

The Centurion, Son of God, and Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles

Contesting Narrative and Commemoration with Mark

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Abstract

Against a longstanding tradition of ascribing religious conversion to the centurion who witnesses Jesus's death in Mark 15:39, I argue that his acclamation of Jesus as $\nu\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ is better understood within the narrative as the words of a conquered enemy. The centurion's confession parallels the responses of unclean spirits and Legion, two other vanquished enemies who, in the moment of defeat, see and name Jesus $\nu\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$. By framing the centurion as a defeated enemy, Mark contests the meaning of Jesus's crucifixion: rather than remembering it as a performance of Roman rule, Mark commemorates it as the summary victory of the rule of God. Turning from an ancient capital offender to a contemporary one, I recast the memory of Kelly Gissendaner, who was executed in Georgia in 2015, and attempt to narrate and commemorate her state-sanctioned death in light of the Markan Jesus's.

Keywords

Gospel of Mark – Mark 15:39 – son of god – narrative criticism – centurion's confession – commemoration – capital punishment

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On the face of it, the execution of Jesus is a fairly straightforward event within the narrative of Mark's Gospel. Jesus, who has been anticipating his death since the midpoint of the story,¹ gets what's coming to him: he dies, forsaken by God (15:34), nailed to a Roman cross. But then something happens that is at once both surprising and utterly expected: the Roman centurion standing by, who oversaw Jesus's execution, remarks, "Truly, this man was υἱὸς θεοῦ" (15:39).² The title, υἱὸς θεοῦ, is itself unsurprising: among other significant titles, "Son of God" is a common epithet for Jesus that appears throughout the Markan narrative at moments of particular import.³ From 1:1,⁴ the Markan audience knows that Jesus is υἱὸς θεοῦ, the royal, messianic Son of God.⁵ What is surprising, however, is *who* names Jesus υἱὸς θεοῦ here, at Jesus's final appearance in Mark. On the lips of a Roman soldier, the title raises questions: why should an executioner so acclaim his victim and what does it mean for him to do so?

Against a very longstanding tradition of ascribing piety, confession, and religious conversion to this surprising centurion, I argue that, within the context of the Markan narrative, it is possible to interpret the centurion's remark as the words of a conquered adversary. Alongside Mark 3:11 and 5:1-13, in which unclean spirits *see* and *name* Jesus as υἱὸς θεοῦ within the context of their immediate subjugation, I read 15:39 as a parallel event of an enemy who *sees* and *names* Jesus as υἱὸς θεοῦ at the moment of his defeat. Two theoretical assumptions undergird my reading of Mark's Gospel: (1) that Mark is best understood as a narrative text, and (2) that Mark's story unfolds within a cosmological clash of kingdoms, the rule of God versus Satan. The former is a particular reading strategy for Mark that has, in most quarters, won the day. The latter assumption, too, is standard fare for Markan interpretation. Both are crucial as I

1 Mark 8:31; 9:31; and 10:33-34.

2 ἀληθῶς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν (NA²⁸). All biblical quotations in English are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

3 Mary Ann Beavis highlights Jesus's baptism, transfiguration, and death as three key moments in which Jesus is named υἱὸς θεοῦ in Mark. Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 33. As we shall see, however, these are not the only important points in the Markan narrative in which this title is applied to Jesus.

4 Mark's incipit includes the title υἱοῦ θεοῦ or υἱου του θεου in A K P Δ f¹³ 33. 565. 579. 700. 892. 1241. 1424. 2542. ℳ lat, but is omitted by ℵ* Θ 28. L 2211 sa^{ms}. With such split external evidence, the internal evidence comprised of Mark's use of the title throughout the Gospel was not enough to sway the UBS committee to include it in the critical text without brackets. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2d ed.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 62.

5 On the royal, messianic valence of the title, see Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 47-155.

attempt to read the centurion as a character representative of the fall of Satan's reign at the climax of Mark's story. In the paragraphs that follow I briefly sketch these theoretical assumptions. Because I later turn from the text of Mark towards contemporary ethical concerns, I lay out some of my own theological assumptions and aims as well.

