories, as with salt” (61). But one

must wonder whether these tragic grains of salt are truly comparable to salt mine of the great tragedians or whether such salt has the same flavor as grains in other literature. Mode in this case has the potential to ignore the forest for the tree and make comparisons among small snippets of texts. Thus just as genre is wrought with interpretive problems because it can be applied too broadly, so too mode can become equally problematic because its focus can become too narrow on an excerpt of text. While comparisons among ancient texts from diverging genres is nothing new, I remain unconvinced (or at the least, skeptical) that mode is a suitable method for bridging the comparison gap. One does not need mode to come to the conclusion that two pieces of literature merit comparison; and as with Dionysius of Halicarnassus it could just as easily be concluded he composed his work with a vibrant literary style without recourse to tragic mode or motif. The tragic mode in such cases is just a labeled designator and merely part of the broader art of rhetoric and composition.

In all *The Tragic in Mark* is an excellent piece of scholarship and will serve as a useful tool for scholars seeking to understand how the author of the second gospel composed his text with dramatic features in mind and how ancient authors in general evoked tragic motifs in their works for rhetorical effect.