Mark's Gospel as Eschatological Combat Narrative

Embedded in my methodology of reading 15:39 alongside 3:11 and 5:1-13 is the theoretical assumption that Mark's Gospel is a narrative text.⁶ I place myself and my contribution within the wider stream of New Testament narrative criticism.⁷ This approach is widespread in Mark studies today and its popularity is exemplified in the monograph, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, now in its third edition.⁸ Following what is now a mainstay trend in Markan scholarship, I echo Richard Horsley's plea that "we read the whole story" rather than appropriate it "in bits and pieces."⁹ Thus I assume that, when faced with the ambiguity of the centurion's remark in 15:39, (re-)reading it within the Markan narrative is a good first step toward exegesis. A second and equally necessary step for my reading is to note the apocalyptic theological and political context from which Mark's narrative arises.

Although increasingly noted in contemporary biblical scholarship, it still bears mentioning that, if there was something like what we post-Reformation westerners call "religion" in antiquity, it was not hermetically sealed off from what we call "politics."¹⁰ As much as we might like to imagine them to be discrete categories and bar their mention at polite dinner tables, religion and politics intermixed in the lived experience of the ancients. The Roman imperial cult, Judean temple system, and the *kerygma* of the kingdom of God

6 I adopt the Mieke Bal's definition of "narrative text" as "a text in which an agent relates ('tells') a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof." See Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2d ed.; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 5.

7 On the history of this approach, see The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 85.

8 David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (3d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

9 Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 2.

10 Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 25ff.

among early Christians illustrate the common intermarriage of politics and religion in the ancient world. As a document composed within this context, Mark similarly displays a tendency to elide the spaces between the religious and the political.

Although evident throughout, this tendency is most notable in Mark's framing of Jesus's proclamation of the rule of God as an assault on the dominion of Beelzebul/Satan/"the strong man" in Mark 3:20-27. Mark shares this apocalyptic, eschatological worldview with other roughly contemporary writings like Revelation and the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹¹ Mark relates the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah (ὁ χριστός) and Son of God (υἱὸς θεοῦ), who announces the arrival of the rule of God (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ; 1:15) and binds the strong man (τὸν ἰσχυρὸν δῆσῃ; 3:27).

The apocalyptic, eschatological divine rule in Mark comes as a challenge to the rival reign of Satan and its worldly functionaries, the political rulers.¹² Both Mark's narrative and audience inhabit a world that hangs in the balance in "a cosmic battle between God and Satan."¹³ Mark signals this battle early on while the theme recurs throughout the Markan literary "fugue."¹⁴ Throughout the narrative, Jesus understands his ministry and the rule of God as an attack against the house of Satan. Satan, the strong man, is bound and his house plundered as Jesus and his followers travel throughout Galilee and Judea, proclaiming the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ, healing the sick, and exorcising demons.¹⁵ Before the narrative's final turn toward Jerusalem, Jesus shows mastery over the demonic throughout Galilee and gives others similar authority in his name.¹⁶

11 E.g., the beasts of Revelation 13-14; "the king of darkness" (4Q544 and 4QCurses); "the angel of darkness" (1QS III, 20-21); Satan (1QH^a XXII [frag. 4], 6); Mastema (*Jubilees* 1:19-20); Belial (*Community Rule; War Scroll; Thanksgiving Hymns; Blessings; Catena*; 11Q *Melchizedek*). See Loren T. Stuckenbruck, "Satan and Demons," in *Jesus Among Friends and Enemies: A Historical and Literary Introduction to Jesus in the Gospels*, ed. Chris Keith and Larry W. Hurtado (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 174ff.

12 Stuckenbruck, "Satan and Demons," 174.

13 Christopher W. Skinner, "Overcoming Satan, Overcoming the World: Exploring the Cosmologies of Mark and John," in *Evil in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Loren T. Stuckenbruck, WUNT 2.417 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 102.

14 Howard Clark Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Mercer: Mercer University Press, 1983), 75.

15 Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Anniversary ed.; Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008).

16 Jesus shows mastery over the demonic in 1:21-28; 1:32-34; 3:11-12; 5:1-20; 7:24-30; and 9:14-29. He gives mastery over demons to others in 3:14-15; 6:7.

This eschatological combat narrative runs throughout the Gospel of Mark and signals a faithfully subversive way of seeing the world—an apocalyptic “squint”—that assumes that the rule of God is invading and disrupting the worldly order. Here I adapt James C. Scott’s playful characterization of the anarchist perspective, the “anarchist squint,” to the Markan apocalyptic worldview and my own politically invested theological appropriation of it.¹⁷ Scott argues that the state, when viewed through the suspicious and subversive “anarchist squint,” can be critiqued and understood in ways not afforded by other popular perspectival alternatives. I suggest that viewing the state through a Markan “apocalyptic squint” opens up new possibilities of critique from a particularly Christian perspective that assumes that God has intervened in the world and its normal order of operations in and through the crucified messiah, Jesus Christ. As I will develop it later in this essay, I take the Markan apocalyptic squint as an invitation to wrest from the state the power to narrate itself and its victims. In and through the cruciform show of divine force that is the death of the messiah, the satanic rule of Rome—and the modern state—is eclipsed and its power to name and commemorate its executed victims is contested.

Turning now towards the text of Mark and its combat narrative, I wish to suggest that Mark tutors its readers to expect God’s victory over all of God’s enemies. The victory of the rule of God in Mark happens in two movements. First, the reign of God begins to upset the old order in and through God’s agent, Jesus, and his preaching and healing campaign. Second, the victory of God’s rule is fully realized in Mark through the death of Jesus on the cross. Although a full exploration of this Markan motif falls outside the scope of this essay, the connection of God’s eschatological victory to Jesus’s death is encapsulated quite neatly in the parallelism between 13:24-27 and 15:33, in which darkness attends

17 Scott argues that “if you put on anarchist glasses and look at the history of popular movements, revolutions, ordinary politics, and the state from that angle, certain insights will appear that are obscured from almost any other angle.” James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), xii. I suggest that the Gospel of Mark assumes a similarly critical optic, typically termed an “apocalyptic worldview,” which results in a radical reorientation toward political power and rule. The rule of God is “at hand” (1:14-15); as such, it is the primary lens through which other powers and regimes in Mark are viewed. This critical lens, which I am calling Mark’s “apocalyptic squint,” may be adopted today to open up new ways of framing political power and pursuing a Christian biblical theological politics. Later in this essay I attempt to view a recent capital punishment case through Mark’s “apocalyptic squint.”

both the coming of the son of man and the crucifixion of Jesus.¹⁸ There are many such linkages between the so-called “apocalyptic discourse” (13:1-37) and the Markan passion narrative. Together, these narrative links strongly suggest that, in Mark, the eschaton is at hand and God is somehow victorious over all of God’s enemies—including Satan, unclean spirits, and a Roman centurion—in and through the death of Jesus and the promise of his resurrection.¹⁹

“Son of God” on the Lips of Enemies in Mark

Unclean Spirits: 3:11 and 5:1-13

If the incipit in 1:1 is original, Jesus is explicitly referred to as the υἱός of God six times. One time the narrator gives Jesus this title (1:1); twice God bestows it upon him (1:11; 9:7); and three times Jesus is called some variation of υἱός θεοῦ by characters who are not God (3:11; 5:7; 15:39).²⁰ In two of the latter three instances, Jesus is named υἱός θεοῦ by soon-to-be vanquished adversaries: the unclean spirits see Jesus, recognize his power, and name him υἱός θεοῦ before their summary defeat. I wish to read all three of these passages closely and synoptically, in an effort to draw out parallels and suggest that the centurion, like the unclean spirits, names Jesus υἱός θεοῦ in the face of his defeat.

The first instance of υἱός θεοῦ on the lips of a defeated enemy comes at 3:11, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Here it becomes clear to the reader that Jesus’s preaching, healing, and exorcising campaign has become wildly successful (3:8). Because news of Jesus’s healing powers have become so widespread, the crowd presses in on Jesus so much that he must retreat to a boat (3:10). But while the human crowds press in, the Markan storyteller notes the

18 In the latter passage, usually read as an eschatological prediction whose scope extends far beyond the Markan narrative, Jesus predicts that the full victory of God will be accompanied by, among other things, a darkened sun (ὁ ἥλιος σκοτισθήσεται) and the son of man’s arrival “with great power and glory” (13:24, 26). As Jesus hangs, dying on the cross in 15:33, the sun is unnaturally blotted out, as darkness (σκοτός) covers the whole land in the early afternoon. Cf. Dale Allison, *The End of the Ages Has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1985; repr. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 28; 36-37.

19 Danny Yencich, “Sowing the Passion at Olivet: Mark 13-15 in a Narrative Frame,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* (forthcoming). Cf. R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 48-59.

20 The high priest asks Jesus if he is “the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One” (ὁ υἱός τοῦ εὐλογητοῦ) in 14:61. Within the courtroom context of 14:53-65, the high priest is not bestowing this title upon Jesus but is pointedly questioning him on it.

response of the demonic to Jesus's power: "Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!'" (3:11). As the human crowds advance, the unclean spirits surrender. Whenever they *see* (ἐθεώρουν) Jesus, they fall before him and acclaim his royal power over them by naming him ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ.²¹

As in 3:11, 5:1-13 describes a scene in which an unclean spirit sees Jesus, recognizes his power, and names him a variation of υἱὸς θεοῦ in the moment of defeat. The vignette takes place outside the boundaries of Israel, again near the Sea of Galilee—this time on its eastern bank (5:1). As Jesus steps out of the boat, a man with an unclean spirit (ἄνθρωπος ἐν πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ), driven out of society to live among the tombs, comes out to meet Jesus (5:2). Seeing Jesus from a distance (ἰδὼν τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἀπὸ μακρόθεν), the man rushes to him, bows, and cries out in a φωνῇ μεγάλῃ, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God (υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου)?" (5:6-7).

Whereas 3:11 seems to speak of unclean spirits only in terms of their spiritual possession,²² 5:1-13 highlights the political valence of demonic possession explicitly as the unclean spirit names itself "Legion" (λεγιῶν), a Latin loan-word that specifically refers to a Roman military unit "numbering in the time of Augustus about 6,000 soldiers."²³ Some interpreters wish to arithmetize the name and focus only on its numeric connotation of "many."²⁴ Ben Witherington, for example, notes the Roman imperial connection only to dismiss it: since the story takes place outside of Israelite territory, it cannot be an "allegory" about Roman occupation of Israel.²⁵ While it may not be a critique of Roman possession of *Israel*, I hasten to note that Israel was not the only occupied land in the first-century Roman Empire. The Decapolis, from which the Gerasene demoniac had been expelled and to which he later returned

21 Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, BNTC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 110.

22 But cf. Paul W. Hollenbach, "Jesus, Demoniacs, and Public Authorities: A Socio-Historical Study," *JAAAR* 49 (1981): 567-88. Hollenbach marshals postcolonial theory to suggest that ancient demonic possession, like madness in colonial contexts, may be linked to the social stratification created by the imperial situation.

23 Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), BibleWorks. v.9.

24 Ben Witherington, III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 183; Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 145. Both scholars focus on the numeric connotation of "Legion" and downplay any connections the name may have had to Roman military power.

25 Witherington, III, *The Gospel of Mark*, 183.

(5:19-20), was at the eastern edge of the Empire. Thus Ched Myers is right to press the point: according to the sources as they have come down to us, “this term had only one meaning in Mark’s social world: a division of Roman soldiers.”²⁶ By naming itself “Legion,” the unclean spirit illustrates the blurry and unkempt boundaries between “spiritual” and “imperial” possession in the first century. In the single simulacrum, “Legion,” two kingdoms are represented: Satan’s and Caesar’s. Likewise, by seeing and submitting to Jesus as the royal “son of the most high God,” Legion, whom no one but Jesus had been able to subdue (5:4), represents the implied eclipse and subjugation of both of these kingdoms in the face of Jesus and the in-breaking rule of God.

The Centurion (15:39)

We turn now to the crucial verse, 15:39, in which a Roman centurion witnesses Jesus’s death and remarks “Truly, this man was υἱὸς θεοῦ.” The centurion’s naming of Jesus explicitly parallels 3:11 and 5:1-13 in three ways: (1) Jesus is seen and (2) named υἱὸς θεοῦ (3) by someone characterized in the Markan narrative as an enemy. I argue for a final parallel as well: (4) the enemy sees and names Jesus υἱὸς θεοῦ *at the moment of its defeat*.

The first and second parallels (*seeing* and *naming* Jesus) are lexical in nature and thus fairly straightforward. All three passages employ a seeing verb and so suggest that there is something about Jesus, something visible, that sets him apart as “son of God.” In 3:11, the “seeing” verb is ἐθεώρουν, an imperfect form of θεωρέω.²⁷ In 5:6 and 15:39, the verb is a participial form of ὁράω, ἰδών. For the unclean spirits and Legion, simply *seeing* Jesus is enough to cause them to name him “Son of [the most high] God.”²⁸ In 15:39, it is upon witnessing the way Jesus died that the centurion names him “son of God.” For the centurion, there is something about Jesus’s *death* that signifies him υἱὸς θεοῦ.

26 In my estimation, Myers presses the evidence a bit too hard, however, by suggesting that ἀγέλη (“herd,” 5:11) is an “inappropriate” word for a gathering of pigs and more typically used to refer to “a band of military recruits.” Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 191. BDAG glosses the word as “herd” and references other instances of the word in Greco-Roman literature in which it explicitly denotes a herd of swine. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, BibleWorks. v.9.

27 “To observe something with sustained attention, be a spectator, look at, observe, perceive, see.” Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, BibleWorks. v.9.

28 In 3:11, the title is articular and straightforward: the Son of God (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ). Legion’s title, Son of the Most High God (υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου), shows some variation, perhaps attributable to the Gentile context of the event. Cf. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 143. The centurion’s title in 15:39 is the anarthrous and culturally ambiguous υἱὸς θεοῦ.

It is here that Mark 15:39 presents readers with a problem. Unlike 3:11 and 5:1-7, in which unclean spirits “shouted” that Jesus is υἱὸς θεοῦ, the centurion in 15:39 simply said it. Maddeningly, the verse lacks any explicit indication of illocutionary force.²⁹ We know *what* the centurion said, but we know not *how* he said it. Faced with this ambiguity, Mark’s earliest interpreters—Matthew and Luke—supply the illocutionary force that Mark does not: Matthew’s centurion was “terrified” (ἐφοβήθησαν; Matt. 27:54), while Luke’s “praised God” (ἐδόξαζεν τὸν θεόν; Luke 23:47). Many modern commentators follow suit and supply the illocutionary force to this centurion that Mark does not.

Whereas all commentators readily describe the unclean spirits in Mark 3 and 5 as defeated enemies, few are willing to describe the centurion similarly. For many, the centurion’s remark signals a genuine confession of Christian faith, “the conversion of an unbeliever by the dying Saviour”³⁰ and “the first-fruits of the Gentiles unto Christ.”³¹ For Morna Hooker, “the centurion stands at this point as the representative of those who acknowledge Jesus as God’s son.”³² Others read 15:39 more neutrally (or at least less Christologically) as a Roman acclamation of a great or even “divine man.”³³

Myers reads the centurion’s remark in starkly negative terms, as the mocking words of a victorious soldier who stands “over against” his vanquished enemy.³⁴ Myers’s reading has much to commend it. Throughout the Markan passion, the Roman forces are characterized negatively: instead of exercising his power to exonerate and free Jesus, Pilate pacifies the unruly crowd by

29 Kelly R. Iverson, “A Centurion’s ‘Confession’: A Performance-Critical Analysis of Mark 15:39,” *JBL* 130 (2011): 329-350.

30 Dennis Eric Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark* (London: Penguin, 1968), 430.

31 R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St. Mark*, 57. Cf. W. R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 134; Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 324; Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark’s Gospel: Text and Subtext* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 93; Christopher Stephen Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 27 (London: Doubleday, 1986), 189; Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 719; Iverson, “A Centurion’s ‘Confession,’” 336; R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 564.

32 Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 379.

33 Beavis, *Mark*, 232; cf. Brian J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark’s Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 169; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, CGT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 460; Whitney T. Shiner, “The Ambiguous Pronouncement of the Centurion and the Shrouding of Meaning in Mark,” *JSNT* 22 (2000): 5-7. Cf. Augustine, *Cons.* 3.20.57.

34 Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 393.

handing him over to be crucified (15:14-15). Roman soldiers beat and openly mock Jesus (“Hail, King of the Jews!”; 15:18), compel a bystander to carry the cross (15:21), and carry out Pilate’s order to crucify Jesus (15:25ff). Roman forces, especially if we include Legion as a Roman representative (5:1-11), are characterized in negative, even satanic, terms in Mark’s story. Thus Myers interprets the centurion as a mocking enemy who is confident that “Rome has triumphed over the Nazarene.”³⁵

For all that Myers’s reading helps us to see in Mark, I do not think open mockery to be the most natural or narratively-sensitive interpretive frame for the centurion’s remark. Like Myers, I wish to emphasize that “[e]very other occurrence of the designation ‘son’ in reference to Jesus” when spoken by a character other than God “has been attributed to either demons or political opponents.”³⁶ Neither the unclean spirits in 3:11 nor Legion in 5:7 seem to be mocking Jesus. Rather, they name him within the context of conflict—conflict that in both cases Jesus handily wins. Thus I see my reading here as taking Myers’s insights to their logical conclusion: the centurion, like the unclean spirits before him, is a defeated enemy who sees and names Jesus υἱὸς θεοῦ.

Read synoptically, then, 3:11, 5:1-13, and 15:39 name Jesus “son of God” within the context of spiritual, physical, and martial combat. Mark itself, as I have tried to read it, is an eschatological combat narrative. God’s agent, Jesus, the royal Son of God, advances the rule of God against the rule of Satan through a campaign of preaching, healing, and exorcism. Represented by the unclean spirits, Legion, and the Roman centurion, the rule of Satan is undone. If the rule of God has advanced through Jesus’s campaign throughout Galilee and Judea, paradoxically, it fully subjugates its enemies and binds the strong man at Jesus’s death and resurrection.

As a Galilean corpse hangs on the cross, the centurion does what vanquished enemies do in the Gospel of Mark: he sees him and names him υἱὸς θεοῦ. The strong man’s house has been ransacked and pillaged. The kingdom of Satan is divided against itself and cannot stand: in the execution of Jesus and the promise of his resurrection, its “end has come” (3:26).³⁷

35 Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 394.

36 Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 394.

37 Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 390.

FIGURE 1 "Son of God" on the Lips of Enemies in Mark

	Translation (NRSV)	Narrative Outcome
3:11	Whenever the unclean spirits (τὰ πνεύματα τὰ ἀκάθαρτα) saw (έθεώρουν) him, they fell down before him and shouted, "You are the Son of God (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ)!"	Jesus displays mastery over the unclean spirits and commands them silent (3:12).
5:2, 6-7	² And when [Jesus] stepped out of the boat, immediately a man with an unclean spirit (πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ) met him. ⁶ When he saw (ιδῶν) Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; ⁷ and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God (υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου)?"	Following a brief exchange, Jesus is shown to have authority over even an entire λεγιῶν. Legion "begged" him (παρεκάλεσαν αὐτὸν) and Jesus thus permitted Legion to leave the man and go into a herd of pigs. The herd then rushed headlong into the sea and drowned (5:13-14).
15:39	Now the centurion, who stood facing him, seeing (ιδῶν) how Jesus breathed his last, said, "Truly, this man was son of god (ἀληθῶς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν)." ^a	The centurion reports Jesus's death to Pilate (15:44). Jesus is buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea (15:45-47). The Markan narrative ends with the tomb empty and the executed υἱὸς θεοῦ alive, waiting for the disciples in Galilee (16:1-8).

a Here I have slightly amended the NRSV's translation to more clearly highlight the lexical similarity between the centurion's "confession" and the acclamations of the unclean spirits and Legion. Cf. "Truly this man was God's Son!" (15:39; NRSV).

Naming and Remembering the Executed: Adopting the Markan Apocalyptic Squint

In this essay I have attempted to re-read a familiar and famous passage and offer up a new interpretation of the centurion as a vanquished enemy. By suggesting that the centurion is an adversary defeated, I run the risk of caricaturing Mark as political resistance literature and being taken as yet another peddler of the hermeneutical “gymnastics” that some scholars associate with imperial-critical approaches to the New Testament.³⁸ For this reason I play my cards face-up: I do not think that Mark’s chief aim in narrating the story of Jesus is to criticize or zealously resist Roman rule. As I read Mark, the critique of Rome is an *implication* of Jesus’s ministry and the in-breaking rule of God. Thus “anti-” and “counter-imperial” do not neatly describe Mark’s Jesus or his story. Rather, I read Mark alongside other Second Temple Jewish texts that saw the dominion of Satan as the primary adversary of the invasive rule of God.³⁹ Roman rule, as an expression of Satanic dominion in the world, is therefore eclipsed and subjugated throughout Mark, fully so at Jesus’s death.

As a reader of Mark who inhabits a world like Mark’s, one that does not always neatly separate the “political” from the “religious,” I find that I also cannot so neatly disconnect the “ancient” from the “contemporary.” As a biblical scholar, I often read Mark with traditional questions in mind: what does this word, this phrase, this event in Mark’s Gospel *mean* within its literary and socio-historical context? Such is the stock-in-trade of traditional historical-critical biblical scholarship, a cottage industry of critical inquiry to which I am happy to contribute. But “the word leaps the gap” between the ancient and the contemporary, between history and theology.⁴⁰ Thus I have found it fruitful—*meaningful*—to re-read Mark’s story of an executed Jew alongside a modern story of an executed Christian. Let the reader understand: this is not “disinterested scholarship.” As a committed Christian pacifist, I am keenly *interested* in a theological participation in the Markan possibility that the executed faithful are “re-membered” ἐξ ἐναντίας, *in opposition to*, the narratives bestowed upon them by their executioners.⁴¹

38 E.g. Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, “Introduction,” in *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies*, ed. Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 20.

39 Cf. Stuckenbruck, “Satan and Demons.”

40 J. Ross Wagner and A. Katherine Grieb, *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

41 I approach Mark’s narration of the death of Jesus as an act of memory-making from within a colonial context: a “re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past

*The Bodies of Christ and Kelly Gissendaner and the Narratives
of the State*

As I write this sentence, it has been 128 days since the state of Georgia executed Kelly Gissendaner. Convicted of hiring her boyfriend to kill her husband in 1997, Gissendaner was the only woman on Georgia's death row. During her incarceration, Gissendaner "experienced a profound spiritual transformation," completed a Certificate in Theology from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and became a provider of spiritual care for her fellow inmates.⁴² Following two delays, numerous failed appeals to the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles for a stay of execution, a groundswell of popular calls for clemency, and a statement in support of her on behalf of Pope Francis,⁴³ Kelly Gissendaner was executed by the state of Georgia at 12:21 AM ET on Wednesday, September 30, 2015.

In the state's press advisory issued ahead of Gissendaner's original February, 2015 execution date, no mention was made of Gissendaner's rehabilitation. Over 1,600 of the 2,108 words in the release, however, were devoted to the detailing of her crime.⁴⁴ Although published before Gissendaner's death, the "public transcript" of the state of Georgia now commemorates Kelly Gissendaner solely in terms of her crime.⁴⁵ Gissendaner, who died singing "Amazing Grace,"⁴⁶ is not remembered by the state for her rehabilitation; instead she is only remembered for her offense. Christians and other people of conscience have,

to make sense of the present." Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 10.

- 42 "About Kelly," #kellyonmymind, September 9, 2015, n.p. [cited 16 January 2015]. Online: <http://www.kellyonmymind.com/about-kelly/>.
- 43 Carlo Maria Vigano and Pope Francis, "Letter for the Commutation of the Death Sentence for Kelly Gissendaner," 29 September 2015. [cited 16 January 2016]. Online: <http://www.archatl.com/download/apostolic-nunciature-on-behalf-of-kelly-gissendaner/?wpdmdl=7642>.
- 44 Samuel S. Olens, "Execution Date Set for Kelly Renee Gissendaner, Convicted of Husband's Murder" (Georgia Department of Law, February 9, 2015), n.p. [cited 16 January 2016]. Online: <http://law.ga.gov/press-releases/2015-02-09/execution-date-set-kelly-renee-gissendaner-convicted-husband%E2%80%99s-murder>.
- 45 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 45ff.
- 46 Tracy Connor, Dan Shepherd, and Gabe Gutierrez, "Kelly Gissendaner Sings 'Amazing Grace' During Execution," *NBC News*, n.p. [cited 16 January 2016]. Online: <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/lethal-injection/pope-urges-halt-execution-georgia-woman-kelly-gissendaner-n435566>.

however, contested this commemoration of Ms. Gissendaner and challenged the state's narration of itself as arbiter of justice.⁴⁷

Unlike Kelly Gissendaner, Jesus of Nazareth is not remembered by any of his contemporary governmental officials, according to the historical record as it has come down to us. No official record exists of Jesus's execution and no Roman official before Tacitus makes explicit mention of him.⁴⁸ The centurion in Mark 15, who reappears in Matt 27:54 and Luke 23:47, is the only first century example of a Roman memory of Jesus's execution. While it is of course *possible* that Mark preserves a memory of genuine history in which a Roman soldier openly acclaimed the dead Jew that he had just executed as $\nu\acute{\iota}\delta\varsigma \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$, the historical critics are right to suggest that this is not entirely *likely*.⁴⁹ It is considerably more likely that Jesus of Nazareth died an unremarkable and likely un-remembered state-sanctioned death, as one of the *humiliores* for which the indignity of crucifixion was reserved.⁵⁰ If ever there was an official record of his execution, it is unknown today.

Because no Roman written record of Jesus's death is currently known, perhaps we can say that his corpse served as the official record of his execution. This corpse, the body of Christ, was inscribed with the "public transcript" of the state, commemorated only by a cross and a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea (15:43-46). In composing an account of Jesus's execution, Mark textualizes the corpse of Christ as a counter-claim to the Roman narrative. By placing the title $\nu\acute{\iota}\delta\varsigma \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ on the lips of the centurion, Mark has characterized this symbol of imperial hegemony, terror, and satanic rule as an enemy who, in the moment of defeat, finally sees and recognizes Jesus as the victorious son of God.

Historically-speaking, all of this is of course terrifically unlikely—and *that is precisely the point*. If there was a centurion standing by at Jesus's death, he likely did not see the way Jesus breathed his last and think that it was representative of divine power in any way. Instead he probably saw what most people saw: a dead Jew. Likewise, those who read Kelly Gissendaner's story according to the state of Georgia are likely to see little more than a dead convict. Yet wherever Mark is read, it presents the audience the possibility to view and commemo-

47 E.g. "Homepage," *#kellyonmymind*, n.d. [cited 16 January 2016]. Online: <http://www.kellyonmymind.com/sample-page/>

48 Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.

49 Cf. Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, WBC 34b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 510; Shiner, "The Ambiguous Pronouncement of the Centurion."

50 Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), 34.

rate Jesus and others executed by the state differently, to openly contest the narrative by claiming that the executioner does not retain the power to name and remember the executed.

The corpses of Christ and Kelly Gissendaner are the official transcripts of their deaths. But in the Markan telling, *over against* the official transcript, the death of Jesus is evidence that the enemies of God have all been subjugated and Jesus, God's son, is victorious. The actual centurion is lost to history. But, in the Markan telling, he is given a memory and a voice, both of which testify to the victory of God over Rome and Satan in and through the death of Jesus. In Mark's story, the centurion is framed as a vanquished enemy; all he can say in the face of defeat is, "Truly, this man was son of God." Jesus, according to the Markan apocalyptic squint, is remembered not as the executed criminal but as the raised, victorious, and vindicated son of God. Perhaps we might say that Kelly's story, viewed through Mark's optic and in a Christian theological frame, is of a redeemed and forgiven sister, an inheritor of the rule of God who will live again—despite the strongest efforts of her executioners.

Seen through Mark's subversive perspective, the executed faithful are not victims; they are victorious, the state is a defeated enemy, and death is not final. If we adopt Mark's apocalyptic squint, we see the state and its machinations of power, violence, and "justice" for the frailties that they are. Where Rome and Georgia framed themselves as the arbiters of justice in the executions of Jesus and Kelly, the reign of God—binder of strong men and subjugator of unclean spirits, centurions, and state parole boards—narrates them differently: as God's enemies, vanquished by the Son of God, whose victory comes with power and glory at the moment of the cross.